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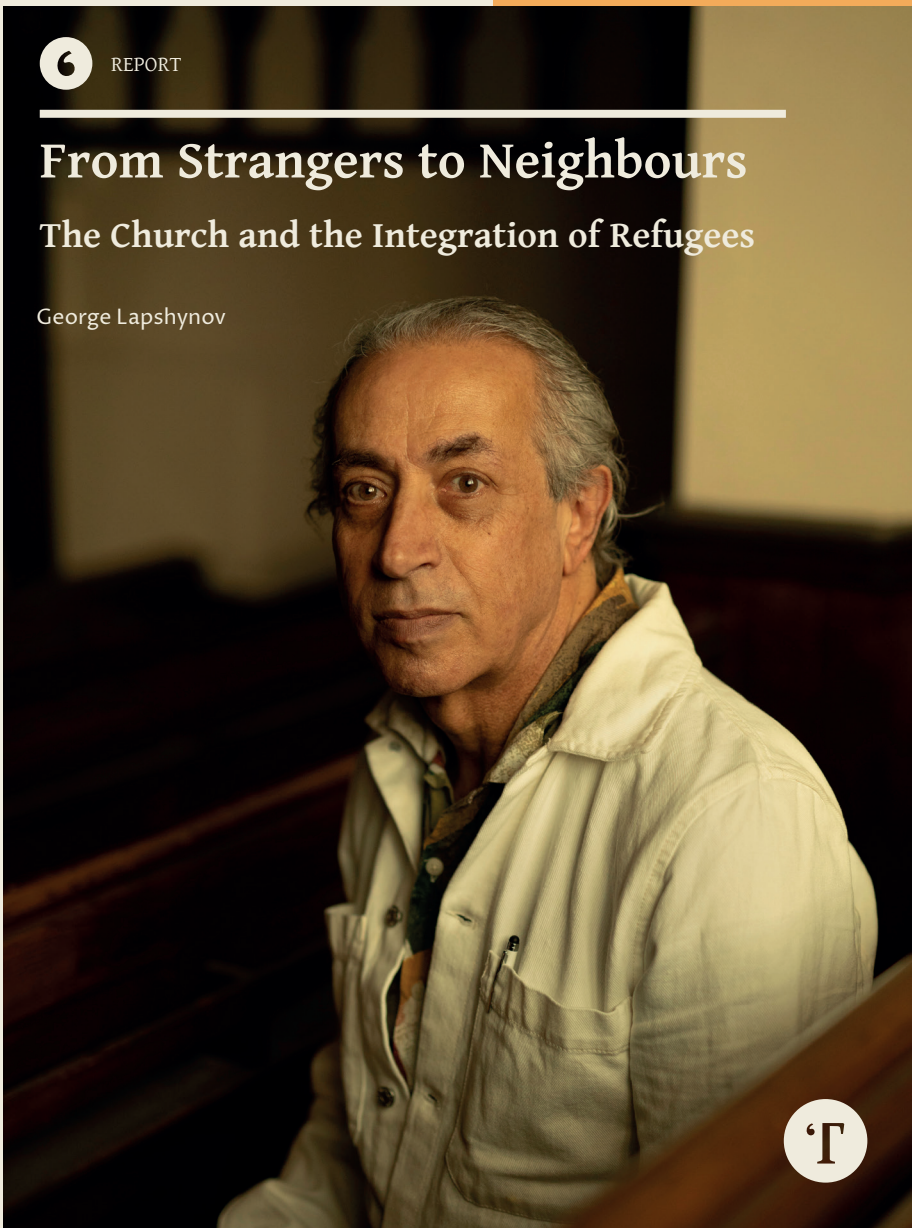
REPORT

From Strangers to Neighbours

The Church and the Integration of Refugees

George Lapshynov



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Published by Theos in 2025

ISBN 978-1-0682488-0-1

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REPORT

From Strangers to Neighbours

The Church and the Integration of Refugees

George Lapshynov

This report in 60 seconds

This report explores the significant but often overlooked role that churches across the UK play in supporting the integration of refugees and asylum seekers. Despite migration dominating political discussions, the focus typically remains on reducing the number of migrants rather than on enabling those who have already arrived to settle and flourish.

Drawing on extensive interviews with church leaders, charities, and local authorities, this report uncovers the practical and relational ways churches help refugees find community in the UK. Addressing misconceptions surrounding church activities, including unfounded allegations of proselytism and 'fake conversions', it highlights how churches complement the work of voluntary and statutory organisations. It identifies the strengths of churches that enable them to play a key role in refugee integration, particularly their ethical framework, based on Christian teachings, that rejects the alienation and commodification of immigrants.

The report also highlights the challenges that churches face, such as limited resources, volunteer burnout, and tensions between faith-based motivations and public perceptions.

Ultimately, it calls for an improved national strategy for integration, urging policymakers, charities, and churches to collaborate more effectively. By recognising and supporting the distinct contribution churches offer, Britain can better welcome refugees – not merely as strangers living on this island, but as neighbours who belong, thrive, and contribute meaningfully to society.

6

Key Recommendations

This report proposes practical policy changes that would support churches and facilitate a smoother and comprehensive integration of refugees.

Drawing on our fieldwork, we believe that integration is inherently local, relational, and practical. Churches and civil society organisations are best placed to accompany asylum seekers and refugees through integration. For this reason, we argue that it is not solely the role of the government to directly deliver integration, but that it should create the framework that enables the efforts of civil society and churches. Crucially, we believe it can do this without significant new expenditure, not by 'overhauling/upheaving the system' but by humanising it.

To achieve this, we propose **three fundamental principles** that focus on integration from day one that could radically improve integration outcomes:

1. A seat at the table — Despite providing key frontline services and serving as an essential safety net, churches often remain isolated from strategic partnerships. By virtue of the significant work of churches in local communities across the UK, and for the benefit of refugees and their integration in the UK, we believe it is essential that churches have a seat at the table in strategic discussions at local, regional and national levels.

2. A community access model — Asylum accommodation in general, and contingency accommodation in particular, is one of the greatest shortcomings of the UK asylum system. It lacks community buy-in, fuels local resentment, and contributes to the stigmatisation of asylum seekers. Yet we believe the time asylum seekers spend waiting can be optimised through a community access model that encourages accommodation providers to play a

more positive role in integration and work increasingly closely with churches and civil society.

3. A right to volunteer —While charities up and down the country do much for asylum seekers and refugees, only initiatives enabling them to give back and have a stake in the wellbeing of their host communities can foster their dignity and sense of purpose. We therefore recommend formally promoting a right to volunteer for all asylum seekers and refugees. Provided the necessary safeguards are in place to avoid exploitation, volunteering will improve integration through language acquisition, social engagement and increased employability.

Contents

Acknowledgements

Thanks to all who have been part of this very timely and necessary research project.

I am particularly grateful to the church and charity leaders who shared their stories and insights with me, and to the local authority staff and refugee sector experts who gave of their time and wisdom.

Special thanks to Caritas, JPIT, CTBI, Cytûn, and Welcome Churches for helping me to identify interviewees in all three nations of Great Britain.

My heart goes out to those who showed me hospitality as I travelled around the UK for this report, for *I was a stranger, and ye took me in*. The list is long, but special thanks go to Archpriest Paul & Matushka Jane Elliott, and to Hieromonk Augustine & Brother Basil.

Thank you also to Theos colleagues for their support and advice throughout. A profound thanks to Rosie Bromiley, our Research Assistant, and Paul Bickley, Head of Political Engagement, who have been my right and left hands respectively.

I would like to thank Dr Sophie Cartwright for her thoughtful and constructive feedback on earlier versions of this report. While her input has strengthened the research, the views expressed and responsibility for the final content and any remaining errors rest solely with the author.

I am grateful to our Communications team, particularly Lizzie Harvey and Emily Ikoshi – who have helped with the visual elements of this work, and to the MB Reckitt Trust and Susanna Wesley Foundation, whose generous financial support enabled our fruitful collaboration with John Boaz and dissemination of this research.

Finally, I am extremely grateful for the Mary Begg Legacy, without which this project would not have been possible.

Introduction

Eli is a 40-year-old mother of three who came to the UK seeking asylum.[1] She comes from a Middle Eastern country where she was persecuted for converting to Christianity; conversion from Islam is punishable by execution where she is from. She has lived for nearly a year in temporary accommodation in a small room with four single beds. The food in the hotel is poor quality and sometimes mouldy. She is not allowed to work and her weekly allowance is so small that she cannot afford bus tickets. Her children have nowhere to do their homework but on the carpeted hotel floor between the beds.

Eli is one of thousands of asylum seekers living in similar conditions in the UK. Her story of fleeing danger, only to face new hardships on arrival, captures the challenges of forced migration in Britain today. Eli's story highlights not just the logistical failures of the asylum system, but deeper questions about how we welcome those who seek refuge on our shores.

Migration remains one of the most contentious and politically polarising issues in contemporary British society. A majority of the British public is proud of the UK's history as a nation of welcome for those fleeing war, persecution or life-threatening circumstances.[2] However, a collection of underlying assumptions dominate the public debate, stoking division around it. Asylum seekers are commonly portrayed not as individuals fleeing genuine danger, but as opportunists seeking economic gain and exploiting the welfare system. Such perceptions, reinforced by certain media narratives and political rhetoric, distort the public conversation and promote suspicion and division rather than understanding. They have also led to regular attempts by UK governments, especially since 2021, to

undermine the right to asylum, a trend that is growing across the West.

As debates intensify about who should be allowed into Britain and how, an equally critical conversation is being overlooked: how effectively we are integrating those we have already received.

This report argues that integration – understood as a two-way process in which migrants navigate adopting the cultural norms of the host country while maintaining their own cultural identity, and the host country adapts the environment to integrate migrants – is not merely a secondary concern to controlling migration flows, but central to the flourishing of both migrants and the wider community that welcomes them. It is therefore critical of the way in which successive governments have prioritised a narrative of controlling forced migration – particularly through promises to 'stop the boats' – over the development of coherent strategies for the integration of those granted refuge here, especially when some of the anxieties behind the reception of asylum seekers could be addressed through better integration.

It is within this context that churches have emerged as essential, if often overlooked, actors in supporting refugee integration. Previous research by Theos has demonstrated that churches play a vital role in fostering social cohesion at a local level.[3] Their importance is amplified in relation to refugees, who are amongst the most vulnerable and in need of support, and many of whom come from regions where religious identity is an important determinant of cultural norms and expectations.[4] Churches offer unique strengths in integration efforts precisely because they are communities rooted in shared values and relationships rather than transactional service provision alone.

However, the role of religion, particularly Christianity, in the integration process is often viewed with suspicion. Concerns about proselytism and even allegations of complicity in facilitating so-called 'fake conversions' to secure asylum status, both debunked in this report, have cast doubt on the positive contribution of churches to the lives of refugees.

> "Churches offer unique strengths in integration efforts precisely because they are communities rooted in shared values and relationships rather than transactional service provision alone."

This report seeks to challenge these assumptions. Through extensive fieldwork and interviews across locations in England, Scotland, and Wales, it highlights both the practical and relational support offered by churches to asylum seekers and refugees, examines the complex dynamics at play in church-related refugee work, and explores the barriers these communities face amidst a deeply divisive national conversation on immigration. Ultimately, this report calls for a new, coherent vision of integration, one that acknowledges and leverages the unique contribution of churches to ensure that refugees are not merely housed but truly welcomed, not merely present but fully integrated, flourishing alongside their neighbours in communities across the UK.

We recognise that there are voices, including many Christian voices, calling for a complete overhaul of the asylum system. We also recognise that many Christian schools of thought, including Catholic Social Teaching, are far more radical in their support for the rights of asylum seekers and refugees than the provisions of

> "Ultimately, this report calls for a new, coherent vision of integration."

secular UK and international law.[5] While we are grateful to those who speak truth to power and bring a prophetic imagination to bear on how to radically reform the way we do asylum, this report complements these more radical traditions by deliberately remaining within the confines of the current UK asylum system and legal framework and identifying the tangible ways in which churches navigate the existing system and Christians make the UK a welcoming home for asylum seekers and refugees.

The research

This report draws on 65 in-depth interviews conducted between August and November 2024. These covered four locations with a high density of asylum seekers and refugees, and involved 91 interviewees[6], including 72 national and local church leaders and church-related charity leaders, seven refugee sector charity leaders, four local authority staff, three sector experts, and one school of sanctuary[7]. Given the often traumatic nature of the asylum process, refugees were not directly sought out for interviews and were only interviewed where they were encountered organically or personally introduced and were willing to share their stories. Our fieldwork resulted in interviews with four refugees.

