

LONDON CHURCHES REFUGEE FUND SPEAKER EVENT,
BLOOMSBURY CENTRAL BAPTIST CHURCH, LONDON, TUESDAY 4
JUNE 2024

INTRODUCTION

I greet you all in the Name of Christ and wish upon you the peace and blessings of God.

It is an honour to share with you all.

Thank you Gillian Dare for liaising with me in relation to the event.

I want to begin by saying thank you to you the Churches Refugee Fund and supporters for your contributions and commitment to the achievement of justice for refugees.

Churches Refugee Fund, Christian Aid, CAFOD, and Tear Fund do well to honour, treasure and value Christian congregations, followers of Christ, who bring great passion and generosity for your work.

Sometimes churches ask me for a summary of my presentation to publish in newsletters and magazines. I usually give a one-word summary. The word is “sanctuary”.

And I say to you, if you forget what I offer you here, remember and take away this one word: sanctuary.

Sanctuary for all, the safety and well-being of all, is my political, religious and social passion.

So, high fives. Give each other a high fives of welcome and greeting.

Can you describe the shape formed by a high five.

Arch, roof...?

It is the logo of City of Sanctuary.

The shape is like a roof or a simple shelter/house. It is also like the nativity crib, imagine the manger within it.

Sanctuary is about finding shelter in each other, building sanctuary in community, in congregations, and giving shelter to each other. This is the sanctuary churches build.

As it says in a Celtic Proverb:

Ar scath a cheile a mhaireas na daoine (It is in the shelter of each other that the people live).

I am wearing this rope as a stole.

I picked up this rope from a broken refugee boat that came to grief off the coast of Lampedusa Island in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, most of those on board drowned.

If this rope could speak what stories would it tell of the people who were on board.

From the same boat I took this sock. It is a large size and carries on it the word "sport".

Whose sock is this? Obviously someone with sporty ambitions. Where is the owner of this sock? If this sock could speak, what stories would it tell us of it's owner?

And I broke off this piece of wood from the boat, and made a cross from it. It is a charred piece of wood. The boat had caught fire. What stories does this wood hold?

A stole represents the cross of Christ that we carry. This rope will be my stole as long as people seeking sanctuary continue to die. Last year 3,105 died crossing the Mediterranean. As of May 880 have drowned this year. Between 2014 and 2018 it is recorded that around 12,000 people who drowned were never found. The sea is their grave.

When will this outrage end?

A Church of Sanctuary conference, aimed at resourcing and supporting congregations in this work and to build networks, is planned for England on 8 June 2024, to be held in Carrs Lane Church Centre, Birmingham. Contributors include Nicola Brady, General Secretary of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, Bishop Rose Hudson Wilkins, Bishop Mike Royal, Professor Robert Beckford, Dr Jayme Reaves and myself. Refugee witness and voices will be heard alongside congregations recently awarded the Church of Sanctuary certificate and will share their stories.

It should be no surprise to anyone that churches are showing a strategic alternative to “stop the boats”. The government hostile environment includes anti-refugee rhetoric, stopping small refugee boats crossing the English Channel, and the threat to detain, deport and send “illegal immigrants” to Rwanda.

BOATS AND CHURCH

Boats are not only prominent in politics. They are a metaphor of Church and life.

Christian witness often portrays the Church as a boat afloat on the ocean of the world with a mast in the form of a cross, symbolising faith and unity. After all the word ecumenical has its roots in the Greek word *oikumene* meaning the whole inhabited earth, and embraces, shelters, protects all people.

Ecclesial architecture reflects boats, recalling the rescue mission symbolised in Noah's Ark, Paul's sailing missions and shipwrecks, the place of boats in Jesus' ministry.

Many church roofs resemble boats. Sometimes, the wooden arches under these roofs are like the ribs of a boat's hull, it may feel like sitting under an overturned boat.

Congregations sit in a central area called the nave, a word derived from the Latin *navis* which means ship, and gives us the word navigation. Sometimes, certainly in Celtic spirituality, Christian pilgrimage is portrayed as a boat journey of pilgrims to the shores of heaven. This is imagery that provokes reflection and response. We cannot ignore those in danger on the sea.

Where are we now as Churches in the world, and what message do we offer?

In an increasingly polarised world blighted with hatred and hostility, we hold up a world defined by hospitality and sanctuary for all.

I am currently working with Churches Together in Britain and Ireland to develop and promote the idea of Church of Sanctuary.

