

*From "When did we see You a stranger and take You in?"
- Resource document for the Church on asylum and refugee policy, Oslo, October 2005*

Part I: Introduction

1. REFUGEES – A CHALLENGE FOR THE CHURCH

Around 40 million people in the world today have fled from their homes. Most of them are refugees in their own country or neighbouring countries. Some make their way to Norway. They have fled from dictatorial regimes, from ethnic or religious persecution or from abuse that especially affects women and children.

Refugees who arrive in this country represent a challenge for the church. The encounter with strangers and the persecuted touches on central elements in the Christian faith. The church is called to show hospitality and take practical measures to improve living conditions for refugees.

For the Christian church, the question as to how we react to refugees is not an optional, supplementary issue. It touches the heart of the church's teaching about who God is, who we are and who the earth and the land belong to. The church must maintain its responsibility for and openness towards the stranger and the immigrant. The church is a global organism and offers a constant corrective to the tendency to link privileges and rights explicitly to the nation state. Many refugees will look to the church with expectations based on their knowledge of the church in the country they have fled from.

Countries in the North cannot continue to reap the benefits of globalisation without taking responsibility for the damage that is caused, or becomes more apparent, in a globalised world. Many of the conflicts that people flee from are caused and intensified by the struggle for resources. Other conflicts are relics of the random national boundaries that colonialism drew, or are caused by ethnic groups being stirred up against one another. In some cases the ethnic conflicts are linked to religious differences. In some places religious minorities are persecuted. This can affect different religious minorities, also Christians.

People who flee from conflicts encounter more and more obstacles if they choose to come to our part of the world. The right to seek asylum is undermined by measures that make it increasingly difficult to make use of that right. The burden is then left with the countries where the conflict is taking place or with neighbouring countries. Restrictions in asylum and refugee policies are often based on internal political considerations. These considerations in their turn are often based on a growing scepticism and fear of strangers in the population. Increased security measures at borders are based on a fear of terrorism, which can lead to increased xenophobia and to an unjustified association of entire groups with violence.

This process is intensified by the fact that none of the Northern countries wants to appear less strict than the others. This leads to a vicious circle, where it becomes increasingly difficult to achieve the status of asylum seeker. And it is the weakest that suffer most.

In reacting to this situation, the church must show solidarity with the poor, the oppressed and the hopeless. It must dare to lend its voice to those who suffer in an unjust world order and to those who are often forgotten. The church must criticise the structures that create the victims, while at the same time discerning and restoring the dignity of those who have given up. The

church must speak out clearly against a development that makes it increasingly difficult for the least privileged to reach our borders, and more likely that they will be rejected if they do so. The church must above all strive to appear as a living symbol of the hospitality, openness and love that the gospel of Jesus Christ proclaims.

The church's role in society is not to wield formal political power. The church is a participant in civic society. In Norway, policies are traditionally worked out through interaction between the authorities and voluntary organisations in civic society. Together with other instances, the church must contribute to ensuring that the policies that are put into effect are in accordance with international obligations that we are bound by, and that they express our Christian and humanistic traditions. The church must show respect for the complexity of the considerations that those with legislative and executive responsibility must take into account. This respect does not imply servility or reluctance to take action to ensure a proper treatment of those who seek protection. Hospitality when confronted with those who are persecuted or helpless springs from the heart of the Christian faith.

The church must therefore press for a generous interpretation of the conventions we have committed ourselves to, and for taking the human predicament of refugees into consideration when they apply for residence in this country. The church must seek to meet refugees who come here in a humane and diaconal way, be willing to listen to their life stories and help them to find a solution to their problems.

When the church takes up individual cases, this is not simply in order to obstruct the nation's asylum and refugee policies, but to connect them to their original starting point. Co-operation with the authorities is both possible and preferable on these premises. To get involved in these questions and in the persons who seek protection under the conventions we have committed ourselves to, is a means of preserving what is best in the values that we have inherited. In this way we also preserve our own dignity.

Part II: Theological and ethical basis

2. HUMAN DIGNITY AND THE BIBLE'S TEACHING ON HOSPITALITY

The church believes in one God who created everything and gives life. The earth, nature and the land that provides the necessities of life are all God's gifts. When refugees come to our country, we are challenged to share these gifts with them, in thankfulness to God.

In the same way, the church believes that God cares for everyone and regards each individual human being as infinitely valuable. In Jesus Christ, God himself became a human being, and was a refugee in his childhood (Matthew 2). In Jesus, God has experienced the pain that human beings experience. Jesus met the outcasts and the weak with a love that emphasised their value and raised them up to new life. In those who are persecuted and vulnerable, God draws near to us in a special way. We recognise our own vulnerability and dependence, and as a global, national and local church, we are called to show practical care and respect.

In the gospels, Jesus develops and radicalises the Old Testament concept of hospitality. Care for strangers is linked to the Last Judgement in Matthew 25: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me", and "I was a stranger and you did not welcome me". In the parable of the

Good Samaritan, one of the key narratives for Christian ethics, responsibility for others is portrayed as transcending national, cultural and religious boundaries.