The interviews spanned England, Scotland, and Wales and interviewees represented 12 different church denominations or non-denominational groups.[8]

Most church leaders were ordained or denominationally recognised church leaders of congregations, along with a small

number of lay leaders with responsibility, e.g. elders of non-denominational churches. All refugee sector charity leaders interviewed ran secular or faith-based charities and interacted with churches in their work. All the sector experts knew the UK asylum system well but differed in their view of churches' work in this area.

We identified geographical locations that are high density points of asylum seeker relocation or refugee dispersal. We then mapped churches in these areas that were specifically welcoming asylum seekers and refugees, either through regional denominational bodies to be referred to churches in these areas that work with asylum seekers or refugees, or through networks such as the Welcome Churches network. We approached clergy and/or senior leaders with an invitation to take part in the research. Local authority staff and charity leaders were approached either through official channels or through referrals from church leaders.

This report uses terminology in accordance with the official language used in the UK – though we recognise that many of our interviewees had legitimate concerns and rejected this terminology. **Asylum seeker** refers to someone who wishes to be recognised as a refugee and granted leave to remain in the UK, but whose claim to refugee status has not yet been determined as valid. **Refugee** refers to someone who has been deemed by the UK Home Office to have a well-founded fear of being persecuted in their home country and has been offered leave to remain in the UK. **Forced migrant** is a catch-all term covering all immigrants to the UK who have had to leave their home country under duress rather than by choice. This includes asylum seekers who are in the process of applying for asylum, refugees who have been granted asylum, and all those who have fled war or famine without being persecuted on the basis of

a particular characteristic and who have come to the UK on special visas and through humanitarian routes, such as from Ukraine, Hong Kong and Afghanistan. **Immigrant** or **migrant** refers to anyone who has moved to the UK, regardless of the reason. See Appendix 1 at the end of this report for a full explanation of the language surrounding migration and why it is important to use appropriate language.

The asylum system

According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the UK population grew by over 4.6 million between mid-2011 and mid-2023, with net international migration estimated at over 3.2 million in that period.[1] The overwhelming majority of this migration, however, is economic rather than humanitarian.

Forced migration to the UK consists of two main groups: people arriving via formal humanitarian routes that are only accessible to specific groups in specific circumstances (which the government calls 'safe and legal humanitarian routes'), and asylum seekers. As there is no such thing as an asylum visa, people seeking asylum in the UK have no choice but to travel through informal routes – whether arriving on small boats, stowed away in vehicles, or at the airport – and claim asylum on arrival. Since 2011, 678,200 people have been offered safe and legal humanitarian routes to enter the UK.[2] Over the same period, around 709,300 people have claimed asylum in the UK, with 58.9% of claims receiving a positive outcome, either as an initial positive decision by the Home Office, or after appealing that decision in court.[3] In other words, only a quarter of net international migration to the UK over the past 14 years was humanitarian, and only 1 in 7 net international migrants to the UK was a refugee.

While voluntary migrants – those who are driven by economic or social motivations and face no immediate threat – may be subject to reasonable regulatory controls, forced migrants, by definition, have far less choice regarding their displacement.[4] As a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the UK is legally bound by the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits returning refugees to countries where they may be persecuted, and it must adequately consider each asylum claim.[5] Accordingly, though the UK has no

control over the timing and scale of humanitarian crises, legitimate asylum seekers cannot be turned away regardless of domestic attitudes.[6] However, recent legislation such as the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and the Illegal Migration Act 2023, which have been widely condemned as contravening the Refugee Convention, threaten the right to asylum and criminalise informal entry into the UK.[7]

Forced migrants also differ significantly from voluntary migrants in another way: whereas voluntary migration is typically justified by the economic benefits that accrue to the receiving state (chief among which is the provision of labour to address shortages in key areas of the British economy, such as those on the Immigration Salary List[8]), forced migration presents no immediate economic advantage. Many asylum seekers flee conflict or persecution, often arriving with physical or mental impairments caused by trauma. As the Home Office has itself recognised, they may have few resources and need significant support before they can contribute economically or otherwise to their host community[9] This is not to say that they do not want to contribute. As we will see in this report, many are eager to do so and, with the right support, are very capable of working.

> "In meeting humanitarian obligations, government and society alike have a rare opportunity to emphasise compassion for those in dire need."

While there is no short-term economic incentive, then, to fulfil this legal obligation, especially in our current political economy, there is a moral one. Fulfilling these legal and moral responsibilities

could be a source of national pride, rather than a burden.[10] In meeting humanitarian obligations, government and society alike have a rare opportunity to emphasise compassion for those in dire need. By providing asylum seekers and refugees timely, compassionate support to help with their integration from day one, they will more rapidly feel at home, flourish, and enrich their new communities and the British economy for years to come.

Why integration

While many church and charity leaders interviewed for this report used the term 'welcoming' to convey the idea of making asylum seekers and refugees feel at home in and part of UK society, our choice of the word 'integration' is intentional. As we shall see, there are many ways of welcoming –that is to say, of living together – and not all are equally intentional or equally beneficial for all parties.

"By providing asylum seekers and refugees timely, compassionate support to help with their integration from day one, they will more rapidly feel at home, flourish, and enrich their new communities and the British economy for years to come."

All migrants undergo cultural change, referred to as *acculturation*, which involves adaptation to new physical, economic, and social contexts.[11] This includes changes in housing, diet, employment, bureaucracy, and relationships. Identities shift while encountering unfamiliar linguistic, religious, or educational norms. Crucially, how well migrants and the host society adapt to

each other influences how smoothly this process unfolds. As Nick Spencer notes, "asylum and immigration force both immigrants and host nations to ask of themselves the one question which marks us out as human: who am I?"[12] In a best-case scenario, both migrants and hosts develop a positive vision of how to coexist, rather than leaving the process to chance.

Psychologist John W. Berry's typology describes four main acculturation strategies: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalisation.[13] Of these, integration is unique in encouraging migrants to maintain core aspects of their own cultural identity while also breaking down barriers to meaningful intergroup relationships. It attempts to strike a balance between requiring adaptation on the part of migrants and inviting the host to adapt the environment to the integrating migrants. Other strategies – assimilation (losing one's cultural identity), separation (maintaining one's culture but rejecting the host), and marginalisation (failing to engage meaningfully with either one's own culture or the host culture) – tend to produce social tension between the host and the migrant or isolation of one or the other.

From a Christian social teaching perspective, integration is also the approach to welcoming that best acknowledges human dignity and our inherently social nature.[14] Humans are social beings, constituted by relationships and engaged with others in the search for meaning. Flourishing, especially for those fleeing dire circumstances, depends on material wealth but also on meaningful relationships and belonging, on the pursuit of intangible goods such as giving and receiving care, and the aspiration to be part of particular communities and to contribute to society. These goods,

both material and intangible, need to be pursued deliberately and should not be left up to chance.

Beyond ethical and social considerations, integration has tangible economic benefits. Analysis by the London School of Economics (LSE) found that an integration-focused asylum system could yield a net national *benefit* of at least £1.2 billion within five years, compared with the estimated £5.4 billion annual cost of the current (as of October 2024) integration-hindering asylum system.[15]

Although policy discussions frequently focus on labour-market integration – which is more readily quantified[16] – other dimensions are equally significant. A purely economic view overlooks the reality that migrants need more than jobs; they also need a sense of belonging and community. This assessment of human worth in purely economic terms promotes integration only insofar as it serves economic ends.[17] It is also self-defeating since all dimensions of integration – cultural, social and emotional[18] – have a real economic impact.

“A purely economic view overlooks the reality that migrants need more than jobs; they also need a sense of belonging and community.”

For migrants, the integration process often requires a delicate balance between maintaining their cultural identity and adopting the cultural norms of the host country. Most, if not all, migrants to Britain long to be recognised within the UK’s political systems and culture. But they are not blank slates to be rewritten, just as the UK is not a blank slate to be rewritten by migrants. Rather, most migrants want to belong to their new host

society while remaining invested in their linguistic, familial, cultural, and religious identities.[19]

This process is dynamic and takes time; it also requires patience and understanding from the host society as migrants negotiate the preservation of their roots while striving to belong. This is particularly fraught for asylum seekers, who often arrive traumatised and with limited resources.[20] They depend heavily on sustained support that acknowledges their vulnerabilities and recognises that forced migration rarely allows time for planning or preparation.[21]

The current state of integration

Despite these realities, the current British asylum system often hinders rather than helps. As the Commission on the Integration of Refugees argues, it is "harmful," "unethical," "inefficient," and "costly to the taxpayer."[22] Government policies and public attitudes increasingly frame forced migrants as either burdens on society or potential security threats, making it harder for them to settle.

Early integration is discouraged by long waiting times, restricting employment through a ban on work and enforced idleness and relocation, granting precarious legal status, or limiting access to healthcare. These constraints prolong dependence on state support, cause social isolation, and deprive asylum seekers of dignity and autonomy – that is to say, of

"Government policies and public attitudes increasingly frame forced migrants as either burdens on society or potential security threats."

their humanity. Even when restrictions are lifted, their effects are long-lasting and refugees can suffer from the consequences of the asylum system for decades.[23] Theos research has previously noted that government approaches can impede community cohesion within the context of migration; this finding also clearly applies to refugee integration.[24]

Even once asylum seekers receive leave to remain – which the majority currently do – they have only a 56-day grace period (temporarily extended from 28) to find employment and housing before losing government-provided accommodation, thereby risking homelessness or destitution.[25] Added to this, refugees face barriers in the labour market: they are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed, and discrimination on their immigration status is not uncommon. Research suggests it may take over 25 years for refugees to reach parity with native populations in earnings and employment.[26]

> "The UK's multicultural policy framework has often defaulted to acceptance of diversity without offering a shared sense of community."

This disadvantage is not because of a lack of willingness to integrate. Refugees who cannot return safely home often have particularly strong incentives to settle into the host country and invest in acquiring language, education, and citizenship.[27] However, according to the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), which measures how well countries' policies support the integration of all migrants, the UK's integration policies remain only "halfway favourable", receiving a score of 56 out of 100.[28] Considering the additional hardships faced by asylum seekers and refugees

specifically, it is likely the UK would score even lower if economic migrants were omitted from the picture. Although migrants to the UK benefit from robust anti-discrimination legislation[29], they lack the long-term security that would encourage them to participate as full citizens. Instead, the MIPEX reports that the UK's policies encourage the public to see immigrants as foreigners rather than potential citizens, hindering migrants in their long-term integration and discouraging them from putting down roots.

A sign of this is that the Home Office tracks indicators of integration but has no integration strategy.[30] The path to citizenship is so long and bureaucratic that it adds little value in terms of cultural, social or emotional integration. Recent census data is also consistent with these findings: nearly 3 in 4 (74%) non-EU-born international residents who have arrived in the UK since 2011 report they neither identify as British nor feel a sense of belonging to one or more of the nations within the UK, suggesting that many remain unconvinced that they truly belong in the UK.[31]

This is not to say the UK does not welcome cultural diversity under the umbrella of British national identity. British culture has long been shaped to varying degrees by influences from across the globe, not least because of its colonial history, and the British Isles have absorbed many different linguistic, religious, cultural, and culinary traditions over the centuries.

The UK's multicultural policy framework has however often defaulted to acceptance of diversity without offering a shared sense of community. Excessive emphasis on individual autonomy has bred isolation and self-segregation, as has the lack of a sense of what Britishness entails. Yet Britain, as a gathered community, is a *real*, if historically contingent, entity. We cannot deny that its

borders define its narrative identity, and that, while not immutable, neither are they wholly arbitrary. Nor can we say that there is no such a thing as British culture – even if it has been shaped to some extent by colonial history and recent migration.[32]

The features of the asylum system and the absence of a clear pathway to integration therefore make it difficult for migrants of all backgrounds to 'feel' British, English, Scottish, Welsh, or indeed Northern Irish, as the case may be. Britain's world-leading anti-discrimination policies are unable to offer migrants – and especially asylum seekers and refugees, who are most in need of a place to call home – a pathway to integration into British society. This is because integrating migrants raises the question of what it means to be part of the British community in a way that merely outlawing discrimination and protecting its victims does not. It is also necessary to stress that migration status is not a protected characteristic under English law and that successive governments have developed laws that marginalise people on the basis of their immigration status.

A concerted, coherent integration strategy is therefore urgently needed.

