



Media Release - 20 June 2021

## Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce shares vision of new season of community support for refugees and asylum seekers

In a meeting at Parliament House in Canberra on Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> June, a delegation from the Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce (ACRT) met with the office of the Hon Alex Hawke MP Minister for Immigration, Citizenship, Migrant Services and Multicultural Affairs to share the churches' vision for a new partnership and a new season.

"Our churches have a shared vision of an Australia which is welcoming and compassionate, where people who are refugees and seeking asylum will find a place, where they are treated fairly, they feel welcome and safe, and they can contribute their gifts to our society, so that they and we can flourish", said Dr Deidre Palmer, President of the Uniting Church in Australia.

Mr Kevin Amiri, Ministry Assistant and Community Liaison with the Salvation Army's Brunswick Corps and Mr Joseph Youhana, Community Inclusion Manager with the Brotherhood of St. Laurence, highlighted the contribution that young people who have grown up in Australia on temporary visas have made to Australia. They told stories of several young women who through education, sport and thriving small businesses are contributing to Australian society but now find themselves unable to go further because of their unresolved visa status.

At the simplest level, the ACRT is calling on the Australian Government to:

1. **Conduct fair and timely assessment of claims for refugee status** (putting resources into fair and timely assessment of claims and *not* into the exorbitant, unnecessary and harmful costs of detention).
2. **Support people seeking asylum to live in the community with adequate income and access to health care during the assessment of their claims** (if they are unable to find work to support themselves.)
3. **Introduce community sponsorship of refugees** as a new mechanism in Australia to provide safety and protection for those seeking refuge.

The ACRT is an affiliate of the Community Refugee Sponsorship Initiative which is currently being trialled in Australia. Church groups are participating in the Group Mentorship pilot program providing settlement support to refugees. The mentor groups provide the mentees with practical and holistic support for an agreed period. This model is based on the groups raising the funds to support the basic needs of the refugee(s) during their first year in Australia.

Anglican Church

Antiochian  
Orthodox Church

Armenian  
Apostolic Church

Assyrian Church  
of the East

Chinese Methodist  
Church

Churches of Christ

Congregational  
Federation

Coptic  
Orthodox Church

Greek  
Orthodox Church

Indian  
Orthodox Church

Lutheran Church

Mar Thoma Church

Religious Society  
of Friends (Quakers)

Roman Catholic Church

Romanian  
Orthodox Church

Salvation Army

Syrian  
Orthodox Church

Uniting Church

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ABN 47 000 391 104

Australia's existing Community Support Program (CSP) which commenced in early 2018 carries a similar name but is significantly different in practice. It requires private individuals or businesses as sponsors rather than community groups. It is extremely expensive and gives priority to applicants who are 'job ready', with 'adequate English', and coming from certain priority countries. This tends to preclude those in most urgent need of resettlement.

"Humane treatment for those currently in Australia seeking safety, together with a new community supported refugee intake program will foster connectedness, cohesion and revitalisation not just for refugees and their families but for Australian communities", said Mr. Rob Floyd, ACRT Chairperson.

Ms. Carmen Lazar, Program Manager at the Assyrian Australian Association welcomes the idea of working together to resettle refugees and for a new program that will increase refugee intake. "We can help our regional areas with a workforce that will work hard in our agricultural and rural industries."

Ms. Elizabeth Stone, General Secretary at the National Council of Churches in Australia explained that "Our churches, and other faith communities, are willing and able to be more involved in supporting refugees in our communities, and there is an existing groundswell of activity in many parts of Australia supporting people on temporary visas living and contributing to our communities. But we need government to make the changes to end detention and to support and encourage this community movement by giving permanent protection. It is good for Australia in so many ways."

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