

London Churches Refugee Fund

Thank you for the invitation to speak here this evening. When I was asked I was both flattered and excited by the idea of having some space to share reflections on thirty years of working with refugees and migrants in London. I was told by a friend that I should say “I am retiring from Praxis but not from work.” But in truth reaching the age of 65 seemed like an important reason for leaving Praxis which has been an amazingly rewarding experience for me. I have worked with some remarkable, dedicated and inspiring people and already miss it. I am actually spending two days a week at Praxis’ new social enterprise in Holloway Road – the Praxis Language Gym so I am not entirely free of it as yet.

For those who don’t know, Praxis was started in 1983 with funds from a charitable trust established as a result of a bequest from the late Rev. Robert Kemble, a United Reformed Church minister. Robert had spent time in Latin America, the Philippines and Apartheid South Africa. He had been converted to the “option for the poor” and came back to London where he lived very frugally. For a while he lived in a squat with a Franciscan brother. He had his own plans for his ministry but sadly died at the young age of 38 before his ideas of an alternative ministry in the city centre could be realised. The United Reformed Church had agreed a salary and he had bought a house in Goodge Place where he would live. Just before his death he left the money he had inherited from his father to friends asking them to ensure that his hope for a city ministry would be realised.

I came into the picture because at that time I was the Coordinator of New Horizon Youth Centre which was and still is working with homeless youth in Central London. I was also, in my spare time, studying for the ministry on the Southwark Ordination Course. One of my colleagues was Brother Thaddeus SSF, the same Franciscan who had shared the squat with Robert Kemble. When we talked of our future ministries, I was always torn. Did I want to take on a church and go down a conventional ministry pattern or did I really want to stay in the voluntary sector, which I was also finding to be fulfilling. Brother Thaddeus would always enigmatically say, “I know the job for you.” In due course it became clear that the Robert Kemble Trust had been set up and with a salary from what was called the “URC New Enterprise in Mission Fund” they were looking for someone to develop a new ministry with very little in terms of guidelines as to what that would be. However, my own interest in Liberation

Theology, my experience working in homelessness came together and I managed to convince the Trust and the URC that I was the person for the job.

Thirty years later, Praxis Community Projects and its new Community Interest Company Praxis Enterprises play an important role in addressing the needs of vulnerable migrants in London and I hope has not lost its prophetic role, even if we have learnt to be more nuanced in how we undertake it.

Looking back over the thirty years, I see a number of phases which parallel major global issues and trends.

In the early days of Praxis, we organised a Requiem Mass at St Martin-in-the-Fields church on the occasion of a visit by President Ronald Regan. I think it would be around 1985/6. The Mass was for the victims of American Foreign Policy. I remember Robina asking me if it was a mistake to mix a church service with a political event. The challenge was welcome because it clarified what the service was about. It was about real people who had died. Paul Oestreicher celebrated. Bruce Kent took part. Sister Pamela Hussey who was so involved in El Salvador. Cedric Mason, the South African Methodist Minister preached. The church was packed and it was clear that so many people were caught up in “la Gguerra sucia” the dirty war. Low intensity conflict was used in the many proxy wars which took place in what we then called the Third World as part of this global struggle between capitalism and communism. Praxis’ own part in this was focused on Latin America, Namibia, East Timor and the Philippines for the most part. We remembered the “Day of the Disappeared”, spent many hours outside South Africa House. But we also spent time thinking about these as faith issues. Our monthly Eucharist of Liberation brought together Christian activists.

A Kairos document from the time was called “The Road to Damascus” and was produced by Christians in Central America, South Africa and the Philippines and it referred to Paul on the way to Damascus in the business of persecuting Christians. He saw the light (literally) and was converted. The document spelt it out that the world was witnessing horrific Christian on Christian violence and there was a huge responsibility for the Christian world to be converted. We sought to be part of that conversion. Praxis, working in the wider solidarity movement came into close relationships with people who were refugees from these conflicts.

