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The Refugee Crisis: will the Church give, act and speak out?

DURING ELECTION campaigns, vox pops capturing the concerns of people from around the country are broadcast daily on the radio. I find myself wondering what the results would be if a similar vox pop was done surveying only Church of Ireland members. Would we highlight valid yet very personal concerns as top priority issues, or would the Church look beyond who will serve its needs best and look to who will respond with real urgency to the needs of those most marginalised and least protected by current policies? In short, would we serve God by serving others or would we serve ourselves?

The current situation

In January 2016, representatives from the Irish Council of Churches alongside representatives from the Bishops' Conference and from the Islamic community in Ireland met with the Irish Government Task Force for the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP) in the Department of Justice. The Government Task Force is made up of a variety of different government departments as well as the Irish Red Cross and the United Nations Refugee Agency, UNHCR. The conversation centred around two key issues for the Government: support for accessing accommodation for refugees and support for messaging and communication about refugees given the danger of Islamophobia after the Paris attacks.

The various faith groups at the meeting were ready to help raise awareness about the need for housing through their various channels of communication and happy to reinforce a message of welcome; but they needed clarification on the legal aspects of the contracts that might be entered into, either by parishes or individuals. Indeed, the Church of Ireland prepared a press release with all the necessary details for making pledges, ready to be issued once those legalities were clarified. Then the response in Europe began to crumble and the number of refugees arriving in Ireland stagnated. Further

meetings regarding the legal clarifications were cancelled and the Church/Government collaboration came to a standstill.

To understand why this happened, we need to look at some of the back story. The Irish Government has pledged to accommodate 4,000 refugees over three years. 520 of these refugees are being selected from the countries bordering Syria, a country now decimated by five years of conflict. They are part of the Refugee Resettlement Programme, a programme that has existed in Ireland since the 1950s and has seen small numbers of people such as the Vietnamese boat people and South Sudanese refugees come to Ireland with the same rights as any other Irish citizen. In 2015 the first 176 of these Syrian resettlement refugees arrived.

The remaining 4,000 refugees the Government pledged to accept are part of a new Relocation Programme. 2,400 will be relocated from Europe, the stalemate there currently preventing such relocations from taking place, and the final 1,000+ are to come from what Eurostat considers to be nationalities with a 75% likelihood of receiving refugee status on applying first time round. These could include people fleeing countries such as Eritrea and the Central African Republic.

An Oxfam report recently detailed each country's response to the migrant crisis, comparing it to what would be their "fair share" in terms of humanitarian aid donated for refugees in Syria's neighbouring countries. It stated that Ireland's giving in 2015 was in line with our fair share, but that we would need to give the equivalent of another \$23 million to the humanitarian response funds again in 2016 to keep contributing fairly. The same report called for 10 percent of the total number of refugees registered in countries neighbouring Syria, equivalent to about 460,000 people, to be resettled or offered humanitarian admission in countries that have signed the UN Refugee Convention by the end of 2016. Based on this minimal request, Ireland's pledge to take 520 refugees from Lebanon and Jordan over 3 years is far below our fair share of these refugees, which should be 1,697 in 2016 alone.¹

Neither the Resettlement nor the Relocation streams above take into consideration the people who arrive at Ireland's ports seeking asylum each year. Most of these are placed in the notorious Direct Provision System, a "for profit" form of

institutionalisation where people are left in limbo waiting for responses to their application for years on end, with no right to access employment or third level education. Alarmingly, of the 3,000 plus people denied entry to Ireland in 2015 to claim their legal right to asylum, 139 were Afghani, 11 were Eritrean, 44 were Iranian and 59 were Syrian. On being questioned about this, Minister for Justice, Frances Fitzgerald, said that all were returned to their previous point of embarkation, mainly within the EU, thus completely negating the claim that refugees fleeing conflict and coming to Europe do not want to resettle in Ireland.

The costs

Deportations from Ireland are effected by the Garda National Immigration Bureau under the aegis of the Department of Justice. An example of the cost of deportation from 2013 showed 209 deportees on a chartered flight costing the state €545,000. This does not include the cost of paying private companies to house and feed asylum seekers in the Direct Provision system. For example, Barlow Properties in Cork has received €40 million from the State for running five direct provision centres; East Coast Catering has received €90 million since 2000; Bridgestock, based in Roscommon, has received at least €68 million for its role in running direct provision centres.ⁱⁱ There are 37 Direct Provision Centres in the Republic.

Whilst these private companies make million, the asylum seekers are given €19.10 per week per adult, are not permitted to cook let alone to work, and as a result are unable to pay taxes. If they were, they could be contributing hugely to Irish society, a long held dream of those trapped in these "for profit" institutions.