Church of Sanctuary is my *particular* passion and contribution now to the City of Sanctuary movement and network.

My appeal to churches is, become Churches of Sanctuary, and support your nearest City of Sanctuary group in their work.

I have written about this work in my book *Hospitality and Sanctuary for All*. I will say a little more about this, and you can obtain copies from the CTBI website by making a donation to cover costs.

I invite you on behalf of ctbi to promote the development of a Church of Sanctuary movement. Church congregations working together around the idea of hospitality and sanctuary for all is what is envisioned. A movement is built on the strength of shared enterprise, working together around a

common cause and idea. The lead here is taken by people at grassroots level who act for social change, and that's you and me.

We can imagine a Church of Sanctuary movement around many local church members and congregations who want to extend and express hospitality to people suffering the vileness of hatred and hostility.

Alongside the Church of Sanctuary, ctbi has worked with the Refugee Council and City of Sanctuary to establish an annual Sanctuary Sunday which is the Sunday at the end of Refugee Week.

So, 23 June in 2024. Note this and mark it in your Church, use the occasion to launch your Church of Sanctuary initiative and hold a collection for the Churches Refugee Fund.

Sanctuary Sunday is an annual moment to call us back and to recommit ourselves to ensure that our work with refugees is rooted in our worship and prayer, and engages our congregations.

HOSPITALITY AND SANCTUARY FOR ALL

The Hospitality and Sanctuary for All resource I mentioned earlier offers prompts for conversation and reflection on the theme of hospitality and sanctuary. Though people of different backgrounds and beliefs are involved in the work of hospitality and sanctuary, this is a resource produced for churches.

This resource is supported by the Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, and invites you to worship and pray, and reflect theologically around the themes of hospitality and sanctuary. It encourages and resources the development of Church of Sanctuary.

There are five sections in the Hospitality and Sanctuary for All resource.

Each section focuses on the biblical foundations of sanctuary and includes ideas for group work and personal reflection. The resource includes reflections on what is a Church of Sanctuary.

Section One explores the idea of God taking sanctuary among us. Biblically, the first one to ask for sanctuary is God. In Exodus 25:8 we read of the Migrant God who says to Moses, have the people “make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them”. It is this concept we see in the New Testament where we read in John 1:14 that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”. So what do we take from the idea of God dwelling among us, and where do we encounter this God?

Section Two calls for hospitality to the “stranger”, and considers biblical and also some interfaith perspectives. We reflect here on stories where people have found that they encounter and entertain God and “angels” when they build hospitality with the stranger (Hebrews 13:2), as in the story of Abraham and Sarah sharing bread with strangers in the wilderness (Genesis 18:1-8), and Jesus grief-stricken disciples meeting him as a stranger on the road to Emmaus and recognising his face in the breaking of and sharing bread (Luke 24: 13-35). What is your experience of sharing hospitality and finding yourself in the company of angels?

Section Three introduces discussion around the themes of gift and redemption. The stories of Jesus’ arrest, passion and crucifixion hold hope in the midst of hurt. In his crucifixion people see how God is present in the heart of human agonies, giving meaning and hope in their most awful experiences, not least of wrongful persecution and false testimony. In what ways is your community and congregation enriched, blessed by “the stranger”?

Section Four introduces the idea of City of Sanctuary and building cultures of welcome and hospitality, rooted in the biblical stories of Cities of Refuge found in the Book of Numbers, and Joshua, and the repeated command to love the stranger. There is a brief invitation to look at what it means to be a sanctuary to yourself and to others, and there is a challenge to engage with the city and church of sanctuary movement.

Section five offers ideas for action, worship and prayer.

The Act of Worship can be used to conclude this study. It could also be used as a resource for a Sanctuary Sunday, or for the established Racial Justice Sunday which is observed on the second Sunday in February.

The resource concludes with reflections on what a Church of Sanctuary is, and stories from local experience.

Make your place of worship a sanctuary where all are treated with warm welcome, generous hospitality and protection from harm. A Christian symbol of this is Holy Communion, a revelation of the world as it is meant to be, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, where all are welcome and valued equally, and where no one is excluded or made to feel like an outsider, a sign of the Kingdom of God.

What is the process to become a Church of Sanctuary, and what is the value of being a Church of Sanctuary?

WHY BECOME A CHURCH OF SANCTUARY?

We are not talking about a novel, unimagined idea, but one that has a long history in Wales, Scotland, Ireland and England.

The concept of sanctuary is rooted in the Bible.