The inviolable dignity of human beings, affirmed by both basic human rights and the testimony of Scripture, calls the church to restore and clarify the dignity of human beings suppressed in an underprivileged life. The church bases its teaching on the equal and inviolable dignity of every human being on the belief that all human beings are created in the image of a righteous and loving God. The dignity of human beings is thus not bound to ethnic, cultural, religious or national identity. Ultimately, national and state authorities find their legitimacy in their willingness and ability to defend human dignity and to protect people from exploitation of their vulnerability.

When states are not able or willing to protect people from abuse, or when they use their power to persecute individuals or groups, the legitimacy of the states concerned is undermined. The God-given human dignity of the persecuted remains. Declarations and conventions that defend refugees from conditions that abuse their human dignity can thus be given a Christian ethical basis. In the light of this, the church has a many-faceted vocation:

- The church in each country should take initiative to make national authorities exercise the protection and equal treatment of their citizens that human dignity requires.
- As part of the universal church, the church should support the struggle against persecution and oppression in other countries.
- Together with other instances in civil society, the church should work to give fugitives the right to seek asylum. The church must struggle to ensure that refugees are given the same legal rights as citizens of the state where they reside.
- Finally, the church must argue in favour of emphasising not only the letter of the law, but also the ethical foundation of legislation. The international conventions that the state has committed itself to must be interpreted generously.

A church that follows the biblical message of the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ will echo the Old Testament's crass criticism of those who oppress and exploit the poor, take away the civil rights of the lowly, hold people down in injustice or distort the rights of aliens (Malachi 3:5; Jeremiah 7:6). The gospels make this message plain and link liberation from oppression to salvation (Luke 4). God and Jesus Christ meet believers with openness and hospitality, in spite of everything that divides them. This should be a natural aspect of the life of faith when believers encounter other people. Jesus' example makes it clear that hospitality should not least be shown to those whom society regards as outsiders. In them Jesus himself meets us in a special way.

Stories of persecution, captivity, flight and exile are an important part of the Bible, not least the account of the Israelites' flight from Egypt. This experience formed their understanding of who God is: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). God reveals himself as God of the persecuted and oppressed. This narrative also becomes a blueprint for the way in which Israel is to treat the stranger in her midst. God cares for and watches over those who are persecuted and who must flee for their lives:

"For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and

clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Deuteronomy 10:17-19.)

And:

"When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." (Leviticus 19:33-34.)

To welcome and look after an alien is therefore linked to both an understanding of who God is and the people's own experience of captivity and oppression, flight and rescue. Those who come as aliens are to be received kindly and treated as one of their own people. God loves the alien. The command to show hospitality is strengthened by the fact that the people know what it means to be an alien, to be treated badly and be forced to leave everything and flee.

Responsibility for welcoming strangers and practising hospitality is often stressed in the New Testament. When the Christian is called to lead a new life in Christ, this also means welcoming strangers. Just as the Christian lives by the serving love of Christ, the Christian must serve others. The New Testament testifies to how this also includes welcoming strangers. As was the case with the people of Israel, hospitality is linked with the believer's own experience of vulnerability and physical suffering:

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were *in the body*" (Hebrews 13:2-3, NRSV, alternative reading)

"Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers." (Romans 12:12b-13, NRSV)

To be vulnerable is part of being truly human. It is an indispensable prerequisite for fellowship and interdependence, for rejoicing together and extending hospitality. Acknowledging this is also relevant when meeting refugees. Vulnerability reveals a basic interdependence and dependence. It opens up for hospitality and pleasure in meeting other people. At the same time it indicates a need for protection.

In the world today, our own security is often given higher priority than the ethical demands that refugees' vulnerability confront us with.

3. THE BASIC VALUES OF THE CHURCH AND THE CHALLENGES IT MEETS TODAY

The conviction that every human being is infinitely valuable and is the object of God's love, and the intention of welcoming strangers with hospitality, help us to be aware of our responsibility as a church when people come to our country from other parts of the world, having fled from persecution, inhuman treatment and abuse.

In recent years the church has experienced a special challenge, in that the treatment of refugees has repeatedly been made more restrictive. This document will describe some of the restrictions that have been made. Here we will name a few of them:

- Individual cases where insufficient account is taken of personal considerations.
- The introduction of maintenance requirements for family reunions, which in praxis makes it extremely difficult to arrange for members of families – even little children – to come to Norway.
- That courses in Norwegian are no longer held at reception centres for asylum seekers, a factor that can contribute indirectly to deterioration in mental health.
- That asylum seekers who have been denied residence permits no longer have the right to stay at reception centres – a development that casts people out into the street without any rights.

The church should oppose some of the recent developments in asylum and refugee policy on the grounds of our responsibility to give shelter to fugitives. As Christians, as a church and as a society we cannot turn our backs on the hope that refugees harbour.

