

Made for goodness: A faithful response to the refugee crisis

A briefing from

the **Baptist Union of Great
Britain**

the **Church of Scotland**

the **Methodist Church**

the **United Reformed Church**



“We are made for goodness. We are made for love. We are made for friendliness. We are made for togetherness. We are made for all of the beautiful things that you and I know. We are made to tell the world that there are no outsiders. All are welcome: black, white, red, yellow, rich, poor, educated, not educated, male, female, gay, straight, all, all, all. We all belong to this family, this human family, God’s family.”
— Desmond Tutu

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus
(Galatians 3:28)

A Christian response to the unfolding refugee crisis must begin with an acknowledgement that there is no outsider. Neither geography nor legal status can deny a person access to God’s family, nor do they afford other people a privileged status in God’s family.

But our understanding that we all have a common identity in God is profoundly at odds with the prevailing rhetoric around migrants. The divisive rhetoric of the recent EU referendum campaign symbolised by the infamous “Breaking Point” poster is the most recent example of migrants and refugees being presented as an “other” group different from ordinary people. There is strong public narrative that promotes the image of refugees as a threat, an economic drain and a major cause of the problems faced by disadvantaged people in the UK, which often overwhelms the essential truth that these are valued and loved members of God’s human family.

In September 2015 the publication of images of the body of a toddler, Alan Kurdi (sometimes reported as Aylan Kurdi), washed ashore on the Turkish coast, horrifically demonstrated the humanity of the refugee crisis. A Syrian refugee crisis which to many seemed distant, now had the face of a young child. In the aftermath of this, public opinion moved and the Government responded with some small but positive changes in policy.

But Alan’s story, tragic as it is, forms just a part of an unprecedented *global* refugee catastrophe. 65 million people are now either a refugee, internally displaced or seeking asylum. That’s one in every 113 people¹. People are fleeing violence, conflict and poverty not only in Syria, but also in Yemen, Iraq, the Central African Republic, South Sudan and Burundi and many

other places. This catastrophe has led to significant increases in population in Turkey and other countries, and to official and unofficial refugee camps within Europe, for example in France, Greece and Italy. This is a humanitarian disaster which has been building over many years and crosses national boundaries.

Forced migrants are some of the most vulnerable people on earth. Having encountered hardship or persecution in their country of origin they have the additional upheaval of leaving their homes in search of a safer existence. The vast majority of refugees, asylum seekers and others seeking sanctuary are now living in developing countries. For those people who do make it to the European continent, the chaotic and unpredictable nature of the various European asylum systems has resulted in unaccompanied children going missing, families being separated and, for an increasing number of unsuccessful applicants, destitution.

Churches and other groups have responded across Europe welcoming refugees and providing practical support. But the challenge of providing long term sustainable solutions for those displaced by poverty and conflict remain. The refugee catastrophe requires a political response as well as a practical one.

On 23 June 2016, the UK voted to leave the European Union. The exact consequences of this decision remain uncertain, but it is clear is that we are about to embark upon an inevitable process of change, that is likely to have profound implications for the way our Government responds to the refugee crisis.

As Christians, we have a key role to play in the upcoming months and years, highlighting the ongoing plight of refugees and displaced people. We must affirm the case for a human response to the crisis, which recognises that we are all made for goodness, and that the human dignity of refugees is intimately connected to our own.

This briefing looks at the history and consequences of the current humanitarian crisis and highlights four specific areas that Churches can engage with and campaign on.

Produced by the Joint Public Issues Team: Baptist, Church of Scotland, Methodist and United Reformed Churches working together

Summary

1. **The refugee crisis is not new.** Conflict and unrest in Iraq, Egypt and Libya resulted in a new wave of violent extremism and mass displacement of people across the Middle East and North Africa. Long term conflict and poverty in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa have also contributed to the movement of people.
2. **People are fleeing their countries of origin because they want safety and security;** as well as conflict and direct persecution the effects of poverty, inequality and discrimination are forcing people to flee their homes.
3. **People are dying by making unsafe journeys across the Mediterranean.** Reports suggest that more than 25,000 lives have been lost since the year 2000. The introduction of a UK humanitarian visa system would mean that those who are most in need can reach safe places when they need to, without having to resort to people smugglers to make the dangerous sea crossing.
4. **The UK has a legal duty to give asylum to those human beings who face violence and persecution,** and a moral duty to fulfil these duties to the best of its ability.
5. **The vast majority of refugees live in some of the world's poorest countries.** The UK has been generous in providing financial aid, but accepting a fair and proportionate share of people is equally necessary.
6. **Refugees have historically and currently made positive contributions to our economy, culture and services.**
7. **People seeking asylum in the UK face a hostile system and many end up destitute.** This is at odds with the common societal perception that the UK has a long and proud history of supporting people fleeing violence. We need to ensure that no one seeking asylum in the UK is deliberately made destitute.

8. **On 23 June 2016, the UK voted to leave the European Union.** The UK's legal obligations to refugees exist beyond the confines of EU membership, most notably in the form of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. As such, it is vital that the UK continues to live up to its legal and moral responsibilities to offer protection for refugees.

As Christians we are called to stand in solidarity with the displaced and dispossessed. There has never been a greater need for Churches to highlight the plight of refugees and support those already resident within our communities.

