Ministry to Migrants and Asylum Seekers

A Guide for Evangelical Churches

By Nick Park

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Park was raised in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and was won to Christ through the ministry of the Salvation Army. After graduation and ordination from the William Booth Memorial Training College in London, he and his wife, Janice, served as Salvation Army Officers in Leicester, and then in pastoral ministry with the Assemblies of God in Lancashire.

In 1994 they started the Solid Rock Church – known as 'Ireland's Multicultural Church.' They also founded the ministry of the Church of God in Ireland. Nick still serves as Senior Pastor of the Solid Rock Church, while Janice serves as Worship and Prayer Pastor.

Nick is Administrative Bishop of the Church of God in Ireland, holds an MTh in Applied Theology from the University of Liverpool, and is Executive Director of Evangelical Alliance Ireland. He has been elected to the International Executive Council, or Council of Eighteen, of the Church of God denomination on three occasions.

Nick and Janice Park have a daughter, Kirsty, and live in Dromin village in County Louth, Ireland. You can find details of his other books at www.nickpark.ie

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Evangelical Alliance Ireland exists to serve individuals and churches in Ireland who share our distinctive beliefs. These beliefs can be summed up in four primary characteristics.

1. The New Birth. We believe in the absolute necessity of a personal experience of Jesus Christ by which each person is born again by faith.
2. The Cross. Our beliefs and practices must be Christocentric. Christ's atoning death upon the Cross is, and always will be, the defining event of human history.
3. The Bible. The Scriptures are the Word of God and are authoritative for Christian faith and practice.
4. The Gospel. Our experience of Jesus Christ necessarily involves us in proclaiming the message of salvation, both in word and by actions that reflect the grace and truth of Jesus Christ.

We serve by connecting, equipping and representing. We seek to connect and facilitate cooperation between Evangelicals from a wide range of congregations, movements and denominations. We aim to equip individuals and churches by providing insights and resources that can help them to minister the Gospel in authentic, relevant and faithful ways. We strive to represent by articulating a voice in Irish society that expresses Evangelical viewpoints in a way that is attractive, coherent and biblical.

This slim volume is part of our equipping ministry. It is primarily aimed at churches, but will also be of benefit to individuals who want to share the love of Jesus more effectively with migrants and asylum seekers.

In order to effectively minister to migrants and asylum seekers, it is necessary to establish a biblical basis for doing so. Therefore I strongly encourage the reader not to skip through the opening sections to get straight into 'the practical stuff.' Ministry is not a matter of techniques, to be memorised as if we were selling life insurance or double glazing. True ministry comes from the heart, and we cannot minister Jesus to migrants and asylum seekers unless we share Jesus' heart for them.

For readers outside of Ireland, this book may be both off-putting and enlightening. It is firmly set in the context of ministry in the Republic of Ireland. In some respects therefore, as when discussing Ireland's Direct Provision system for asylum seekers, it may contain some information that is not directly relevant to your own laws and society. However, we can all benefit from looking at situations from a fresh perspective, and therefore I pray that viewing the topic of immigration through Irish eyes might be a helpful and enlightening experience.

Some years ago, when EAI was addressing a different issue in society and culture, someone from the other side of the Atlantic commented, "Perhaps to be 'Evangelical' means something different in Ireland?"

Certainly Evangelicals in Ireland and in the US, as in other countries, are the same in that we share our common distinctives to do with the New Birth, the Cross, the Bible and the Gospel. But we are also different in that we come from very contrasting places in society. Our 'story' is very different from that of

Evangelicals in the US. Evangelicals in Ireland are, and always have been, a minority group. We don't fight culture wars to preserve our values and way of life in society because Irish society has never really reflected our values and way of life in the first place!

This means that we have a tendency to sympathise with the underdogs and other minorities in our society. And that can very often be a very biblical place to start, given that the New Testament was originally written for a persecuted Church that very much lived on the margins of Jewish and Roman culture.

I have discovered that some, but thankfully not all, Christians have never stopped to ask themselves if there is an authentically biblical position to take on the subject of immigration. They simply adopt the position of their favoured political party, be it conservative or liberal. My prayer is that this book, by seeking a genuinely biblical perspective through Irish eyes, may help all of us to discover innovative and grace-filled ways to minister Jesus to migrants and asylum seekers.

Finally, I want to express special thanks to Louis Hemmings, a great friend of EAI and without whom this project would not have been possible. It was Louis who emailed Tony O'Connor, my co-Director at EAI, and asked, 'What can we do to help these people?'

And from that simple, yet profoundly Christ-like, question this little book was born.

Nick Park
Executive Director, Evangelical Alliance Ireland
1st January 2015

1

A BIBLICAL APPROACH TO IMMIGRATION

We tend to think of immigration as a modern phenomenon. According to this viewpoint, different human populations in the dim and distant past settled in different parts of the world and, for the most part, stayed there. Indeed this is how most of us form our ideas of national identity. We like to think of the shared history and traditions we possess as a group of people who have always been Irish, Nigerian, American, or British, or whatever nationality we claim.

Yet, even before humans began to record their history, individuals and groups of people were on the move. Modern scientific analysis of our DNA has demonstrated that the idyllic notion of settled populations happily existing for untold generations in a pastoral homeland does not describe most of our heritages. Instead we see a picture of swirling migration patterns as our ancestors embarked on quite incredible journeys in search of food, land, peace or just the yearning sense that a better future lay beyond the horizon.

Abraham

We see a similar process at work in the Bible. We all know that God called Abraham to leave his home and to go to a place that God would show him.

Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. (Genesis 12:1)

However, we often overlook that 'his country' was neither the place of his birth nor of his childhood. Abraham had grown up in Ur, in Mesopotamia. There he married his wife, Sarah, and then subsequently they set out on a journey to Canaan, along with Abraham's father and other clan members.

A journey from Ur (on the Persian Gulf in the south of modern Iraq) to Canaan would be about 400 miles, or 600 kilometres, if you travelled in a straight line. However, only a fool would travel in a straight line, on foot, across inhospitable desert. Instead, their route would have followed the Fertile Crescent up into modern Turkey, then westward and down into Canaan. Two thirds of the way along this route you would reach Haran – and that is where Abraham's family stopped and settled down (Genesis 11:31-32).

Certainly Haran would have made an attractive haven when compared with Ur. At that time Mesopotamia was facing political insecurity and economic uncertainty. The Elamites were invading, and that would have forced farmers to abandon their lands and to flee as refugees to cities like Ur. Crops were failing, which made for a difficult economy. The combined pressure of food shortages and an influx of refugees was causing political instability. In short, we see most of the same factors at work that cause people to emigrate today.

Haran, in contrast, was prosperous and peaceful. It was on a major trade route, which made for a productive financial environment and provided a cosmopolitan culture with many different nationalities and languages. Also, Haran and Ur were the two major centres in the ancient world for the worship of Nanna, the moon god, which meant people from Ur could feel right at home in Haran.[1]

So Abraham was already an immigrant before God told him to leave his newly adopted country of Haran, and to head for Canaan. In this respect he was not unusual. He was one of many migrants who were wandering through the ancient Near East looking for a place to call home.

The Children of Israel in Egypt

When Abraham's grandson, Jacob, travelled with his sons and their families to Egypt, it was to find food at a time of terrible famine (Genesis 47:4). The welcome they received from Pharaoh was not just a courtesy due to Joseph's exalted position in Egypt. Immigrants were generally viewed as a blessing, not as a burden. Most societies, in order to grow and prosper, needed to attract workers who either had marketable skills or who were prepared to do the kind of jobs that the native population weren't prepared to fill. In the Israelites' case they ended up herding sheep since such employment was considered beneath the dignity of Egyptians (Genesis 46:31-34).

So, once again, we see that some of the factors at work in ancient immigration were remarkably similar to how things work today.

Of course, over time, the relationship between the Pharaohs and the Israelites changed from one of cooperation to one of

exploitation. One notable feature of the Israelites was that they never assimilated into Egyptian society. They kept their separate identity and never came to view Egypt as home. For example, Joseph would not allow his bones to be buried in Egyptian soil (Genesis 50:22-26). Even though Haran had become Abraham's 'own country' in less than one man's lifetime, Egypt never became the Israelites' own country in four long centuries.

Yet this separateness and identity with another place as home was not so much based on the past as on the future. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had never settled down in Canaan, but had lived as immigrants in a land controlled by others.

By faith Abraham made his home in the Promised Land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. (Hebrews 11:9-10)

The refusal of the Israelites to view Egypt as home was not due to any patriotic attachment to a fatherland or motherland, but rather because of a spiritual attachment to a Promised Land.

Due to their separateness, the Israelites came to be viewed as a threat by the Egyptians. Yet this sense of threat was radically different from the suspicion that is often directed at non-assimilating immigrants in our day. The problem was not that they might 'take over' Egypt, or that Egyptian culture would be diluted.

No, the real threat from the Egyptian perspective was that the Israelites might grab an opportunity to emigrate once more, and lend the considerable blessing of their presence to the prosperity and security of one of Egypt's political rivals!

Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. 'Look,' he said to his people, 'the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.' (Exodus 1:9-10)

Immigrants and the Law of Moses

Once the Israelites had entered into and possessed the Promised Land, they were commanded to show kindness and hospitality to foreigners who came to live in their midst. Foreigners could gather fallen fruit from vineyards (Leviticus 19:10) or gleanings from the fields at harvest (as in the story of Ruth).

The commands to welcome immigrants were based on several factors. One was the principle of hospitality – considered one of the most important virtues in the ancient Near East and in Israel's own heritage. For example, Abraham was zealous to welcome visitors at Mamre, acting as if they were the ones blessing him by allowing him to host them (Genesis 18:1-7) and so would become the prime example of hospitality in the New Testament (Hebrews 13:2).

A second reason why the Israelites were to treat immigrants kindly was because of their own experience as migrants. There were repeated commands in the Law for them to welcome, and even to love, foreigners, since they themselves had been foreigners in Egypt (Deuteronomy 10:19). This reasoning is especially relevant to Irish people today, given our experience as a nation of emigrants for many years.

Another reason to welcome immigrants was the principle of stewardship. From a theological standpoint, Israel never actually

owned the Promised Land. God stated clearly that it was His land and that the Israelites were there as His guests.

The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is Mine and you reside in My land as foreigners and strangers. (Leviticus 25:23).

So, if an Israelite were to ask, 'Why should we allow these people to come and live in our country?' then God could reply, 'Because it isn't *your* country – it's Mine!'

Strangers and Residents

There were two classes of immigrants in Old Testament Israel, *zarim* and *gerim*.

The *zarim*, literally 'strangers,' were those who lived and worked in Israel but still identified with a homeland somewhere else. Their stay in the Promised Land was, to at least some extent, temporary. Both culturally and religiously they stopped short of fully embracing Israel. It is significant that the word *zarim* comes from the same root as the 'strange fire' (*es zarah*) that Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, offered on the Lord's altar, thus provoking God to consume them with fire (Leviticus 10:1). The Talmud also contained a section against idolatry entitled *Avodah Zarah*, or 'strange worship.'

The *gerim*, or 'residents,' were immigrants who had adopted Israel as their permanent home. They became integrated into Israel, often embracing the Jewish faith. Indeed, in post-biblical times *gerim* came to be used as the common term for proselytes, or converts to Judaism. It can be viewed, therefore, as a much more positive term.

Immigration is a hot political topic in the modern state of Israel today. The anti-immigration lobby insists on calling immigrants *zarim*, whereas the pro-immigration faction calls them

gerim.[2] This would be somewhat similar to how people in Ireland, depending on their stance on immigration, often refer to 'non-nationals' or to 'the new Irish.' *Avodah zarah* is also used by some ultra-orthodox Jews as a term of abuse against Messianic Jews in Israel.

Immigration and the New Testament

Of course, as Christians, we worship one who was Himself an immigrant and an asylum seeker. While Jesus was still an infant, Mary and Joseph fled with Him to Egypt to escape the murderous rage of King Herod, and remained there until Herod's death (Matthew 2:13-23). This period in Egypt may have been anything from a few months up to two years or longer. When Jesus died, it was outside a city so cosmopolitan that the inscription on His cross, proclaiming Him to be King of the Jews, had to be written in three different languages (John 19:19-20).

The Day of Pentecost, rightly celebrated as 'the birthday of the Christian Church,' culminated in an evangelistic outreach in multiple languages to people who were Jews yet who resided in many different nations (Acts 2:5-12).

When the Gospel first entered Europe, following Paul's vision of a Macedonian man calling out for help, the key contact in Philippi was an immigrant called Lydia from Thyatira in Asia Minor (Acts 16:9-15).

Most of the New Testament was written by people who ended up living somewhere other than in their cities or regions of birth. That might help explain why there is such an absence of any kind of patriotism or national identity in their writings.

