

A Global Dilemma, a Challenge for Christians

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No government in the world wants refugees who turn up unannounced on their border, in search of protection and assistance. Even countries such as Australia and the United States, which have long traditions of refugee resettlement, devise ways to prevent the arrival of asylum-seekers and to make life uncomfortable for those who do manage to get in. Why is this? Why would a government which devotes considerable energy and expense to resettling refugees in a country with a rich multi-cultural heritage be developing draconian policies to keep other refugees out? Some politicians would argue that the people arriving now aren't really refugees or if they are fleeing persecution, they are somehow "jumping the queue." Others would argue that they have used criminal means or falsified documents to gain entry to Australia and therefore can't be "genuine." There is a confusion in public opinion, sometimes exacerbated by politicians, between refugees, migrants, victims of trafficking and asylum-seekers.

The issues are complex and messy. Sometimes we get so caught up in our procedures and processes that we forget the human side of the dilemma of people forced to flee for their lives. Desperate people do desperate things. The conflicts that uproot people are not neat, orderly processes. Sometimes people seize the chance they have to escape and can't wait in the resettlement queue (although the term 'queue' itself is misleading.) Sometimes the only way to reach safety is to lie or to buy a false passport. Does that mean that individuals who do so are less worthy than those who come through "established channels?" We need to remember that when Jesus Christ urged his followers to "welcome the stranger," he didn't limit this to people whose documents are in order and who follow the procedures followed by our governments.

Today, on every continent, Christians are being challenged in unprecedented ways by the politics of international migration. While much of the public debate focuses on policies, procedures and numbers, the questions raised by migration are ultimately ethical, moral and theological issues. How do we define the "other?" Where do we draw the line to exclude others? What are we afraid of? What is our responsibility for suffering in other parts of the world? What is our responsibility as Christians and as human beings to those who arrive on our doorsteps after having been forced to abandon their homes and flee their communities?

You can't understand what's happening in the area of refugees without considering the broader question of migration. And migration is too important an issue to leave to the politicians. It is also not a new issue. Since the time of the Old Testament, people have fled their homes because of persecution, war, famine and poverty. The Bible has been called the "ultimate immigration handbook" and is filled with admonitions to do justice to the stranger and "to show hospitality because in doing so you may have welcomed angels unawares." But the stories of the Old Testament also reflect their historical context in the tales of backlash and scapegoating of foreigners. Those of us working with immigrants and refugees don't often quote the texts from Ezra and Nehemiah, but those stories remind us of the ageless tendency to exclude those who are different. It is Christ's message of inclusion that transcends these Old Testament stories. "From his parables and his actions, it is clear that Jesus not only challenged those individuals (e.g. the Pharisees) who maintained the barriers that marginalized whole groups within his society, but was prepared to confront any system of thought or practice that created those barriers...It is this challenge to the dominant, and dominating religious system which provides the basis for the church's obligation to call into question any system which leads to or justifies discrimination, regardless of the form that discrimination might take: economic (hunger, thirst, nakedness), national loyalty (foreigners), physical (sick), or social (in prison.)" Christ himself identifies with the migrant when he tells us that in welcoming the stranger we are welcoming him (Matthew 25).

Migration issues are complicated and (given limitations of time this afternoon), I will risk oversimplifying complex issues and confine myself to making 4 short points, raising questions about Christian responsibility “for such a time is this.” This phrase comes, of course, from the story of Esther, but for me, it evokes memories of the last time I was in Australia where this was the theme of the Pre-assembly Women’s meeting in Canberra in 1991.

1. INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION IS A FACT OF LIFE AND WILL INCREASE IN THE FUTURE.

We live in a world where people cross national borders for many reasons. Some are forced to flee their communities because of persecution and violence. Others are forced to leave because they can no longer survive at home because of economic or environmental disasters. Still others migrate because they hope for better economic prospects or to reunite with family members. While the cornerstone of globalization has been the increased international flow of trade, capital, information and services, the right to freedom of movement for many people – especially refugees, asylum-seekers and non-wealthy migrants – has been severely curtailed. Governments in both North and south have become more active in trying to limit the movement of people into their territories. Control of borders is perhaps the last bastion of sovereignty at a time when governments are no longer able to control the movement of money, information or jobs from their countries. But in spite of governmental efforts to control migration, international migration – particularly irregular migration – continues to rise. Indications are that in our globalizing world, the pressures for migration will further increase in the years to come. The causes of migration are rooted in the dozens of conflicts around the world as well as the underside of globalization – the growing disparity between rich and poor resulting from the inequitable distribution of resources. Until the international community is prepared to tackle the fundamental causes of violence and inequality, migration will continue.