Therefore as a society we need to:

- **Introduce a system of humanitarian visas –** the UK and countries within the European Union need to introduce a system of humanitarian visas to help people fleeing violence and persecution to travel safely and legally to a country which will give them sanctuary.
- **Enable family reunion for refugees –** the UK should make it easier for refugees living in the UK to bring older children, dependent parents and siblings with no other family to join them. United families are stronger and more able to build independent lives and contribute to society.
- **Provide care for more unaccompanied children –** the UK should be striving to offer a home to at least 3,000 of the 88,000 unaccompanied refugee children in Europe², who are amongst the most vulnerable of those seeking sanctuary.
- **Reform the UK asylum system –** people who claim asylum in the UK should be treated with dignity. No-one should be deliberately made destitute.

Christian experiences of movement and migration

Movement and migration are two defining aspects of the Christian story. Since the earliest stories told in Jewish and Christian Scripture, God's people have been on the move. But our shared history reveals that two themes in particular, of oppression and hope, have dominated the migration experiences of humanity, and continue to shape the lives of refugees today. Movement away from danger and oppression and towards justice and hope is the salvation narrative of all God's people. This promise still holds profound relevance for the millions embarking upon dangerous journeys today.

God's greater purpose

The movement of people is often a key element in God's greater purposes. In the Bible this is first highlighted in the book of Genesis, when Abram receives the call to embrace God's promise that he will be the founder of a great nation. He is called from a state of settlement in Ur to a nomadic journey of faith – quite literally placing his feet in the pathways God determines for him.

Years later his great-grandson arrived in the land of Egypt as part of a merchant caravan. He had been bought, sold and trafficked, and it was not long before he found himself locked up in a cell, branded as a sex-offender, as a result of nothing more than a revenge allegation. As a foreigner and a slave, he could expect little else from the justice system of the day. Yet within a few short decades, he becomes one of that land's most important rulers, eventually re-locating his whole family in the fertile plains of Goshen. People are moving – God is at work.

God rescued his people from oppression and brought them to a place of safety

Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey."
(Exodus 3: 7-8)

That same family became a nation, and once again found themselves victims of injustice and oppression. Eventually they are subdued through state-sponsored genocide, but one child escapes, ironically being brought up in the royal palace, before he also flees for his life, having committed a "red mist" crime of violence. But years later he returns, and within a few short months is leading an entire nation on a journey to a "promised land". At the root of this movement of people is an encounter with God and at every turn in their journey God is seen to be present.

Having settled in their new land, the people became complacent. Complacency led to division and division led to weakness. The nations of God's people felt under threat from their powerful military neighbours; in successive invasions by Assyria and Babylon, thousands were displaced and forced into exile and captivity. Yet, a generation of prophets emerged, seeking to speak God's truth into the increasingly dangerous and unstable situation. And their message was not one of safety and security, but that the inevitable invasion and displacement was also a sign that God was at work. These were also voices that were not afraid to challenge the injustice, exploitation and inequality that prevailed in the society that felt so under threat.

God's people are instructed to welcome and look after the stranger

The Jewish people viewed themselves as being both governed by the teachings and actions of prophets like Abram on the one hand, and the law of the Torah on the other. Within these legal writings, there are clear instructions on how and why God's people must behave justly and fairly to the landless stranger.

*When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.
(Leviticus 19:33-34)*

*You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.
(Deuteronomy 10:19)*

The Torah makes clear that the moral imperative to look after and welcome the stranger and foreigner is born out of our own history. The call to uphold and protect the human dignity of the dispossessed is therefore intimately connected to our own human dignity.

Jesus the refugee

*An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod.
(Matthew 2: 13-14)*

One of the enduring images of our salvation story is that of a young couple, silhouetted against a dawning sky, their heads bent low, making their weary way to Bethlehem. It is an image that speaks to us at two levels.

First, it is a powerful image of hope. This is no ordinary couple and we have come to recognise that this is indeed the dawning of salvation. Amidst these chaotic and difficult earthly circumstances, God is at work. The dawning sky reminds us that these two are caught up in a narrative of eternal dimension; that God's purposes and promises prevail as they eventually arrive in Bethlehem and the Saviour of the World is born.

Second, it is also an image of oppression. Just as they are dwarfed by the huge open skies, this couple are also at the apparent mercy of the earthly circumstances in which they find themselves. Despite being heavily pregnant, Mary is forced to make the journey because Joseph is perceived as the father of her unborn child. The bureaucracies and power structures of the day insist that they return to the city of David to be registered and taxed; they are the powerless ones, manipulated and controlled by the political agendas and economic interests of others. They will arrive in Bethlehem to be rejected and left homeless, and a short time after the child's birth will once again be on the move; fleeing in terror from a murderous regime that is intent on destroying them. God's purposes are at work, but human injustice and oppression are also unleashed.

Christians have experienced persecution throughout history

*That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.
(Acts 8: 1)*

Years later, the followers of this same Jesus would also rush from their homes, seeking to make new lives away from the persecution and violence that was waging against them, simply because they had chosen to become followers of the Prince of Peace. And as they travelled, so their faith began to take root in new communities and networks: rather than destroying their new found faith, persecution became the means through which it spread.