The apostle Paul, for example, was born both as a Jew and a Roman citizen in the city of Tarsus, in what is now modern-day Turkey. He lived in Jerusalem and studied under the rabbi Gamaliel, eventually ended up as part of the church in Antioch and is believed to have died in Rome. Yet none of these places claimed his allegiance.

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:20).

Paul's Roman citizenship might have come in handy at times (Acts 22:22-29), but it did not define his identity. His identity depended on his relationship with Christ, and the only citizenship that really mattered was his place in the Kingdom of God.

Paul might have had an impeccable Jewish background, being a veritable 'Hebrew of Hebrews' (Philippians 3:5), yet that did not define who he was, or with whom he identified. Instead he saw himself, along with the Gentiles in Ephesus, as part of something new.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of His household (Ephesians 2:19).

In this repudiation of national or racial identity, Paul was simply building upon the teaching of Jesus Christ. After all, the idea of a motherland or fatherland, to which we are expected to display allegiance and even to kill or die for, is based on the notion of shared blood ties – an extended family, if you will. But Jesus had already banished that notion by teaching that the commitment to follow Christ supersedes all familial ties and loyalties.

While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, His mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to Him. Someone told Him, 'Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to You.'

He replied to him, 'Who is My mother, and who are My brothers?' Pointing to His disciples, He said, 'Here are My mother and My brothers. For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother.' (Matthew 12:46-50)

If we follow this New Testament idea that our citizenship is really in heaven, and that we are no longer strangers or foreigners in God's Kingdom, then there is a further logical conclusion. That must mean that in the kingdoms of this world, including the nation where we were born or hold a passport, the citizens of God's Kingdom now live as strangers and foreigners. And that is exactly the conclusion that Peter came to.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. (1 Peter 2:9-11)

God and Government

Certainly we are subject to the governments and authorities under which we live, and the Scriptures repeatedly tell us to be law-abiding and to respect those authorities. But that it is a very different matter from pledging allegiance to them.

For over 1500 years following the writing of the New Testament, most Christians lived under systems of government that were built on the principle of the divine right of kings.

By this reasoning, rulers were appointed by God, and held absolute sway over the lives of their subjects. Any attempt to restrict the actions of a king was viewed as blasphemy and treason, and was almost invariably punished by execution by the most painful means possible. According to divine-right kingship, there was no conflict between allegiance to Jesus and to the State. To say that the king was lord was the same as saying that Jesus was Lord! As King James I of England put it in a speech to parliament, just one year before the publication of the Bible translation that bears his name:

The state of monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth, for kings are not only God's lieutenants upon earth and sit upon God's throne, but even by God Himself they are called gods.[3]

During the Enlightenment period, philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau came up with the idea of a social contract. This concept, which viewed the relationship between rulers and their subjects as one of mutual benefit, was the basis for the Constitution of the United States, and underpins most of our ideas of how democratic societies operate. The idea is that individuals surrender some of their freedoms and submit to the authority of a government. In return the government provides advantages such as a well-regulated society, where the lives and property of individuals are protected from the harm that might be expected in a lawless anarchy.

The New Testament does not endorse one particular system of government over another. But its teachings are much more consistent with living under a social contract than any notion of divine right of kings. Governments exist as God's 'servants' (Romans 13:4) – the actual word is *diakonos* from which we get

the idea of a church 'deacon.' They are to promote the public good and to restrain and to punish evil. In return we are expected to obey the reasonable laws passed by governments, yet not to give them the unconditional loyalty that belongs only to Christ.

Under a social contract, the government expects individuals to meet obligations to contribute to the overall good, for example by paying taxes that are used to provide benefits to the society, or even by helping to defend the society from attack in time of war. These obligations apply to all who live in the society, irrespective of whether they were born there, or arrived as immigrants and chose to be part of this social contract.

We can readily see that appeals to patriotism and nationalism sit more easily in a system of divine-right kingship than in a democratic social contract. If you believe that the ruler owns you as his or her subject because of your place of birth or ethnicity, then you are bound to support your country whether it be right or wrong. Insisting that only Jesus should be honoured as Lord may well cost you your life.

However, if you are part of a social contract, then appeals to blind patriotism or nationalism will be less convincing. You still want to do what is good for the society in which you live, but you can aim to do so in a way that is consistent with following Jesus and where you can still love those who do not belong to your nation, particularly since some of those foreigners will be your brothers and sisters in Christ.

It is reasonable, for example, for a government to regulate its borders in order to protect a society from war, terrorism or other activities that would harm the greater good. Having a heart for

the stranger and the foreigner does not necessarily mean operating an open borders policy.

So, as Christians, we are expected to be a blessing to the society in which we live. We should be peaceful and law-abiding, provided of course that such laws do not conflict with our allegiance to Jesus Christ, and we should contribute to the greater good of the land in which we live. Yet we still live as pilgrims, as strangers and foreigners, even in the land of our birth or citizenship. This has important implications as to how we treat others who are strangers or foreigners.

Us and Them

In 1994, a terrible genocide erupted in Rwanda, with members of the Hutu tribe turning on their Tutsi neighbours. Over 800,000 were slaughtered, many hacked to death by machetes.

One of the most horrifying aspects of the Rwandan genocide was that so many of the perpetrators were ordinary, outwardly respectable, people. They included housewives, doctors and teachers. Many professed to be Christians and regularly attended churches. What could cause such people to commit crimes against humanity?

During the colonial period, German and Belgian authorities had deliberately fostered divisions between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes. They believed the Tutsi were more Caucasian, and so racially superior and more fitted to administer the colony. This caused long-lasting resentments and increased the sense of distinctiveness of both tribes.[4]

These divisions remained after independence, and Hutu radicals began to stir up hatred. A new radio station, Radio

Télévision Libre des Mille Collines, broadcast a stream of anti-Tutsi propaganda, music and obscene jokes. Tutsi were referred to as 'cockroaches.'

Perhaps the most terrifying thing about the Rwandan genocide was that it came about through two factors that can be seen at play in most human societies – a heightened sense of group identity (an 'in group') and a diminished view of others (the 'out group').

'Us and Them' thinking is at the root of much anti-immigrant rhetoric:

"These foreigners are taking our jobs."

"We can't have an open door for all the world's poor and suffering. We have to look after our own first."

"Our national identity and culture is being diluted."

"We're being taken over by outsiders."

Pro-immigration rhetoric often seeks to play on the same sense of group solidarity – stressing the economic benefits to our own people of immigration, and the necessity for population growth in western societies with declining birth rates.

For Christians, however, neither of these approaches should be the major factor in our thinking. We are no longer part of the 'in group.'

In the World but Not of the World

One of the reasons why Christians have suffered so much persecution over the last 2000 years is because kings and emperors have grasped a biblical truth, one that some Christians fail to grasp – that we can never give them our ultimate loyalty.

The Early Church were prepared to live as peaceful and law-abiding residents of the Roman Empire, but they were not prepared to take the Empire's oath of loyalty and declare, 'Caesar is lord.' Therefore they suffered and died for the amusement of the crowds in public arenas. Once Jesus becomes your Lord, then Caesar can no longer be lord.

This is why Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hanged by the Nazis in Flossenbürg concentration camp. He refused to swear allegiance to the German state, to be part of the 'in group' of a patriotic church, or to treat Jews as an 'out group.'

The underground Chinese Church understands this truth well. They could make their lives so much easier by joining the official State-run church – the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. But the Chinese Christians know that such a step would be to acknowledge the lordship of the State. The Chinese Communist government has therefore responded with harassment and persecution because, like their counterparts in the Soviet Union and North Korea, they cannot tolerate those who refuse to be defined by the State's ideas of 'Us and Them.'

Of course I am not suggesting that the immigration issue in Ireland is in any way equivalent to the Rwandan genocide or the regimes in China and North Korea. But we need to recognise the fundamentally anti-Christian nature of any approach whereby we see ourselves as part of the 'in group' and treat migrants and asylum seekers as an 'out group' that is assigned a lesser status in our society.

For example, I reject wholeheartedly the notion that just because someone was born within the same geographical borders as me, or comes from the same ethnic background as me, that therefore I share some kind of special bond with them to the

exclusion of others. I cannot buy into any policy whereby such a person is guaranteed human rights and benefits which are denied to others simply because they were born elsewhere or come from a different ethnic background. I see myself as a stranger and a foreigner in this nation and this world, and I have a God-given duty to bless others, whether they come from next door or from the other side of the globe.

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. (Galatians 6:10)

2

MIGRATION AND THE IRISH EXPERIENCE

We have already mentioned that at many points in history immigrants were seen as a valuable resource to be welcomed and retained. For example, the children of Israel were welcomed into Egypt and the Egyptians were prepared to go to great lengths to stop them from leaving. Border controls were designed more to discourage people from leaving than to prevent them entering!

The Roman Empire

It is true that the Romans built barriers at the frontiers of their territory. One famous example would be Hadrian's Wall, an 80-mile long barrier constructed in Northern England. However, this served more as a means to prevent smuggling and to collect taxes on imports than as any anti-immigration measure.

Legions of Roman soldiers were stationed on both the Rhine and the Danube rivers, but these were designed to guard against invading armies, not to prevent individuals from entering the Empire.

Indeed, it is doubtful whether the Romans had anything close to our concept of a nation of citizens to which someone might emigrate. According to censuses conducted by Caesar Augustus in 8 BC and 14 AD, less than 10% of the population of the Empire were Roman citizens.[5] Between 35% and 40% of the

population were slaves, leaving a majority of inhabitants who lived within the geographical borders of the Empire, not as citizens, but as strangers and foreigners with no real sense of national identity.

People often identified themselves more by their trade or by their religion than by nationality. And if that identification threatened their rulers then they were ruthlessly suppressed irrespective of their place of birth or ethnic origin.

For example, Christians had lived in Persia from the very earliest days of the Church. Parthians and Medes were among the crowd that heard Peter preach the Gospel on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:9). For three centuries Syriac churches in Persia prayed and worshipped in the Aramaic language that Jesus and His disciples had spoken. But then the Roman Empire, which was the sworn enemy of Persia, adopted Christianity and began to style itself as a Christian Empire. Persia's rulers, the Sassanids, decided that if their enemies were now Christians, then that made the Christians within Persia enemies as well. A fearful persecution of the Persian Church ensued.[6]

In a tragic irony the same process is being repeated in our own day in the same part of the world. Those who view Christianity as a western, or even American, religion are persecuting Christians in the Middle East. Their faith, rather than their passports, mark them out as strangers and foreigners who are deemed not to belong in that part of the world.

The Middle Ages

Today we hear so much about the dangers of overpopulation that it's hard to realise that in the Middle Ages the opposite was the case. Depopulation was the major crisis. Diseases such as

the Black Death, combined with a climate change that ushered in the Little Ice Age, wiped out over 50% of the population of Europe in the Fourteenth Century. Famine killed millions. In France, the Hundred Years War (1337-1453) caused such devastation that the population of some regions, such as Normandy and Paris, were reduced by over two-thirds.[7]

Migration depends to a great extent on 'push and pull' factors. There are conditions that push people to emigrate, and there are attractions that draw immigrants. Famine and warfare have always been powerful push factors, forcing hordes of refugees to take to the roads in search of food and safety.

Today we often hear a distinction made between 'genuine refugees' and 'economic migrants.' According to this reasoning, emigration to flee political or religious persecution is understandable and even praiseworthy, but travelling to another country in search of work or to feed one's family is something that should be discouraged. In reality, people's motives are rarely as cut and dried as that.

In the Middle Ages it made little difference whether refugees faced death from warfare, persecution, famine or disease. When you're fleeing for your life, it makes little difference what kind of death you're trying to escape.

In such an environment, with crops lying untended in the fields and cities left half-empty, attracting immigrants was the name of the game. Some Central European countries, such as Poland, Hungary and Bohemia, offered inducements to immigrants by granting them legal privileges similar to those enjoyed in Germany, but which were not enjoyed by the native populations.[8] This offer to immigrants to live in Central Europe under 'German law' was similar to how banks and insurance

companies today will often offer preferential rates to new borrowers and customers.

Since skilled workers were spoiled for choice in the Middle Ages when it came to migration, many cities sought to attract them by becoming more democratic. This was the period of history when cities that had previously been controlled by the aristocracy and landed gentry began to create opportunities for guildsmen to become part of the local government.

The Passport

The first recorded instance of a passport in history was actually in the Old Testament, when Nehemiah requested letters from King Artaxerxes to enable him to pass through Trans-Euphrates on his way to Jerusalem. But it was during the immigrant boom in the Middle Ages that the passport became popular.

The original purpose of a passport was not to regulate or control who should be allowed into a country. It was more to allow people to pass through a region or a city unhindered. In an age when immigrants were so valued, there was always the danger that a traveller might be prevented from leaving a city and forced to remain there, compelled to stay and contribute his labour and skills to the local economy.

So, rulers and other figures of authority began to issue their travellers with a safe-conduct letter, or a 'pass-porte,' demanding that they be allowed to pass freely in and out through the gates (*les portes* in French) of cities. Any city that tried to detain such a traveller would incur the wrath of the ruler who had issued the passport.