One of the characteristics of today’s globalization is that the world’s conflicts and suffering enter most of our homes every day by television, newspapers and the web. As one of the CCIA youth commissioners said at our Commission meeting last month, “we can choose not to act, but we cannot choose not to know.” The presence of refugees and migrants among us, invited or not, serves as a bridge across borders, enabling us to interact with other parts of the world in unique ways. For example, you can read a dozen newspaper articles about Afghanistan, but your view of the Afghan situation and perhaps of that region of the world will be inalterably shaped by coming to know an Afghan refugee. Refugees and migrants offer us a different way of knowing the world.

I invite you to think about Christian responsibility in a world of people on the move. In such a time as this, what is the appropriate response? What is our responsibility towards refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants? Do people fleeing persecution have a greater claim on the churches’ compassion than those trying to escape poverty? Does this imply that violations of civil and political rights are worse than violations of economic, social or cultural rights? Should everyone fleeing violence or poverty be allowed to enter any country of the world? How should governments set limits and what role should Christians play in the policy debate?

2. REFUGEE PROTECTION IS BEING ERODED IN EVERY REGION OF THE WORLD.

Fifty years ago, the international community developed a particular regime to respond to one group of forced migrants: refugees. This international refugee regime includes a common definition of the people of concern, proscribes certain standards for their treatment through an international convention, and recognizes an international agency, UNHCR, to protect and assist refugees. Undergirding this international refugee regime was a consensus that individuals fleeing persecution (as defined by the Convention) required protection.

This system has been far from perfect and the present UNHCR Global Consultations on Refugee Protection are intended to identify gaps in the 1951 Convention and to move towards common interpretation of the convention as well as to reaffirm the convention. This international system of refugee protection, and particularly the institution of asylum, need to be upheld and strengthened to ensure that all those in need of international protection are able to find it. The reality is that there are still many people in the world in need of protection from persecution and war who are not able to find safety.

In the past decade, the right to seek and enjoy asylum has been eroded in many countries. Governments have made it more difficult for people fleeing persecution to even reach their borders and access asylum procedures through interdiction, visa requirements, carrier sanctions, immigration controls in airports of departure and other measures. In many cases, it is impossible for people fearing persecution from their governments to obtain a passport from that government or to approach embassies in search of a visa. Once asylum-seekers enter a country, they often find the procedures confusing and intimidating. If they arrive without documentation, they are often treated with suspicion. Moreover, they may be detained and lack legal counsel to present their cases in the best possible way.

The acceptance rates of asylum applications have plummeted in most Western countries over the past 15 years. While governments argue that this is due to the fact that many “bogus asylum-seekers” are abusing the system, many refugee advocates assert that people with genuine asylum claims are being denied. And many people with reasons to fear persecution in their home country choose not to enter the asylum process because they perceive that the personal costs are greater than their chance of success.

What is the particular responsibility of Christians to those forced to flee violence? Most fundamentally, Christians are called to struggle for justice and to overcome violence in order to make ours a world where people aren’t forced to abandon their homes and flee their communities. Churches and their organizations have been in the forefront of the struggle to protect the basic human right of every person “to seek and enjoy asylum.” On the national level, this means urging that the benefit of the doubt must always be given to those who say they fear persecution back home.

3. DEVELOPMENTS IN AUSTRALIA ARE SHAPED BY AND CONTRIBUTE TO THE WEAKENING OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM OF REFUGEE PROTECTION.

Australia has a wonderful history and tradition of welcoming immigrants and refugees. The treatment of aboriginal people is a dark side of the story in your country (as in mine) which must be acknowledged and redressed. But your immigrant tradition is a tradition to protect, to be proud of, to uphold. There is something very special about being a country of immigrants – something that sets Australia apart from most countries of the world. Your country has meant freedom, safety, and opportunity for hundreds of thousands of people who could not stay in their country of origin. And your country has been transformed by the presence of immigrants. While it’s not perfect, your model of a multi-cultural society has been a shining example to the world. When it comes to refugees and immigrants, Australia has a wonderful international reputation.