In the international conventions on refugees and asylum seekers to which Norway has committed itself, the church can find ethical principles that correspond to biblical ethics. This is why the church need not hesitate to appeal to the conventions that the state has committed itself to.

The church maintains therefore that when the state considers refugee policies and the lives of refugees on the grounds of the rights that are to be found in these conventions, it cannot use self-interest or domestic political considerations as an excuse to close the door in the face of fugitives. Norway must face the challenges that follow when it gives shelter to persons who can bear deep wounds within them as a result of violence and war.

It can be a difficult undertaking to give shelter to persons from distant countries, with a cultural background very different from those that have influenced Norwegian society in the past. Norwegians have been used to living in a homogeneous culture. We have regarded ourselves as being so alike that minorities and indigenous peoples have often been subject to a brutal process of norwegianisation. In recent years we have admitted that variation and migration have existed in Norway. We are a nation consisting of two peoples – Sami and Norwegians – and we have several national minorities (Jews, Romany people, Kvens and other groups of Finnish descent). There has been considerable migration and intermarriage between Norway, Sweden and Finland. The coastal regions have close bonds to other nearby parts of Europe: The British Isles, Germany and Denmark. And for a long time Norway could tackle its population increase by sending hundreds of thousands of emigrants to the USA.

Migration from countries that are not among our near neighbours is a relatively new phenomenon. It was not the intention that migrant workers from Turkey and Pakistan, who came to meet a need for labour in Norway at the end of the 1960s, should form a permanent immigrant population in the country. Many of those who came during the 1960s and 1970s have stayed. Those who came as single men have brought their families here, and many families still maintain contact with their homeland in the second and third generation. In addition, we have welcomed refugees from – among other countries – Vietnam, Chile, Iran and Somalia. Some Norwegians regard immigrants' and refugees' otherness as a threat. How

much variation can we tolerate before society breaks down? What values and ideas must we agree upon?

The new immigrants' family values and view of women are regarded as especially threatening. Headscarves and girls that are not allowed to take part in mixed classes in swimming can be understood as a result of patriarchal structures and discrimination, and many Norwegians find this difficult to tolerate. In addition, some people are uncertain whether refugees from dictatorships and countries torn apart by war are able to accept our basic democratic institutions. At a time when Muslim terrorism is high on the agenda, Muslim immigrants can make people nervous: Do they really want a liberal and democratic society?

We must take such questions seriously. It is not always easy to find good and just ways of living together in spite of important differences in values and ways of life. And Norway has little experience of integrating and uniting different cultures and different sets of values within one nation. Experience shows too that xenophobia and scepticism in themselves can make encounters between cultures and sets of values difficult. On the other hand, a welcoming and hospitable attitude could build bridges, encourage dialogue and make it possible to begin to face the challenges that we find most urgent. Churches can point to achievements in some of the most difficult areas. For example, The Oslo City Mission Primary Medical Workshop (PMV), where the staff are mostly women from Somalia and the main focus is on combating genital mutilation. There are unfortunately other examples where the authorities try to solve problems by means of force and of laws that appear to be directed specially at immigrants. Co-operation and dialogue would give better results.

In spite of the problems mentioned here, there are reasons to assert that society can be enriched by asylum seekers and by refugees and their families who are allowed to settle.

In the first place, we can discover that the differences are not as great as we thought. Many basic values are the same across cultural boundaries.

Many Muslim parents send their children to Christian activities in Greenland in Oslo. Why? "They understand perfectly well what a religious children's choir or club is, while they are uncertain as to what kind of agenda the public sector activities have."

In the second place, the fact that systems of values and ways of life are different is not a bad thing. Through closer contact with other cultural forms and value systems, for example family patterns and ways of expressing religious faith, we can become familiar with other ways of understanding the world. This can lead to new reflection over our own values and way of life.

Another important point is that in a society with cultures, values, religious systems and ways of life that are often very different from one another, we are forced to find ways of living together, in spite of our conflicting values. We need to work out common, binding values and ideals. A more manifold cultural picture can therefore contribute to strengthening important values. A more manifold society can encourage the just and peaceful solving of conflicts, and can increase mutual respect and appreciation, so that these factors become integrated in our national self-awareness.

A third positive result of new immigrants settling in our country is their potential contribution to the economy. In years to come, important sectors of society will in all probability need

manpower that it will be difficult to recruit from domestic sources alone. The national economy and public welfare services will benefit from the extra labour resources that can share the tasks to be carried out. Such national economic interests must never be decisive in determining whether refugees who need protection should be given shelter in Norway. But this illustrates how asylum seekers and refugees can make an important and positive contribution to society.

A final aspect of the question is what it does to us as a society and as individuals, if we react with increasing rejection and inhumanity towards those who need our protection. Such a development can lead to a gradual and invisible change in our fundamental social values in a more cynical direction. And in this way confidence in other forms of fellowship and the basic trust between citizens can be undermined. To give shelter to refugees is ultimately a question of preserving our own human dignity.