Between 2000 and 2014, the EU spent \$12 billion on deportations, a sum which undoubtedly increased exponentially since 2014. The figure does not include the hundreds of millions spent on security companies, border controls, 235 kilometres of fencing, drones and other expenses in this category. In the same time frame, smugglers are estimated to have made \$17.5 billion smuggling people into Europe; and the budget for Frontex, the main EU security company, increased from 100 million to 200 million between 2013 and 2015.ⁱⁱⁱ

Ironically, those opposed to these responses cite not only our responsibility to protect and welcome refugees, but our actual need of them:

It is clear that 800,000 people seeking refuge in Europe, which has a population of 500 million, does not constitute a 'migration crisis'. This is especially true as due to demographic change across the EU it is projected that 50 million additional workers will be needed by 2060 to sustain the economy.^{iv}

At the time of writing, refugees trapped at the Greece - Macedonia closed border at Idomeni, many without proper shelter or food supplies and with nowhere to go, attempted to cross Suva Reka river, which was swollen with rain, and some, including a pregnant 27-year-old and her younger 17-year-old sister, lost their lives. In the meantime, far right-wing parties in Germany are gaining momentum as Angela Merkel's policy of welcome in the name of duty comes under attack.

Anglican Response: Action & Advocacy

This reminds us once again, as if we need any more reminding, that we need to be pushing for policies that allow for safe passage so that people can flee safely. Furthermore it highlights that funds must be invested in the humanitarian response and the political solutions to the conflict instead of being diverted to private security companies to build higher fences and to profiteer from both fear and suffering. The Church cannot stay silent on this. Indeed, the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) and Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) have mobilised and spoken out, but it will be our persistence, our resolve not to shy away from speaking out when it becomes unpopular, that will see our solidarity grow a backbone, and our belief in the Jesus Christ who is *for* the dispossessed go beyond tradition and charity to an all-encompassing faith response.^v

In Europe this faith response has involved church communities rolling up their sleeves and joining with local community groups and NGOs to provide shelter, clothes, medicine and counselling for arriving refugees. The Anglican Church in Florence has offered art classes as part of psychotherapy groups and the Anglican Church in Paris provides cookery classes for refugee children as part of their food bank and soup shelter initiatives. In Greece, the Church works alongside the Salvation Army in Athens, supporting

refugees seeking refuge in parks, and the Church financially supports and provides volunteers for efforts by NGOs on the islands of Samos and Lesbos providing dry clothes and food and medicine to refugees arriving exhausted on their shores.

An Irish welcome

In Ireland, the Lismore Group of Parishes in Cashel, Ferns and Ossory met with other concerned locals and joined Deise Refugee Response Community group from Dungarvan in welcoming and supporting Syrian refugees arriving at the Clonea Strand Hotel in Waterford.^{vi} This was part of a wider diocesan response which continues to include Lismore, Waterford and Kilkenny. The Bishop, the Dean of Lismore and some parishioners went initially to welcome the new arrivals and those parishioners who joined Deise have formed friendships with them, inviting them to their homes for tea and describing them as people just like you and me. Some of the Syrians are architects, landscapers and teachers; others did not have the opportunity to go to school. All are grateful to be out of the refugee camps and to see their children living with a sense of security. Many still have family and friends in Syria and so their worries for the wellbeing of loved ones and for their home country continues.

Restrictions have since been placed on people entering the hotel and parishioners have joined with broader community groups to apply for Garda vetting. In the interim Deise, with support from parishes in Waterford, Lismore and Kilkenny, has sourced old bikes and had them reconditioned locally so refugees have easier access to Dungarvan. They have also provided wellies for any of the Clonea Strand residents who wish to walk the beach. All 48 refugees accepted the invitation to come to the local parish hall in Lismore for an evening of food and dance. Irish and Syrian foods were cooked and Arabic translations were given, much to the delight of the guests.

Members of the parishes are taking English Language (TEFL) courses to help some of the residents who need English classes. This is to complement English classes offered by the Government. However, parishioners stressed that the most important aspect is not the practical help; it is the welcome. With quite a large number of people from the area viewing the refugees negatively, there has been scaremongering about loss of tourism and rumours of shoplifting which the manager of

Dunnes Stores refuted unequivocally. The greatest way the Church can challenge these negative views is by openly engaging in simple acts of welcome.

A very culturally sensitive approach was taken by parishes to have a clothes collection, to sell the clothes and to use the funds raised to buy vouchers so that the newly arrived refugees could purchase personal items that they need themselves. After living for years in refugee camps in Lebanon or Jordan, the opportunity to choose rather than to be given a handout is extremely important. Some of the women asked for help from Irish women in buying undergarments. It is wonderful that enough trust was already built up to make this request. The residents of the Clonea Strand Hotel will move on and be resettled elsewhere in smaller groups and more refugees will arrive at this newly established reception centre. How important that their first impression of Ireland is that of warmth and welcome and that the Church played a pivotal role in this.

Ways to help in future

Despite the current standstill regarding refugees arriving in Ireland, dioceses and parishes throughout the country can still choose to engage when the time arises and can prepare for doing so now. We can do this by pledging accommodation through the Irish Red Cross^{vii} and by collaborating with local community groups to establish a network of support for English language classes. Even now we can commit to programmes for befriending newly settled families who may arrive in our areas much further down the line and can explore intercultural training for locals and congregations who wish to get involved. Bible studies that explore migration are being adapted to an Irish/EU context and are a good way to explore faith and action together.^{viii}

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?