It is this reputation which makes current policy developments so troubling. For example, there is something profoundly disturbing about Australia putting asylum-seekers in isolated detention centers. This isn’t a new or unique trend; many governments followed these kinds of policies, reflecting a global trend of isolating asylum-seekers from the general public. It’s easier to deport people when no one in the country knows them, when they have no friends or advocates. But it is new to see Australia doing it. It is new to see Australia leading the critics of UN human rights instruments. It’s shocking to see the government react to a few boatloads of asylum-seekers

with draconian measures which undercut decades of generous policies. A few months ago, UNHCR's Executive Committee considered how the international community should respond to situations of mass influx. What's the appropriate response when a million Rwandans flee the genocide in their country? How should the international community respond to the exodus of ethnic Albanians from Kosovo where hundreds of thousands of people flooded into neighboring countries in a few days? Most of the interventions came from governments of countries that had experienced large-scale mass influxes – governments like Tanzania, Ethiopia, Pakistan, Iran. And then the Australian representative said something like “well, small numbers of people arriving over time can have the same impact as a sudden mass influx.” The reaction in the room was one of amazement – surely Australia isn't claiming that the boats arriving on its shores are comparable to mass influxes of hundreds of thousands of refugees arriving in poor countries. Unfortunately, the impact of these Australian policy changes and the tenor of the public debate goes far beyond your country's borders.

Negative public opinion towards asylum-seekers is obviously growing in Australia. There is a backlash. But backlashes are like pendulums – they come and they go. It is sad to see Australia apparently willing to abandon basic standards in its treatment of asylum-seekers because of what is probably a transient phenomenon. In my country, the United States, there was a horrible backlash against immigrants in the mid-1990s. Politicians railed against the “illegal aliens” taking Americans' jobs and many restrictive laws were passed. But now the pendulum has swung in the other direction and politicians are trying to undo some of the most egregious laws passed five years ago.

How are Australian churches and individual Christians responding at such a time as this? I know that many churches are involved with these issues -- churches are speaking out against politically unpopular policies, advocating for changes in policies, organizing hearings and writing letters, visiting detention centres and assisting individual asylum-seekers and migrants in many ways. Like Christians in many parts of the world, speaking out on behalf of uprooted people can be very difficult and very lonely. You may sometimes think that no one is listening when you speak out and policies can be frustratingly difficult to change. But you are not alone. At church gatherings – like this one – in South Africa and Argentina, in Norway and Thailand, Christians are coming together to pray, to share experiences, to educate each other and to develop means of translating the Gospel imperative to welcome the stranger into concrete actions.

4. THERE ARE NO EASY ANSWERS.

As long as we live in a world plagued by war and poverty, people will try to escape their conditions by migration. They will bypass governmental efforts at border control and their journeys will become more dangerous and more costly. The causes and inter-relationships of migratory flows are complex. Governmental efforts to stop smugglers and traffickers can make it more difficult, more expensive, and sometimes impossible for people fleeing persecution to find safety. We know that refugees frequently use routes used by traditional migrants when war forces them to leave their homes. In a world where there are limits to the number of refugees and migrants who will be admitted into rich countries, the questions of whom to admit are difficult. What should be the balance between admitting immigrants who meet Australia's labour needs and accepting refugees for humanitarian reasons?

Similarly there are no easy answers to questions about Christian responsibility in such a time as this. Like the Good Samaritan, we have a responsibility to the victims on the road -- to patch them up, to care for them, to help them. This is noble work. Even as we in the churches complain about the inadequacy of the international system of refugee protection, we recognize that millions of people every year are safe because of this system. While we urge governments of resettlement countries to accept more refugees because the numbers are never enough, we know that hundreds of thousands of individual human beings are being given a chance to start

new lives because of these policies. We need to affirm the positive aspects of our present system – even as we advocate for changes which would make the systems more responsive to the needs of uprooted people.

For churches in Australia, reaching out to the strangers in our midst or advocating with the government in an increasingly difficult climate is not easy. Sometimes the people in our churches are confused or even hostile to refugees. The backlash isn't something that is happening "out there." It is also happening in our own communities. It can be very tiring to always be explaining why refugees sometimes can't enter through established channels. Nevertheless, if we are to be faithful to the Gospel -- to welcome the stranger and work for justice – we have no choice. It must be our task and responsibility to open our eyes to the uprooted among us. Let us take to heart the words in the book of Hebrews that it is our privilege and duty as Christians to welcome strangers, for by doing so we may unknowingly have entertained angels in our midst.