A Christian welcome

While the government may lack a national integration policy and the asylum system may actively discourage integration, communities across the UK are working hard against the odds to make asylum seekers and refugees feel at home. To understand why churches welcome asylum seekers and refugees, and how they go about it, we interviewed church and church-related charity leaders in four case study areas across the UK with particularly high densities of asylum seekers.

There is a clear theological motivation for churches to 'welcome the stranger', not least because many biblical writers themselves experienced exile and dispossession. While the contemporary Church has been well established in the West for many centuries, the experience of alienation in both the early days of the New Testament church and the Old Testament Israelites remains central to its identity and worldview.[1] If in the day-to-day business of politics, the "humanity of those on the move is obscured in a morass of statistics"[2], then the Christian tradition emphasises seeing migrants as individuals with inherent dignity. The biblical story indeed compels Christians to see migrants as bearers of God's image, and not simply to love them in an abstract sense, but to ensure their social, moral, economic and relational wellbeing.[3]

"There is a clear theological motivation for churches to 'welcome the stranger', not least because many biblical writers themselves experienced exile and dispossession."

This Christian teaching to love the stranger is put into practice every day by local churches across the UK.

Organic – not programmatic

What emerged from many interviews was that welcoming asylum seekers and refugees is simply understood as what the church "does and has done for millennia as church."[4] Making a special effort to welcome the stranger – regardless of their background – was seen by many as the natural outworking of being a Christian: "We are doing it because we feel we have to… even if they have [another] faith."[5]

> "The Christian tradition emphasises seeing migrants as individuals with inherent dignity."

In particular, several interviewees stressed that the qualitative difference between the welcome offered by Christians and that offered by other organisations is due to Christians being *compelled* to "clothe and feed the needy"[6] and that, at least according to some traditions of Christianity, this is not an option for them:

> *It is one thing to 'be nice' and give some time away on a weekend to do volunteering. But it is qualitatively very different when you are told by your faith that you* ***have*** *to give your time, that you* ***have*** *to give what you own, that you* ***have*** *to sacrifice your own surplus, that you* ***have*** *to love the stranger. It's not just 'being nice' – it's a command. And this matters.*[7]

In short, churches overall do not have a refugee 'strategy' and there is no question, as one local authority staff member wondered, of whether or not it is part of their 'remit' to welcome asylum seekers and refugees.[8]

> *Churches have buildings. They have a brief to be kind to people. They have connections across the country and across the world. They are stable institutions and well-established in communities… Reaching asylum seekers and refugees is absolutely natural for the Church.*[9]

Some churches that are now key hubs for asylum seekers and refugees in their community have become so only recently. In many cases this is not because their theology or priorities have changed, but because their circumstances have changed: a hostel for asylum seekers has opened locally, or refugees have been resettled in the area.

> *Everything started when a hostel for asylum seekers opened on Christmas 2021. Soon afterwards, some asylum seekers – Joseph and Mary with child, on Christmas! – turned up for a service and the local community immediately reached out to the church for help. The existing Welcome Centre was too busy… and the church agreed to open its doors to asylum seekers once a week.*[10]

However, not all churches are equally committed to welcoming asylum seekers without distinction. This may be because they already devote energy to helping another group in need, such as the homeless, or because they place a greater emphasis on another aspect of the Christian message, such as evangelism. This is not to say that churches cannot change their priorities over time. The minister of a church that is now known in its community for its warm welcome described its journey to where it is today:

> *Our church changed tremendously over the past twelve years, but this did not happen automatically. My wife and I worked very hard to change the community, and to create a space that*

is warm and cosy… It is impossible to get 'being welcoming' to asylum seekers and refugees in an instant. We have many more years of learning to do, of falling and standing back up. We made many mistakes along the way and will make many more.[11]

When it comes to the nature of the support offered by churches, it can essentially be divided into material support on the one hand, and more intangible emotional, spiritual and psychological support on the other, as we will now explore.

Emergency relief

Many refugees and asylum seekers experience significant material deprivation upon arrival, as the state's support mechanisms are often insufficient to meet their basic needs. Churches have stepped into this gap, providing life-saving assistance.

"As the state's support mechanisms are often insufficient, churches have stepped into this gap, providing life-saving assistance."

While asylum seekers and refugees have different material needs – the former are housed and sometimes fed whereas the latter need to find their own accommodation and source their own sustenance – churches do not appear to be drawing distinctions: the churches we visited respond to the needs of those who turn up at their door and do their utmost to provide whatever assistance is most appropriate.

The types of material support for asylum seekers and refugees that we encountered in our fieldwork included:

- Operating a food bank, clothing bank, furniture bank, or SIM card collection point;
- Operating a Warm Welcome Space[12], a Place of Welcome[13], or similar type of informal social space;
- Providing English conversation (informal) or English classes (formal);
- Organising drop-in sessions, afternoon tea/coffee, or lunch clubs to connect and communicate;
- Opening the kitchen to allow guests to cook for themselves;
- Providing (emergency) accommodation for homeless refugees in the church hall, or (long-term) in the home of a church leader or a church member;
- Helping asylum seekers pay their legal fees and transport costs, helping refugees pay their rent and bills through fundraising or personal donations, and helping them navigate British payment systems;
- Helping refugees find work by writing CVs, preparing them for interviews and identifying job opportunities in the community;
- Helping refugees move homes, acting as guarantors for rent;
- Acting as witnesses in asylum appeal hearings and writing letters of support to the Home Office and the courts.

The economic value of these essential services provided by churches to asylum seekers and refugees is difficult to quantify. However, the National Churches Trust's estimate of a social return of up to £181 for every £10 invested in churches is a good place to start.[14] This material support keeps some of the country's most vulnerable people clothed, fed, and living in dignified conditions – as far as that is possible – despite years of cuts in public funding, and

relieves the pressure on contracted providers like Migrant Help, which are unable to cope with the huge demand for help.[15]

Most of these activities are designed to address a specific need or problem (food poverty, homelessness, etc.) within the community. Drop-in sessions and initiatives like Warm Welcome Spaces, however, stand out as being about creating a space to welcome people. In our fieldwork, church and charity leaders and volunteers included a wide-range of tasks in their descriptions of drop-in sessions, from filling in HMRC and Home Office forms to preparing for a job interview, and from finding out when someone's bin day is to showing a mother how to use disposable nappies.

> "Churches often work directly with charities in a constellation network of partners."

> *We found it was a barrier going on to the council website even for myself as a council officer to find these different local authority services. So, I'm thinking, 'Well, if that's difficult for me as a professional that can speak English and is working with these different services all the time, what's it like for other people?'*[16]

All churches and church-related charities visited provided some combination of these types of support, depending on the different needs of the community and on existing charity work within their area. It is clear, however, that there is no one-size-fits-all: each church we visited was in a different community with different needs and had adapted to meet those needs.

In most cases, the types of support offered also evolved (and typically expanded) as the number of asylum seekers or refugees increased, requiring the church to be flexible and adapt quickly.

> *It started with a shared tea and coffee once a week, but then it very rapidly turned into a drop-in session as local volunteers came together to start something new. Now we offer a foodbank with both fresh produce from shops and donations, English language classes, a hot meal cooked by volunteers and asylum seekers in the church kitchen, an advice bureau with lawyers, a barber service, a clothes bank, NHS interventions, school interventions, charity interventions, job advice, and more.*[17]

Churches often work directly with charities "in a constellation network of partners"[18]. We encountered churches and church-related charities that work together with statutory bodies such as NHS trusts, with anchor institutions such as universities, and with other faith organisations, including non-Christian faith organisations. These organisations work with their local church, recognising that it has the right assets[19] (buildings, leadership, volunteers, networks) to mobilise quickly and (cost-) efficiently. In return, churches found that they also benefited from these partnerships in terms of increased credibility.[20]

> *The NHS approached us asking if we could help with some of the asylum hotels, and so we started taking teams into those hotels and doing Initial Health Assessments and basic GP registration.*[21]

Working together, we found, was a necessity not only to optimise efforts and avoid duplication, but also in order to deliver better care and achieve the best possible outcome for asylum seekers and refugees. Where good charities already exist, several

senior church leaders insisted, churches should work with them, not try to copy them, which would inevitably drain their resources while providing a lesser service. Conversely, where (good) charities do not exist, they should seek to discern whether it is their calling to meet a particular need in the community.

> "Working together was a necessity to optimise efforts but also achieve the best possible outcome for asylum seekers and refugees."

> *Churches lack technical knowledge and legal knowledge. They need to learn what they can do and what they cannot do... There is a risk that churches might try to take on the workload themselves rather than redirect asylum seekers in need to appropriate, qualified places.*[22]

The fact of the matter, however, is that thousands of churches across the country are in the latter scenario. While there are more charities, both in number and diversity, in more affluent areas than in more deprived ones, churches exist in all communities across the UK.[23] This means that churches are often the only provider of charity in areas that are already deprived, and that they have access to communities that no other refugee sector organisation has.[24]

Not all churches attract the same diversity of asylum seekers and refugees. While most churches we visited welcomed all asylum seekers and refugees, some focused specifically on Christians or those exploring the Christian faith.[25] Others – particularly single nationality churches – prioritised supporting asylum seekers and refugees of their own nationality. However, as far as we observed, churches in the latter two categories did not actively exclude

others; rather, their outreach reflected their particular priorities, often centring on co-nationals or co-religionists, some of whom happened to be seeking asylum or had recently been granted leave to remain in the UK.

An act of compassionate solidarity

John has been a devoted member of his church since the late 1970s, a congregation with a long history of charitable work. The ministry of his church has been particularly focused on helping the homeless. It was during a period of renewed involvement with the local homeless community that John's path intersected with asylum seekers in a more direct way. Unexpectedly, a family friend who passed away left his house as an inheritance to John's children. After a period of prayerful discernment, the family decided to offer the property to refugees, in partnership with the local refugee council, forgoing a significant second income stream. The council then identified a Muslim Kurdish Iraqi family to live in the house rent-free.

For six years, the refugee family thrived in their new home. Free to live in a good neighbourhood and environment, they secured decent employment, quality education for their children, saved diligently and have now reached the milestone of buying their first property with a mortgage.

This act of generosity was deeply influenced by Christian teaching. Inspired by the need for Christians to tackle widespread poverty, John and his family have adopted a lifestyle of simplicity – believing they should have just enough to live

comfortably, with any surplus going to charity. The family has deliberately kept this arrangement secret. Only their church minister and the local refugee council are privy to the full details of their initiative, a decision made both to avoid any perception of mixed motives and to adhere to a tradition of modesty in charitable acts.

Extending friendship

Beyond providing essential material support, churches offer equally vital yet less tangible emotional, spiritual, and psychological assistance to asylum seekers and refugees.

Unlike emergency relief – which deals with the emergencies of homelessness or food poverty – this form of support is of a different, more intimate nature. Going beyond simply trying to keep asylum seekers and refugees alive, it aims to give them a quality of life, a dignity of life, and to accompany them in the difficult process of healing from their often-traumatic journey to the UK. By offering friendship and community, churches humanise those dehumanised by the asylum system, walking alongside them on their journey toward integration and neighbourliness.

From our fieldwork, it is clear that this intangible life-giving support arises organically alongside material assistance. Those who visit a church drop-in centre, clothes bank, or attend a shared meal in search of basic aid also find care, companionship, and a listening ear. In other cases, the company and friendship are precisely the primary goods that asylum seekers and refugees visiting a church are seeking.

> "By offering friendship and community, churches humanise those dehumanised by the asylum system, walking alongside them on their journey toward integration and neighbourliness."

This support can be broadly categorised into assistance for asylum seekers, who typically stay in one place only briefly for a few weeks to a few months awaiting a decision on their asylum claim, and for refugees, who are trying to build a life in the UK, find stability and plan for the years ahead. While this impacts the depth of the bonds church members and volunteers form with those who come to them, it does not affect the generosity with which they welcome those in need, whatever their migration status.

This, we believe, is what distinguishes churches and church-related charities from many other voluntary organisations operating in this area: well-established charities have to meet targets set out in contracts and agreements, they have a narrow remit and a duty to limit their activities to what will help them achieve their charitable objectives. Churches have a much broader calling to provide all the help they can physically manage, and often even beyond what they can manage. Their role extends beyond service provision to fostering connection, community, and personal relationships.

> *Some people from larger NGOs come to us [churches] saying, "What do we need you for? We're here." But they were often there as emergency responders, not to build long term relationships with people, or they weren't from the local communities, and so therefore they'd kind of come in and out and have quite a*

transactional relationship. So sometimes the value of churches, faith communities, local communities, wasn't seen.[26]

> "Charities have to meet targets set out in contracts and agreements and limit their activities. Churches have a much broader calling."