In England, during the Fifteenth Century, passports were issued free of charge by the monarch to immigrants who wished to travel, but a fee was charged for any Englishman who required a passport. This reflected the high status of immigrants in society at the time.[9]

Irish Emigration

The Irish, perhaps more than any other people in the western world, have a history of emigration. There is a story that the Ninth-Century Irish poet, Sedulius Scotus, arrived at a European monastery, only to be asked by the abbot whether he had left Ireland due to the unsettled state of the country or because of 'the Irish habit of going away.'[10]

Certainly the Irish have been prolific emigrants, with America often being the destination of choice. It has been estimated that over 44 million Americans, or about eight times the population of Ireland, have some form of Irish ancestry.[11]

The first great wave of Irish emigration occurred in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries when over 250,000 Catholics and Presbyterians left for America.[12] They were certainly disadvantaged and discriminated against under the Irish Penal Laws, which favoured the Church of Ireland (part of the Episcopalian, or Anglican communion). However, most of these emigrants were not experiencing persecution in the sense of facing imprisonment or death, and economic factors were also a strong reason behind their migration.

When these immigrants arrived in America they were frequently looked upon as the lowest of the low. Many of them arrived as indentured servants, a form of temporary slavery where

they had to work for a master for up to seven years in order to pay off their passage across the Atlantic.

The second great wave of Irish emigrants occurred between 1815 and 1845. An economic crisis followed the Battle of Waterloo and the end of the Napoleonic wars. As new trading opportunities arose between England and continental Europe, the value of Irish exports collapsed. Almost 1 million of the Irish left for the US and Canada during that 30-year period.[13]

The push factors for Irish emigration reached their peak during the Famine of 1846-1852. During and immediately after *an Gorta Mór*, or 'The Great Hunger,' over 2 million people left Ireland in just eleven years. This was an unparalleled displacement of human beings in western history, representing over 25% of the entire population of Ireland.[14]

When one considers that over 1 million Irish people also perished in the Famine, it is understandable that this period left an indelible mark on the Irish psyche. Population levels have never again come close to those of pre-Famine Ireland. Emigration became an accepted way of life, with 4 million more leaving Ireland over the next century. By the end of the Nineteenth Century, over 50% of all people born in Ireland were living overseas. Today, the Irish overseas Diaspora is estimated to number over 100 million people, nearly 20 times Ireland's current population.

Ireland, possibly more than any other country in the world, could be described as a nation of emigrants. In order to survive, the children of the land of a hundred thousand welcomes (*céad míle fáilte*) have for generations had to learn to live as strangers in foreign lands and to rely on the welcome of others.

As President John F. Kennedy famously expressed it in 1963, "Most countries send out oil or iron, steel or gold, or some other crop, but Ireland has had only one export and that is its people."[15]

You would think that Ireland's unique Famine and emigration experience would have made us particularly welcoming to those fleeing from similarly horrific scenarios. Unfortunately that wasn't the way it worked out when our nation had an opportunity to provide help to fleeing strangers.

'The Emergency'

There has been a small Jewish community in Ireland for many years. A number of Jews from Lithuania arrived in Cork in the late Nineteenth Century, knowing that it was 'the gateway to America.' Many transatlantic liners, including the Titanic, made Queenstown their final European port of call. Some of these immigrants did what Abraham's family had done in Haran nearly 4000 years earlier, and decided to settle down before reaching their intended destination! The son of one of these Jewish immigrants, Gerald Goldberg, eventually became Lord Mayor of Cork. Another, Robert Briscoe, fought for the IRA in the war of Independence and later became Lord Mayor of Dublin.[16]

Another notable Irish-born Jew was Chaim Herzog, son of the rabbi of Dublin, who was twice elected President of Israel.

Ireland remained neutral during the Second World War, or 'the Emergency' as the government preferred to call it. However, its record on welcoming Jewish refugees from Nazism contrasts poorly with other neutral nations.

Switzerland accepted over 30,000 Jewish refugees. Sweden provided a safe haven for virtually the entire Danish Jewish

community in 1943. Portugal allowed Lisbon to operate as an escape route for Jews en route to the US or South America. Even Spain, whose fascist government had seized power with Hitler's help, welcomed over 30,000 Jewish refugees, while Spanish diplomats across Europe issued thousands of identity document to help Jews flee the Holocaust.

Meanwhile it is estimated that Ireland, both before and during the War, accepted a grand total of 30 Jewish refugees.[17] The criteria for acceptance was that any such Jewish refugees must be converts to Catholicism and wealthy enough to support themselves without needing to seek employment or to involve themselves in the economic life of the nation![18]

The reasons given for this policy were twofold. Firstly, Ireland was a poor country with high unemployment. Secondly, the government felt that any large scale influx of Jews would increase anti-Semitism.

Following Hitler's suicide in his Berlin bunker in 1945, both Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Éamon de Valera, and an envoy of Irish President Douglas Hyde, visited the German Embassy in Dublin to express their condolences.[19]

It would appear that during 'the Emergency' Ireland never quite caught the idea of 'paying it forward' when it came to welcoming refugees and migrants.

From Doom and Gloom to the Celtic Tiger

After the War, due to a decline in agriculture, unemployment rocketed again. During the 1950s, another half million young people emigrated, representing, in just one decade, a loss of 16% of the country's population. 60% of children who grew up in Ireland during the 1950s ended up leaving the country.[20]

A further wave of emigration occurred during the 1980s. Again the push factor was high unemployment, caused by excessive levels of national debt and spiralling oil prices. Another half million emigrants left, but this was different from earlier Irish migrations. Previously, emigration had been highest among unskilled workers, but the 1980s departures were predominantly highly educated. During this 'brain drain' Ireland lost large numbers of university graduates.[21]

In the mid-1990s, the economic boom known as 'The Celtic Tiger' helped turn Ireland from a nation of emigrants to a destination for immigrants. A number of factors combined to transform the Irish economy.

Membership of the European Union provided huge amounts of financial aid for poorer countries from the EU's Regional Development and Social funds. Ireland, to a greater degree than other beneficiaries, invested this money in education and infrastructure. The EU also opened up easy access to export markets for Irish goods.

This attracted investment, particularly from the United States, as did a low corporation tax rate, a government that was actively courting entrepreneurs and investors, and the availability of a highly-educated English-speaking population. Meanwhile, the peace agreements that appeared to end a long-running violent conflict in Northern Ireland created a feel-good factor. Investment in Ireland not only made financial sense, but it also allowed captains of industry to feel as if they were making the world a better place, particularly if, like many Americans, they had some kind of Irish ancestry themselves.

The economy, exports and employment all soared. Ireland's exports had traditionally been in the agricultural sector. Now

foreign-owned companies, particularly in pharmaceuticals and technology, accounted for over 90% of Ireland's exports.[22] The Irish, who had for so long been forced to emigrate in search of work, were now among the wealthiest people in Europe.

Push and Pull Factors

The rise of the Celtic Tiger economy was the major, but not the sole, factor in turning a nation of emigrants into a destination for immigrants. Immigration into Ireland continued even when the boom years were followed by economic recession and a return to high unemployment.

We have already noted that push and pull factors contribute to migration. Ireland's fast-growing economy was an obvious pull factor. But it coincided with a dramatic world-wide increase in the number of people on the move. In 1990, 154 million people were living in a country other than their nation of birth. By 2000 this figure had increased to 175 million. By 2013 it had reached 232 million.[23] True, migration has always been a part of human experience – but why is it increasing as never before?

Violence and poverty have always been powerful push factors affecting emigration. When it comes to warfare, there are two apparently contradictory long-term trends. The number of wars being fought in the world are steadily increasing each year,[24] yet the number of fatalities are steadily decreasing.[25] One plausible explanation for this is that modern transportation has made it easier for civilians, who have always been the chief casualties of war, to flee the worst of the violence. This helps explain why the number of refugees in the world, at 50 million, is now higher than at any time since World War II.[26]

Poverty, believe it or not, is also decreasing world-wide. There are still huge numbers of people living in horrible conditions, and there is no room for complacency, yet the numbers of those who live in absolute poverty (defined by the World Bank as having an income of under $1.25 per day) is steadily falling. In 1981, 52% of people in the developing world lived under this level. By 1990, that figure had reduced to 43%. In 2011 the World Bank reported that 17% of the developing world now lived on under $1.25 per day – that's calculating income in real terms and allowing for inflation and changes in purchasing power.[27] Of course 17% of the developing world's population represents a massive and unacceptable amount of people still living in abject poverty, but the trend is in the right direction.

However, the reduction in the number of people in absolute poverty can cause an increase, rather than a decrease, in migration. The very poorest of people are often too poor to travel. For example, during the Irish Famine years the poorest people did not emigrate to America – they died! Those who emigrated were those who could scrape together the resources to fund their way across the Atlantic.

One major problem with statistics such as the numbers living on less than $1.25 per day, is that they refer to absolute poverty. Poverty, for most people, is not absolute. It is relative. Once we move above the level of having our basic needs of food and shelter met, we tend to define poverty by comparing our standard of living with those around us. Absolute poverty may be falling, but inequality in income and wealth is rising, which increases relative poverty, as more and more people see how poor they are compared to others.

According to the International Monetary Fund, the richest 20% of the world's population controls 83% of the world's wealth and resources. The next 20% holds 11% of this wealth. This means that 60%, or the largest part of humanity, only possesses 6% of the world's wealth and resources.[28]

Not only that, but improved communications technology and globalisation means that those living in relative poverty are constantly reminded that there are others who are living a much more privileged lifestyle.

In my travels in the developing world, I have often been struck by the seeming absurdity of the heralds of western consumerism in the most incongruous settings. You can drive for hours on unpaved roads, finally arriving in a village that has no mains electricity supply or running water. There, in the midst of a cluster of sparsely furnished mud huts, surrounded by skinny children in ragged clothing, you find a shack that boasts a solar powered satellite dish. Inside, a group of men are sitting on the bare earth floor watching an English Premiership soccer match where commentators talk about players who were signed at the 'bargain price' of only 5 million euro. At half time they watch advertisements for McDonalds and KFC where well-fed and well-dressed children, with gleaming white teeth, tuck into mountains of food. After the soccer finishes, the programming switches to American and Australian soap operas, where the characters drive gleaming cars, wear designer clothes and live in houses that appear to be larger than the viewers' entire village.

Men like these have lived in villages like these for thousands of years. Most of the time they never considered themselves poor. All the neighbouring villages enjoyed a similar lifestyle.

Their idea of wealth was possibly to own a few more goats than the rest of the villagers.

Now, however, a tantalising vision of how other people are living is dangled before them on a daily basis. Is it surprising that some of these men will become dissatisfied with their lot and strike out into the wider world to claim their share of the consumerist dream that beckons through the satellite dish?

Global inequality of wealth, coupled with globalisation and mass media, have created the greatest push and pull factors for migration that this world has ever known.

Why Ireland?

The push and pull factors we have been exploring hold true for any western society, but Ireland had some additional attractions.

The powerful position of the Catholic Church, coupled with years of unemployment, had created a scenario where it was commonplace for at least one son in Irish families to be expected to enter the priesthood. As a result, Irish missionary priests could be found working in schools and hospitals in the unlikeliest spots in the world. Paddy O'Connor, a former Irish soldier, is one of our members in Solid Rock Church in Drogheda. He told me of the occasion when, while on UN peacekeeping duties in Lebanon, he was accosted at a checkpoint by an Arab youth speaking fluent Irish. The boy had learned the Irish language from 'the reverend fathers' in his school.

When African immigrants began arriving in Drogheda in significant numbers in 2000, I was surprised at how many were called Sean or Patrick. At first I thought that they must have adopted these names on arrival to fit more easily into Irish

society, but I was wrong. Once again these baptismal names back home had been inspired by 'the reverend fathers.'

Another pull factor for immigrants to Ireland was a clause in the Constitution that guaranteed citizenship to anyone born on the island of Ireland. This provision had been part of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, designed to bring peace to Northern Ireland. The idea was that Irish Nationalists living under British jurisdiction in the North could be legally recognised as part of the Irish nation and have their Irish citizenship affirmed as a Constitutional right. A parallel part of the Agreement was that Ireland would abandon its Constitutional claim to the territory of Northern Ireland. Together, it was reasoned, these proposals would reassure Unionists that the North would not leave the United Kingdom unless a majority of the Northern Irish population voted to do so, yet would help satisfy the aspirations of northern Nationalists.

Since both these moves involved changes to Ireland's Constitution, they had to be approved in a referendum. They were presented as part of the Nineteenth Amendment, a package promising peace in the North that was approved by a massive 94% of voters.[29] It is doubtful whether many, or indeed any, of those voters realised the implications for immigration.

Word began to spread that having a baby on Irish soil would confer automatic Irish, and therefore European Union, citizenship on the Irish-born child. Bear in mind also that Article 41 of the Irish Constitution declared the family to be 'the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law.'[30] This meant that it

would be very difficult indeed to legally prevent the parents, and even siblings, of an Irish citizen from residing in the State.