But of course things did change. The Berlin Wall came down. The Cold War ceased and the new geo-political settlement brought new challenges. 1992 was the five hundredth anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the Americas. Another Kairos document from Central America challenged Christians in the West to re-think their history in this year. Together with partners from across Europe, and with considerable support from the World Council of Churches we worked on Kairos Europa. Rather than produce a document we decided to organise an event. So in 1992 in Strasbourg, Kairos Europa organised a Parliament of the People for 500 activists from the peace movement, environmental groups, migrant organisations and anti-poverty groups. Actually 700 people arrived and we had to find beds for 200 extra people. 1992 was also the year of Maastricht, the advent of Fortress Europe. Praxis took responsibility for designing the process of the Parliament and for facilitating one of the Commissions – on the right to move. This experience really defined our story from then on. Up until this point we saw “solidarity” as being from here to there. From this point we saw the relationship between north and south as being defined by our interdependence within this city called London.

Migration becomes our theme. Some may have thought that the refugee issue would go away with the ending of the Cold War and that legislation to keep people outside of the borders of Europe whilst permitting free movement within would end migration from the global south. None of it. Numbers of refugees increased from the vacuum states, notably Somalia. The horrific events of the genocide in Rwanda and the subsequent violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo, continuing civil conflict including Sudan and Sri Lanka, together with the continuing Middle Eastern tensions all resulted in more not fewer refugees and Western states seeking to limit their response. At the same time, organised crime which was so active in the smuggling of drugs and armaments realised that the penalties for trafficking human cargo were lesser. Travel and inter-continental communications become easier and cheaper. The make-up of this city was changing and changing rapidly.

Praxis’ approach to solidarity changed with it and rightly so. We became less polemic, more practical and, I hope, more analytical at the level of micro policies without losing an overall critique of the impact of globalisation on people. As we had used the opportunity of Regan’s visit to think about the real lives of real people and the real suffering of real people as a consequence of political decisions, so we needed to engage with the impact of globalisation on

our city by focusing on the real lives of real people and the real suffering of real people.

Having said all that, I do think this was a very creative and positive time for our work. Successive legislation brought tighter and tighter border controls and acquiring status became more difficult as the Home Office became progressively less and less fit for purpose. However, there was a real drive within civil society and among parts of the political class (yes – the Labour Party!) for the integration and settlement of refugees. A lot of our work focused on education, employment and settlement.

We were not afraid of some of the less attractive areas of policy. When Labour came to power, enormous sums of money were awarded by the Home Office to other refugee organisations. We decided not to apply for these as we did not want to be part of the official asylum process. Without entering into a historic debate which still evokes emotions in the sector, it meant that we were in a position to adopt some independent positions. For example, we worked with the Probation Service and prisons with foreign national offenders. It was hard for the larger, better known refugee organisations to do this as they did not want to shine a spotlight where public opinion might be negatively affected. But our relative size to the NGOs has often given us space to engage in a different way. Rather than run huge programmes we have run programmes of leadership development for refugees and migrants which contribute to the building of resilience among communities rather than dependency.

But coming to the present. There is no doubt that we have reached a very critical point. Professor Guy Standing addressed a conference organised by Praxis in November 2012. His work has identified the growing “precariat”, that is to say people whose lives are increasing precarious from an economic and social perspective. People on low pay, zero hour contracts, limited employment rights, limited or no immigration status. This is a global phenomenon but one acutely felt in London. The emergence of makeshift dwellings around the capital is a consequence of the growth of the precariat within our de-developing nation.

Nation States are undermined by the supra-state elites of global capital unaccountable either for taxation or conduct by separate nation states. For us in civil society, the issue remains: how does this impact on the real lives of real people and the real suffering of real people

In this context, the word refugee loses something of its coinage. Forced displacement can no longer be boxed neatly within the terms of the post-second world war settlement. No one should argue for the removal of the UN Convention but we do hang onto it as a drowning sailor hangs onto passing driftwood in the ocean. Forced displacement is a product now of globalisation. It results from environmental degradation, changing locations of wealth and employment, the free movement of capital with corresponding legislative restriction on the movement of labour, the restriction of labour rights, the reduction of social wage, geo-political trends which demonise Islam and artificially manufactures “clashes of civilisation” resulting in localised but nonetheless brutal conflicts and growing inequalities in developed and emerging economies and at the global level. We are in a completely new place for which new paradigms are needed in civil society, including faith communities, and a new praxis (with a small p) is needed.