Two basic realities: injustice and oppression

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

(Luke 4:18-20)

In each of these episodes, those two basic realities prevail. Injustice and oppression are never far away – even those who journey in hope are leaving behind situations that are scarred by evil and wrongdoing. And in each of them we can trace the hand of God at work, even in the midst of deeply troubling human circumstances, God's purposes and possibilities move towards fruition.

It is clear that movements of people are riddled with injustice. Many are only making these treacherous journeys because of intolerable situations in the places they call home. And as they travel across our planet, they are faced with further injustice, some at the hands of those individuals who see them as a means of exploitation, and some because of states and nations who place their own visions of wellbeing and security above the interests of those who are most needy in our world. The vision of Mary and Joseph reminds us that Jesus is no stranger to injustice, and his adult words in the synagogue of Nazareth make clear his commitment to challenge and overcome its hideous agendas.

And so as this couple made their weary way to Bethlehem, they were part of God's future purposes, but they also were part of an unfolding narrative of movement and displacement of people. Some of the displaced people whose stories we find in Scripture travelled with visions of new prosperity and hope; some with an inescapable conviction that this was their life's calling; others journeyed with a deep sense of fear and foreboding; some with a deep sense of betrayal by those they should have been able to trust; and some simply in fear for their lives.

God is at work in the movement of people today

We are recognising God at work in these movements of people. Churches are providing warm welcomes and sharing stories of new arrivals bringing fresh life and energy to their congregations. Incredible stories are emerging of individuals arriving at our shores with a new-found commitment to become faithful followers of Jesus. And we might also stop to consider what else God is saying – this movement of people seems to defy the economic, political and physical barriers that we have established in our world; yes, it is a threat to the status quo, particularly in those nations that are wealthy and self-satisfied; but this is a "status quo" that compared to the values of God's Kingdom is found seriously wanting.

There are many in our world whose instinctive response to mass migration and the call to provide refuge is to perpetuate the narratives of threat and fear. Narratives that only make sense when self-interest and personal prosperity matter more to us than our common humanity. We cannot pretend that the current world situation does not raise enormous difficulties for us, particularly those who have become used to the privileged lifestyle that prevails in the nations of Western Europe. But threat, fear and self-interest are not the narratives of God's Kingdom, and throughout our salvation story they are exposed as narratives that ought not to prevail.

Earlier this year, the Baptist Union of Great Britain made the following statement as a demonstration of Christian solidarity and commitment to refugees and asylum seekers.

We stand together and we stand with those who would welcome the stranger

And we stand in common humanity with those who some would call stranger

We recognise the cost to us of building communities of refuge

But dare to believe that the values of God's Kingdom are of greater worth

We celebrate the courage of those who come seeking refuge, acknowledging our common humanity and believe that God is at work within us

***And we will see God's purposes even in the midst of
human chaos and tragedy***

***We long we a different story; defined by justice and
mercy***

***We place self interest aside and will live as citizens of
heaven in the midst of this earthly story³***

As we embrace the reality of our world situation,
viewed through the lens of our Gospel story, these two
questions remain:

- What is God saying to his people and his creation in the midst of these new exiles and exoduses?
- What are the underlying injustices that we need to expose and challenge?

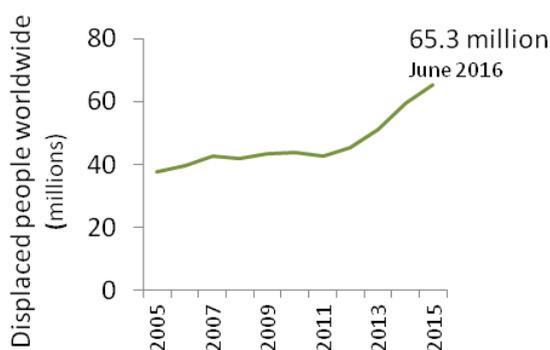
The crisis to date

- 1. The refugee crisis is not new. Conflict and unrest in Iraq, Libya and Egypt resulted in the growth of violent extremism and mass displacement of people across the Middle East and North Africa. Long term conflict and poverty in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa has also contributed to the movement of people.***

The civil war in Syria has resulted in 9 million people fleeing their homes since the outbreak of war; over 4 million have fled to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, whilst a further 6.5 million⁴ remain displaced and homeless within their own country. But even before the war broke out in Syria, the Middle East was already destabilised by the Iraq War, the consequences of western military intervention and the emergence of violent extremist groups. One of these, ISIS, moved into the vacuum created in Syria, increasing the dangers for the Syrian people already experiencing violent conflict. In addition to these events, the civil war in Libya sparked mass unrest and displacement of peoples in North Africa. Of course, there are no determined ‘origins’ of the current situation, but these more recent events contributed to growing instability across many countries.

Ongoing crises in the Central African Republic, Nigeria, South Sudan and elsewhere have also contributed to the soaring refugee population in Sub-Saharan Africa. Over 18 million people in this region are now of concern to the UNHCR, whilst conflicts emerging in South-East Asia, Burundi and Yemen⁵ put even more at risk of displacement.