The numbers of asylum seekers coming to Ireland, many of them pregnant women, increased dramatically. In 1992, only 39 people sought asylum in Ireland. In 2002 the figure was 11,634.[31] Some people referred to babies as 'the Irish Green Card.'

A further amendment to the Constitution, passed in 2004, stipulated that an Irish-born child, in order to be guaranteed citizenship, had to have at least one Irish citizen as a parent. This measure was expressly designed to stop 'birth tourism' since, prior to this amendment, Ireland was the only European nation that guaranteed citizenship on the grounds of birth alone. However, by this time, Ireland was already firmly established as a destination for migrants.

Also in 2004, the European Union was greatly enlarged, welcoming ten new countries, most of which had been part of the Communist bloc in Central and Eastern Europe before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Romania and Bulgaria were then added in 2007. Ireland was one of the few EU countries that completely opened its borders to workers from these nations. The construction industry was experiencing a boom, which would eventually turn out to be a bubble and then a bust. But, in the meantime, workers flocked to Ireland to 'join the party.'

Ireland changed beyond recognition. A country that had experienced little or no immigration for centuries suddenly became more cosmopolitan. The Irish census of 2011 revealed that 12% of the population were immigrants, having been born somewhere other than Ireland (these figures do not, obviously, include the Irish-born children of immigrants).[32]

Most Irish people, particularly during the boom years of the Celtic Tiger, were relaxed and positive about immigration. Opinion polls revealed that a majority of respondents, much higher than the European average, saw immigration as being a positive phenomenon that enriched the country economically and culturally. Since the economic recession, that view still prevails, but less so than in the good times.[33]

In contrast to many nations in Europe, there is no popular support in Ireland for xenophobic or racist right-wing politics. That is not to say that individual cases of racism or discrimination never occur, but overall there is a singular absence of intolerant or anti-immigrant rhetoric in either politics or the media.

Immigration and Evangelicalism

Numerically speaking, Evangelical Christianity in Ireland has benefitted hugely from immigration. New churches, predominantly composed of different nationalities, and often worshipping in different languages, have proliferated across the country. Existing congregations, many of which had previously been exclusively white and Irish, have seen their numbers increase through new members from all over the globe. David McWilliams, economist and broadcaster, has claimed that Evangelical Christianity grew by 1000% in a single decade![34]

One example of this growth is the Redeemed Christian Church of God, a Nigerian-based denomination with a passionate approach to planting new churches. The media, when it refers to religion at all, still speaks of 'the four main churches' (Roman Catholic, Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist). However, informed commentators agree that the Redeemed

Christian Church of God is now the third largest denomination in the Irish Republic.

The Direct Provision System and Children

One of the most contentious aspects of Ireland's immigration system is how it deals with asylum seekers. Many people would argue that the western world's foremost nation of emigrants is once again missing the opportunity to deal in a compassionate and principled way with migrants from other countries.

Direct Provision was introduced in 1999 as an emergency measure. It was anticipated that it would be a short-term mechanism for coping with unexpectedly high numbers of asylum seekers arriving in Ireland.

Basically, those living in the Direct Provision system are provided with accommodation, food and basic medical care at one of thirty five Accommodation Centres that are dotted around the country. The asylum seekers are provided with pocket money (€19.10 per week for an adult, and €9.60 per week for a child) and are not permitted to seek employment. Rules vary between different Accommodation Centres, with some preventing residents from receiving visitors in their rooms – a ban that was condemned by the High Court in 2014 as unconstitutional.[35] Married couples often have to sleep in a small room with up to four children. Single parents and their children are sometimes forced to share a bedroom with other adults.

The effect of the Direct Provision system on children is of particular concern. When this system was first introduced it was envisaged that no-one would live under Direct Provision for more than six months. However, Ireland's system for addressing asylum claims, including a cumbersome appeals process, means

that families have ended up living like this for up to ten years. Children, some of them born into Direct Provision, have never known what it is to live in a family home. Some Accommodation Centres provide very limited access for children to play, and for recreation. Children are provided transport to attend local schools, but these arrangements often do not permit them to participate in after-school activities such as sports, clubs or other extras.

More than 1,500 child protection or welfare concerns involving children living in Direct Provision have been reported to Irish social workers in the last five years. This represents over three times the frequency of such reports for children in the rest of the population. Problems reported include inappropriate sexualised behaviour among children, the inability of parents to cope, a lack of supervision and mental health problems. The placing of children in shared accommodation has resulted in numerous cases of inappropriate sexual contact between children and adults.[36]

Dr Geoffrey Shannon, the Irish government's Special Rapporteur on Child Protection, has called Direct Provision 'institutionalised poverty' and has described it as having 'a profound impact on the mental health of adults and children.'[37] Comparing our treatment of asylum seekers with previous horrendous institutional child-abuse scenarios in Irish history, Dr Shannon commented, 'When we look back in ten years' time, we may well ask ourselves how we allowed the Direct Provision system to exist.'[38]

Food, Work and Security

Another major concern about Direct Provision is that it weakens the bond of the family, even though the Irish Constitution asserts that the family, as the fundamental unit on which society is built, should take precedence in all matters of law. One of the basic activities that binds a family together is a shared mealtime in the family home. Parents see the ability to prepare a meal for their children as the very essence of family life. Yet our government has created a system whereby young children have never in their lives experienced a home-cooked meal in a family home. They have to eat mass-prepared food in a canteen at set times. This is surely more akin to how Chinese children were raised during the Cultural Revolution than to the Irish concept of the family.

Some Accommodation Centres go to great lengths to try to provide asylum seekers with good food, but that is not always the case. Some years ago I was visiting members of our church who were living under Direct Provision in a centre in Drogheda, now thankfully closed. One mother from Angola, who had fled Africa in fear of her life, had tears in her eyes as she held out a plate containing a piece of pizza base smeared with tomato puree. 'Pastor,' she wept, 'What kind of mother am I when this is what I am ordered to give my children for their main meal of the day?'

The irony was that this Angolan lady is actually the most talented and creative cook that I have ever met in my life. Any time we had social events in the church, she would serve up banquets of the most varied and delicious food imaginable, feeding up to 50 people yet only utilising the ordinary domestic kitchen of another church member. For this lady to be forbidden

to weave her culinary magic on behalf of her own children was, in her mind, an assault upon her role as a mother.

A further irony is that the self-same building which once served as an Accommodation Centre now houses one of the best restaurants in Drogheda. Occasionally I have dined there with my wife and friends, savouring five-star cuisine. Even as I enjoy the fine food, I can't help remembering that previous encounter in the same room, with a despairing mother and a very different standard of food.

Denying asylum seekers the right to seek employment is another detrimental aspect of the Direct Provision system. In many cultures a father is conditioned to see the ability to provide for his family as the very essence of manhood. Of course many women were also, prior to having to leave their homeland, accustomed to working hard and pursuing a career. To force such people to live for years in virtual limbo, forbidden to even look for work, is immensely harmful to their feelings of dignity and self-worth.

One of the most common complaints from the anti-immigration lobby is the number of foreigners who end up as welfare recipients, draining from the State rather than contributing to the economy. In my experience, most asylum seekers hate being in receipt of welfare. They desperately want to work, but are forbidden to do so.

In 2003, the European Union issued a Reception Directive, EU Directive 2003/9EC, which is designed to ensure that member States grant basic human rights to asylum seekers. One of those basic human rights is seeking access to work. The Directive states:

Member States cannot deny applicants for asylum access to the labour market and vocational training six months after they have lodged their application.[39]

Even though Ireland professes to be an enthusiastic member of the European Union, to date our government has refused to participate in, or to comply with, the Reception Directive. The Irish position on the treatment of asylum seekers is, from an international perspective, looking increasingly isolated. The United Nations Human Rights Committee has also criticised the prolonged use of the Direct Provision system.[40]

A further problem with Ireland's asylum system concerns the care, safety and security of victims and survivors of sexual abuse. Asylum seekers are often fleeing from societies where there has been a breakdown of law and order. Rape is also a common atrocity in times of warfare. Therefore, those living in Direct Provision are much more likely to have been victims of sexual abuse than the general population. For example, according to the Rape Crisis Network, the percentage of asylum seekers who have been victims of multiple abusers (i.e. gang rape) is five times higher than the rest of the population. A higher than average proportion of asylum seekers have also been the victims of people-trafficking and forced prostitution. Despite this, access to counselling and support in Accommodation Centres is often limited.[41]

The Immigrant Council of Ireland has warned that placing victims of people-trafficking in the Direct Provision system 'puts them in immediate danger of abuse, threats and a return to prostitution.' There is little or no privacy to recover from highly traumatic experiences, and the mixed-gender format of

Accommodation Centres can leave vulnerable young women open to grooming and further exploitation.[42]

There is also evidence that the Centres are targeted by men looking for prostitutes and that victims could easily be traced and intimidated by their traffickers.

Perhaps the most shaming indictment of Ireland's treatment of asylum seekers occurred at Northern Ireland's High Court in 2013. A family from Darfur, where Sudanese militia have been carrying out a policy of genocide and enslavement, were seeking permission to remain in the United Kingdom. The UK government wanted to deport them to Ireland, since they had been seeking asylum in Ireland before crossing the border into the North.

The court ruled that to return the family to the Irish Republic would be detrimental to the welfare of a child. The Direct Provision system, according to this ruling, is so harmful to the physical and mental health of children that it would be unlawful for a UK court to send a child to a friendly fellow member State of the European Union to be treated in such a fashion.[43]

We would expect such a ruling to be made concerning a country in the developing world, or one known for repression and human rights abuses. For it to be issued with respect to Ireland is shocking indeed.

3

A LEARNING CURVE

I shared in the Introduction to this book that a catalyst for its writing was the question, 'What can we do to help these people?' So far we have explored the issue of immigration into Ireland, and the plight of asylum seekers, from the standpoints of theology and history. In this Chapter we are going to take a different perspective – that of personal testimony. I want to share how one Pentecostal church in Drogheda learned how to minister Jesus to migrants and asylum seekers. What follows is an account of our journey.

Developing a Heart for the Nations

The first thing we needed in order to minister effectively to migrants and asylum seekers was a call from God.

As the year 1999 was drawing to a close, I became increasingly disturbed by the near hysteria among many Christians about the Y2K Bug. The theory was that computers could not cope with the date change at the new millennium, and that worldwide chaos would ensue. Supposedly planes would fall out of the sky, trillions of dollars would disappear from bank records, cities would be left without power or water, and civilisation would fall apart. In the event, the year 2000 would roll in without a hitch, but sadly Christians were in the forefront of scare-mongering and propagating the Y2K hoax. Some

believers in the United States were even stockpiling food and making plans to hideout in the mountains!

Now, I am not a computer engineer, so I was in no way qualified to judge how ready computer systems across the globe were for the new millennium. But the problem with the whole Y2K hoax, like so many other stories that Christians gullibly forward in emails (including anti-immigration scaremongering), was that it was all based on fear rather than faith. God has not given us a spirit of fear! (2 Timothy 1:7)

In the Solid Rock Church in Drogheda, we began to pray in late 1999. We asked God to fill us with excitement at what He intended to do. We didn't want to swallow a message of fear and gloom. We wanted to enter 2000 in a place of faith and trust. I began to understand that now was the time for us to get ready for being multicultural. So, on the final Sunday of 1999, I made this statement while I was preaching, "In this coming year, 2000 AD, God is going to bring the peoples of the world to Drogheda, to this church, to enable us to touch the nations." That wasn't just wishful thinking – I knew I had heard from God.

So, throughout the year 2000, I kept telling the church to get ready to receive the nations. I taught on what this might involve. How we might have to adapt the way we programme our services, how we should be proactive in inviting people of other cultures into our homes, how we would need to involve those of other cultures in ministry positions and in leadership.

Week after week of that year went by, but there were no signs of any nations coming near our church. I kept saying, "Get ready to welcome those of other cultures" – but people were starting to get restless. By the time we got to October I was thinking of how false prophets were stoned in the Old Testament, and wishing

that maybe I hadn't been so definite that the arrival of the nations was going to happen this year. Immigrants from other countries were arriving into other parts of Ireland then, but not in Drogheda.

I didn't realise it at the time, but, during those first eleven months of 2000, God was doing a deep work of preparation within us. Churches should not get involved in ministry to migrants and asylum seekers on a whim, or because it seems like a nice idea.

This is why, in this book, I took so long in laying a theological and historical foundation for this kind of ministry. I could have jumped straight in a practical 'how to' manual – but that would only produce programmes that would be shallow and superficial. Cross-cultural ministry is not an optional 'add-on' that you can stick onto an existing church culture. It will cause us to make changes that shake our comfort zones. For that to happen, church leaders need to be convinced, both in their heads and their hearts, that this ministry is the will of God.