We have mentioned at the beginning of this section that fellowship and community are no less essential than services delivering material support to forced migrants of all kinds. We recognise that food and shelter must come first, but human flourishing is impossible unless the need for love, community and dignity is also met.[27] This is supported by social science and psychology, which have shown that nothing is as positively correlated to human well-being as the quality of our relationships.[28]

The need for love, community and dignity is even more acute in asylum seekers and refugees, precisely because these basic human needs are made unattainable by the dehumanising conditions – whether accidental or deliberate – of the asylum system. Reports by major UK asylum and refugee charities frequently and systematically note the "indignity of reporting procedures, indefinite detention and the use of force, enforced destitution and the dependency and precarity this brings"[29], and the occasional complicity of charities and lawyers in this process. The friendship offered by churches and other organisations is therefore all the more vital.

Churches specifically can contribute towards meeting these relational needs more than other type of organisations in the sector precisely because they offer opportunities for *informal* bonding.[30]

> *What we want to offer first, I think, is friendship. So rather than starting projects or anything like that, we start by building friendship… And then we want to invite people into community. So, on a Friday night, when we have a meal just once a month, asylum seekers come, but other friends come too, and they'll be dancing in the garden with Iranian music. Then they're part of a community… and that's what we want to offer.*[31]

"Human flourishing is impossible unless the need for love, community and dignity is also met."

This is far from being only an accidental byproduct of how churches are run. From the evidence gathered during our fieldwork, we find that, thanks to their ethical framework grounded in Christian teachings that resist objectifying immigrants as unwanted aliens or as economic commodities, churches commonly make a special, deliberate effort to avoid transactional relationships with asylum seekers and refugees who use their services. Where the asylum system often dehumanises them, treating them as problems to be solved or inanimate beings whose lives can be put on hold for months or years on end, many churches and church-related charities consciously treat them as *people*, restoring their trust in themselves and in others.[32]

> *Our approach has been to not see them as a block of people… They need to be seen otherwise, because they come here… and they're just part of this possibly unwanted group, but they're human beings who need to be seen and understood individually. And most of them need a mum and dad, and that's what [my wife and I] have been to them: a mum and dad.*[33]

The creation of family-like bonds was common in the churches and church-related charities visited. Asylum seekers and refugees would deliberately and explicitly address church members and volunteers as 'mum', 'dad', 'aunt', 'uncle' or indeed 'granny'. While we recognise that kinship terms are used differently in some Asian and African cultures from which many asylum seekers hail, what is remarkable is the seriousness with which these roles – and not just titles – have been taken on by typically white British volunteers and church members. These seemed to crystallise the level of commitment and sense of *personal responsibility* of the locals for the long-term wellbeing of their surrogate 'nephews' or 'grand/children', as the case may be.

Some churches were also making a conscious effort to undo their categorisation "as asylum seekers and refugees, as different, as a category apart"[34], emphasising instead their common humanity. They are "just human beings... who happens to be seeking asylum and going through the process"[35], as one leader of a church-related charity put it. They are "human beings with whom we have human relationships"[36], another stressed.

> *Within the church, most church members have no notion of someone else's immigration status: asylum seeker? Refugee? Economic migrant? Who cares. Everyone is just a brother or a sister to everyone else.*[37]

"Everyone is just a brother or a sister to everyone else."

A supportive local authority[38]

Cheshire West and Chester Council (CW&CC)[39] demonstrates a proactive model of supporting churches and charities to integrate refugees and asylum seekers into their local community. It has been awarded Council of Sanctuary status, recognising its role not only as a direct provider of resettlement and integration services, but also as an enabler of grassroots integration efforts.[40]

Initially dedicated to assisting Afghans, the Refugee & Asylum Seeker (RAS) team expanded to assist individuals from Ukraine, Syria, and other regions. Reflecting its hands-on commitment, senior council staff personally participate in welcoming refugees, preparing housing, and managing essential logistics such as transport and food provision. As one official stated, their work embodies a deep commitment: “we put our heart and souls into those roles”.

CW&CC gives priority to sustainable, long-term integration over temporary solutions. It makes a clear distinction between immediate resettlement and ongoing integration and partnership building. Recognising local churches as key community assets, the council actively promotes partnerships with Chester Cathedral and other churches across the city and council. These collaborations have been instrumental in initiatives ranging from pandemic vaccination and food distribution to hosting refugee advice services. Council staff regularly visit churches that act as community hubs, using the churches’ existing community links to deliver support effectively and economically.

In addition, CW&CC encourages collaboration within its vibrant voluntary sector through charity forums, which promote co-ordination, efficiency and mutual support between different organisations. Council-appointed Move On Officers provide specific support to refugees and voluntary groups, reducing duplication of services and increasing charities' effectiveness.

Addressing negative stereotypes and misinformation, the council also runs myth-busting workshops to cultivate mutual respect and trust between newcomers and local residents. While CW&CC exemplifies innovation and proactive investment, its efforts are still constrained by austerity and limited resources. Even greater cooperation with churches, supportive national policy, and devolved financial decision-making could empower councils like CW&CC to expand even further their successful initiatives, ultimately facilitating deeper, more durable integration.

Restoring agency

Whether or not asylum seekers and refugees come to a church for material assistance or advice, we have often seen spaces set up in such a way that they do not feel like they are the beneficiaries of charity: rather, they are deliberately made to feel like they have agency. This is because humanising asylum seekers and refugees also means creating the kind of environment where equality in the relationships can flourish, where we do things *with and alongside them* rather than *to and for them*, as Paul Bickley wrote in the 2018 Theos research on neighbourhood resilience.[41] Since their

circumstances make them feel helpless, and in the case of most asylum seekers, unable to work, being able to contribute (e.g. through volunteering) rather than just being a passive recipient can be truly life-giving.[42]

In other words, churches are not simply striving to help – they try to empower asylum seekers and refugees to help themselves, and they do this by giving them the space and opportunities to flourish, and a community to belong to.[43]

One great source of empowerment in local communities is grassroots sport.[44] It bridges divides of religion, culture, language, socio-economic status, and life experience. However, asylum seekers – especially minors – often lack the confidence, networks, and finances to join regular clubs. This is where churches are particularly well placed to help: migrant children already connected with a church for other forms of assistance can be guided into church-run sports activities as a more informal entry point. Churches can then leverage their wider networks, including partnerships with charities and sports clubs, to help these children overcome the barriers they face. One church running such a project told us:

> "Humanising asylum seekers and refugees means creating an environment where equality in relationships can flourish, where we do things with and alongside them rather than to and for them."

With the football project we've been keeping 17 or 18 boys off the streets in Croydon on a Friday night... We're working with coaches from the Fulham FC and Tottenham Hotspur Foundations and our team is from our church... I think it's helping

them build confidence to go out and be part of activities in the community. Next week we're taking nine of them to The Prince's Trust [sic] and helping them sign up for a course, and there will be a lot more local British youth there as well.[45]

Another clear example of how churches empower asylum seekers and refugees is by making their kitchens available for use with minimal supervision, usually at set times or on specific days. The church might provide fresh ingredients while allowing complete autonomy over the cooking process, thus offering charity in a way that preserves the dignity of the guests.

There are many benefits to allowing asylum seekers and refugees to cook for themselves. During the assessment period, asylum seekers in hotels are completely dependent on the food provided by the asylum accommodation in near-carceral conditions which can undermine their sense of self-worth and agency.[46] Choosing what to eat and how to prepare it restores a measure of autonomy. It also ensures better quality meals, addressing widespread concerns about poor food in asylum hotels, while avoiding the stigma of being dependent on charity that is common with food banks or church-provided lunches. It helps asylum seekers and refugees to alleviate homesickness, which many feel acutely. It also gives them a sense of ownership of the church building: by moving freely around the kitchen, they begin to feel at home and gain a foothold in the local community beyond their isolating asylum accommodation. Finally, cooking gives them an opportunity to give back and to share a piece of their home culture by preparing meals for church members, volunteers or the wider community.

Of course, true equality and mutuality between church members and volunteers on the one hand, and refugees and asylum

seekers on the other, can be challenging for both. Several church leaders described the difficulty of learning to sit down and eat a meal cooked by the people they are supposed to be helping, expressing feelings ranging from guilt to discomfort at the sense of losing the (superior) position of *service provider*.[47] To be a 'kind host', as the church is in many cases, is also to be in a power dynamic; to become 'guests to their guests' instead is liberating and empowering for asylum seekers and refugees, but quite humbling for the churches.[48]

It is in this regard that churches have a particular contribution to make to civil society. Their 'service' is not simply transactional but rooted in genuine human engagement, offering more than what can be measured by targets or policies. Not being burdened by the same budgetary and other constraints refugee-sector charities face, they can afford to take a person-centred approach, to build deep and meaningful relationships, and are able to act as bridges to the local community.

This is not to say that refugee-sector charities are opposed to restoring agency to their service users. Indeed, there are charities that have a special focus on relationship as part of their mission.[49] Rather, this inability is due to their nature as service providers. While churches, as community organisations, are able to level the playing field and empower asylum seekers and refugees, albeit not without some deliberate effort, charities, as service providers, are typically in a power dynamic with their service users. This power imbalance, which needs to be managed carefully, requires boundaries and limits relationship building.

Providing continuity

> "To be a 'kind host', as the church is in many cases, is also to be in a power dynamic; to become 'guests to their guests' instead is liberating and empowering for asylum seekers and refugees, but quite humbling for the churches."

In terms of emotional support, churches have another strength that they mobilise to help asylum seekers in particular. Asylum seekers are frequently moved to different accommodation, often in different towns and regions of the UK, while their asylum claim is being assessed. This can be very traumatic, firstly because they have no control over how and where they are moved, and secondly because the few acquaintances they may have made and the proto-relationships they have managed to build are torn apart, forcing them to start from the ground up. This is where another strength of the Church comes into play: while it is deeply rooted in local communities, it is simultaneously enmeshed in cross-country denominational and inter-denominational networks.

To make this transfer less traumatic, many of the church leaders interviewed told us how they used their networks "to make sure that they have a smoother transition, to make sure that someone was there at the other end to take over."[50] The same is true for refugees, many of whom are forced to move to more affordable areas after being granted leave to remain, uprooting their entire precarious social networks. Again, many churches with a strong refugee presence reported doing the same.

One of the most valuable things I've done is put people in touch with a local church wherever they're moving, and I've always

emailed the vicar and said "One of our asylum seekers has been moved to your area. Is your church a place where they can find a home? Or can you suggest somewhere?" This is really where the church is of great service, so I know they're being looked after. Because not every church would, you know.[51]

"Churches can afford to take a person-centred approach, to build deep and meaningful relationships, and are able to act as bridges to the local community."

Where denominational and personal networks are insufficient, charities such as Welcome Churches help churches to ensure that the asylum seekers and refugees they have come to love continue to receive moral and emotional support as they move on. As well as equipping churches to better welcome asylum seekers, they have set up a network of friendly churches called the Welcome Network.[52] While not all churches choose to join the network, over 1100 churches across the UK have, giving them access to the network and the ability to find other welcoming churches across the country at the click of a button.

Single nationality churches

Churches however can only assist asylum seekers and refugees that turn to them for help. Many forced migrants may feel hesitant to enter a local Anglican or Methodist church, regardless of how welcoming it is and how visible a presence it is in the community. Single nationality churches play a crucial role here, offering not only practical resources about the host country in a familiar language but also an immediate sense of belonging. As one senior church

leader put it, "it's a safe and familiar entry point, especially with people who feel strongly about their faith."[53]

Beyond language and cultural barriers, many asylum seekers and refugees carry traumatic experiences that are difficult for the wider local population to relate to. As one church leader observed, "how do you start a conversation when you don't know what to say?"[54] In single nationality churches, asylum seekers are more likely to encounter others who have undergone similar journeys or who are in a better position understand their struggles.

While integration into broader society is possible over time, and desirable for all parties, the emotional comfort of worshipping in a setting that feels like home is irreplaceable. For many, the ability to pray in their native language and hear familiar hymns is deeply grounding. It can help them preserve a sense of who they are when everything about them is changing.[55] A church leader reflected:

"Beyond language and cultural barriers, many asylum seekers and refugees carry traumatic experiences that are difficult for the wider local population to relate to."