Fig 1. Increasing numbers of Displaced People



Source: UNHCR

There are many ways in which this current situation can be described. Some believe that the language of ‘refugee crisis’ inadvertently places blame on refugees and prefer to describe it as a ‘humanitarian crisis’. Others feel that the language of ‘crisis’ is insufficient, and is prefer to speak of it as a ‘catastrophe’. Civil society groups have consistently used the phrase the ‘refugee crisis’ to refer to the ongoing mass displacement of peoples across the globe. This briefing recognises the limits of the term ‘refugee crisis’, but uses it in the belief that this is a global disaster that has resulted in the unprecedented growth in the number of refugees.

- 2. People are fleeing their countries of origin because they want safety and security.***

People leave their homes for many reasons. It is tempting to draw a distinction between people who are forced to leave their homes as refugees, fleeing from particular acts of violence or persecution, and those who appear to choose to migrate for economic reasons. In reality this distinction is very hard to identify.

It is clear that many refugees forced to flee from Syria had good jobs, but relative affluence did not enable them to remain safe in the face of civil war. In other circumstances, wars or disasters may act as triggers that compound the effects of poverty, inequality and discrimination, forcing people to flee their homes and country of origin.

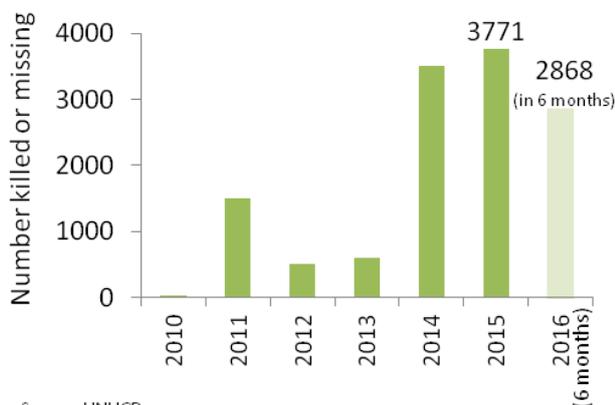
People facing food insecurity, extreme poverty, generalised violence or environmental degradation need protection but, if they live in a fragile state where the government is unable to protect people, they may be forced to flee. These people are increasingly termed “survival migrants”.

The UK system seeks to differentiate between “genuine” refugees and economic migrants. The process is messy and inaccurate, but even if it was perfect it would be important to recognise the genuine suffering and fear for safety that many of those who are refused asylum will have experienced. Our care and responsibility cannot end with those who meet the legal definition of asylum seeker.

3. People are dying making unsafe journeys across the Mediterranean. The introduction of a UK humanitarian visa system would mean that those who are most in need can reach safe places when they need to.

2,868 people died between January and June 2016 attempting to cross the Mediterranean⁶. At the moment, there are few safe, legal routes that people can use to reach safety and apply for asylum. Until there are, migrants will continue to make unsafe journeys on boats to Italy and Greece, and across land.

Fig 2. Large numbers of deaths of people crossing the Mediterranean



Source: UNHCR

The introduction of humanitarian visas would mean that a person in need of sanctuary could apply for a visa in or near their home country, fly to the safe country that had offered the humanitarian visa legally, and then apply for asylum on arrival. At the moment the paradoxical situation exists where people cannot claim asylum until they arrive in the safe country, but they are unable to travel legally to that country if they wish to seek asylum. A person wanting to seek asylum has to try to get a standard tourist visa, which is virtually impossible as they have to prove their willingness and intention to return home, or to travel illegally in order to make their asylum claim.

Humanitarian visas have precedent; in Italy, the Government has agreed to let the Church pilot a humanitarian corridors programme, which is already facilitating the safe movement and registration of 1000 refugees.

The European Union’s asylum system to date

The situation in the European Union is currently regulated by the Dublin framework. This is meant to

ensure that individuals can only seek asylum in one EU country, rather than make multiple applications. It also means that the country with responsibility is the first country through which the asylum seeker entered the EU. This creates tensions between poorer southern states, like Greece and Italy where the majority of migrants enter the EU, and richer northern states like Germany and Britain who are entitled to transfer seekers back to their first country of entry. It is a framework that ultimately depends on the political will and cooperation of individual countries; as such, it has struggled in the current climate to be effective and to share responsibilities equally across European countries.

Britain has long been exempt from most collective EU action on refugees. This is illustrated by the UK’s decision to opt-out of quotas for refugee resettlement. Whilst the UK has to date been bound by the Dublin framework, our UK refugee policy has been primarily shaped in London, rather than Brussels.

Family reunion provisions not working

The Dublin framework recognises that families should be allowed to refuge together. Under Dublin rules, an asylum seeker who has a family member with refugee status in an EU member state or an active application for asylum has the right to have their claim dealt with within that same state. Similarly, if an unaccompanied minor has family in another member state, then his or her claim should be transferred to that member state too. In reality this is not happening effectively and appears not to be prioritised by EU states. The result is that many vulnerable families are unnecessarily scattered throughout Europe.

People will continue to make unsafe journeys until there are safe routes, or they no longer feel the need to travel. Humanitarian visas will make safe routes available. The UK now has an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to supporting refugees by including such a visa system within a new asylum framework.

4. The UK has a legal duty to give asylum to those human beings who face violence and persecution, and a moral duty to fulfil these duties to the best of its ability.

The moral duty to help humans fleeing from conflict or persecution was made clear by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 14 recognises the “right of persons to seek asylum from persecution in other countries.” This duty was given legal force by the 1951 UN Refugee Convention.