The Breakthrough

Then, on the last Sunday in November, Tunde and Bisola Oki, a Nigerian couple from a Muslim background who had received Christ back in Nigeria, walked into the Solid Rock Church during our morning worship. Since all of our people had been preparing for this moment for the best part of a year, Tunde and Bisola probably received the warmest welcome that any visitor to an Irish church has ever received! They knew right away that they had found their spiritual home, and their arrival seemed to open the floodgates. Within weeks, dozens of immigrants from various nations were worshipping with us.

Some of them didn't even speak our language. One Moldovan lady came every week, even though she spoke no English. One Sunday I realised that we had another Russian speaker who could translate, so I asked this Moldovan lady why she came to a church where she couldn't understand a word that was being said. She replied, "I feel Jesus here."

The immediate impact that Tunde and Bisola made on their arrival in our church demonstrates two more important principles for churches that want to minister to migrants and asylum seekers – those of Serendipity and the Homogeneous Unit Principle.

Serendipity

It turned out that Tunde and Bisola weren't even supposed to be in Drogheda. On arriving in Ireland and claiming asylum they had been housed in an Accommodation Centre in Dublin. They were due to be transferred to Cork, but heavy rains flooded the roads, so they unexpectedly ended up in Drogheda. Being committed Christians, they wanted to find a place of worship, so they asked around to find if there were any Pentecostal churches in town. Someone told them, "I haven't any idea what a Pentecostal is, but there's a crazy group of Christians who meet in a hotel, play loud music, and raise their hands in the air."

'Serendipity' is supposed to be one of the hardest words to translate from English into other languages. It refers to those occasions when things happen just like they are supposed to, with all the pieces falling into place at the right time. In non-Christian thought and literature, serendipity is linked to coincidence and happy accidents. For those of us who follow Christ, however, we can see another hand at work in apparent coincidences.

There are times when you step out in faith to do something great for God, and then God honours that by sending along just the right people at just the right time.

A biblical example of serendipity occurs in the Book of Acts. Philip the Evangelist, having conducted a gloriously successful campaign in Samaria, was instructed in an angelic vision to go and stand by the side of the road in a desert (Acts 8:26). From a human logical standpoint, this made no sense whatsoever. Philip was an evangelist, after all, and one of the fundamental principles in evangelism is to go where the people are – not to stand beside roads in empty deserts.

Yet as Philip waits beside that desert road, he sees a cloud of dust in the distance. As the cloud of dust draws nearer, he sees that it is caused by a chariot. In the chariot is an Ethiopian eunuch. This royal official, by coincidence, is reading the Scriptures. He just happens to have reached the passage in Isaiah that speaks of the Messiah being led like a lamb to the slaughter for the sins of the world (Isaiah 53:7-8). And, in a further coincidence, he is wondering who the prophet was talking about, and wishing that there was someone there to explain the passage to him. Then, just by coincidence, Philip, the only evangelist for miles around, suddenly appears and jogs alongside the eunuch's chariot.

The eunuch invites Philip up into the chariot to sit with him, and Philip goes on to explain the passage in Isaiah, to preach the Gospel and to lead the eunuch to faith in Christ. The eunuch is then baptised and returns rejoicing to Ethiopia.

The author of Acts, Luke the physician, was a scientist and an educated Greek speaker. He would be well aware of the passages in Strabo's 'Geography' that quote Homer as saying that 'the

Ethiopians live at the ends of the earth.'[44] So, for Luke, a series of apparent coincidences regarding Philip and the eunuch, ended up fulfilling the words of Jesus, that the purpose of the pouring out of the Spirit was for the Church to bear witness to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

That is also my experience. When you determine to minister Jesus to people of different nations, you have joined yourself to God's overall plan for the ages. Jesus gave us the Great Commission:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:19-20)

The promise of Christ's continual presence is not, in this passage, a blanket assurance to everyone who calls themselves a Christian. It is rather promised to those who will make disciples of all nations!

Philip the evangelist, by obeying a seemingly irrational command to go and stand by a desert road, had committed himself to being a part of God's plan to reach the nations. This opened the way for the series of coincidences that took the Gospel to Ethiopia – the ends of the earth.

When the Solid Rock Church in Drogheda began to prepare itself to receive international immigrants, even though no such immigrants were in our area, we were stepping into God's plan – and that is the zone where serendipity happens.

Tunde and Bisola Oki weren't even supposed to be coming to Drogheda. They were destined for Cork. The only reason they came to Drogheda was because of floods that blocked the road between Dublin and Cork. Such severe floods are so rare as

almost never to happen. Then, when they arrived in Drogheda, they were directed to our church by someone who didn't even know who or what we were. Then they arrived at a church that had been preparing to receive international visitors for the last eleven months.

As if all of this were not already an impressive string of apparent coincidences, Tunde and Bisola Oki were very far from being your average asylum seekers. They turned out to be the most fervent evangelists that it has ever been my pleasure to work alongside. They were extraordinarily effective in inviting other asylum seekers to church.

Over the intervening years we have welcomed hundreds of Africans into our church. Many of them have been wonderful Christians, passionate in worship and prayer. But none of them have proved quite as effective as Tunde and Bisola in reaching others with the Gospel. In the first six months that they were with us, they brought more people into the church than I, as the pastor, had managed to reach in the previous seven years.

I don't believe it was a blind coincidence that the very first asylum seekers who came to our church were also the most passionate of evangelists. God's serendipity was at work.

Pastors Tunde and Bisola Oki were eventually ordained and served on our Pastoral Team for many years. They now lead Solid Rock Southside, a vibrant daughter church in Drogheda.

The next example of serendipity in action came just one week after the first asylum seekers walked into the Solid Rock Church. In December 2000 the government signed a deal to turn the Mosney Holiday Centre, less than eight miles from where our church was meeting, into the largest asylum seekers' Accommodation Centre in Ireland.

Mosney

Mosney Holiday Centre had originally been part of the Butlin's chain of holiday camps, with cheery 'redcoats' exhorting holidaymakers to participate in talent contests and knobbly-knees competitions. In later years it operated under Irish ownership. By 2000, however, the Celtic Tiger economy, combined with cheap airfares to the Mediterranean and other sunny climates, had caused custom to dwindle to such an extent that the holiday centre had to close. Now it was to re-open as an Accommodation Centre for asylum seekers.

So, just at a time when our church had thrown open our doors to the nations, and was already receiving a flood of asylum seekers, another huge area of ministry opened up on our doorstep.

When I first drove up to the gates of the Mosney Accommodation Centre, I didn't exactly receive a rapturous welcome. The security staff refused me entrance! They told me that I could visit a particular family of asylum seekers if I had a specific invitation, but under no circumstances would I be allowed to wander round the camp and speak to other people.

I prayed about this at our next Monday night prayer meeting, and two others agreed to go back with me to Mosney and to try again. So, on Tuesday morning, I presented myself at the gates of Mosney once more, this time accompanied by Tunde Oki and an elder in our church by the name of Pat O'Boyle. Pat was a retired police officer who had, for a number of years, been the Superintendent for the police in Drogheda.

To our surprise, on arriving at Mosney, the security staff turned out to be ex-police officers who knew Pat well. After they had swapped a few stories about the goings on in Drogheda

Garda station, Pat said, "This is my pastor, Nick Park, and this is our friend Tunde, from Nigeria. We'd like to get to know some of the asylum seekers and see if we can help them in any way. Would that be OK?"

From that day forward, every time I visited Mosney, the security staff would greet me with a cheery wave and say, "Welcome, Pastor Nick!"

God opened up so many doors for ministry in Mosney that within six months we were chartering a 50-seater bus each Sunday to bring a crowd of people to church. We decided to launch cell groups, or house fellowships, within the camp in order to minister to these people more effectively. That was when God's serendipity was displayed again in a couple called Emmanuel and Evelyn Might.

Solid Rock Dublin

Emmanuel Might was already serving God in Christian ministry in his home nation of Cameroon. Together with his wife Evelyn, he fled a very dangerous and difficult situation there where their lives were at risk. They arrived in Ireland as asylum seekers and were placed in Mosney Accommodation Centre.

Emmanuel had a strong desire to find an Irish Church where he could be mentored and equipped to effectively minister to others. As he puts it, "I needed a spiritual father figure." He had heard about the Solid Rock, but for some reason we had not met him during our weekly visits to Mosney. He felt strongly that God wanted him to join us, so he caught a bus to Drogheda and walked the streets, stopping total strangers and asking them, "Excuse me, but do you know where I might find the Solid Rock

Church?" Within a short time he had connected with us and started a cell group meeting in one of the chalets in Mosney.

Pastors of churches will tell you that there are certain people who are so talented, and who are so willing to combine that talent with a heart to serve others, that you are blessed if, in an entire lifetime of ministry, God sends such a person your way. In less than a year, because we had made a commitment to minister to migrants and asylum seekers, God had sent two such couples to us.

The flood of asylum seekers entering Ireland was so great that Mosney and other Accommodation Centres soon filled up. The Department of Justice began to take some asylum seekers out of the Direct Provision system, and gave them permission to find their own accommodation. Others were successfully recognised as refugees and so left Mosney. For some reason, people renting apartments in Dublin were able to get their security deposits paid by Social Welfare, whereas those in Drogheda had to fund their deposits themselves. We suddenly found that a growing number of the people we had been ministering to in Mosney were relocating to Dublin.

There were many great churches in Dublin. Some were long-established Irish churches. Others were indigenous African congregations. So every time a family moved from Mosney to Dublin we would try to recommend good churches that they could attend. Many people found wonderful spiritual homes. A growing number, however, kept calling us and saying, "Pastor, it's not the same. We want to be part of a multicultural church like the Solid Rock." So we made the decision to launch Solid Rock Dublin.

Trying to plant a church in another city, while still trying to pastor a growing congregation in Drogheda and oversee a regular outreach in Mosney, proved to be enormously stressful. My wife, Janice and I, accompanied by Tunde and Bisola, would sprint out at the end of our Sunday morning services in Drogheda and jump into our cars to head for Dublin. The new congregation there was not just composed of the families that had previously been in Mosney, but other migrants were now joining the Dublin church.

One night, exhausted beyond measure, I prayed to God. I said, "Lord, I can't do this anymore. If we're going to keep reaching people in Dublin then we're going to need a pastor here in our capital city. I could sure do with some more of that serendipity right now."

The next day I received a phone call. It was Emmanuel Might. "Pastor Nick," he said, "I've got some bad news for you." I really wasn't in a fit state to receive any bad news, but I said, "Go on, hit me with it!"

"Well, Pastor," continued Emmanuel, "The Department of Justice is moving us out of Mosney. We've got to move to an apartment in Dublin."

"Hallelujah!" I shouted, "You have just been appointed as the pastor of Solid Rock Dublin!"

For the last ten years Emmanuel and Evelyn Might and Solid Rock Dublin have ministered to people of all nationalities. Every Sunday their beautiful church sanctuary in Inchicore is filled with hundreds of people from Africa, South America, Asia, Eastern Europe and Ireland. Pastor Emmanuel, along with other key leaders in the Irish Church, including Bishops and denominational heads, serves as part of Evangelical Alliance Ireland's Council of Reference.

Don't Block the Blessings

I know that I've laboured this point about serendipity, but I am convinced that being an enthusiastic part of God's mission to disciple the nations opens the door to unexpected blessings.

This also explains why I took the time in the first two chapters of this book to lay a theological and historical foundation for why Irish Evangelical churches should be welcoming and positive towards migrants and asylum seekers.

The other side of the coin to God's serendipity occurs when we place ourselves in opposition to those who are seeking a better life for themselves and their families. I believe churches and ministries can block themselves from receiving God's blessings, when they backslide into a nationalist agenda and become motivated by fear, rather than faith.

For example, I have been horrified at the number of Christians who repost on Facebook anti-immigration links that were originally posted by extreme right-wing and racist organisations. Many Christians also forward fear-mongering emails that issue dire warnings about Europe being taken over by Muslims and turned into 'Eurabia.'

Yes, there is certainly a form of Islam that is violent and intolerant, but that does not reflect the majority of Muslims who emigrate to the west. Nor is anyone being overrun. Muslim immigration into Europe has been going on for centuries, yet not one western European country to date has a Muslim population that exceeds 10%. Projections based on current migration patterns and birth rates estimate that Muslims will increase from 6% of the European population today to 8% in 2030.[45] That hardly suggests that anywhere in western Europe is going to be

overrun in our lifetimes, or indeed those of our children or grandchildren.

But this debate is not just about facts and statistics. It is also about how we view ourselves as ministers of the Gospel with a mandate to disciple the nations. Do we really believe it is the will of God for us to shelter behind heavily fortified borders and repel any outsiders that might threaten our 'Judeo-Christian culture?' As citizens of heaven, who do we have more in common with – the racists and xenophobes who wave flags and demand that foreigners be deported, or the millions of our Christian brothers and sisters who live and bear witness in cultures other than our own?

