

43. Briefing for conferring on the Justice Priority: justice for refugees and asylum seekers

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Action required	For information
Resolutions	None

Summary of content

Subject and aims	This briefing introduces the session on conferring on justice for refugees and asylum seekers and invites members of the Conference to consider some questions in preparation.
Main points	Current situation facing refugees, particularly in the UK Range of responses by churches Questions for consideration
Background context and relevant documents (with function)	The Justice-seeking Church report (2023) https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/29385/conf-23-pc-12-walking-with-micah-project.pdf https://jpit.uk/issues/asylum-and-migration

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"The war with ISIS was very bad. My family had death threats for saying what we thought was wrong. People were being killed on the street for smoking or listening to music. I came here because I know the language and we know that the UK has a great tradition of taking care of refugees and I would be welcomed here. I want to be part of UK society and hope to be able to continue my medical training to become a GP."

Ali, a medical graduate from Iraq, Trinity Safe Space, Widnes, [from [methodist.org.uk](https://www.methodist.org.uk)]

Introduction

1. The Methodist Conference 2023 adopted the Justice-Seeking Church report.¹ One of the recommendations was:

¹ <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/29385/conf-23-pc-12-walking-with-micah-project.pdf>

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"that the Conference sets aside time each year for members to confer deeply on one of the five Priorities, in a way which offers resource or direction for the future, a practice that could also be reflected in districts and circuits. . . the main focus would be on discerning where God is acting for justice within the priority areas and conferring on how the Methodist Church can best join in."

2. Conference members will this year be invited to confer on the priority of **Seeking justice for refugees: one people, one world**. This paper offers some contextual information on the situation facing refugees, particularly those in the UK; describes some of the ways Methodists are engaging with this justice priority; and suggests some ways in which members of the Conference might prepare for this session.

Who is a refugee?

3. The definition of a **refugee** according to the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention is:

"A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it."

4. A **person seeking asylum** is someone who has left their country of origin and formally applied for protection in another country. They are awaiting the outcome of their application.
5. A **migrant** is a person who has moved to another country for any other reason, such as to find work or join family abroad.

The global picture

6. As of the end of June 2024, there were an estimated 122.6 million people around the world who had been forced to flee their homes. Among them are nearly 43.7 million refugees. 71% of the world's refugees and people in need of international protection are hosted in low- and middle-income countries. Children account for 30% of the world's population but 40% of all forcibly displaced people. People flee their homes for many reasons - conflict, violence, persecution and fear of human rights violations – and factors such as poverty and climate change may leave them fewer options.

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7. The World Methodist Council's theme for 2024-9, *On the Move*, recognises the broader impact of migration and that most of our global Church Partners experience at first hand the impact of displacement and people on the move in their contexts. In the words of Martin Mujinga of the Africa Methodist Council, people are coming with 'faith seeking a home'. How do we understand and join in the movement of God in migration?

Refugees and asylum seekers in the UK

8. The incoming Labour Government scrapped the scheme to send asylum seekers to Rwanda without considering their asylum claims and has re-started assessing pending claims. The espoused focus of government policy efforts continues to be on reducing the numbers of people arriving across the Channel by small boats.
9. People from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran were the most common nationalities claiming asylum in the UK in 2024, together representing 25% of people claiming asylum. Of people who arrived on small boats, six in 10 were from just five nationalities – Afghan, Syrian, Iranian, Vietnamese and Eritrean. These are all countries where people face violence, conflict, persecution and human rights violations.
10. Unless you qualify for a resettlement scheme (eg such as the Ukrainian or Afghan schemes), there are no safe and legal routes through which you can claim asylum in the UK.
11. People claiming asylum experience a significant wait for their claims to be processed – at the end of 2024, there were 91,000 cases awaiting an initial decision, relating to 125,000 people. During this time, they are provided with accommodation and an allowance of just £7 a day and not permitted to work. If they are judged to have no recourse to public funds, they may well find themselves destitute.
12. The increased use of hotels to house people seeking asylum meant that large numbers of people were placed in communities without preparation, support or integration, and liable to be relocated at short notice. These hotels (and the people within them) became the focus of violence and racist hatred during the riots in summer 2024, with an impact on the mental health of refugees and people seeking asylum.
13. 47% of initial decisions on people's asylum claims made in 2024 were grants of protection, meaning they have been awarded refugee status or humanitarian protection. More people are granted protection on appeal.