> *It means a lot [to Ukrainian refugees] to hear the prayers said in Slavonic, to hear Orthodox hymns in a form that they can recognise... In times of great personal trouble, this has a great soothing effect on them. In fact, it helps to keep people sane... Even if they speak excellent English, it means more to them to receive a blessing in Slavonic before going to the Home Office or a job interview.*[56]

In fact, where national networks and diasporas are wholly absent, forced migrants experience significant long-term integration difficulties.[57] Some research suggests that the failure of many government refugee resettlement programmes before the 2010s was partly due to dispersing refugees in areas without established national (and related faith) communities.[58]

National networks not only provide immediate support and security but, as Lord Griffiths of Burry Port recently argued in a Lords debate on social cohesion, they can also be "agents for change in society at large... They can bring points of view to the attention of a larger society; they can shape local communities."[59] One Chinese church we visited (which has been anonymised) illustrated this well.

Serving the community across borders

At Faith Church, a predominantly migrant church with a Chinese congregation, "kingdom spirit" is at the heart of everything they do. They believe that all newcomers should seek to integrate into British society, and encourage their members to move quickly from being recipients of social support to active contributors to the local community. The leadership is a strong advocate of responsible citizenship and actively encourages members to engage positively with wider society, pay their taxes and work towards financial independence.

It also acts as a vital community hub for co-nationals, both Christian and non-Christian, and offers a range of cultural and artistic activities, using the sense of belonging and familiarity

it gives to recently arrived Chinese nationals to engage them in service to the local community. They believe it is the responsibility of Christians to be at the giving end of social services as much as possible and strongly desire that all their members be forces for good in the local community.

The church also leads initiatives to bring together several other single nationality churches in the local community, all serving different and unrelated national groups. Each of these single nationality churches is rooted in its own diaspora networks, but Faith Church manages to achieve unity of purpose through collective action (such as cleaning the streets), mobilising these churches and their discrete networks to all serve the local community in which they are located.

Faith Church is a living example that national networks, when harnessed well, can benefit both their own members and the wider society. And they can do this precisely because they are a single nationality church. As a diaspora hub, they can reach a large national group that is not always well integrated. They can also mobilise this group to improve their integration. As a church, they have an entry point into other diaspora communities through those communities' churches and through their shared Christian values and desire to serve their neighbour, here in a literal sense.

For the children of asylum seekers and refugees, migration can be especially disorienting. They may not fully understand why they have left their home and family, often longing to return. Language and culture classes in their mother tongue can be vital in maintaining a

connection to their past, building their confidence, and helping them adapt to school in the UK.[60] Any meaningful approach to integration must therefore consider the role of single nationality churches and diaspora communities in providing continuity through such upheaval.

This is not to say there is no risk of ghettoisation or self-segregation. Some of our interviewees were wary that single nationality churches might discourage migrants from engaging with the wider local community, and especially that it might discourage locals and migrants from working together for their mutual welfare (Jeremiah 29:7). One church leader, reflecting on years of service in a single nationality church, expressed this concern strongly:

> *[Single nationality churches] can lead to siloing and be profoundly undermining of society. They can distort the imago Dei, because people start to believe that God looks only like them... They also stop people from living in the place where they are, even though it is God who leads us to a given country and expects us to belong to that country.*[61]

This challenge is not limited to Christians, or even to migrants. Religious identity, when closely linked to national identity, can make integration difficult for anyone. For many migrants, integration does not mean abandoning their roots, but it may require disentangling national and religious identities sufficiently to forge wider social connections.

“For many migrants, integration does not mean abandoning their roots, but it may require disentangling national and religious identities to forge wider social connections.”

Some refugees we encountered were aware

of these dynamics and deliberately chose to attend local churches instead of ones serving their national community to avoid isolation. One interviewee told us that several members in his mainstream church had joined their congregation "to run away from ghettoisation."[62] Others actively avoided the churches serving their national community for personal security reasons.

For some, particularly LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, their own national communities may not be safe spaces. Many seek asylum in the UK due to persecution for their sexuality, and they often fear similar rejection from their co-nationals and any church that they might be part of, upon arrival.[63] While some mainstream Christian denominations in the UK may also be unwelcoming, there are churches that intentionally curate safe spaces, offering LGBTQ+ asylum seekers not only practical support but also the friendship and inclusion they urgently need.[64]

As well as the difficulties faced by LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, there is a risk that we underestimate the divisions that exist within national groups. Asylum seekers and refugees can face challenges when trying to connect with co-nationals once they arrive in the UK, based on differences that existed before they migrated, as well as differences that may emerge after they move to the UK. For example, a Chinese church leader described in detail how his congregation had split in two after tensions between mainland Chinese and Hong Kong people became too great for them to share the same space.

Conversion

In addition to Christian migrants seeking out their co-nationals in the UK and attending churches that are diaspora hubs, our fieldwork also confirms that conversions to Christianity

among asylum seekers, often in mainstream British churches, are widespread, and we explore this in detail below.

In recent years, several media stories have centred on the role of churches in the asylum process. A notable controversy in 2024 framed the Church – particularly the Church of England – as a 'conveyor belt' of baptisms, allegedly facilitating 'bogus conversions' to help ill-intentioned asylum seekers strengthen their claims. [65]

However, we found no evidence of an industrialised 'conveyor belt' approach to baptism, nor that conversions are 'bogus' or insincere. The argument that baptism can help asylum seekers gain leave to remain is also unfounded: while religious conversion is a factor in some asylum cases, it is exceedingly rare. In 2023 only seven asylum seekers were granted leave to remain on the basis of religious conversion.[66] Furthermore, the Upper Tribunal does not recognise clergy testimony as expert evidence, nor does it treat religious conversion as a determinative ground for asylum.

Churches across the UK do a lot for asylum seekers and refugees, as we have seen. It is therefore unsurprising that many asylum seekers and refugees – though by no means all – are drawn to inquire about the faith that has helped them. The idea that welcoming people with no ulterior motive might lead some to genuine conversion should not be alarming.[67] Nor should it surprise the wider public that individuals gravitate towards warm, compassionate communities. Indeed, conversions occur commonly even in churches that have

"The idea that welcoming people with no ulterior motive might lead some to genuine conversion should not be alarming."

deliberately avoided active evangelisation. One church leader put it simply:

> *They come into the Christian life of love, acceptance, generosity, kindness, and it's such a sharp contrast [with that they knew before] that it blows their mind, really. And that's what pulls them and keeps them here.*[68]

Church leaders in nearly all the churches we visited reported baptising, confirming, or otherwise formally inducting both asylum seekers and refugees – but especially the former – into the Christian faith. From our research, we identified three common pathways to conversion.[69]

Some asylum seekers arrive already Christian 'in their heart.' They have encountered Christianity in their home country or en route to the UK and accepted its truth but were unable to make a public profession of faith or receive baptism due to persecution. Many come from countries where apostasy is severely punished, meaning conversion before arrival could have risked their life or liberty.

Others, the majority in our research, embark on their faith journey only after reaching the UK. Most were young and male and had converted from Islam, often profoundly moved by, in the words of one church leader, the "softness, love, care, and sacrifice of Christianity"[70] they encountered. Church leaders frequently remarked on the "great depth of faith", the uncommon "devoutness", and the particular receptivity of forced migrants to the Christian story.[71]

"Conversion before arrival could have risked their life or liberty."

A third group converts less from a personal religious experience than from a sense that Christianity offers a path to integration and belonging in British society, that it might help them "understand British values better."[72] For these individuals, their strongest relationships in the UK have been forged within church communities. While their initial motivation may be more social than theological, they nonetheless approach conversion sincerely and understand what it entails. Some might argue that this is an illegitimate reason for conversion, but we will see why that assumption is mistaken.

We encountered no cases of asylum seekers deliberately deceiving churches to gain support for their claim, though we acknowledge the possibility that some exist. We also stress that even in cases where asylum seekers succeed in deliberately deceiving churches, this is very unlikely to improve the outcome of their asylum claim, for the reasons listed above.

Approaches to baptism

Nevertheless, church leaders take the issue of 'bogus conversions' seriously. All the churches we visited had clear pathways to baptism, requiring participation in formal or informal Bible study and active church involvement.[73] Baptism was never granted lightly, and in some cases was deliberately made more difficult to obtain for asylum seekers. We do also note that our fieldwork took place several months after the controversy in the British media, which may explain why our interviewees were especially attuned to it.

> *I'm very cautious, over-cautious, about baptizing Muslims or any person of any faith who presents themselves to us for various reasons.*[74]

Before baptism, they go through a programme so we understand where their faith is at. I have refused people because I think "You're not there yet."[75]

One church introduced even stricter protocols in response to the media controversy. Before an applicant could even enter the baptism preparation course, a confirmed testimony of faith from several church members was required. Upon completion of the course, and before baptism could be considered, the examination would be repeated.[76]

Conversions were, as far as we could ascertain, never rushed. Several church leaders emphasised that "baptism isn't cheap,"[77] and some churches deliberately prolonged the process for individuals who appeared overly eager, to ensure 'due reverence and care' was observed.[78]

On the question of those converting more out of a desire for community than from a deep religious experience, it was clear that they were still properly prepared. Their desire to become Christian, as far as church leaders could discern, was genuine. However, motivation, we were systematically reminded, is notoriously difficult to judge. Throughout our interviews, church leaders repeatedly stressed that they "cannot read people's hearts."[79] While they look carefully for signs of authentic faith, "they accept that only God can know the true nature of conversion."[80] One priest emphasised that the language of certainty is inappropriate here; rather, all that can be asked of clergy is that they show "discernment and wisdom."[81]

Many also rejected the notion that conversion is an instantaneous or binary process. Faith is "not an on/off switch."[82] Even lifelong Christians experience fluctuations in belief and relationship with their faith. If it is difficult for clergy – whose

expertise lies in recognising spiritual commitment – to judge conversion, how much harder must it be for a civil servant assessing an asylum claim. Equally, baptism is not "about a general knowledge test"[83], and theological literacy is not necessarily an indicator of faith. There is no easy rule-of thumb way for the judiciary and Home Office to assess conversion.

> "If it is difficult for clergy to judge conversion, how much harder must it be for a civil servant assessing an asylum claim."

It is true that clergy, by virtue of their pastoral training and their relationships with inquirers into Christianity, are best placed to assess conversion honestly and carefully. And, as a matter of course, they should be solely entrusted with the task of ensuring that all conversions are genuine. However, in cases where an asylum seeker's claim hinges (at least partly) on religious conversion, the genuineness of their faith becomes a matter of public concern, and therefore a matter for the Home Office or the courts.

Given the difficulty of assessing whether a baptism is legitimate or not, and given that both the clergy and the Home Office need to be involved, both parties need to be involved and work together more effectively. Clergy could benefit from better guidance on Home Office requirements to avoid creating further difficulties for their catechumens and those joining a church. Civil servants involved in assessing asylum claims need to learn from clergy about the process of conversion and improve their religious literacy more generally. We heard from two senior church leaders from different denominations we interviewed that such learning initiatives had been undertaken

at various times, but that despite initial optimism, this had failed to develop into a longer-term relationship.[84]

This is especially important as the Church has practised 'open baptism' for millennia, welcoming all who sincerely desire it. It is unfortunate that criticism from both government and media has led some churches to become so cautious that they now apply stricter criteria for baptising asylum seekers than for others, effectively creating a two-tier system based on immigration status. This cannot be right. Baptismal preparation and examination should not be affected by a person's immigration status.

Although our research does not represent every church in the UK, we found no evidence of churches bypassing due diligence or providing testimony of conversion to the Home Office without corresponding evidence. Furthermore, clergy who support asylum seekers' claims rarely base their support solely on conversion but on a wider picture of church involvement. They can provide concrete evidence that converted asylum seekers have become integrated members of their communities, embodying Christian love through action rather than merely reciting Bible verses.

> *I can say not just that they've been baptised, but I can say they've been part of the Bible Study, that they've become friends with our community, that they've joined in our activities, that they've joined in volunteering days or work days at church. That they've all turned up and that they've helped.*[85]

This is not to say that baptism is always handled perfectly. The Right Reverend Dr Guli Francis-Dehqani, Bishop of Chelmsford, acknowledged, when giving evidence to the Home Affairs Committee on the baptism of asylum seekers, that "the Church [*of England*] is

> "Criticism from government and media has led churches to become so cautious that they apply stricter criteria for baptising asylum seekers than for others."

not infallible. It is a human institution and errors of judgment... may be made."[86]

Yet even if mistakes occur, conversion alone rarely determines asylum claims. And if an individual has attended church consistently, become embedded in its community, and volunteered solely to strengthen their claim, that still does not mean they are not on a genuine faith journey.

