



1 ZIMBABWEAN STORY

story collected in 2004

I left Zimbabwe in October 2002 because of the political situation there. I was a primary school teacher in Zimbabwe and was involved in the trade union. There were a lot of problems and my life was in danger.

I came to Northern Ireland because there was someone there I already knew as a friend. I slept over in England for one night and came over here the next day. I went to stay with my friend. Later on, someone advised us about NICEM (Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities) so I went there and they helped me start the process to claim asylum.

We did go through some interrogation at the airport but they let me through. I put in my claim for asylum when I went through the airport and so the process started immediately and I was granted refugee status

in February 2003. So I am still on refugee status. This means you can work and access mainstream benefits. Once NICEM processed the asylum claim in November 2002, they arranged accommodation for me and now I am a training officer with them.

In Northern Ireland, the weather is quite different from Zimbabwe. There, I lived in a rural town and the people were generally very friendly on the streets. I do find it easy to mix with other people here because of the person I am and the job I am doing means I have to interact with many different cultures. Local volunteers give me help and friendship and invite me to their homes.

Zimbabwe is a predominantly Christian country but in Northern Ireland, the Roman Catholic/ Protestant issue makes us feel very uncomfortable. It is hard to know whether to identify with one group or the other.

In Zimbabwe, you can walk into any church and it is OK.

How can churches be more involved? The best thing is to invite strangers into your church. When I started working here, a Presbyterian minister invited me to come to a service to answer questions about asylum and he blended it well into the service by using a bible reading that talked about Ruth as a foreigner. I enjoyed it a lot and it would be great if more churches could be aware. Most information is inaccurate from the media. Personal contact is always more real and accurate.

Church here is a lot different from home. At home there is a lot more singing and dancing. You do miss things that you identify with. My wife and 2 kids have now joined me but you want to share things with your people back home. You want to grieve with them and when there's a

funeral you miss out a lot.

Since Zimbabwe is a British colony, it has a lot of similarities but the food is still quite different here and there is a lot of our own food that you can't get here. You can get some food but it's not the same.

My wife has adjusted well. We have been able to make a lot of friends at our church. A lady GP in particular used to take my wife out to various events in the church, to bazaars and sales. The children go to a school where the church and the community mixes well. I am able to meet a lot of people through my work here.

Any bad experiences?

I have had a few people driving past me shouting abuse. Young people have shouted racial comments at me but this has not happened much. We do feel safe in our home and the children are adjusting well at school.

Churches need to be at the forefront in condemning racial attacks and violence in homes. These people may be a part of a congregation and we need to get preaching about how to live with people from another culture.

This man continues to live and work in Northern Ireland.