The aim in Church of Sanctuary is to take steps to build protective hospitality in ways that are mutually enriching. The hope is that churches will become places for all and proud to foster welcome, hospitality and safety to people fleeing violence and persecution. This would be a clear demonstration of Christian discipleship.

The association of sanctuary and holiness is universally recognised. Hospitality is holiness in action, and is a call to prophetic Christian witness. Sanctuary is an expression of hospitality as a clear challenge to hostility. As I have stressed:

- Sanctuary, or hospitality-with-safety, is a long-standing prophetic theme of Scripture
- Sanctuary is the most repeated ethical requirement in the Hebrew Scriptures. The foundation is: love your neighbour as yourself (Leviticus 19:18) and love the stranger as yourself (Leviticus 19:34)
- This is echoed in Jesus' teaching about how we treat the neighbour and the outsider.

Sanctuary in churches used to assist those claiming to be innocent of a crime. More recently it has operated to protect people facing deportation by the state. Now we need Sanctuary Churches who wish to greet new arrivals fleeing from danger to their lives. We need sanctuary for all vulnerable people

Who are the people lacking financial communal, emotional, and other support, or feel isolated? The priority of providing safety to older people and children is increasingly recognized. The challenge to provide safety for refugees and all those seeking sanctuary must receive greater attention.

WHAT IS A CHURCH OF SANCTUARY?

Churches take pride in welcoming all. Many churches are thoroughly engaged with welcoming and supporting refugees and people seeking sanctuary. I am thankful for the Welcome Church development. What value is added by becoming a recognised Church of Sanctuary?

- It further strengthens and embeds your ethos and culture of welcome and hospitality
- It roots your work in ancient biblical wisdom

- It connects you to the Church of Sanctuary network of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, the wider City of Sanctuary network, and the wider community engaging with refugees and people seeking sanctuary
- It takes you on a journey to build collaboration, to know you are part of a movement endorsed by a diverse range of people.

You become part of a movement to build cultures of welcome and hospitality. You engage in more informed ways with serious issues that matter to you. You connect refugees and people seeking sanctuary to support networks and agencies.

In a Church of Sanctuary all members of the congregation intentionally work together to:

- **Learn** about and listen to real life stories of refugees and people seeking sanctuary, and engage with others to work from facts not fiction
- **Embed** the values and cultures of welcome, hospitality and safety as part of the values of your congregation and community, and use these to support refugees and people seeking sanctuary, and include them in your activities
- **Share** with pride your vision, commitment and achievements, and let others know about the positive contributions of refugees to society and the benefits of welcoming others

All members engage in this work together. It is not left to those who hold office, or to people who particularly hold a passion for this work. Buildings can provide shelter but sanctuary is best provided in human community and relationships.

Church of Sanctuary is not a campaigning political movement but it informs our political engagement, and helps to equip congregations to speak out and speak up for justice. It is a biblically inspired initiative, it is about being prophetic, challenging hostility with hospitality. This can mean we become political, and this is in keeping with the style of biblical prophets, speaking truth to power with passion and compassion. Church of Sanctuary is not about opening up buildings for people to live in. It is about building communities of hospitality and sanctuary. Learning and working together to grow cultures of welcome and hospitality is rewarding. The Church of Sanctuary certificate you can apply for has value as a statement by your congregation, that you are committed to inclusive values of welcome, hospitality and safety for all. It is something to celebrate and to share with others as an encouragement and inspiration.

CHURCH OF SANCTUARY MOVEMENT

I now want to place the Church of Sanctuary movement in the context of the City of Sanctuary movement, which itself is a movement within a movement around work with people who are seeking sanctuary.

City of Sanctuary was founded in 2005.

On 18th June 2007, Sheffield was declared UKs first City of Sanctuary. By June 2021 there were over 100 Cities/Towns/Boroughs/Areas in Britain and Ireland working with the City of Sanctuary vision, to “build cultures of welcome, hospitality and safety”. This vision has also been taken up to develop Schools of Sanctuary, Universities of sanctuary, Theatres of Sanctuary, and so on.

The origins of City of Sanctuary are modest.

It emerged from an initiative I took. In my work as a Methodist Minister in Sheffield, I have been associated with key organisations, religious and secular, working with refugees in the city, and their work.

In October 2005, with my colleague Quaker Craig Barnett, a meeting was convened in Sheffield which led to the launch of the City of Sanctuary initiative.

The meeting was attended by around forty representatives of organisations working with refugees in the city. At the meeting, participants were invited to describe the work they were doing.