Imagine if Christians put as much time and energy into learning how to reach Muslim immigrants with the Gospel as they do into composing,g and forwarding, emails that try to whip up a mob-like fear of foreigners. Our society, and our churches, might look very different.

Once we determine in faith that we are going to proactively bless those from other nations, then we start to unblock the blessings.

One of the people we met in those exciting days in 2001 was an African Muslim. He was a qualified doctor back home, yet was now seeking asylum in Ireland. He started attending the Solid Rock Church and received Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Through an Irish-born child he eventually gained Irish residency and citizenship, and studied to bring his medical qualifications to a level of equivalency so he could practice in Ireland. He served on a medical team that we sent to Africa as part of our church's missions outreach, helping alleviate enormous suffering and

participating in evening outreach services where both animists and Muslims gave their lives to Christ.

You never know what gems you will find when you start ministering to migrants and asylum seekers!

Ministering to Felt Needs

As Evangelical Christians we have a tendency to tell other people what they need. We might listen to the problems of others as a means of gaining an audience, but we don't feel that we've really witnessed unless we can change the direction of the conversation to where we tell them that their real problem is sin, and then go on to explain how the four spiritual laws work.

Jesus, however, had a different approach. He heard two blind men crying out for mercy and responded with a question, "What do you want Me to do for you?" (Matthew 20:32)

Surely, of all imaginable situations, this would be one where such a question is unnecessary. These are *blind men*! This is Jesus, the *Healer*! What does He think they want Him to do for them? Yet He asked the question anyway. Even in the most obvious scenario Jesus still let them express their needs.

That was what I did when I began walking around Mosney Accommodation Centre. Every time I spoke to an asylum seeker, I asked them what they wanted me to do for them. Once we got past the fact that I didn't have lots of money, or that I wasn't a government official with the power to grant them residency, I began to notice that the same answers kept occurring – and they weren't the answers that I had expected. In fact, if I had just started ministering to what I thought people's needs should be, then we would have missed out on some of the most productive, and surprising, ministry opportunities.

This was during the period when having an Irish-born child virtually guaranteed the parents being granted residency in the State. Therefore a large proportion of the residents in Mosney were pregnant women living on their own. The plan was usually that their husbands would come over and join them after the child was born.

Many of these mothers-to-be, as soon as they realised that I was a pastor, asked me if I would be willing to conduct baby namings and dedications for their children. I hadn't a clue that there was a difference between a baby naming and a baby dedication, but I was here to be helpful so I agreed to everything. As soon as I got out of Mosney that day, I went to find Tunde Oki so he could tell me what I had committed myself to.

I discovered that in many cultures it is the custom to conduct a baby naming ceremony, often in the family home, on the eighth day after the birth of a child. Then, at a later date, the dedication takes place at church. It is often customary for the dedication to be followed by a feast, with many friends and visitors joining in the celebrations. So the Solid Rock Church embarked on what seemed like an endless series of baby namings and baby dedications.

As we were planning each baby dedication I would visit the mothers and explain the spiritual significance of the event. A baby dedication, of course, differs from infant baptism in that we are not claiming that the ceremony confers any spiritual benefit or change of status on the child. The baby dedication is primarily an opportunity for parents to promise that they will raise their child in the knowledge of the Lord so that, when they are older, they can make an informed choice for themselves to place their faith in Jesus, be born again, and to follow Christ.

Time after time, I would sit in cramped rooms in Mosney, among all the clutter and paraphernalia you would expect when several young mothers with babies were sharing the same accommodation, and I would explain the meaning and purpose behind dedicating a baby. And time after time, the mother would say, "If I'm going to make those promises then I need to know Jesus as my Saviour too, don't I? Will you pray with me so I can receive Jesus?"

On many occasions other new mothers, having to share the same apartments, would be listening to these conversations. Often they would be amused onlookers, scepticism written all over their faces. By the end of my visits many would ask if their babies could be dedicated too, or would ask me to lead them also in a prayer of faith and salvation.

The most babies we ever dedicated in one Sunday morning service was twenty-seven! I think that day every one of those babies seemed to be crying at the same time.

We didn't have our own church building at that time, as we were renting a ballroom in a local hotel, but after the dedication services we would rent another large room in the town and lay on a banquet. Obviously, due to living in the Direct Provision system, these mothers did not have the facilities to prepare much food at all, let alone the quantities required for a baby dedication celebration. So we decided to help out by providing free food. Both our Irish and our African members would contribute to the catering. These events were so colourful that the local newspaper would send their photographers to cover them. Drogheda had never experienced anything quite like it.

I've read dozens of books on evangelism over the years, but none of them ever mentioned that you could conduct evangelism

by dedicating babies. Yet this was to become one of the most effective methods of soul winning that I have ever been involved with. And it all started because I asked people what they wanted me to do for them.

Integration

Another common response, when I asked people in Mosney what they wanted me to do for them, referred to integration. They wanted to belong in Irish society. People in every culture want to feel part of a community. That is hard-wired into our very humanity. When lifestyles cause people to get disconnected from community, then they will go to great lengths to find a place and a people to which they can belong.

Howard Schultz, CEO of Starbucks, has stated that his company might sell coffee, but that is not their main product. More than anything else they see themselves as selling a community experience, a 'third place' between work and home, where people can recapture that sense of belonging.[46] When you think about it, the church should do community better than anyone else on earth. *Koinonia*, the fellowship and communion of God's people, is the very essence of who we are.

This is one of the reasons why, in almost every society, immigrants tend to be much more receptive to the Gospel than are more settled segments of society. When you are dislocated from community, then you seek out new communities – and very often that will turn out to be a community of faith.

One of the most soul-destroying aspects of the Direct Provision system is its erosion of family harmony and community. I discovered that, for many asylum seekers, what

they really wanted me to do for them was simply for me, along with the other people in our church, to be their Irish friends.

One simple strategy, connected with all the baby dedications we were conducting, paved the way for genuine and long-lasting cross-cultural friendships.

The idea of a child having godparents is common in Irish Catholicism, but many Evangelical Christians have jettisoned the practice. There is something absurd about parents, when their child is being baptised in a Catholic church, choosing friends to act as godparents, even when those friends are some of the most ungodly people you could imagine. Besides, since many Evangelicals do not practice infant baptism, the tradition of godparents seems redundant.

It appears that the appointing of godparents was originally a response to fierce persecution against Christians in the Roman Empire. If a child's parents were both martyred for their faith, then the godparents undertook to care for their children and provide for their religious instruction.[47]

The more I thought about it, the more I realised that it was no bad thing for children to have a godly adult figure to look out for them. This would surely be even more true for a child being raised in the Direct Provision system, quite possibly without an accessible extended family network. We made a decision that we would restore and redeem the practice of having godparents.

The next step was to ask some of our Irish church members to volunteer to serve as godparents. Many of them were delighted to do so. It was heart-warming to see the bonds of friendship that began to be created between the godparents and the mothers and babies. Lasting cross-cultural relationships were formed that still flourish to this day. It became a common sight,

during services in the Solid Rock Church, to see middle-aged Irish women happily caring for African babies whose mothers were participating in the worship team, or some other aspect of church life.

Prayer

Sometimes we belittle prayer by treating it as a last resort when nothing else will work. When we can't think of what else to do or say, we respond with, 'Ah well, I'll pray for you.'

Yet prayer, real faith-filled believing prayer, is one of the things we can do best in the church. Most of the people we met in Mosney, even those who didn't profess to be active Christians, were genuinely glad when we offered to pray with them for the things that were going on in their lives.

One of the most unusual ministries that we discovered was that of praying for babies. A couple, who had been trying for a long time without success to conceive a child, came to the church. I prayed for them, and they immediately conceived. They told others what had taken place and, without realising just how it had happened, I began to be known as the pastor who prayed for people and then they got pregnant.

Remember, this was at a time when an Irish-born baby was known as 'the Irish green card!' Every week, at the close of service, there would be a long line of couples seeking prayer. Each time I asked, "What do you want me to pray for?" the answer was always the same – "Fruit of the womb, pastor, pray for fruit of the womb!"

Today many of those families are still part of the Solid Rock Church, and their answered prayers are boys and girls in our Sunday School classes and Youth Group.

At that time I lost count of the number of reference letters I had written to the Department of Justice on behalf of families and individuals who were being threatened with deportation. We regularly prayed over people's cases and legal proceedings, and many times we saw apparently hopeless situations turned around.

Being the Church

What is striking is that our most effective opportunities to minister to the asylum seekers in Mosney and elsewhere, and the things that were most requested by the asylum seekers themselves, did not require any specialised skills on our behalf. We were not called upon to provide educational or medical services. We did not try to reduplicate the work done by social services agencies. We simply did what churches do best. We listened to people. We prayed for them in their times of need. We tried our best to be good friends and neighbours and to integrate them into a caring community.

This is not to say that individual members of our church have not got involved in other ways. But this happened in very natural ways as people responded to the needs they saw in the lives of those that they had learned to love. We did not try to 'create ministries' so much as to simply lend a listening ear, and to show the love of Jesus in the best ways we could.

Cross-Cultural Missionaries

Peter Wagner, in his many books on Church Growth and Church Planting, has often stressed the importance of having people in the church who have a cross-cultural missionary gift. Wagner asserts that possibly only 1% of believers have such a gift.[48] Our experience in Drogheda suggests that the figure is

somewhat higher than that, but perhaps that is another example of God's serendipity at work!

Cross-cultural missionaries put themselves in other people's shoes. They try to listen to themselves through other people's ears. For example, an English-speaking missionary going to China should not expect everybody in China to learn English. Instead they learn to speak Chinese.

For some reason we readily understand this principle when it comes to missionaries travelling overseas, but we fail to apply it when we are at home. We tend to take the attitude of saying, 'If they want to come here to our country then they need to do things our way.' But remember the biblical truth that, even in the land of our birth, we are still strangers and foreigners – missionaries from the Kingdom of God.

Certainly some people do seem to have a specific gift for cross-cultural ministry, while others just want to do things in the way that seems the most comfortable and familiar. Some people, when they travel to a strange culture, are eager to sample new foods and enjoy new experiences. Others search for what they are used to – like Irish tourists who pay hundreds of euro to travel half way round the world, and then spend all day sitting in an Irish pub!

Here's an easy test to assess whether you have a cross-cultural missionary gift or not. Imagine that you are an Irish person hosting a visiting party of Americans – or, if you are American, imagine that you are showing the sights of your city to a group from England. It's well known that people from opposite sides of the Atlantic speak very different forms of the English language. We are, to quote George Bernard Shaw, "two nations divided by a common language."[49]

Most of us have watched enough movies to know the different words that will be used. Walking on the sidewalk versus the footpath. Putting bags in the trunk of a car versus the boot. Men wearing pants versus trousers. Paying a check in a restaurant versus a bill. Cutting the grass in the yard versus the garden.

Now, when you are communicating with people from the other side of the Atlantic, what will you do? Most people just use the words with which they are most familiar, and don't even stop to think that there might be a communication problem. A smaller number of people will try to make the effort to translate terms, and will struggle to use language that is more easily understood by their hearers. But those with a cross-cultural missionary gift won't struggle at all. They will use the terminology of their visitors *without even stopping to think what they are doing*! Putting themselves in other people's shoes comes as naturally to them as breathing the oxygen in the air.

Peter Wagner argues that a genuine cross-cultural ministry gift tends to come naturally to those who have it, and can rarely be learned or taught. He may well be right. That means that wise churches that wish to minister to migrants and asylum seekers should identify those within the church who possess such a gift, and encourage them into key roles in cross-cultural ministry. And if your church has a pastor with this gift, then you really are in a great position to make a difference!

However, the rest of us can at least learn how to make the effort to see things from the perspective of others. That is what most of the members of the Solid Rock Church tried to do. They weren't perfect at it by any means, and sometimes we made

embarrassing mistakes, but, for the most part, the folks in Mosney could see the effort we were making and appreciated it.

The Homogeneous Unit Principle

Much earlier in this chapter, when I first described the arrival in our church of Tunde and Bisola Oki, I mentioned the Homogeneous Unit Principle. This is one of the most controversial aspects of Church Growth theory and cross-cultural communication.

'Homogeneous' simply means 'of the same kind.' When you buy a carton of milk you might notice the small print on the label that says it has been 'pasteurised and homogenised.' These rather unappetising-sounding words simply mean that your milk has been briefly heated (using a process invented by Louis Pasteur to prevent the growth of harmful bacteria) and then squirted through small holes, which breaks up the fat in the milk and disperses it uniformly through the whole – thus making the milk 'all of one kind' rather than separating into watery and creamy bits.[50]

So, the Homogeneous Unit Principle simply means that people who are like one another tend to gather in units, or groups. Or, to use an old proverb, 'Birds of a feather, flock together.'

We can readily see how this principle would work in evangelism. It is easier to share the Gospel with someone if they speak the same language as you, share some of your interests, or are in a similar age group to yourself. This principle works even more powerfully when you are in a strange culture or surroundings, because our natural reaction when everything seems strange is to seek out something that looks familiar.