The bigger issue here is not whether asylum seekers are "gaming the system" but why they so often turn to churches in the first place. Any genuine spiritual experience and encounter with the divine aside, their willingness to convert also speaks to a deeper need – one for community, belonging, and rootedness. If some find in the Church the welcome and stability they so desperately lack elsewhere, the real question we should ask is not whether they should be converting, but why there are so few other places offering them the same.

Pathway to integration

At the beginning of this report, we established that the UK's priority of 'managing migration' over integration, under successive governments including the current Labour one, together with the lack of a coherent national policy undermines refugee integration. As a result, our asylum system is ineffective, slow and piecemeal. Most asylum seekers spend over 18 months waiting for their claim to be processed, and some much longer, all the while relying on

public funds. Even those granted leave to remain receive overall little practical support in rebuilding their lives in the UK.[87]

Treatment of asylum seekers varies according to immigration status and mode of arrival (e.g. resettlement or sponsorship schemes versus irregular entry), as well as by location within the UK. In England, initiatives are largely limited to refugees with leave to remain; Scotland and Wales include asylum seekers by largely operating on the principle of 'integration from day one', although the implementation of this strategy is heavily constrained by Home Office policy, which is not devolved.

In contrast, institutions like churches and schools across the country offer a powerful alternative to this challenging environment.[88] The churches we visited, all help to mitigate the many disadvantages faced by forced migrants by creating living conditions that are as 'normal' and humane as possible. We observe that the non-transactional relationships with local church members and volunteers not only informally teach asylum seekers and refugees British cultural codes, but also restore their dignity and autonomy and enable them to flourish in the UK. We find that they gently guide asylum seekers and refugees towards full participation in local communities and, through them, membership of wider British society.

"The non-transactional relationships with local church members and volunteers not only informally teach asylum seekers and refugees British cultural codes, but also restore their dignity and autonomy."

Although churches are often one civic actor among many, they are in many respects a unique part of the ecology. When it comes to providing essential services, they complement the work of both voluntary and statutory organisations, while they do much – if not most – of the heavy lifting in supporting integration.

Churches improve refugees' and asylum seekers' economic integration. They support newcomers by helping with CV-writing, interview preparation, and job-hunting. They often provide English lessons (both formal and informal through conversation cafés) and connect asylum seekers and refugees with social networks that can lead to professional opportunities. One church-related charity, for example, helped an asylum seeker trained as an architect secure an internship at a local firm through personal connections – a chance he would not have discovered otherwise.[89]

Equally importantly, we can see that churches across the UK participate in the social, cultural, and emotional dimensions of integration both by meeting material needs and simply by being who they are.

We know from previous Theos research that churches can be one of the few places in British society where deep relationships are still cultivated and social capital (understood as the networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation in a community) can still be generated.[90] We also know that British society is experiencing a crisis of social capital, reflected in widespread loneliness and the decline of local community groups,[91] but that churches at their best remain places of robust social engagement, offering meaning and belonging.[92]

We observe three main features that make churches good at accompanying refugees towards integration.

Firstly, the welcome that churches afford all, not just asylum seekers and refugees, aligns with the principle of 'integration from day one'. Every visit to the local church or church-related charity becomes an exercise in integration. Churches do not treat migrants differently on the basis of their immigration status, so there is no delay in their inclusion in the community.

Secondly, churches are deeply connected to specific places, enabling attenders to develop a sense of belonging through regular contact with local people. This "bridging capital" brings together individuals across ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural divides. As one interviewee explained:

> *They get to know people from the local community and local people get to know [them], and it helps create understanding and create a bond between these different groups of people... It really helps and pushes them to be more confident in terms of speaking English, but also connecting with people that are not from their nationality or language or ethnicity.*[93]

Thirdly, even as churches guide refugees into British society, they respect each person's cultural identity, and offer them space to negotiate the preservation of their roots as they develop a British identity of their own and strive to belong.[94] Because their approach is organic rather than programmatic, this process can take as long as necessary.

> "To integrate is not to disown your mother culture and language. What we look for is not key markers of behaviour, but rather a sense of belonging."

> *To integrate is not to disown your mother culture and language… What we look for is not key markers of behaviour, but rather a sense of belonging. We know someone is integrated when they can say "I belong **here**. I can serve the community **here** and I can do things **here**."*[95]

This emphasis on 'here', illustrates that integration happens locally, person-to-person.[96] One interviewee recounted how forced migrants, especially children, feared the police due to previous abuses in their home countries. Overcoming such fear required *personal* introductions to friendly police officers, fostering positive, direct relationships.[97] While key markers of behaviour do not define integration, they might be a component of it. Guiding newcomers through the behavioural changes necessary for UK life – such as tolerating mixed sex groups or adopting British codes of social conduct – is also most appropriately done on a personal basis and in relation to practical, real settings. Speaking about male refugees who, for cultural and religious reasons, refused to be in the same classroom as women, one local authority worker said:

> "Their goal was neither to tick boxes nor 'make someone British', but rather to welcome and patiently walk alongside refugees."

> *We respect their beliefs, their values… but we also make them understand that if they go to an ESOL class at a college, then they're going be in a mixed class, and that's the way we work.*[98]

We were struck by how many of our interviewees, who were clearly leading the way in integration, had no formal "integration

strategy"; instead, they embodied it naturally through deeply personal, interdependent communities. Their goal was neither to tick boxes nor 'make someone British', but rather to welcome and patiently walk alongside refugees until they could confidently say, "I belong here."

Case Study

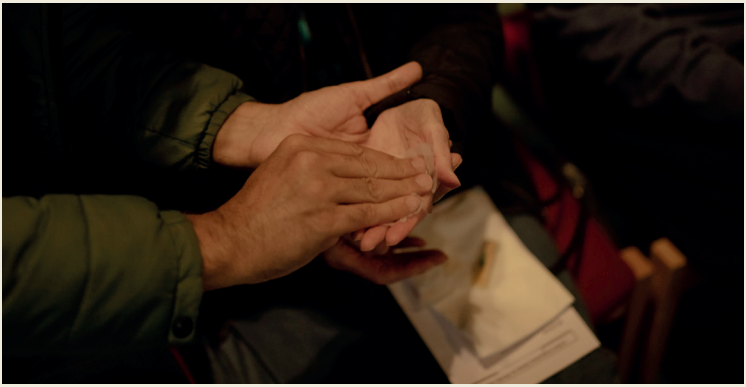
Photography by John Boaz

St Luke's Methodist Church Hoylake has been set up for the Maundy Thursday service, with chairs arranged on either side of the Way of the Cross.

67

Churches at their best are uniquely placed to assist with the integration of asylum seekers and refugees because of the care, companionship and listening ear they naturally provide to those who cross their threshold. An example from our fieldwork of such a community is St Luke's Methodist Church, Hoylake.

At the height of the pandemic, while everything was closed, 80 young male asylum seekers were relocated to a hotel in the small seaside town of Hoylake. They had no belongings, nothing to keep them busy, poor food, and nowhere to go other than their hotel rooms. That is when St Luke's stepped in. St Luke's fed the young men, opened the church, and gave them a place to meet, socialise and cook for themselves. Eager to ensure that the asylum seekers received the best possible support, St Luke's started collaborating closely with charities and local churches. They also partnered with the local authority, which provided a coordinating link and brought all these stakeholders together.



Above: at the Maundy Thursday service, the community – locals and refugees alike – wash each other's hands. Right: Portrait of Ali, a refugee and Farsi-to-English interpreter at St Luke's.

“They want to give to us, and we’re not very good at receiving. I suspect our culture isn’t very good at it.”

CATE

Church and Community Lay Development Worker

Portrait of Cate

Close-up of the Haft Seen table in the entrance of St Luke’s Church, a traditional custom for Nowruz (Persian New Year).

Asylum seekers move on quickly, relocating from town to town. Yet even once they have left the area, many of those who ended up in Hoylake at some point during their journey still consider St Luke's to be their home.

On special occasions, refugees who have been resettled elsewhere return – some after travelling for several hours – to St Luke's. Although most of them are not Christian, they return to give back to the community that once gave them the chance to feel valued and human again, and allowed them to cook for themselves when they were new to our shores, homesick, and constrained by the asylum system.

One such special occasion was this year's Maundy Thursday at St Luke's, when Christians commemorate Christ's Last Supper by sharing a meal. Refugees travelled to spend the afternoon and early evening catching up and cooking a variety of dishes from their home countries. They proudly served these to Hoylake residents at the ritual meal, who came along to enjoy both the refugees' food and the companionship.

The meal was followed by a Maundy Thursday service, during which congregants – local residents and refugees alike – washed each other's hands in memory of Christ washing his disciples' feet, and worshipped together.

Refugees and members of St Luke's prepare the Maundy Thursday meal together.

“‘Worked alongside’ doesn’t do justice to the very real relationships that have developed. I know unequivocally that whatever happens going forward we have a large, vibrant and diverse group of people that will come together when needed.”

CATE

Church and Community Lay Development Worker

Portrait of a refugee.

When the asylum hotel experienced a crisis and its residents found themselves homeless in the middle of the night, Cate, the Lay Development Worker, was alerted and swiftly opened the church to them. Thanks to her existing relationships with the local authority, the local MP, the police and other stakeholders, she was able to mobilise her entire community instantly and start preparing to accommodate dozens of displaced asylum seekers for the night. Although the situation was resolved later in the night, eventually allowing the asylum seekers to return to their rooms, the church's response was swift and effective, not only because it had the necessary resources, but also because it was already part of an active network of local partners.

The senior manager of the accommodation provider was so grateful for the church's swift action that, upon learning that the hotel's residents frequently used the church facilities, he undertook a complete refitting of the church kitchen as a reciprocal gesture.

Good cooperation with the local voluntary sector, statutory organisations, local authorities, and indeed with asylum accommodation providers contracted by the Home Office, is an important aspect of successful integration. However, many churches across the UK report challenging relationships with these potential partners, who are often suspicious of faith-based initiatives. St Luke's demonstrates the remarkable capacity of churches to mobilise in times of crisis and the positive outcomes that can result from integrated working and trusting relationships between churches and local partners.

Ali is a Christian and an integrated refugee. After hearing about the influx of refugees to the hotel in Hoylake, he saw an opportunity to welcome others in the same way he had been welcomed, and offered his services to St Luke's as a Farsi-to-English interpreter. Here, he enjoys the meal as part of the community.

A refugee prepares food for the Maundy Thursday meal

Portrait of a refugee.

Close-up of the variety of cultural dishes that were cooked and served by the refugees.

Although those first asylum seekers who arrived mid-pandemic have long since moved on, and Eritreans have succeeded to Kurds and Syrians to Iranians, St Luke's continues to welcome those whom fate brings to Hoylake. It continues, together with its partners in the community, the work of treating them as people, restoring their dignity and autonomy. And it keeps building deep, meaningful relationships with them, enabling them to integrate into the local community and flourish and feel at home in the UK.

6

Barriers to church engagement

So far, this report has explored how churches support asylum seekers and refugees and how it is in their nature to accompany migrants organically on their journey of integration. However, this work is not without obstacles. This chapter identifies the main barriers, both internal and external to churches, both structural and personal, that limit their impact.

We note that there are many challenges that churches face alongside charities and voluntary organisations in the refugee sector. These include hostile rhetoric, restrictive policies and sensationalist media portrayals, all of which have made the context in which refugee charities operate more difficult, fuelling local resistance and complicating the delivery of services.[1]

However, mindful that these sector-wide challenges are covered extensively in existing research, this report will focus on the specific issues that are unique to churches.

Invisible work

Many church-led initiatives across the UK operate quietly, their significant impact on individuals and communities going largely unnoticed.[2] This invisibility arises partly because key actors in academia, civil society and the refugee sector frequently fail to take organised religion seriously as a force for social action. Additionally, many churches and their associated charities deliberately avoid publicising their work, influenced by theological convictions and practical concerns.

For numerous churches, humility is rooted deeply in Christian teachings that encourage discreet giving. Several of our interviewees expressed deep reluctance to advertise their efforts,

believing that acts of kindness should remain hidden, recognised only by God. Some cited Jesus Christ's teaching that "your left hand should not know what your right hand is doing" (Matthew 6:3), insisting that Christian giving loses its value if it seeks anything beyond love itself.[3] As one put it: "God knows, and that's enough."[4]

> "Many church-led initiatives across the UK operate quietly, their significant impact on individuals and communities going largely unnoticed."