Under regular circumstances, this right is granted on an individual basis, but during times of upheaval the right to claim asylum may be granted collectively.

The UDHR declaration defines a refugee as someone “Unable or unwilling to return to the country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reason of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.” Syrian refugees are being identified as such within Syria or surrounding countries by the UNHCR, and governments may then choose to allow a certain number of these refugees into the country. People who manage to reach a safe country may then also apply for asylum: an asylum seeker is someone who has applied to have their refugee status recognised by the government of a country of refuge, but whose application has not yet been concluded.

Although individuals with refugee status within the UK are entitled to request family reunion, research from the Red Cross indicates that limited access to legal services, travel assistance and other necessary forms of support are preventing refugees from pursuing family reunion with their loved ones. In 2013, the government withdrew legal aid funding that enabled refugees to seek out expert help in filling in application forms. More than half (51%) of refugees interviewed by the Red Cross indicated that the process involved costs, and many reported having difficulties in covering these costs⁷. Rights which cannot be accessed are without practical purpose. This situation is concerning both legally and morally.

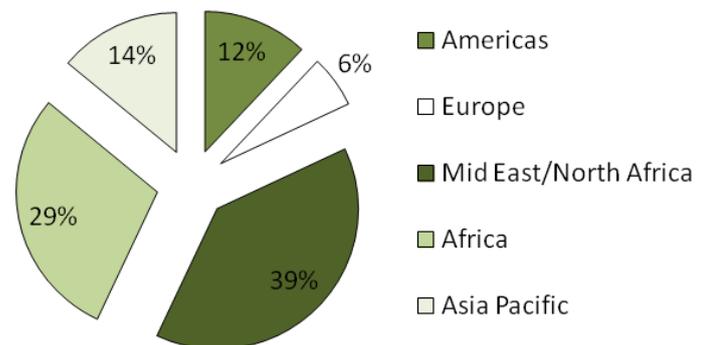
Even more worryingly, if an unaccompanied child is granted asylum in the UK they cannot sponsor any family members, even their parents, to join them⁸. Whilst this policy may fall within our international legal obligations, the morality of ensuring that vulnerable

and often traumatised children grow up without the support of their parents is highly questionable.

5. The vast majority of refugees live in the world’s poorest countries. The UK has been generous financially but ungenerous in offering sanctuary.

The UK is the second biggest bilateral donor in providing financial support to humanitarian efforts in Syria and the surrounding region. It has pledged over £2.3 billion over four years to support education, jobs and humanitarian protection. But this cannot replace a commitment to support people who are no longer in the region. The UK’s offer to resettle just 20,000 refugees within the next five years pales in comparison to the response from countries neighbouring Syria. Poorer, mainly Middle Eastern, African and South Asian Countries, host a remarkable 86% of all refugees⁹. In contrast, Europe is host to just 6% of the world’s refugees.

Fig 3. Europe is host to only 6% of the world’s refugees



Source: UNHCR

In Lebanon, a country of just 4.5 million people, the UN has registered more than 1.2 million Syrians since the beginning of the conflict¹⁰, but Lebanese officials estimate a further million people have crossed the border and have not been counted. Turkey has taken an estimated 2.7 million¹¹ and Jordan 642,000¹². Understandably, these countries are struggling to cope with the scale of the crisis.

Most people fleeing a crisis want to stay near to their original home; this is why so many refugees have opted to travel to Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, and why the UK Government’s financial contribution to the humanitarian effort is vital in relieving the financial burden faced by these countries. But some refugees may need to travel further, away from camps in

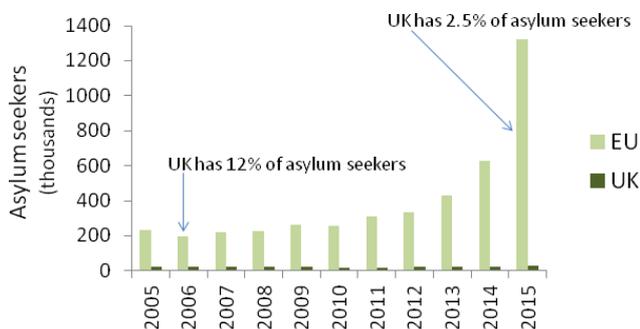
neighbouring countries, to find safety and a future – this is why it is essential that the UK offers asylum in addition to foreign aid, and plays its part in ensuring that there are safe routes across Europe.

6. Refugees and forced migrants have historically and currently made positive contributions to our economy, culture and services.

People in the UK are generally proud of their history of welcoming people seeking asylum. This has been demonstrated recently by the local campaigns in every part of Britain to persuade local authorities to voluntarily resettle Syrian refugees. This has not, however, been an unblemished history – Jews fleeing Nazi Germany were not all welcomed, for example. Whilst we may talk in terms of tolerance and welcome, our practice has sometimes been suspicion and our rhetoric divisive.

Refugees and forced migrants have contributed to our society. Between 1946 and 1949, Britain accepted more than 90,000 people from displaced persons camps in Europe specifically to rebuild its weakened economy.¹³ Today, one third of the UK’s medical practitioners were born outside of the EU¹⁴ and migrants play a key role in holding together our social care system. Some of our most famous cultural icons; musicians, politicians, writers and poets, have been able to thrive and succeed in the UK because previous governments acted on their obligation to take vulnerable persons from conflicts around the world.

