

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

Report of the Board of Social Responsibility (Republic of Ireland)

Proposer: Canon Desmond Sinnamon, (Chairman), Rector of Taney Parish, Diocese of Dublin

- * Do you believe the Church of Ireland has a social responsibility?
- * Do you believe your Parish has a social responsibility that extends beyond those who look upon themselves as parishioners?
- * Do you believe that that responsibility extends to asylum seekers and immigrants in this country?
- * Do you know personally or have you any relationship with a refugee or immigrant?
- * Have you shaken hands or greeted anyone who was clearly a newcomer?
- * Have you extended your friendship beyond a greeting?

If not, why not?

If we do not welcome newcomers from outside, if we don't befriend the stranger within our gate, who will?

In the last decade, Ireland has been enriched by the presence of increasing numbers of people from other cultures. Clearly many are immigrants who have come here to work. For some of the newcomers who came to seek refuge and safety, or to seek asylum, there are, outside Dublin, 63 centres through 24 counties.

Members of the Board of Social Responsibility have visited some of these centers where asylum seekers are accommodated by direct provision.

By the end of March, 5650 people were accommodated in the Centres; their top countries of origin were Nigeria 35%, Democratic Republic of Congo 6%, Romania 5% and Somalia 4%.

Last November, we visited Mosney, the largest centre in the Republic. There were 750 people living there for anything up to two years. Only 1% of these people are granted refugee status. One house was shared by three families, offering little or no privacy.

Many are ill informed of their entitlements such as to free legal aid, with the result that they often complete applications (in a foreign language) without any professional assistance. Cultural differences are often misunderstood and this leads to problems. Staff, mainly Irish, may be rude thinking that asylum seekers are rude because they don't look the staff in the eye. However, in many cultures, it is ill-mannered to look people in the eye. In fact, not looking shows respect.

Another Centre visited was St. Patrick's Accommodation Centre, Monaghan. There were 125 people living there. The most startling revelation was that there were 48 children under the age of 4. Situated two miles outside the town and with a limited bus service, there is an undoubted sense of isolation from the local population. Accommodation was comfortable and warm with good recreation facilities.

The overriding impression was one of boredom in a people accustomed to hard work at home. Contrary to some media images of "spongers" and "leeches", asylum seekers are not allowed to work. In the Centres, adults receive ?19 per week with food and lodgings. From different countries of different cultures and faiths, they are not an homogenous group. Some may not even get on with each other and many are traumatized.

We think that Primary education requires particular attention. Parents were not given choice in which school their children attended, Church of Ireland or Roman Catholic. Neither are the school active in making contact with the centres of accommodation. We have drawn this to the attention of the Church of Ireland Board of Education.

Our visit to the Vincentian Refugee Centre in Phibsboro, Dublin.7 helped confirm our findings and brought us into contact with a place of welcome for asylum seekers/refugees. It also highlighted the plight of unaccompanied minors, children under 17 in homes like Chester House, Phibsboro and Kilmarnock House near Dun Laoghaire. Outside school hours they have nothing to do. At 18 (aged-out minors) there is no education provision for them as they are not allowed into third level education.

The Church of Ireland Board of Social Responsibility is now working on a code of good practice for our churches. We know that many local committees, with churches working together, have tried to help those who come as strangers to us, to integrate into community life. But the truth is that main-line churches are not good at hospitality and welcome. We have ourselves witnessed the aggressive mission of some sects. We have also worshipped with the more genuine African Churches, indigenous to the Nigerian people.

As clergy and people of our church, we can influence how others think about newcomers by choosing our language carefully or carelessly. I suggest that we do not buy into the language of some sections of the media and some politicians. I stood underneath Israeli helicopter gun ships in a Gaza Refugee Camp and I was on the streets of Jerusalem after a suicide bomb. I quickly discovered that terror is not exclusively located in the domain of any one group.

We have a responsibility, as members of the Church of Ireland, to be a welcoming community where hospitality is at the heart of our faith. We need to listen to, to hear what others are saying to us. Can we make for example our parish facilities available, free of charge, to those who seek refuge? The dissemination of information about parish and local community resources are vital to asylum seekers. Can we help by acting as advocates and witnesses during meetings with community welfare officers and local officials? How about church families 'adopting' an asylum seeker/refugee family as godparents or sponsors? Or inviting them to our homes? Or helping with awareness programmes, language training, organizing crèches? Can our parishes, our church be a bridge to help our newcomers become valued members of our local communities? As Mary Robinson has said..."We should feel proud to be a country of destination!" They are not depriving the Irish of anything. They are giving of their different gifts and enriching us through their diversity of culture and background.

The understanding of cultural difference is vital. And we can all inform ourselves and learn to have respect for the culture of others. As a founder member of the Three Faiths Forum, I can tell you that there are many positive things happening to help create an ambiance of understanding of other peoples faith and culture. We meet together regularly to discuss aspects of Islam, Judaism and Christianity and to build trust between people of faith.. Many individuals and churches in their communities are reaching out in the same way.

As the poet, Walt Whitman wrote: "I and mine do not convince by arguments. We convince by our presence."

Sixty-three parishes have within their boundaries in every Diocese of the Republic of Ireland, a Centre for Asylum Seekers. In city and urban parishes, many are living in rented accommodation. Unaccompanied children are in institutionalized homes. Are they convinced by our presence? You know the answer.

The anthropologist, Rappaport said "it is the visible, explicit, public act of acceptance, and not the invisible, ambiguous, private sentiment that is socially and morally binding". In our social responsibility, we are what we do, not what we think. Our Lord was the perfect exemplar. "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" Hospitality is at the heart of our faith. We must put it at the heart of the church's life.