All the participants agreed that if the groups all collaborated and shared their wisdom, it would have a bigger impact on the city and work towards building a culture of welcome, hospitality and safety, especially for asylum seekers and refugees.

It was also agreed that if all the initial participant organisations were to sign a pledge of support, and, get up to one hundred organisations in the city to become committed supporters, it would then be possible to ask the Local Authority to support this.

If this could be achieved, there would be a strong case to be declared a City of Sanctuary, a city with a wide range of groups and organisations committed to working together to build cultures of welcome, hospitality and safety for refugees.

The target was to achieve this by 2015, a ten-year target.

However, in only two years, in 2007, Sheffield was declared the UK's first City of Sanctuary (see City of Sanctuary website).

What this meant was that the Sheffield City Council had just passed a resolution to support the many local community groups who had signed a pledge (Barnett and Bhogal, 2010) to work together to build a culture of welcome and hospitality in the city.

MY STORY

Where does my passion for this work come from?

My own parents left their home in Panjab, India, as young teenagers soon after independence, and the partition, in 1947, a situation that led to one of the biggest movements of people across borders in human history. It was a movement that sadly witnessed much violence and bloodshed. They will have witnessed atrocity and will have been traumatised by it.

Their parents will have suggested to them to go elsewhere for safety. They went to Kenya.

I was born in Nairobi where I lived till the age of 11 in 1964. Then, Kenya achieved independence, and with my parents and family I left for Britain, via a nine-month sojourn in what was then Tanganyika. By the time they were thirty, my parents had left their home twice as a result of political decisions of nations. My first home in this country was in Dudley, West Midlands. My real claim to fame is that I am a contemporary of Lenny Henry, and we went to the same School in Dudley.

From my earliest days of life in the UK people of Asian backgrounds talked with me, because I was fluent in English, about their immigration concerns and paper work.

So personally, rather than professionally, I have become familiar with immigration matters, policies and procedures. I have determined to take simple steps to seek justice, mercy and humility in policy and procedure.

My theological reflection, and theology, is rooted in my experience of immigration. The language I use has arisen from my faith, including stories recorded in scripture. Words like walking, wilderness, exile, refugee, sanctuary, prayer and pilgrimage are deeply spiritual terms and full of meaning.

As a Methodist Minister, and Pastor, I have worked with others, especially in churches, to critique and challenge policy and procedure where it has been unjust and discriminatory. I have supported many campaigns to challenge unjust deportations orders. In the 1980s I supported people taking sanctuary in churches.

In March 1997 I walked from Sheffield where I live, to 10 Downing Street, with a letter to the Prime Minister asking that Asylum Seekers, who are not criminals, are not detained in conventional prisons alongside convicted criminals, and for a fairer deal for Asylum Seekers.

As President of the Methodist Conference in Britain (2000-2001) I visited all the Detention Centres in Britain and Northern Ireland, following which I wrote a reflection entitled “Unlocking the Doors” (2001).

In October 2005 I called a meeting, with Craig Barnett, a Quaker colleague, to launch the City of Sanctuary initiative. In 2007 Sheffield was declared UKs first City of Sanctuary.

At the time of writing, there are now over 100 cities/towns/areas in Britain and Ireland working with the City of Sanctuary vision, to build cultures of welcome and hospitality, cities we can be proud to live in. Two thirds of our Universities are Universities of Sanctuary. There are hundreds of Schools of Sanctuary, Gardens and Theatres and Libraries of Sanctuary. My question is, what about Churches of Sanctuary?

THE CONTEXT: IMMIGRATION IS NOT A CRIME

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, has recorded that over 100 million people have fled their homes because of the danger to their lives, many are separated from families and friends in the process.

Ninety percent of the world’s refugees are from countries in or close to war and conflict, like Afghanistan, Gaza, Myanmar, Syria, Sudan, Yemen, Ukraine.

Around seventy percent of them are displaced, trapped in their own countries.

Around ninety percent of those who manage to get out take sanctuary in a neighbouring country.

Afghanistans go to Pakistan. People from Myanmar go to Bangladesh. Sudanese go to Uganda and Egypt, Syrians go to Lebanon.

Those who manage to escape, and go in search of safety face horrendous hardships, dangers and obstacles, crossing the wilderness of deserts, treacherous sea waters, unscrupulous smugglers and water tight borders, and horrific sufferings.

Those who manage to cross deserts, Mediterranean Sea, many borders, then the English Channel, face what the government has called “a hostile environment”, detention and deportation, with the threat to be sent to Rwanda. The message is, you are not welcome here.