Fig 4. UK is seeing a decreasing proportion of Europe’s Asylum Seekers



Source: Eurostat and Home Office

Immigration was a powerful and often divisive political issue that dominated much of the coverage of the recent European Union referendum. Polling consistently shows that the British public wants immigration levels to be reduced and that there is

particular concern about asylum seekers. Interestingly, personal experience or friendship with migrants is strongly correlated with more positive views towards migration.

Grants of asylum represent a tiny proportion of net immigration to the UK (3.5% in 2015). The issues around the effects of immigration on the economy and public services are beyond the scope of this discussion. However, given the proportionately small numbers of refugees and the UK’s considerable resources, it is clear that effective policies of resettlement and integration could enable higher numbers of refugees to be supported while meeting the concerns of existing local communities.

9. People seeking asylum in the UK face a hostile system and many end up destitute. This is at odds with the common societal perception that the UK has a long and proud history of supporting people fleeing violence. We need to ensure that no one seeking asylum in the UK is deliberately made destitute.

By the end of March 2016, 1,854 Syrians had been resettled under the Government’s Syrian Vulnerable Person’s Resettlement Programme¹⁵. These refugees are given housing, access to benefits, the right to work, as well as support as they arrive and integrate. People who arrive independently and apply for asylum, however, face a very different situation. Individuals who may have fled from violence in their country of origin face what they report to be a “culture of disbelief” as they make their case over a number of months or, in some cases, years, are normally refused permission to work and are reliant on financial support from the Home Office which amounts to just over £5 per day.¹⁶

In 2013 the Government set up a ministerial committee initially called the “Hostile Environment Task Group”, later renamed the “Inter-Ministerial Group on Migrants’ Access to Benefits and Public Services”. The explicit aim was to create a more hostile environment towards groups of immigrants and thereby encourage them to leave the UK. In this light it becomes easier to understand recent policies such as removing legal aid support for asylum claims and requiring that all appeals be lodged in person at a

single office in Liverpool, irrespective of where the asylum seeker may live.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has found that around 120,000 asylum seekers, including approximately 30,000 children, experienced destitution in 2015. Many asylum seekers who have their claims rejected have “no recourse to public funds”, even if they are unable to return to their home country, and as a result end up destitute. The British Red Cross has reported a rise in the destitution of asylum seekers and irregular migrants: in Manchester it found most destitute asylum seekers are at the end of the asylum process and a significant number are waiting for emergency support to begin¹⁷.

Current policy appears to be in danger of creating a distinction between “deserving refugees” who enter the UK from Syria under government programmes, and “undeserving” ones who come to the UK and apply for asylum themselves.

Latest reports indicate that around 30,000 people entered immigration detention centres in the year ending June 2015¹⁸, of that number 3,418 were ‘in detention’¹⁹. The single most common category of immigration detainees is people who have at some point sought asylum in the UK. Over half of detainees are held for less than two months, whilst a small but consistent minority (6%) remain in these centres for over six months. Guidance states that people should only be sent to a detention centre when removal is ‘imminent’, but there is nothing in immigration legislation limiting the amount of time a person can be detained. Survivors of torture, pregnant women and those with severe mental health problems are often held in detention even though it is government policy not to detain those with serious medical conditions²⁰. Jesuit Refugee Action argue that the environment of detention centres can both worsen pre-existing medical conditions and cause mental ill health in those who do not possess otherwise recognised vulnerabilities.²¹

Refugees and asylum seekers, many of whom endured traumatic episodes in their country of origin causing them to leave in the first place, face immense challenges in attempting to rebuild their lives in a new country.

“There is a cyclic character to people’s experience. The humiliation that they have longed to escape is inflicted on them all over again; and often inflicted, as we’ve heard, in an unfamiliar language, in an unfamiliar cultural setting, in an environment where people’s age and experience don’t equip them to deal with the complexities of what’s thrown at them. To me, one of the worst and most nightmarish aspects of what we are doing to refugees in this country is that sense of intensifying the humiliation.”

The Rt Revd Dr. Rowan Williams, in a speech given to the London Churches Refugee Fund in July 2016.²²

This country should not be a hostile environment. Common decency dictates that we should afford newcomers a welcome and every opportunity to flourish while the immigration processes run their course.

8. On 23 June 2016, the UK voted to leave the European Union.

The European Referendum was not a vote about refugees, but it is a clear indicator that the UK’s immigration and asylum policies are going to change; and this is likely to affect the way in which the United Kingdom responds to the refugee crisis.

Our obligations to refugees predate our EU membership, and it is vital that the UK continues to live up to its moral and legal responsibilities to offer protection for refugees. Whilst the UK’s relationship with the Dublin III framework is likely to alter, our responsibility to resettle and support refugees remains.

As Christians we are called to stand in solidarity with the displaced and dispossessed. There has never been a greater need for Churches to highlight the plight of refugees and support those already resident within our communities.

Experiences of the crisis

No one story or description of the refugee crisis can reveal the complexity and devastation experienced as a result of forced displacement. But these three perspectives highlight the ongoing challenges facing those affected by the crisis, but also signs of hope and goodness amidst the tragedy of conflict, displacement and war.

