

Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce

Background

ACRT is not an incorporated organisation. The ACRT was established by the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA), but in 2017 a review of ACRT was undertaken, and new governance arrangements were developed. Under these arrangements, ACRT utilises AfP's legal entity, but has separate governance arrangements with an Executive Committee, Steering Committee and an Executive Officer.

ACRT has existed for over seven years. In 2011 Act for Peace (AfP) undertook an external review of the value and strength of the NCCA agency's historical and present refugee-related work (domestic and overseas; programs, policy, advocacy, campaigns and education). A wide range of stakeholders were engaged, both faith-based and non-faith based. The feedback was strongly in favour of the churches and faith-based agencies doing more in the area of asylum and refugee issues, in Australia in particular. As a result, the Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce (ACRT) was initiated. AfP released funds to support churches and their agencies that wished to have a stronger voice in refugee and asylum seeker public policy and debate through the ACRT.

Mandate

The mandate of the ACRT is to strengthen the protection of refugees and asylum seekers subject to the direct control of the Australian Government. This includes refugees and those seeking asylum in Australia and in Australia's offshore detention and processing centres in Manus Island and Nauru.¹

ACRT's mandate does not include regional or global refugee issues or Australian foreign policy. However, the Taskforce complements the AfP's regional and international refugee programs and works co-operatively and collaboratively with other AfP programs where key protection themes align. Should the need arise for ACRT to comment and/or engage in regional or global issues, it has a mandate to consult with AfP first to ensure complementarity, do no harm and effective risk management.

Operationally

The ACRT in its operations seeks to;

- engage with, coordinate and communicate with churches (both NCCA members and others) and service providers on issues relating to refugees and people seeking asylum
- offer a strong moral voice in the domestic debate around refugees and people seeking asylum
- assist with communication and information sharing across churches in Australia
- lead Australian churches in coordinated campaigning and advocacy activities in support of refugees and people seeking asylum
- collaborate with existing and emerging networks and seek to develop consensus with key stakeholders in the Australian refugee sector.

¹¹ This includes refugees and asylum seekers under the jurisdiction of the Australian government (by virtue of being on Australian territory, whether excised or not, and vessels using an Australian flag/registration), including offshore detention and processing facilities. Key issues in this regard are reception conditions, onshore detention, refugee status determination, offshore processing and detention in PNG and Nauru, and resettlement.

Membership

Currently, the ACRT Steering Committee is composed of:

- The ACRT Chair (currently Mr Rob Floyd Associate General Secretary UCA National Assembly)
- The ACRT Deputy Chair, Ms Carmen Lazar, Centre Manager, Assyrian Resource Centre
- The NCCA executive member-ex officio (Ms Liz Stone)
- The AfP Manager (Mr James Thomson Senior Protection Advisor AfP)
- The Executive Officer – ex officio (Ms Caz Coleman)
- 9 general members representative of Christian churches currently made up of representatives from: UCA, Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran, Ecumenical bodies in certain states, Quakers, Baptists and the Salvation Army.

The membership consists of a range of people who are actively working to support refugees and asylum seekers in Australia. As such ACRT offers a place for them to gain support and share their concerns and challenges. Other members are more involved in their respective organisation's advocacy and public policy work. These members are looking to grow the churches' combined voice into the community and government of these issues.

Activities of ACRT

In the seven or so years the ACRT has been operating there have been a number of successes in collaboration with secular agencies and also ecumenically between churches. To name a few these have included;

- Being one of the three key organisers of the highly visible and successful "Let Them Stay" campaign.
- The initiation of the "Churches Sanctuary Movement", which was spearheaded by the then Chair of the Taskforce, The Very Revd. Dr Peter Catt for the specific group of asylum seekers and refugees who had been transferred to Australia from offshore processing.
- Collaboration on the "No Business in Abuse" campaign which targeted those agencies working in Nauru and Manus to expose the breach of human rights involved with working in these areas.
- The "Dignity not Destitution" campaign trying to roll back the social services cuts for asylum seekers and refugees by Government rendering many homeless and destitute.
- Collaboration in the "Kids off Nauru" Campaign
- The establishment of a Guardian for unaccompanied minors within the ALP National Policy Platform to protect unaccompanied minors arriving in Australia.
- Numerous press releases and media opportunities to highlight the work of the churches in supporting and advocating for asylum seekers and refugees.
- The development, in collaboration with other agencies, of a guide for hosting asylum seekers and refugees who have become homeless.
- The initiation of the Manus humanitarian program to support refugee men and the local churches in Manus Island PNG.

Focus for 2019-2020

In the coming year the ACRT have agreed to focus on five pivotal points. These include:

1. Resolution of Offshore Processing
2. Reducing cuts to the Status Resolution Support Services Payment (SRSS) for those onshore.
3. Reform of the current private Community Sponsorship Program
4. Increasing public and political advocacy both in collaboration with the refugee sector and as an ecumenical network.
5. Ecumenical justice networking to improve communication and collaboration.

Future possibilities

As we move forward there are a number of issues to address in regard to the role of ACRT.

There has been significant support from some member denominations and other community groups on the issue of asylum seekers and refugees in Australia and those in offshore detention over the past seven years. The increase in faith-based voices for a fair and dignified refugee process and conditions that reflect human rights over the past seven years has increased enormously. This is not necessarily a direct influence of the ACRT but the ACRT has certainly assisted in organising and promoting these voices.

This said, the relative lack of focus on this important issue in the recent federal election shows that it is not yet a strong issue for many Australians including our own members.

Similarly, developing a strong, unified ecumenical voice is difficult and remains a challenge for ACRT. In the words of one Federal MP, a back bencher in the current government and long-term supporter of asylum seeker and refugee issues *"If all the churches came together to advocate for these issues the Government would fold. The moral power of this group could change the way we do things."*

The ACRT is very interested in how more denominations can be involved with the ecumenical work currently being undertaken and how we may together fulfil, as the MP noted, a greater influence to create dignified and compassionate ways to treat asylum seekers and refugees.

In the true spirit of ecumenism there are opportunities to engage more fully in this area of social justice and human rights.

A key emerging issue for the churches is what should be done to support the large number of refugees whose asylum applications have been rejected by the government and who have now exhausted their appeals and face deportation, which will be a highly traumatic experience for both those being deported and those who have cared for them in churches and through the church agencies. ACRT is aware that our ecumenical voice must respect the International Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the relevant Protocol, which does include provisions for the return of those whose asylum applications have not been upheld. As churches, we have an obligation to our many members who support asylum seekers and refugees to help them understand the process, including the reasons why some people must depart Australia and why others will not. Furthermore, our obligation is to assist our church members to understand the most appropriate methods for supporting vulnerable people while ensuring against any harm to them or bringing harm to their families who remain in their home countries.

Conclusion

The ACRT, with the support of AfP is seeking:

1. Guidance from the NCCA Forum as to the ongoing value of the work of ACRT and, if it remains a priority, how best to undertake that work ecumenically.
2. Guidance from the NCCA Forum as to how best ACRT might engage with people within each NCCA Member Church who are:
 - actively involved with supporting asylum seekers and refugees
 - actively involved in advocacy to the government and their own membership on issues of justice, especially relating to refugees and asylum seekers.
3. Commitment from church representatives at the NCCA Forum to promote the work of ACRT to appropriate people in their own church.
4. That the ACRT continue into the future with the current funding model from AfP.

Rob Floyd

Caz Coleman

Chair ACRT

Executive Officer