This is why, if you are Irish, you might go on a foreign holiday and end up having a great time with other Irish tourists that you meet. You may well exchange telephone numbers, and make great plans to meet up again once you get home.

However, once you get home, it is highly unlikely that you will call that telephone number. And, if you do, you will probably be met by an embarrassing silence as the person who was so friendly on holidays tries to think up a good excuse not to meet you!

The reason this happens is because, in a strange location, your Irishness was something you shared with those people. But once you arrived home, where most people are Irish anyway, both of you suddenly realise that you didn't have that much in common at all.

Utilising the HUP in Evangelism

When Tunde and Bisola first came to the Solid Rock in November 2000, our people's eagerness to welcome visitors from other nations, combined with Tunde and Bisola's determination to find a Pentecostal church, overcame the many potential cultural barriers that could have created awkwardness. Then, as other Africans began arriving in Drogheda, the Homogeneous Unit Principle worked to the Gospel's advantage. Africans were inviting other Africans to church, and things snowballed.

Our ministry to the Romanian community in Dublin was another positive example of the Homogeneous Unit Principle in action. Today Romania is part of the European Union, and Romanian citizens can freely enter Ireland, buy or rent property, and find employment without requiring a work permit. But that was not the case ten or fifteen years ago.

Pentecostalism is strong in Romania, and soon there were a number of Romanian churches in Dublin. I spent many long hours with the Romanian community, helping with issues within their churches, conducting weddings, dedicating yet more babies, and writing hundreds of reference letters to try to help people to remain in the country and to avoid deportation.

It was through the Romanians that I somehow ended up finding myself as the pastor of eight churches at the same time! Many of the most gifted and capable leaders in the churches were actually in the country illegally, having overstayed their visas or ignored a deportation order. Therefore each church needed a pastor who was a long term legal resident in Ireland, particularly when it came to working with any governmental agencies. So I rather reluctantly agreed to be the pastor of several churches. Thankfully there were others who covered most of the preaching, visitation and internal church affairs – but I still had to preside over interminable church business meetings while relying on an interpreter to understand what was going on.

I learned to rely heavily on the Romanian leaders who, in my opinion, were the real pastors. One Sunday evening I was chatting with the leader of one Romanian church on the steps of the church building after a service. This was our largest Romanian congregation at the time, with over five hundred attending the Sunday service. I turned away for a moment to greet somebody, and when I turned back the church leader had disappeared!

I asked some others, "Where did Brother Ion go?"

They replied, "Some men just grabbed him! Look, they're putting him in that van."

Sure enough, Ion was being bundled into a dark minivan with blacked-out windows. I raced down the steps and chased after the van, but it sped off. We knew this was the Department of Justice at work. The next morning, as soon as their offices were open, I rang a lawyer to try to find out what had happened. The lawyer replied, "You're going to have to find a new leader for your church. Brother Ion has been deported and is already on a plane bound for Romania."

Despite such excitements, the Romanian churches became the first place Romanians arriving in Ireland, whether Christian or not, would go to meet others who spoke their language and ate their food. Every week we were seeing new people come to Christ. When ministering in Romanian churches, I still meet people today who tell me that their initial encounter with Jesus occurred when they wandered into some of those services ten or fifteen years ago.

We tried not to miss any opportunities to share the Gospel. On one occasion, as I was conducting a wedding, I felt led to conduct an altar call. Fourteen of the guests gave their lives to Christ during that wedding ceremony, including the bride's mother. The groom was so excited. He told me that now his mother-in-law was saved, they would never argue. "Trust me," I said, "It doesn't work like that!"

The power of the Homogeneous Unit Principle has definitely been a plus factor in evangelising Romanian migrants to Ireland.

Overcoming the HUP in Community

However, many Christians feel deeply unhappy about any discussion of the Homogeneous Unit Principle, because it can easily be misapplied to justify exclusivism and even racism. The

Church of Jesus Christ is not to be composed of one kind of person. The Church is supposed to display 'the manifold wisdom of God' (Ephesians 3:10). The word translated 'manifold' is, in the Greek, *polypoikilos* and means 'much varied' or 'multi-coloured.' A similar word is used in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) to describe Joseph's coat of many colours (Genesis 37:3).[51] The Church is supposed to be heterogeneous, not homogeneous!

Probably the best way to look at the Homogeneous Unit Principle is as a fact of life, like the force of gravity. Gravity is neither bad nor good – it just is! It can work to your good, which is why walking downstairs is so much easier than climbing upstairs. But gravity can also work to your harm, as when you fall off the roof of a high building!

In the same way, the Homogeneous Unit Principle can work for us when we are sharing the Gospel. There's nothing wrong with recognising and utilising that fact. However, the same principle needs to be overcome when it comes to building diversity in fellowship and community. Embracing migrants and asylum seekers as part of an existing church community will inevitably hit some bumps in the road, as the Homogeneous Unit Principle tries to reassert itself. If you recognise that fact, then you can teach church members to be prepared to exercise extra grace.

Building a multicultural church definitely takes a lot of grace. The more different we are from one another, the more opportunities there are for us to misunderstand one another, and to take offence. This was the biggest lesson of all that we learned from our experiences of crossing cultural barriers.

In the end it was a good and valuable lesson for us to learn, for grace is at the very heart of what it means to be a church. We discovered that putting ourselves in a position where grace was absolutely essential to our continued existence helped us to become more authentic as part of the Body of Christ.

There were a few members that were not prepared to walk that journey with us. They left and joined other churches, remarking on the way out that 'Nick Park just lets those immigrants do whatever they want in the church.' But thankfully such people were in a very small minority. Most of our members enthusiastically embraced the walk of grace – and they found it an enriching and exhilarating experience to do so.

Be aware that there may be others, outside your church, who will not appreciate your efforts to befriend migrants and asylum seekers. Ireland may not have significant xenophobic or racist political forces such as the National Front in France, or the British National Party. Yet prejudice and racism do still exist here.

When our church started to become known as being more diverse, we did receive the occasional threat or insult. On one occasion a death threat, accusing me of being a traitor to my race, was delivered to my home. I wasn't overly concerned. It wasn't the first death threat I've ever received, and it probably won't be the last!

My daughter, Kirsty, asked me if I was worried. I replied, "Not really. Look, they've gone to all the bother of constructing the message by cutting letters out of newspapers and gluing them to a sheet of paper – and then they go and address the envelope in their own handwriting! Anybody as stupid as this probably doesn't have enough brains to kill anyone."

A Long Journey

So strong is the pull of the Homogeneous Unit Principle that we cannot overcome it overnight. Be aware that building strong and lasting cross-cultural relationships may take longer than you originally planned.

For years our church had a sign hanging over the door that declared us to be a 'Multicultural Pentecostal Church.' Yet, despite our best efforts, I often wondered whether that sign was an aspiration or a reality.

Yes, we were a congregation of worshippers from over thirty nations. Our pastoral team was composed of different nationalities. We were trying our best to understand one another and to prefer one another with honour (Romans 12:10). Yet, when I pronounced the benediction and closed the service, something strange happened. Everyone would still gravitate to their own groups and start chatting. The Zimbabweans would be standing in one corner exchanging greetings. Nigerians would be gathering in another corner. The Irish tended to congregate together, as did the Indians and the Filipinos. I wondered if this was just the way things were always going to be.

Today, however, things have changed. Breaking down cultural barriers is a process rather than an event, and processes can take time. Now, when we reach the end of the service, there is no longer that discernible gathering of cliques. People of different nationalities and languages mingle freely together. Outside of church, they meet in various social settings and in one another's homes. Tonight, for example, my wife has been invited to a celebration meal in a Chinese restaurant. The meal, organised by a Nigerian lady who we first met as an asylum seeker in Mosney, is to celebrate the 50th birthday of her Irish

friend who, living in a rural area of County Louth, would hardly have had the opportunity to ever meet an African fifteen years ago.

In time, as you walk the road of diversity and grace, you find that you don't actually have to try so hard. It starts to come to you naturally.

In the early days of our outreach to migrants and asylum seekers, we had to be very intentional to ensure that we didn't unintentionally segregate ourselves by thoughtlessly flocking together with birds of the same feather. For example, we carefully structured our various worship teams so that they would always contain a mix of different kinds of people. We knew it would be counterproductive if one team was all white, or another was all black.

Today, however, relationships have developed to the extent that our worship leaders no longer need to be given such guidelines. Being diverse comes naturally to them. Last Sunday, during morning service, I noticed that one of our smaller teams was on duty. There were eight musicians involved, from seven different countries – Ireland, Nigeria, Ghana, DR Congo, Poland, Romania and Uganda. This was no longer due to adherence to a church policy of intentional diversity. It was simply the outworking of people learning to build community with those who are different from themselves.

4

PRACTICAL WAYS TO SERVE

This final Chapter offers some suggestions for churches and individuals who would like to offer practical help and ministry to migrants and asylum seekers. Some of them would require significant investment of time and money, and so would only be within the scope of larger churches, or possibly even groups of churches uniting their efforts. But other ideas could easily be adopted by smaller churches or individuals.

A Caution about our Motives

Hopefully, if you've already read the previous three chapters and haven't just skipped straight to 'the practical bit,' you have some kind of biblical and historical foundation from which to launch into this kind of ministry.

As Evangelical Christians, we believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the ultimate Good News. When we lead people to salvation, and they find a place of joy and fulfilment in a church, then we have done more to bless them than would be possible by any other act of kindness.

Nevertheless, we need to be very careful that our ministry to migrants and asylum seekers is more than just a recruitment tactic. During the Great Famine, when the Irish needed help, there were a few Protestants who offered food from soup kitchens, but only on condition that Catholics would convert to Protestantism. Those who 'took the soup' were derided as

traitors to their faith by other Catholics. In fact, the vast majority of charitable aid from Christians during the Famine had no such strings attached, but that truth has been submerged by popular myth that portrays 'souperism' as being the widespread norm.[52] We need to ensure that our ministry to migrants and asylum seekers is more than a modern day 'souperism.'

In other words, we must ensure that we are genuinely interested in, and truly want to befriend, migrants, not that we are pretending to be interested and to be their friends in order to get them into our churches.

With that in mind, here are some ways in which we can show ourselves to be friends to the stranger and the foreigner.

What is in Your Hands?

When Moses was called by God to deliver the children of Israel from Egypt, he doubted whether he had what it took to do the job. His past record of failure caused him to question whether the Israelites would listen to him. God responded by asking, "What is that in your hand?" (Exodus 4:2)

All Moses had in his hand was a simple shepherd's staff – but, as he got into line with God's will, that simple staff would become 'the staff of God' (Exodus 4:20). With that staff he would turn the waters of the mightiest river in the known world into blood (Exodus 7:20), would call plagues down on Egypt (Exodus 9:23), would part the Red Sea (Exodus 14:16), would bring forth water from a rock (Exodus 17:5-6) and would intercede in order to give Israel the victory in battle (Exodus 17:9).

One of the simplest ways to identify potential ministries to migrants and asylum seekers is to ask yourself what skills you already possess.

Are you a hairdresser? Then why not volunteer to provide free hair-styling to asylum seekers? If you are a teacher, then you could volunteer to help the children in a local Accommodation Centre to catch up academically, or to run a homework club. Perhaps you could provide English or adult literacy classes?

I have noticed that in Irish Evangelical churches, a higher than average proportion of members work as taxi drivers. This is particularly true in churches that already have a lot of immigrants as members. One common problem for children living in the Direct Provision system is that they are only provided transport at set times to and from school. This prevents them from getting involved in sports, clubs and other after-school activities. It would prove a tremendous blessing if Christian taxi drivers were to offer free trips to such children.

Of course some church members have skills that are often inaccessible to those without money. A Christian solicitor or lawyer, for instance, could provide free legal advice – something highly relevant to those who are fighting to remain in the country.

Even those of us without legal training can still accompany an asylum seeker as a friend, providing moral support for them as they try to negotiate the intricacies of the government's assessment and appeals procedures. On at least one occasion, by doing this, I was able to prevent a terrible injustice from taking place.

A young lady attending our church had been a Pentecostal Christian before she had emigrated from her homeland. Indeed, this was the basis for her asylum claim, as it was well documented

that Pentecostals in that country were being persecuted. Her sister had already been arrested and was being held in an unventilated metal shipping container.

I accompanied her to a tribunal that was hearing her case. There I was amazed to hear a representative from the Department of Justice declare that, in his opinion, she was not truly a Pentecostal and therefore her claim was bogus. He wanted her to be deported back to her homeland.

His 'evidence' was that he had asked her if she believed in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and, of course, she had answered in the affirmative. This, he argued, proved that she was not a Pentecostal, since 'Pentecostals do not believe in the Trinity!'

Although I was present to provide moral support, not as a witness, I asked for permission to address the tribunal. I explained that I was the National Bishop in Ireland for a Pentecostal denomination, and that our church, as with the other main Pentecostal denominations, certainly do believe in the Trinity.