‘Violence creates hopelessness’

Mary Mikhael

National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon

“Christians used to live in Syria with security and relative freedom, but the situation for Syria’s Christians has changed dramatically since the Arab Spring.

With the rise of ISIS, and in areas controlled by the (so called) Islamic State, Christians were given choices to convert to Islam, leave, or be killed. Christian youth, Priests and even Bishops were kidnapped, never to come back.

War and violence urge people to run for safety leaving behind all they have. I visited my village in Syria to see my mother a few weeks ago. I was told the village is now empty of its youth. All have sold land to pay smugglers to take them to Europe and some have died in the sea, never to see Europe.

What future is there for Syria’s Christians? A history and culture are being destroyed. [Our] greatest fear is that the cradle of Christianity is emptied of its Christian community – [a community] that has survived for two thousand years.”

‘Not a single incident in our lives can be empty of goodness’.

Javed (not his real name)

A Computer Engineer and refugee now living in Holland

Javed fled from Afghanistan to Turkey fearing that the Taliban intended to kill him. Realising he could not turn back home, he managed to get to Greece and then Macedonia before finally settling in Holland. His boat crossing cost €2,500.

“We came here to seek a safe haven. I’ve never travelled without permission before, and I felt really guilty.

There is goodness here, which makes me feel I can continue. Not a single incident in our lives can be empty of goodness.

There is so much potential, particularly amongst the female refugees. But many Doctors and computer engineers are wasting away in camps.

I am fortunate because I still have financial support [from family in Afghanistan]. Others I know have no work allowance and no money. I get frustrated by people giving my friends second hand clothes; these people need new clothes, money, or the ability to work.”

‘He was left destitute’

A case study from the London Churches Refugee Fund²³

Malik (not his real name) came to the UK in 2005, aged just 17, escaping his home country after being detained and tortured in prison for six months for participating in protests. The Home Office did not believe that he was a child or a survivor of torture. Malik appealed against the rejection of his claim for asylum, but when his lawyer failed to attend the court hearing he was forced to present his case alone. Two weeks later his appeal was dismissed, his accommodation and financial support were terminated, and he was left destitute.

Malik initially stayed with friends, or in his local mosque, but at times he had to sleep on the streets or on night buses, relying on community organisations

and the mosque for food, or going hungry for two or three days. In 2009 Malik was referred to Freedom from Torture for trauma therapy. After years of refusals, in 2011 his appeal finally succeeded. Three months later he was granted permission to live in the UK but was evicted from his NASS accommodation and financial support was discontinued. He was refused emergency accommodation, his mainstream benefits were delayed for three weeks, and he was left destitute again.

Malik was finally provided with temporary hostel accommodation after his local authority was threatened with legal action, but still needs a permanent place to live.

An effective response to the crisis

Our response to the plight of the forcibly displaced is a practical test of our commitment to refugees and human rights. It is a test which the UK is in danger of failing. While the UK has given significant money to help those refugees who remain in countries bordering Syria, we have been slow to recognise the need of migrants who move into Europe. There is far more still to be done, both immediately, and long into the future.

Priorities:

Humanitarian Visas

Refugees are dying and facing danger unnecessarily as they cross the Mediterranean and within Europe. The current system of support for refugees making their way to or through Europe is chaotic and is largely designed to keep people away rather than help them reach safety.

Humanitarian visas are a way in which the UK could play a part in facilitating genuinely safe passage through the continent. A UK Humanitarian Visa system could provide secure entry for migrants who would be able to request it directly in a third country.

This could prevent individuals from needing to take dangerous journeys across the Mediterranean, and is the best way to ensure parity of responsibility for refugee resettlement.

Family reunion

Refugees should be able to be united with close family members. Allowing families to be united strengthens refugees' ability to successfully integrate and build independent lives in their new country. It can also provide a legal and relatively safe way of enabling people to flee from danger.

Currently, those with refugee and humanitarian protection status in the UK can only bring their spouses

and children to the UK. We support the campaign being run by The Red Cross to widen these rules, so that older children, dependent parents and grandparents, and siblings with no other family can apply to join their relatives in the UK.

The UK government should reinstate legal aid for family reunion and simplify the application process so that it is flexible enough to deal with atypical cases.

Unaccompanied minors

Although close to 90,000 unaccompanied children registered as EU asylum seekers in 2015, at least a further 10,000 unaccompanied refugee children in Europe have gone missing. Unaccompanied children fleeing conflict find themselves vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation at the hands of criminal gangs.

The Government has said that it will take around 3,000 child refugees from Syria by 2020, but this does not help the thousands of unaccompanied children who have already made it to Europe. Save the Children have called for the Government to take a further 3,000 child refugees from Europe. The Government needs to recognise that this is not simply a Syrian crisis but a European wide one and respond accordingly.

UK asylum system

The UK asylum system must be fairer, less punitive, and not put asylum seekers at risk of destitution. As the government develops its programme of resettlement direct from one affected region it is seeking to devalue and restrict the asylum system in the UK. This is legally and morally problematic.

