

HEADS OF CHURCHES' REFUGEE SUNDAY STATEMENT

(Made by heads of member churches of the National Council of Churches in Australia*)

"For over 50 years, Australian churches have helped refugees, and since 1997, Australian churches have marked Refugee Sunday. This year, Australia faces a situation that requires a gospel response.

We stand at the crossroads. Confronted by the horrors of war, persecution and displacement. Forced to deal with the victims of atrocities and persecution. And challenged by the need to rid humanity of the poverty, injustice and persecution that breeds discrimination and violence.

Will we fear the stranger and close our doors, or open our minds and work to bridge the ethnic, religious and political divides by welcoming and protecting refugees?"

Australia's Challenge: to Protect or Reject Refugees?

In October 2002, Australia and 61 other member states of the United Nation's High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Executive Committee made an undertaking to protect, rather than reject, refugees when endorsing the '**Agenda for Protection**'¹ (see: www.unhcr.ch).

Having made the commitment, nations like Australia must now live up to their promises to protect and not reject refugees, and share instead of shift their responsibilities. Australia has a strong track record in voluntarily resettling offshore refugees. The Gospel now calls upon us to challenge Australia's treatment of onshore refugees and asylum seekers:

- Our system of mandatory, indefinite and non-reviewable detention should be replaced by creative community-release models, particularly for children and their families.
- Struggling on-shore refugees granted Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) and asylum seekers in the community on bridging visas need much improved income and services support.
- Massive over-spending on border control should be reduced and funds diverted to the UNHCR to assist displaced people in refugee camps and help neighbouring states provide effective protection.
- Australia's so-called 'Pacific Solution' - using the navy to forcibly intercept and transfer asylum seekers to remote Pacific islands detention centres for refugee processing - should be abandoned.

While some governments weaken refugee protections, the Agenda for Protection stands as a beacon of hope. UNHCR's "Convention Plus" initiative stands as another beacon, aiming to complement the Refugee Convention with agreements on secondary movement, mass influxes, resettlement, conflict prevention and development assistance. Implementing these initiatives, however, requires international co-operation and the support of all UN member states.

Celebrating Refugee Sunday on August 31 this year provides an opportunity to educate ourselves and others, while encouraging the Australian Government to act in solidarity with refugees. The NCCA will again provide resources and ideas to help us.

***Signed by (Heads of NCCA Member Churches):**

Archbishop Peter Carnley, Anglican Church Of Australia
Archbishop Baliozian, Armenian Apostolic Church
Bishop Mar Meelis Zaia, Assyrian Church Of The East
Revd Peter Overton, Churches Of Christ In Australia
Archbishop Stylianos, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese Of Australia
Revd Mike Semmler, Lutheran Church Of Australia
Ruth Watson, Religious Society Of Friends
Revd Dr Gabriel Popescu, Romanian Orthodox Church
Commissioners Les Strong & Ross Kendrew, Salvation Army
Archbishop Francis Carroll, Roman Catholic Church
Revd Professor James Haire, Uniting Church In Australia
Revd Zeki Zitoun, Syrian Orthodox Church

*Refugee Sunday is known as Refugee & Migrant Sunday in the Roman Catholic Church

¹ The Agenda for Protection is a 27-page document that represents an international consensus on policy and a blueprint for action. It is the product of a two-year series of Global Consultations and is one of the most important documents since the 1951 Refugee Convention. For more information, search www.unhcr.ch for the 'Agenda for Protection', 'Global Consultations', 'Convention Plus', or UNHCR 2004.