For Praxis (with a big P) it has meant moving into work on homelessness and destitution, advocating for immigration rights, addressing the victims of criminality including trafficking, gender based violence, and dealing with the effect of long term social exclusion particularly among young migrants. It has also meant our having to look at our business model as we know increasingly that the availability of the sort of funding which sustained us over a long period of time will no longer be available.

So what have I learnt from these past 30 years –

It’s fashionable isn’t it to have 10 things we have learnt – at least it is on the Guardian Website.

1 The powerful don’t always win.

After all Namibia is independent, East Timor is a sovereign state, Brazil is a BRIC country, South Africa and Chile and many other former dictatorships are democratic. It is worth sticking around for the long haul.

2 Oppression and violence are chameleons

Having said that the powerful don’t win, they re-emerge and re-invent and continue to amass wealth at the expense of others. Racism is insidious and ever present. This is a life time struggle and we are only holders of a torch which has blazed and will continue to blaze for centuries. (can we call this the communion of saints?)

3 We are not powerless

Globalisation is a top down phenomenon but social movements emerge from below. We can write the history of our times as the story of an elite or we can write it as a time of an assertion of fundamental human rights, of the women's movement, of the assertion of the full humanity of LGBT people, of the changing dynamic of the global south versus the western north.

4 Civil Society is a crucial agent of change

In this I include faith communities, voluntary organisations, community associations, cooperative enterprises, trade unions and (too often we forget this) lawyers. There has been considerable resistance to the growing repression experienced by migrants. Our voices are not lost and there are many people who would be in a far worse situation and may not even be alive were it not for the importance of civil society and the work we collectively do.

5 Civil society is essential to democracy

Political parties are very important and democratic government is dependent upon them. As part of my work in Praxis I spent some time in Liberia when Charles Taylor was in power. It was a dangerous time for the human rights activists we were supporting. But they were reflecting on how their country would be transformed after the dictatorship. One person said to me "an election is just an event in democracy." He meant that democracy requires an active vibrant civil society. Too many resources are spent on influencing public opinion, dressing up messages to suit focus group opinion or marginal voters and insufficient in engaging with people who are directly and adversely affected by policies and enabling them to speak truth to power.

6 Civil society needs an internal debate to remain vibrant and responsive

I disagree with much that happens in the voluntary sector and we have had to argue our corner. In Praxis we have often felt that to engage with colleagues in the sector to re-align provision is proving more effective than engaging with a sterile debate with a government which is unwilling to listen. We have to be sure we are getting it right and we have to be honest. In truth, we are all wonderful in our own way but we are also all compromised and inadequate. We will never get it right but we should never give up trying to do so.

7 Faith sings when it leaves the church

Please don't misunderstand me. I can probably count on the fingers of two hands and the toes of two feet the number of times I have missed going to church on a Sunday since I was about two years old. I am a believer but the teaching of Jesus is not alive in the church. It comes alive when you engage where Jesus would have been and where he is. This has nothing to do with affiliation or the nomenclature of religious allegiance or of doctrinal purity. Rather it is about engaging with the messiness of living on the margins or in the case of migration on the borders between exclusion and inclusion. I am glad that I did not opt just for church ministry alone.

8 People matter

We should never underestimate what we can do for individuals and their families. We should never be surprised to discover the impact that empathy can have on the lives of others. And that to me is a Gospel message that it is in the secret places of human compassion and the hunger and thirst for justice that new qualities of humanity emerge.

9 Human rights are dynamic

The right to shelter, livelihood, health, family and social life, cultural, including faith and linguistic assertion, are interacting dynamics which are worth defending. Human Rights are enshrined in statute which is a good thing but they are also a universal aspiration for which we must all struggle on a daily basis.

10 Life is a privilege

It has been a privilege to have had the opportunity which my dear friend Brother Thaddeus (sadly no longer with us) gave me when he introduced me to the Robert Kemble Trust. It has been an even deeper privilege to know so many brave and courageous refugees and migrants who have struggled hard at great personal cost. This is a cost which those of us who do this work in the UK do not have to bear. But to live life within a wider struggle for peace and justice does make life worthwhile.

I know that Praxis will go from strength to strength and I know that it is in very good hands. And as far as retirement goes – well one thing is sure – I am not going to do any gardening.

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