Despite rapid growth in the use of immigration detention in Britain there is no correlation between the number of people detained and the number of people lawfully deported. The use of detention centres is not an effective way of dealing with asylum issues. The government must minimise its use of detention, ensure better access to legal representation for detainees, and ensure the maximum time in detention is reduced to no more than 28 days.

We need to ensure the government continues to provide a viable and just asylum system for all who seek sanctuary and affords human dignity to everyone.

Glossary of terms

- **Asylum Seeker** – A person who has left their country of origin and applied for asylum in another country but whose application has not been concluded.
- **Refugee** – Anyone who is outside their home country because of fear of persecution.
- **Economic Migrant** – Someone who moves to another country to work. Refugees are not economic migrants.
- **Illegal immigrant** – A pejorative term used to mean someone who enters the country by clandestine means, deception or in breach of a deportation order. Asylum seekers and refugees cannot be illegal immigrants. No person can be deemed illegal for the act of simply taking a step across a border –the term ‘undocumented migrant’ is preferred.
- **Survival Migrant** – People forced to flee their country because their government cannot resolve their problem of food insecurity, extreme poverty, generalised violence or environmental degradation.
- **Displacement** – The forced or obliged fleeing or leaving of homes, usually as a result of conflict, human rights violations or natural disasters.
- **Sanctuary** – Refuge or safety from pursuit, persecution or other danger.
- **Transnational** – Operating beyond national boundaries.
- **Persecution** – Hostility, ill-treatment or oppression, usually on grounds of race or religious beliefs.
- **Safe Passage** – State-facilitated protection offered to registered refugees in the form of established safe routes across a geographical area.
- **“Migrant Shopping”** – The attempt to match skills of migrants/refugees to labour deficits in certain countries
- **Humanitarian** – Concerned with or seeking to promote human welfare.
- **Destitution** – Poverty so extreme that one loses the ability to provide for oneself.
- **Recourse to Public Funds** – The right to-access to financial or in-kind support from the Government bodies.

An extensive glossary can be found at the [Refugee Council’s](#) website.

Resources on the Refugee Crisis

CTBI – [Focus on Refugees](#)

The Baptist Union – [The refugee crisis](#)

Ecumenical and interfaith partners including the Church of Scotland, United Reformed Church National Synod of Scotland and the Methodist Church in Scotland - [Scottish Faith Action for Refugees](#)

The Methodist Church – [Refugee crisis: resources, prayers and updates](#)

United Reformed Church – [Sacred Conversations on Migration](#)

Church of England – [Resettlement Factsheet](#)

Mission Theology Advisory Group – [Mission, Migrants and Refugees](#)

Chapel St, The Good Faith Partnership - [For Refugees](#)

CCME - [Analysis and what we can do](#) and [Theological Reflections on Migration](#)

World Council of Churches – [The “Other” Is My Neighbour](#)

Justice and Peace Commission – [Liverpool Asylum Info for Churches](#)

Diocese of Bath and Wells – [Responding to the refugee crisis - practical guidance.](#)

Diocese of Guilford – [Responding to the refugee crisis with PEACE](#)

The Children’s Society – [Young refugees and migrants](#)

All We Can – [Refugees: “To all the people we can”](#)

Christian Aid – [Refugee Crisis Appeal](#)

CAFOD – [Refugee Crisis: Your questions answered](#)

Other organisations:

[International Organisation for Migration](#)

[Refugee Action](#)

[Refugee Council](#)

[Citizens UK](#)

[National Refugee Welcome Board](#)

[Scottish Refugee Council](#)

¹ <http://www.unhcr.org/576408cd7>

² <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7244677/3-02052016-AP-EN.pdf/19cfd8d1-330b-4080-8ff3-72ac7b7b67f6>

³ http://baptist.org.uk/Articles/468157/Commitment_to_refugee.aspx

⁴ <http://www.internal-displacement.org/assets/publications/2015/201509-corp-IDMC-annual-report-en.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.unhcr.org/africa.html>

⁶ <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/>

⁷ <http://www.redcross.org.uk/~media/BritishRedCross/Documents/About%20us/Research%20reports%20by%20advocacy%20dept/Family%20reunion%20for%20refugees%20in%20the%20UK%20-%20understanding%20support%20needs.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/actions/bring-refugee-families-back-together-asylum-uk-reunion>

⁹ https://www.amnesty.org.uk/webfm_send/723

¹⁰ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

¹¹ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

¹² <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

¹³ Migration and Settlement of Refugees in Britain : Alice Block (2002)

¹⁴ http://www.ippr.org/files/images/media/files/publication/2014/03/Fair-deal-on-migration_Mar2013_11970.pdf?noredirect=1

¹⁵ House of Commons Library briefing: Syrian refugees and the UK response (2016)

¹⁶ https://www.amnesty.org.uk/webfm_send/723

¹⁷ <https://www.scribd.com/doc/177096544/A-decade-of-destitution-time-to-make-a-change>

¹⁸ <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/migobs/Immigration%20Detention%20Briefing.pdf>

¹⁹ <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7294>

²⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jul/20/colnbrook-detention-centre-photographs-asylum-seekers>

²¹ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/document/activities/cont/201110/20111014ATT29338/20111014ATT29338EN.pdf>

²² <http://www.help4refugees.co.uk/>

²³ <http://www.help4refugees.co.uk/case-studies/4587046099>

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All We Can

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