Further reinforcing discretion is a concern that social action could overshadow churches' core spiritual identity.[5] As one church-related charity leader put it, "churches are not bona fide charities. Our charitable work is not the end we are after; it is an outworking of our churchliness."[6] Some interviewees warned that churches can be consumed by social work, losing sight of their primary mission. To prevent outreach from becoming an end in itself, several church leaders mentioned deliberately downplaying their significant charitable activities in their church's public image, so as not to lose sight of their spiritual mission.

Beyond theological concerns, practical considerations also prevent churches from seeking visibility. The churches we visited often feared visibility because of prevailing public attitudes, government policies and possible misrepresentation in the media.[7] Others worried that their limited volunteers and resources would be overwhelmed by the ever-increasing demand.[8]

Some churches cautiously acknowledge their social activities without explicitly referring to their refugee work, primarily to protect those involved.[9] This was particularly true for churches

located in less welcoming communities, which were forced to prioritise the safety of volunteers and beneficiaries over visibility or even the provision of certain emergency services following the 2024 summer riots.[10]

While churches have understandable theological and practical reasons for discretion, forced discretion due to public hostility or government pressure raises significant concerns. Social and material resources are wasted, the provision of essential services is disrupted, and those most in need of these services are made even more vulnerable.

The cost of love

As we have seen, many churches and church-related charities are stretched thin on the ground. Volunteer numbers are dwindling due to social recession, ageing congregations, and the broader cost-of-living crisis.[11] Yet, even as their capacity shrinks, the demand for assistance from refugees and asylum seekers continues to escalate.

If volunteers are overwhelmed, forcing churches to look outside their communities for manpower[12], church leaders are even more so. Living "cheek by jowl"[13] with the people they serve, many see their relentless workload as inherent to their vocation.[14] This intense, close-proximity work distinguishes them from secular charities; the flip side is that they often end up working beyond their limits at considerable personal cost. Church leaders described being overwhelmed by emotional and practical burdens, exacerbated by the traumatic experiences of those they support. Burnout, fatigue and feelings of isolation were common themes in the interviews, particularly as demand for help continues to increase. Some lamented the lack of external support, while others

acknowledged the need to reduce their workload – although none of the interviewees had concrete plans to do so.

The emotional burden on church leaders and on volunteers is compounded by providing regular psychological and pastoral support to asylum seekers and refugees. One church elder reflected: "You dream about them. You can't stop thinking about them even when your work is over."[15] The personal responsibility which many church leaders, members and volunteers feel for asylum seekers and refugees make them second-hand witnesses to the trauma these individuals carry. Their burden is further magnified by the lack of control over asylum outcomes, caught between their desire to help and the relentless uncertainty that defines the asylum system.[16]

Indeed, if church leaders are marginally better trained to handle this emotional strain, many regular church members and volunteers report feeling inadequately equipped to handle severe mental health crises and complex social issues presented by refugees.

> *You end up facing things you never thought you would face… People started coming with their terrible life stories and very urgent needs. Volunteers have to deal with guests' suicide threats, with guests committing crimes and coming to them for help, with homelessness, with complete clinical depression… If you volunteer for the drop-ins, you end up dealing with things that are well beyond your skillset.*[17]

Church leaders and volunteers not only serve asylum seekers and refugees – they carry their struggles, their pain and their uncertainty. It is not a burden they want to talk about, as it distracts from their efforts to generate enthusiasm and support for

refugees, but it is real and poses a threat to sustainable support for refugee integration.

> "Church leaders and volunteers not only serve asylum seekers and refugees – they carry their struggles, their pain and their uncertainty."

Yet it is not without remedy. To mitigate these challenges, improved support networks for churches, better mental health provision for refugees (who have no access to mental health services in most NHS wards), and stronger integration initiatives are essential to reduce burnout and sustain effective church support.

Structural and perceptual barriers

Churches involved in refugee integration also face structural barriers when interacting with statutory bodies, other charities, or seeking funding *as churches*, often compelling them to review their operational choices and identities.

We found that churches primarily support asylum seekers and refugees either directly through church-led initiatives (where members volunteer in an explicitly church-led capacity) or indirectly through separate but church-related charities (which operate independently or in partnership with other stakeholders). While their organisational structures differ, the location often remains the same, with activities taking place in and around the church building.

We note that a significant number of charities run by or for churches adopt secular appearances and charitable purposes,

despite Christian motivations being a driver behind their work. This adds to the difficulty of accurately assessing the full extent of church involvement in social action, particularly in support of asylum seekers and refugees.

Many of the church-related charities we visited had not deliberately chosen the charity model from the outset but gradually transitioned into charity models primarily due to practical advantages like easier fundraising, improved governance, broader appeal to non-Christian beneficiaries, and better opportunities for partnerships.[18] Local authorities and charities can also be sceptical about churches' ability to meet expected sector standards. One sector expert who works with both churches and local authorities told us:

> "Negative perceptions of church-led activities by statutory bodies, charities or even businesses significantly hindered their ability to carry out their work."

> *Councils need to make sure that refugee sector policies are followed, that volunteers are properly trained, and that they're in tune with the sector… Because churches are so numerous, so autonomous, they can't keep track. They can't guarantee that churches are doing this, and there are too many to check them all out individually.*[19]

In addition, some interviewees noted that negative perceptions of church-led activities by statutory bodies, charities or even businesses such as asylum accommodation providers, who are wary of explicitly religious activities, significantly hindered their ability to carry out their social work.[20] Interviews with experts in the refugee

sector revealed that this suspicion might stems mainly from the diversity and decentralised nature of churches and the fear that they might take advantage of vulnerable people.[21] This also led some to adopt a secular charity structure to mitigate eventual negative perceptions and, in particular, the perceived risk of coercion or proselytism.

> "Several church leaders argued that fears of proselytism reflect broader societal discomfort with openly expressed Christianity."

Previous Theos research has shown that setting up a charity associated with a church allows leaders and members to be more intentional about how they incorporate faith into their work. It seems to us, however, that some churches have been compelled to reduce the role of faith in the service they provided – to use the heuristic developed at Theos,[22] to downgrade from a 'half-fat' to a 'low-fat' approach – further than they would have liked, out of a real or perceived fear of proselytism.

While most interviewees recognised the economic and administrative benefits of establishing a charitable structure – particularly the improved access to funding – some church leaders also recognised that, as a charity, the sector would lose out on the unique contributions that churches can only make *as churches*. This downgrading, then, is not just a matter of identity or structural organisation for the church; it can also be an impoverishment of their ministry.

In one illustrative case from our research, a church leader, alone in recognising her church's unique contribution *as a church* to the community, chose to fight to keep social action within the church

rather than succumb to pressure to outsource it to a charity. To this end, her church waged a long campaign against the scepticism and "anti-Christian propaganda" of the local charity forum, which refused to allow the church to become a member on the grounds that it had "an agenda and would 'force church down the throats' of the most vulnerable they were trying to help".[23] They eventually overcame these suspicions through twenty years of persistent community engagement, establishing the church as a trusted partner in the community.

In the case above, the suspicions of the charity forum were real. However, evidence from interviews suggests that in many cases churches anticipate possible scepticism about church-based social action and project onto refugees or external partners a fear of coercion or proselytism that may not be based on their actual perceptions.

A number of churches visited removed overtly Christian symbols or literature out of concern for alienating non-Christian refugees. Staff at one church-run refugee centre were genuinely concerned that if they left Christian literature in sight, non-Christian service users might think they had to convert to get coffee.[24]

Interviews with both church leaders and Muslim refugees, however, suggest that explicit Christian expressions of care generally do not deter non-Christians from seeking help. Non-Christian refugees often view church-based support positively, appreciating assistance irrespective of religious context.[25] Indeed, several church leaders argued that fears of proselytism reflect broader British societal discomfort with openly expressed Christianity, rather than refugees' genuine concerns.

> *Christians are afraid that a cross [...] will put Muslims and Hindus off. But there is no evidence for this. On the contrary, they don't mind. They don't understand our embarrassment at being openly Christian. This fear we have to 'put people off' is likely unjustified. It's a projection... We don't need to be shy of our motives: the welcome and love we provide comes out of our faith.*[26]

Fear of proselytism aside, setting up a charity can also bring unforeseen challenges. One church leader reported confusion and tensions arising from dual roles – particularly in relation to different safeguarding practices between church and charity contexts. In their charity-run drop-in centre, volunteer church members are required to maintain a certain distance from well-known asylum seekers, but when the same asylum seekers attend Sunday services, the volunteers, as church members, welcome them as family and invite them into their own homes, with very different rules of engagement.[27]

The improved access to funding that comes with a charitable structure can also mean a trade-off in a narrower understanding of impact limited to financial metrics, or in an alienation of the congregation from the church charity's social work. Where a church is accountable to its congregation in a church context, it becomes instead accountable to trustees. As one church leader told us:

> *The congregation are more likely to understand the infinite value of helping one single person flourish in the community. You can't put money on any one person.*[28]

There are perfectly valid reasons for churches to adopt a secular charity structure, and churches that specialise in the provision of

particular services may indeed benefit from making the transition. However, before considering adopting a secular charity structure, especially when under pressure from external actors to secularise and professionalise, churches should critically assess whether they are addressing the genuine concerns of asylum seekers and refugees or internalising wider societal anxieties. Spaces are not automatically less welcoming of diversity because they are Christian. Nor is an openly expressed Christian identity necessarily alienating. Provided it is not coercive, expressions of Christian love can deepen and enrich relationships and trust.

Similarly, the voluntary sector and all levels of government naturally prefer to deal with the known entity that is a secular charity. However, they should consider whether a church's openly Christian identity amounts to proselytism simply because it is ostensibly Christian. They should also consider what unique contributions of churches as churches, not least to the integration of refugees as seen throughout this report, they will lose if they require all churches to carry out all their social action through separately constituted charities.

6

Recommendations

Having observed in our research how churches offer a pathway to integration, and how the real and perceived barriers churches face in working with asylum seekers and refugees limit their work, we now turn to what needs to come next.

Drawing further on our fieldwork and interviews with sector experts, this chapter sets out **practical policy changes** that would support churches and facilitate a smoother and more complete integration of refugees.

As we have seen throughout this report, the UK's current asylum system and approach to refugee integration is far from optimal. Asylum seekers are isolated, denied meaningful social or economic participation, and left inadequately prepared for life in the UK. The failure to equip them for navigating British society not only undermines their integration but also exacerbates homelessness and burdens overstretched housing and social services. Britain's current approach is thus fiscally irresponsible and morally problematic.

In a 2022 report on integration, Policy Exchange noted that:

> *There are no simple answers to the conundrums of integration and segregation in liberal societies, and that goes for class and generational divides as well as ethnic ones. Reasonable people disagree not only about the main obstacles to integration but also about what a well-integrated society looks like.*[1]

We may disagree about what constitutes a well-integrated society, but one thing remains clear: the current approach is ineffective, indeed often counterproductive as government policies themselves appear to form significant barriers to integration. Consequently, an improved approach to integration is essential.

This report has consistently shown that integration is inherently local, relational, and practical rather than conceptual or ideological. We have presented clear evidence of churches and civil society accompanying asylum seekers and refugees through integration. For this reason, we argue that while the government need not directly deliver integration, it should facilitate rather than hinder the integration efforts of civil society and churches. Crucially, we believe it can do this without significant new expenditure, not by 'changing the system' but by humanising it.

> "We may disagree about what constitutes a well-integrated society, but one thing remains clear: the current approach is ineffective."

Drawing from our research, we propose **three fundamental principles** that could radically improve integration outcomes. These focus on integration from day one and as such apply not only to refugees who have been granted leave to remain, but also to asylum seekers awaiting a decision on their claim.

A seat at the table

As seen earlier, churches often face considerable obstacles in forming effective partnerships with local authorities and other charities working in refugee support. These challenges arise from multiple sources: governmental and civil society nervousness around perceived risks of proselytism, persistent religious illiteracy in official bodies, and uncertainty around churches' capacity to meet expected sector standards. These challenges also arise

because churches often and for good reason do not advertise their work, making it harder for potential partners to find out about.

The result is that churches, despite providing key frontline services and serving as an essential safety net, can remain isolated from strategic partnerships. Opportunities for collaboration and mutual enrichment are lost. For the benefit of refugees and their integration in the UK, and by virtue of the very significant work that churches conduct in local communities across the UK, it is essential that churches **have a seat at the table** in strategic discussions at the local, regional and national levels.

> "It is essential that churches have a seat at the table in strategic discussions at the local, regional and national levels."