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14. Once people are granted asylum they have 56 days to find a new home. The number of households who became homeless and received help from a local authority after leaving asylum accommodation increased by 250% last year.
15. Migration remains a political issue in much of the UK. Asylum seekers represent less than 10% of long-term migrants to the UK in 2024, but are often at the sharp end of public policy and political rhetoric. In communities where people already feel economically squeezed and politically abandoned, narratives around asylum seekers being given hotel rooms, or perceptions of threat, have in some cases led to increased tensions. Political rhetoric which plays into these tensions and stokes racism is increasingly apparent.

How have churches responded?

16. The story of the people of God is full of experiences of journeying and of exile. Perhaps because of this, a deep ethic develops through the Bible about how travellers and foreigners are to be treated. Repeated instructions to 'love the stranger', respect the rights of foreigners, ensure the fair treatment of those at risk of oppression, and the reminder that 'you were once strangers in Egypt', mean that commandments to protect migrants are the most-repeated injunctions in the Bible. For Christians, added to this imperative is the Gospel understanding that by welcoming the stranger, we welcome Christ himself (Matthew 25:35).
17. God's people are a wandering people, and the Methodist Church in Britain is made up of many people who have chosen or been forced to leave their place of birth for various reasons. Our churches have been changed and are richer for that. Christians who are fleeing persecution or people who simply experience love expressed by local churches are growing and enriching the Methodist family.
18. Specifically looking at refugees and asylum seekers, some churches have been able to respond to asylum seekers arriving in their communities, opening premises for food and hospitality. Some churches have become Churches of Sanctuary, publicly committing to be welcoming places of safety for all and proud to offer sanctuary to people fleeing violence and persecution. Some individuals and churches have participated in community sponsorship schemes or hosting schemes, offering a home to people on resettlement schemes or with no recourse to public funds. Some people and churches join to make communities places of welcome, advice and support for people seeking asylum or resettling as refugees. And refugees and people seeking sanctuary help to enrich and shape their communities in return, with some coming to Christian faith for the first time or finding a new Christian home with local churches.

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19. Through the Joint Public Issues Team, the Church has brought its voice to public policy debates around asylum and migration, calling for a fairer and more compassionate approach and defending the right of people to seek safety from war and persecution in the UK. It has enabled advocacy on issues including the Rwanda scheme, for asylum seekers to have the right to work, and the need to create new safe routes for people to come to the UK.

Conferring at the Conference

20. Conference members will be invited to confer on this justice priority. This will involve listening to the realities and experiences of people who have experienced seeking asylum and those who have been alongside them. The Conference will be invited to listen, pray and confer together, seeking where God is leading us.
21. Particularly for people for whom seeking asylum is part of their personal lived experience, this justice priority is not an issue nor is it just a story. Therefore, members of the Conference are reminded to be mindful of each other's needs as we confer. Members who wish to know more about the session beforehand will be given further details in advance.
22. To prepare for this conversation, members are invited to reflect on these questions, perhaps by discussing them with people in their churches or local communities:
 - a. What has been your experience of the enrichment refugees and people seeking asylum have brought to your church or community? What have been the learnings and the challenges? How might your church be supported to provide a better (or even better) welcome to refugees and asylum seekers?
 - b. How can Churches, Circuits and Districts consider the gifts and needs of refugees in their Mission/Growth planning and equality impact assessments?
 - c. How should the Methodist Church be using its voice and power for justice for refugees and people seeking asylum?
 - d. What one strategic or organisational change or issue might the Conference ask the Connexional Council to consider in the light of this conferring?
 - e. Where do you see God at work as you reflect on these questions? How is God at work through those seeking refuge and those migrating to the UK.

Sources for the data in this paper include: United Nations High Commission for Refugees; UK Government immigration statistics and homelessness statistics; the Refugee Council.