⁷ Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Isaiah
58:6,7

For those of us who don't have refugees arriving in our areas or Direct Provision Centres on our doorsteps, what is our role? How can we support the most vulnerable and the churches who are responding to them, when they are not in our midst? Our first response must be to challenge mentalities of them and us and to speak positively of our responsibility to work for the wellbeing of all who are dispossessed, whether Irish or of different nationalities. Deise Refugee Response Facebook page hosts the Irish proverb: 'It is in the shelter of each other that people live.'

Indeed, our current homelessness crisis also calls for us to respond to all immediate need, as well as confronting the root causes of injustice and inequality rotting the strata of our own society. The Church has been a generous donor in light of the plight of so many millions of people, and its support for those internally displaced in Syria, as well as refugees in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Europe, has literally kept people alive in a situation where international aid has fallen short of 50% of what is needed. This generosity must not wane amidst current fear-mongering about "swarms" of refugees and Islamophobia.

The need for advocacy

Perhaps our greatest task in current times is to become engaged in advocacy. As a Church we must find our place in speaking out for changes in policies that don't protect the most vulnerable. The Church of Ireland joined a Consortium of voices including those of Christian Aid, Dochas, The Irish Refugee Council, Cori, Misean Cara and Trocaire in submitting a document to the Government calling for changes in policy and action at Irish, European and International Levels. As signed supporters, we must persist in calling for these changes to be implemented. This is particularly pertinent when so many of our brothers and sisters are caught up in immediate response and need our support to keep the needs of those they serve at the forefront of political leader's minds.

So what exactly did this document say?^{ix} It called on the Irish Government in its own right and in its talks within the EU to enhance legal channels for migration. 3,770 people died trying to reach safety in Europe in 2015 and 410 more had already died by early March 2016. Those who do survive do so at the mercy of multi-billion dollar illegal smuggling and trafficking rackets, with many young women and separated

children being exploited by sex and labour traffickers. This would not be necessary if there were legal provision such as humanitarian visas that people could access to travel safely. Included in the document is a call to increase the number of refugees being resettled and relocated in Ireland and a request for reassurance that all who arrive on Irish shores seeking asylum will be granted the legal right to do so and not be returned to countries where there is ongoing armed conflict.

There was also a call on the Government to develop community approaches to the integration of asylum seekers and refugees into Irish society. This is something the church can engage with through both advocacy and action, as explained above. We need to strike the balance between these two by collaborating with local groups - (to access intercultural training, lead responses such as English classes and help with accessing education and health services, and to offer long term friendship and neighbourliness) - while reminding those in power that we do these things in collaboration with their own integration policies and not instead of them.^x Groups such as Irish Refugee Council or the Migrants Rights Centre may be available to send solicitors or activists to a parish awareness raising event to help people learn how to use their voices to participate at both levels.

Migration, as a global phenomenon is a permanent feature of life and not a passing occurrence. It demands that we take a fresh look at our status, our deservedness, our possessions and our entitlements. As migration increases not just because of conflict but because of water privatisation, water stressed areas, climate change, and global economic policies that prevent people from surviving in their own context, the theological and humanitarian question will continue to linger and pulsate: "How should we live so that others can live?".^{xi} These calls to action are not optional if we are serious about our duty to speak out for the rights of the dispossessed. They are integral to taking an active role in a living faith which seeks the kingdom of God on earth, a faith which glorifies God by enabling all people to flourish. And indeed we all **will** flourish, when our focus shifts indefinitely from the few to the many, just as God intended.

 NOTES

ⁱ Oxfam has developed indicators to determine the fair level of commitment that each wealthy country should make to the appeals in 2016 to alleviate the suffering of those affected by the Syria crisis primarily based on each country's economy (based on gross national income) See: https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/bn-syria-fair-shares-analysis-010216-en.pdf

ⁱⁱ <http://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/food-and-drink/direct-provision-creating-a-cultural-disconnect-1.2593623>

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Bordernomics': *Who is cashing in on keeping migrants out?* by Ruben Andersson in New Internationalist Magazine, January 2016

^{iv} <http://www.euractiv.com/innovation-enterprise/eu-needs-labour-migration-analysis-507489>

^v <http://www.ccme.be/> and <https://ctbi.org.uk/how-the-churches-are-responding-to-the-refugee-crisis/>

^{vi} <https://www.facebook.com/Deiserefugeeresponse/>

^{vii} <https://www.redcross.ie/registerofpledges/>

^{viii} Integral Alliance is adapting an indepth Bible Study from the U.S. for Europe and the United Society have a simple Lenten Migration Focus that can be adapted to any time of the year:

<http://www.weareus.org.uk/resources/migration/>

^{ix} Full Document here: <http://www.irishrefugeecouncil.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Protection-Resettlement-and-Integration-Irelands-Response-to-the-Refugee-and-Migration-Crisis-Dec-2015.pdf>

^x There were many more calls made to the Government by the Consortium that can be accessed by googling 'Protection, Resettlement and Integration: Ireland's Response to the Refugee and Migrant Crisis.'

^{xi} Adapted from a lecture by Sr. Joan Roddy, from Jesuit Refugee Services.