Deterring people coming to the UK is not going to stop people coming here for sanctuary.

Long term, the solution lies in eradicating war, ending poverty, tackling global warming, being at ease with those who are different.

More immediately people coming here seeking sanctuary require hospitality, not hostility.

This is the context in which we do our work of challenging hostility with hospitality, by building cultures of welcome, hospitality and sanctuary.

Migration made us who we are and defines us, migration is in our blood and bones and being (Vince, 2022).

Roman Catholic Theologian Gemma Tulud (2014), from the Philippines, makes a strong, coherent, cohesive and compassionate case for theological reflection on migration, exploring the positive dimensions of migration and migrants. Working from a theology of “one bread, one body, one people” she argues for social justice in immigration.

What would social justice in immigration look like? Here are a few reflections from me.

SOCIAL JUSTICE IN IMMIGRATION

The UK approach to Borders and Nationality, and the Rwanda deportation scheme is a monstrous response to a human catastrophe. You cannot fix a “broken” system with a broken thread. Any attempt by the UK to control

its border alone, as an Island, is doomed to be a failure. We need to work across borders and divides. Britain needs migrants and the skills they bring. Most UK “migrants” last year came here legitimately on work, student and holiday visas, and as refugees (eg from Ukraine). A much smaller number came through the tortuous route of the English Channel on unseaworthy vessels because there are not safe routes for people to come to the UK and apply for refugee status. Stopping migration is like trying to stop glaciers melting in global warming.

There is an urgent need for global cooperation to manage the global movement of people, and immigration in the broadest understanding of its meaning. What this means minimally for me is:

- processes to manage not prevent immigration
- distinguishing between people who travel on work, student and holiday Visas, those who apply for refugee status, and those who come here as refugees
- broadening the definition of who is a refugee
- creating safe passage for people seeking sanctuary and refugees, not reducing or shutting them
- supporting search and rescue of those in danger
- care and speed in asylum decision and ending detention of already hurting people
- establishing the right for asylum seekers to work
- investing in instruments of peace, not war, healing not harming, mercy and compassion, not cruelty
- building cultures of welcome, hospitality and sanctuary (Bhogal, 2021).

It is possible to protect borders and provide reformed immigration and asylum policies that are based on justice, mercy and humility. Resettlement Schemes can be expanded and enhanced with quality inclusion and integration support of refugees and people seeking sanctuary. As a member of the United Nations and a signatory of the UN Refugee Convention the UK should share the responsibility for the protection of refugees globally.

CONCLUDING WORDS

Poet Laureate Andrew Motion's words adorn the side of a Sheffield Hallam University building. The good sighted can read the words of the poem as they walk to the city from the railway station:

“O traveller from somewhere to here...to wander through the
labyrinth of air,
Pause now, and let the sight of this sheer cliff become a priming
place which
lifts you to speculate...
What if...?
What if...?
What if...?”

What if we could all work together to bring our diverse population into shared conversations, even if difficult conversations, on how we can work together to build better understandings, deeper relationships of mutual respect and trust, and come to genuinely accept each other as human beings?

I share my three challenges in response to these what ifs the last time I spoke here, and I repeat them:

Be human, and always call others back to their humanity, all people are made in the image of God

Be hospitable, and always call others to express hospitality, this is a biblical mandate

Always challenge hostility. This is done by challenging inhumanity and inhospitality, and Jesus models this well.

Be human, be hospitable, challenge hostility. I believe every human being is capable of doing this, and **this is a strong basis for building hope**. The resurrection of Christ calls us to always remain hopeful, to build hope.

The way ahead is to widen and deepen relationships across different cultures, creeds, colours and identities, to end hatred, and together to build cultures where all are welcome, valued, belong equally together and have sanctuary and are safe.

All people are human beings with names, stories and deep relationships.

All want empathy more than sympathy, respect more than pity. We have fantastic opportunities in our multi-ethnic and plural societies to meet and engage with each other. We belong to each other.

We all want the best for ourselves. We can work together to ensure the best for all.

How we all relate to each other, and in particular to people seeking sanctuary and safety will be central to humanity. How we all treat those who are in greatest need for safety will be the measure by which we shall judge personal, national and international morality and spirituality.

You will not be found wanting because of all you are and do. You are amazing people. Thank you for all you do, and for all your commitment. I assure you of my prayerful solidarity.

Bless you, and all the strength of God to you.

Inderjit Bhogal

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