Amazingly, the representative from the Department of Justice continued to insist that I must be wrong because he had 'read it somewhere on the internet.' Thankfully the tribunal accepted my argument that I was likely to know more about the beliefs of my own denomination than someone who was learning his theology by Google.

We are Family

One of the most common complaints about the Direct Provision system is the way that it destroys family life. Imagine trying to hold your family together if you could never eat a home-cooked meal together.

Many Christian families could easily share their blessings by once a week, or even just once a month, opening up their home and inviting a family from a local Accommodation Centre to dinner. If you do this, then try to be as sensitive as possible in how you do it. For example, don't prepare a dish of pork chops for a Muslim family!

An even more creative approach might be to invite the mother, or indeed the father, of a migrant family to come and cook a meal in your kitchen. (I'm trying to avoid gender stereotypes here, but in practice many asylum seekers come from cultures where gender roles are pretty traditional!) Imagine if you were an enthusiastic cook and you had been prevented for months, or even years, from preparing a meal. You would be so excited to be able to show off your culinary skills.

This could be a real win/win situation. You could bless a migrant family, make new friends in the process, and get to eat some ethnic food that you've never tried before!

There are other ways that you can help asylum seekers' children to experience a family atmosphere. This next approach would require church leadership to use discretion, and to follow sensible child protection procedures, but if done correctly it could have untold blessings.

We had a lovely couple in our church in Drogheda who had married later in life. I have no doubt that they would have made wonderful parents, but that blessing appeared to have passed them by. Then they befriended a mother who had, along with her two young daughters, escaped from a horrendous situation in an African country that was engulfed by civil war.

This wonderful couple invited this family to come and visit their home for regular overnight stays. The youngest daughter

was still full of fear due to their ordeal in Africa. Every time someone came and knocked on the door, this little girl would sprint to the kitchen, hide under the table and lie on the floor with her arms over her face. Gradually she learned to regain her trust and security.

I'm not sure which was the most beautiful sight: watching this mother and her girls experiencing the blessing of a family home and enjoying the respite from the institutional setting of an Accommodation Centre; or seeing a loving couple having an opportunity that they thought had passed them by and lavishing attention on young children.

I've deliberately not identified the couple in this story for fear of embarrassing them, for they are some of the most precious and humble people I know. They went way above and beyond what anyone could have expected of them, even incurring significant financial expense to engage legal counsel when it seemed as if this family might be deported.

And as for that little girl that used to hide under the table? Last month I was visiting one of our churches, and I saw her – a beautiful and confident young woman singing in the choir.

Promote Cross-Cultural Understanding

Very often, anti-immigration sentiment is fuelled by ignorance. Christians can help address this problem by educating the wider community about different cultures.

Edward and Flora Okobi, originally from Nigeria, are members of the Solid Rock Church in Drogheda. Flora has worked for over ten years in community based organisations in the Drogheda area. In 2010, they founded a non-profit community organisation called Culture Connect in order to

promote understanding and cooperation between immigrants and the indigenous Irish community.

Culture Connect works with other agencies such as Drogheda Community Forum, Upstate Theatre, Drogheda Women's refuge, Drogheda Senior Citizens, Louth Minority Ethnic Consortium (LMEC), Challenge of Change, Drogheda Food Festival, Music Generation and Louth and Meath Education Board, in order to build bridges in the local community. They organise camps, campaigns, concerts and provide a wide variety of services, including language classes and mediation.

One of the highlights of the year is Culture Connect's annual St. Patrick's Day gathering. This celebration of what it means to be Irish in a multicultural society combines fashion, dance, music, culture sharing, storytelling, and tasting of different traditional foods.

Write Letters

Asylum seekers need advocates who will fight their corner. This is not solely the preserve of those with legal or professional training. Churches or individuals can support the rights of migrants and asylum seekers by writing to the press or to local politicians. Personal stories are always more compelling than statistics or bare facts and figures.

In May 2014, Evangelical Alliance Ireland joined with leaders of the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church and the Methodist Church to make a joint appeal to the Minister of Justice to reform the Direct Provision system. The text of that letter is included at the end of this book.

Bless the Local Community

Ministry between migrants and the longer established population need not all be one way traffic. In Galway, asylum seekers have been enthusiastic participants in the community gardens scheme. Community gardens provide fresh vegetables and produce, but more importantly they are important tools in developing a sense of community. Neighbourhoods with a community garden tend to have much lower levels of vandalism and social isolation.

In October 2014, Galway added a further community garden in Salthill. This garden is unique in that it is run by asylum seekers on reclaimed waste ground behind an Accommodation Centre. The vegetables grown there are used for food preparation in the Accommodation Centre's kitchens.[53]

Voter Registration

Many asylum seekers want to participate fully in Irish society, and this includes voting in elections. Asylum seekers have the right to vote in local Council elections, but not in Parliamentary or European polls. For some reason, however, politicians are prohibited from canvassing for votes in Direct Provision Accommodation Centres.

In Drogheda, the normal procedure to be placed on the electoral register was to visit a Garda station and to submit an application with a police sergeant. We realised that a number of migrants were reluctant to do this. Often people have come from countries where the police are corrupt and are instruments of oppression. We decided to hold a voter registration Sunday at the Solid Rock Church. The local police very kindly facilitated

this and came to the church to witness and receive all applications.

Ironically, that particular Sunday morning we had the lowest attendance for a church service that we could ever remember. A number of our members drove into the carpark, saw the police cars outside the church, and quickly exited the carpark again. Apparently some of them had missed our announcements about the voter registration and had feared that the police were checking everybody's vehicle documentation!

Free Legal Advice

We've already mentioned that church members with legal training could donate some of their professional expertise to asylum seekers. Some churches in Europe have gone further, however, and have provided a full free legal advice service to migrants.

The Swedish Church in Lund, for example, recently set aside 400,000 krona (about €42,000) to fund free legal advice on immigration issues.[54] A number of churches in the UK also provide free legal advice to asylum seekers.

Happy Christmas!

Christmas can be a wonderful time of the year when you are with your family and loved ones. But Christmas can also be the most miserable time of the year if you are separated from family, or if you are in an institutional setting.

One way churches could alleviate this is by putting together small Christmas parcels in shoe-boxes, and delivering them to residents in a local Accommodation Centre.

Churches could consider visiting an Accommodation Centre to sing Christmas Carols. Or they could hold a Carol Concert

somewhere else in order to raise money for services to asylum seekers. The London Churches Refugee Network organises Carol singing in Oxford Circus each Christmas to raise funds for their ministries to migrants.

Another ministry at this time of year could be to invite a family of immigrants to Christmas dinner. One church in the UK, St Mark's in Stoke-on-Trent, goes further. They open the church on Christmas day, not just for worship, but to cook and serve a Christmas dinner for local asylum seekers.

A Warm Welcome

I remember one wintery day, some years ago, when I was visiting some of the residents in the Mosney Accommodation Centre. An east wind was blowing in from the Irish Sea, and, at that moment, Mosney felt like the coldest and most miserable place imaginable. Most of the asylum seekers there had come from sunnier climes. I thought to myself, 'Some of these people must arrive here and ask themselves what on earth they have come to.'

One very practical way of showing love and friendship would be to provide gifts of warm clothing – coats, scarves, hats and gloves. These would be appreciated by new arrivals, both adults and children. If churches are planning to do this, then it is worth liaising with the management of the Accommodation Centre. Usually, if they know you are genuine and have no ulterior motive, they will be happy to cooperate.

If you do decide to provide clothing, then please go the extra mile and do it in a way that encourages the self-respect of those you want to bless. Giving them second-hand cast-offs is likely to reinforce the perception that they are being treated as second-

class citizens. Many supermarkets, particularly the German-owned discounters, now sell clothing items at extremely low prices. It will make a tremendous difference if you spend a little bit extra and ensure that the clothes you provide are new and still have the packaging and labels attached.

Large Scale Assistance

There are some ministries to migrants which, due to the investment of time and finance required, would probably be beyond the capabilities of all but the largest of churches. However, churches have found that by joining their resources, often by establishing a Charity or a Trust, that they can make significant contributions to positively change the lives of migrants and asylum seekers.

The Boaz Trust, named after the biblical Israelite who welcomed a Moabite asylum seeker (Ruth) as his wife, is a Christian organisation serving destitute asylum seekers in Greater Manchester. It provides accommodation, as well as food and other essentials, to those who are unable to access support from anywhere else. It also provides advocacy and pastoral support, and campaigns on a local and national level for justice in asylum legislation.

In Australia, an organisation called Simple Love encourages churches to collect groceries and toiletries, which are then distributed to asylum seekers. They also provide bus passes for migrants to travel to meet with legal support.

There would certainly be scope for Evangelicals in Ireland to join forces to minister to migrants in more meaningful and comprehensive ways.

Text of a Joint Letter from Irish Church Leaders to Frances Fitzgerald, Minister for Justice and Equality.

Frances Fitzgerald
Minster for Justice and Equality
Department of Justice and Equality
94 St. Stephen's Green
Dublin 2

22 May 2014

Dear Minister Fitzgerald,

DIRECT PROVISION SYSTEM

We are writing as representatives of churches in the Republic of Ireland including the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland, the Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church and the other member churches of the Irish Council of Churches and those of Evangelical Alliance Ireland. We have come together out of shared concern for the human dignity and well-being of people seeking asylum in Ireland who find themselves forced to rely on the Direct Provision system. The serious inadequacies of this system have been widely acknowledged and need to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

In summary, we request that:

1. You comprehensively reform the asylum application system in the forthcoming Immigration, Residence and Protection bill so that decisions, including appeal, take no longer than 12 months.
2. Ireland sign up to the European directive on reception conditions (Council Directive 2013/33/EU of 26 June 2013)

and allow those awaiting asylum decisions to work after twelve months.

3. You mandate the provision of cooking facilities in direct provision accommodation.

The indefinite duration of time that people spend in Direct Provision awaiting their decision causes grave mental stress and is extremely damaging to the residents' psychological and emotional well-being. For people in the Direct Provision system, the limitations on personal freedom, notably the right to work and earn money, can result in a situation that is experienced as a form of imprisonment. While prisoners know how long their sentence is, they can look forward to their release and psychologically prepare themselves for the length of time they will be imprisoned, the indefinite duration of the asylum process and the uncertainty about the outcome places serious psychological strain on those affected.

We know that you share these concerns as you expressed your recognition of the need for a more efficient system where decisions are made in under a year in interview with TheJournal.ie last April. We appreciate that your predecessor made efforts to publish a new IRP bill aiming to address these issues and hope that you will expedite this. It is important to consider other economically viable alternatives to Direct Provision. The Irish Refugee Council costed several alternatives in its recent study, "Direct Provision: Framing an alternative reception system for people seeking international protection" of 2013. We would urge you to consider this report in drafting the new legislation.

This bill will take time to enact and will not affect those already in the system of Direct Provision. Therefore we request that, in the meantime, you take action to improve the situation of people already in Direct Provision.

The fact that people have been living in the country for years without being able to work is particularly dehumanising and strips them of their dignity. Ireland's opting out of the European directive on reception conditions (Council Directive 2003/9/EC of 27 January 2003) should be ended and those awaiting asylum allowed to work after one year (as in all other EU countries except Lithuania). The argument that this would act as a "pull factor" does not hold water given that this is the situation in all other EU countries. The oft-cited increase in applications in 1999 was a consequence of the war in Kosovo (Ireland actually invited 1000 refugees from Kosovo at that time) rather than the decision to allow asylum seekers to apply for work permits, only 67 of which were awarded to asylum seekers in the second half of 1999.

Finally, the lack of facilities for people to prepare their own meals diminishes their dignity greatly and is inhumane. Food is a focus of cultural and often religious identity so people cannot for cultural and religious reasons all eat the same foods. The mandatory provision of cooking facilities in all Direct Provision centres would make a huge difference to the residents' mental health. Thank you for taking the time to read this. We would welcome and request an opportunity to discuss these issues with you and look forward to hearing from you!

Would You Like Your Church to Become More Effective in Crossing Cultural Barriers?

There is a growing desire among Evangelical churches in Ireland to become more culturally diverse. Churches that previously ministered almost exclusively to one ethnic group are asking how they can reach more Irish people. Meanwhile, longer established Irish churches are seeking to reach 'the new Irish.'

Evangelical Alliance Ireland is committed to helping churches to cross cultural barriers. There are two ways you can avail of this:

1. Nick Park provides a consultancy service to help churches to become more multicultural. Drawing on insights from other ministries, and from his experience with the Solid Rock Church in Drogheda, he can help you audit your church's cross-cultural potential. This service is free to member churches of Evangelical Alliance Ireland.
2. Your church could host a one day conference in your area on 'Becoming a Church for All Nations.'

For more information write to EAI, check us out online at www.evangelical.ie or email nick@evangelical.ie

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