Strategic Migration Partnerships (SMPs), which function as vital intermediaries between local authorities, regional stakeholders, and the Home Office, illustrate this missed potential clearly.[2] Our research revealed faith representatives are frequently absent from these regional discussions – even where churches are significant local providers, on par with large, national charities.[3] Consequently, local authorities and charities miss valuable, and in many respects unique, insights from church communities, while churches lose out on important opportunities to learn from other actors in the sector.[4]

This situation can be perceived as deliberate exclusion, as expressed strongly by one senior church leader, who considered it a form of discrimination on the basis of a protected characteristic. A more constructive and evidence-based approach, they argued,

would include actors based solely on whether they are "doing the work on the ground".[5] Yet, as another church leader emphasised, the onus also lies with churches themselves. Churches should actively demonstrate their dependability and proactively build partnerships.[6]

While we agree that church representatives should not be excluded from strategic discussions simply because they are faith leaders, we also understand that the nature of churches as highly decentralised in their structure presents a real obstacle to collaboration. Churches, therefore, must clearly identify credible representatives[7] within communities and local authorities to take part in these partnerships. In many cases there will be no need to reinvent the wheel, as existing networks such as Churches Together will make it easier to find credible interdenominational representatives.

Churches must also ensure any charities they establish meet accepted sector standards, with trained volunteers and transparent operations. Where churches provide services as churches, they need to build positive relationships with civil society and local government to foster greater cooperation. This may also include appropriate forms of training and best practice guidance issued by institutional churches and church networks to improve their credibility. Churches should also learn from projects such as Safer Families and Homes for Good, which manage to command the respect of statutory bodies and government agencies without compromising their grassroots activism.

Simultaneously, government bodies and voluntary sector partners must actively work to overcome religious illiteracy, challenge oft-misplaced fears around proselytism, and embrace the distinctive nature of faith-based organisations. Properly

understood, the distinctive features of churches and faith organisations can be valuable strengths, not obstacles, and can significantly enrich strategic discussions.

A community access

Perhaps the greatest shortcoming of the UK asylum system is the policy on asylum accommodation, and especially the use of contingency hotels. As the Refugee Council argues, it "has become a damaging symbol of government failure and a flashpoint for community tensions."[8]

Hotel accommodation is not only costly – £8.2 million a day as of October 2024 –[9] but also fuels local resentment, tensions, and instability because it lacks community buy-in.[10] Contingency accommodation also encourages frequent forced moves – on average three times per asylum seeker –[11] meaning asylum seekers always remain strangers in the communities where they are placed. Even where dispersal accommodation into in houses or flats is used, these are typically in highly deprived areas, further exacerbating stigma and resentment towards asylum seekers.

These policies prevent asylum seekers from forming meaningful community ties or support networks. The excessively long waiting times compound these issues, with nearly two-thirds of asylum seekers awaiting a decision for over a year as of September 2024.[12] We therefore support the Refugee Council's call for radically reforming the asylum accommodation system, starting by triggering the contract break clauses due next year.[13]

Yet even within current arrangements, we believe the time asylum seekers spend in contingency or dispersal accommodation

can be optimised and their integration can be substantially improved through a **community access model** that encourages accommodation providers to interact more with churches and civil society.

While accommodation providers under Home Office contracts already have obligations to *liaise* with local voluntary organisations, to provide support and services to, and promote the interests of, asylum seekers, our findings show they frequently fail in practice.[14] Some exceptions aside, throughout our fieldwork, churches and church-related charities found the process of engaging with accommodation providers extremely challenging and found them to be unaccommodating, unresponsive, and difficult to work with.[15] One church leader noted:

> *I found the company that were looking after that hotel very difficult. We wanted to give some Christmas gifts to the women but they wouldn't even tell me if there were any women staying in the hotel.*[16]

What we propose is not that accommodation providers become merely better at fulfilling their contractual requirement to liaise – a suitably vague term – with civil society actors. Instead, accommodation providers should more proactively open up to meaningful partnerships with local churches and civil society, and explicitly take responsibility for integrational activities.

"Accommodation providers should proactively open up to meaningful partnerships with local churches and civil society, and take responsibility for integrational activities."

It should of course not be the responsibility of accommodation providers to replace churches and civil society. As has been said at various times throughout this report, integration must always be relational and local – this is what makes churches so well placed to integrate asylum seekers. A national or regional commissioned business cannot and should not replace this.

> "Human beings flourish through giving. When we are put in a position where we become unable to give, or convinced that we have nothing to give, it slowly destroys us."

However, under the provision not only of physical but social welfare, asylum accommodation providers can be made to play a more positive role in the integration of asylum seekers and refugees. Providing community access would be cost-neutral and highly beneficial for integrational activities. Local actors could deliver targeted support more efficiently, spending less time identifying asylum seekers' needs and more time addressing them.

Additionally, some of the resentment towards asylum seekers is driven by the opacity of the system and the alienation locals feel from being left in the dark. The proposed approach would address part of community alienation and resentment by increasing transparency, interaction, and understanding, mitigating harmful narratives around asylum seekers.

We recognise that the current 'closed door' policy may reflect deliberate deterrence or security concerns. Starting asylum seekers on the path to integration from day one may be seen as a 'pull factor' for humanitarian migration by some. However, restricting integration activities during the asylum assessment period is

extremely counterproductive. With an estimated 79% of asylum claims in 2023-24 eventually ending in some form of leave or protection being granted, integration should operate on the basis of this evidence.[17]

There are real risks associated with allowing *any* civil society or faith organisation into asylum accommodation, but isolating asylum seekers from opportunities to begin their integration journey at an early stage for the sake of their protection is self-defeating. The perceived protection offered by isolation ultimately damages community cohesion, increases suspicion and risks future tensions and unrest. The risk that hostile organisations might seek to abuse community access can be mitigated by requiring accommodation providers to monitor charities and churches as part of their contractual responsibility for integration activities, provided they are sufficiently religiously literate to respect the distinctive features of churches and faith-based organisations and give them a 'seat at the table'.

A right to volunteer

Churches empower asylum seekers and refugees and enable them to flourish through relationships built on trust, dignity, and friendship. In return for this gift of friendship, when given opportunities to participate meaningfully, asylum seekers and refugees naturally want to give back through volunteering, contributing generously to community life.

Our research shows this clearly, and asylum seekers and refugees were found volunteering, whatever the activity the local church or church-related charity was engaged in: caring for the elderly, maintaining church buildings, volunteering in local charities,

manning food banks, making tea, or assisting newer asylum seekers than themselves at drop-in centres.

We believe this impulse arises because human beings are made to give, and flourish through giving. When we are put in a position where we become unable to give, or convinced that we have nothing to give, Nick Spencer argues, it slowly destroys us.[18] Therefore while charities up and down the country do much *for* asylum seekers and refugees, only initiatives enabling asylum seekers and refugees to give back and contribute to the community foster their dignity and sense of purpose.

For this reason, we strongly recommend promoting a **right to volunteer** for asylum seekers and refugees. While asylum seekers face no restrictions on volunteering under UK law, and while the Home Office recognises that "by volunteering for a charity or public sector organisation, asylum seekers can support their local community, and [that] this will also assist with their integration"[19], we propose making it a formal, explicitly promoted right.

From their first days in the UK, asylum seekers should be proactively supported in finding formal and informal volunteering roles that suit their skills and needs. This approach is cost-neutral yet can powerfully improve integration through language acquisition, social engagement, and by giving asylum seekers and refugees a stake in the wellbeing of their host communities. It can counteract some of the psychological, social and economic damage caused by prolonged idleness resulting from the ban on employment, without being a 'pull factor' in the same way as employment, while at the same time challenging negative 'benefit scrounger' stereotypes about forced migrants.[20]

Volunteering, of course, cannot substitute employment and the financial independence it brings. This is why we strongly support recommendations by the Commission on the Integration of Refugees to grant asylum seekers access to work earlier, ideally from day one for jobs on the Immigration Salary List and after six months for general employment.[21] We also recommend improving the recognition of overseas qualifications, as many highly skilled and qualified asylum seekers and refugees are currently unable to bring their much-needed skills to the UK. However, we also believe that employment and volunteering provide complementary and qualitatively different benefits, and the former cannot substitute the latter.

We recognise that a right to volunteer raises potential safety and ethical concerns, such as vulnerability to exploitation or exposure to hostility. As noted above, making asylum seekers visible to the local community through volunteering may make them more vulnerable to abuse. This concern is, however, moot because genuine volunteering opportunities will inherently encourage positive interactions between asylum seekers and locals, reducing tensions and fostering mutual understanding. There can be few better situations for locals and asylum seekers to meet than when the latter are giving of themselves to the community. Instead, we would argue that keeping asylum seekers isolated and confined to their accommodation, and particularly hotels – symbols of the opacity and inhumanness of the asylum system – is much more likely to attract hostility from the local community.

However, ethical concerns about the risk of labour exploitation require a more cautious approach. The denial of the right to work, combined with very limited asylum support, means that many

asylum seekers resort to informal or illegal work, where pay is extremely low and working conditions are unsafe.[22] This risk is exacerbated by the fact that asylum-seekers and refugees are less likely to report abuse for fear of engaging with the authorities.[23] There is therefore both an ethical question of whether it is appropriate to encourage asylum seekers and refugees to 'work for free' when many cannot afford the basic necessities of life, and the risk that they may be exploited for their labour under the guise of volunteering.

These concerns, we believe, underscore our argument that asylum seekers should be allowed to work earlier, providing legitimate income streams to protect them from informal or abusive labour practices. The ability to work would eliminate the ethical question while also stressing that volunteering should ideally be done not instead of, but in addition to employment, while also being valuable as preparation for entering the labour market in the UK. Practical oversight mechanisms can mitigate further risks. Local integration partnerships, as proposed by the Commission for the Integration of Refugees, or accommodation providers, under our proposed community access policy, could provide such oversight, ensuring volunteering is safe, legitimate, and genuinely beneficial to all involved.

Practical recommendations

In order to realise these three fundamental principles for better refugee integration and church-charity-government cooperation, we make the following practical recommendations.

For churches

- Local churches and church-related charities
  - **Being aware of other actors**. When churches duplicate efforts by taking on a particular project – food bank, clothes bank, drop-in centre, &c. – that another dedicated organisation in the community is already doing, resources are wasted and opportunities for collaboration are lost. It also isolates the church from the rest of the local voluntary sector network. By working with local charities as partners, churches can create cohesive support networks that better meet the needs of asylum seekers and refugees and, in the process, gain a seat at the table.
  - **Upskilling when specialising**. Not all churches choose to specialise in providing specific services. But if they do, they need to ensure that they are seen by charities and local authorities as reliable partners. This may mean improving presentation and communication skills. It may also mean seeking and investing (or requesting, depending on denominational structures) in industry-standard training for church members and volunteers.
  - **Knowing your limits**. Working with asylum seekers and refugees may involve specialist services – e.g. legal advice, medical advice, mental health support &c. These should not be provided without appropriate training and accreditation. By coordinating with these specialists and allowing them to use the church's hard assets, rather than trying to provide the service themselves, they gain credibility while ensuring that asylum seekers and refugees receive holistic care of the highest possible standard.

- National and regional church bodies
  - **Providing feedback to local churches.** Churches are highly decentralised, but many denominational structures have mechanisms for oversight. If a local church specialises in delivering a service to forced migrants, but is not up to standard, or has taken on more than it can handle, or is pursuing a project inappropriately, it needs to be held accountable for its work. A local church that provides sub-optimal services can discredit the work of their denomination as a whole and other churches in the community.
  - **Enabling mutual learning.** Even within a given region (e.g. diocese, circuit or synod) there are churches with very different experiences of welcoming and supporting asylum seekers and refugees. In particular, regional church bodies should provide opportunities for local church leaders to share their experiences and learn from each other, both within and across denominations.
  - **Identifying credible representatives.** Churches can only gain a seat at the table if they have credible representatives. While many denominational structures have natural regional and national leaders (such as bishops and archbishops), churches should draw on their wealth of lived grassroots experience. It may be appropriate for regional and national church bodies to offer the church's seat at the table to particularly experienced local church leaders, making use of churches' unique community assets and making their contribution to strategic meetings all the more valuable.

- **Making resources available.** Local churches can become more reliable partners if they have easily accessible and up-to-date (inter)denominational resources for congregations, clergy and for asylum seekers or refugees. This will also help church leaders avoid duplication of effort and save considerable resources currently spent on searching for accurate information and materials for their congregations.

For charities

- **Opening up to churches.** Churches and other faith-based organisations often have unique characteristics. These, together with an often unfounded fear of proselytism, make many charities sceptical of churches and lose out on their significant assets. It may be tempting for charities to simply expect churches to become charities, but the sector will lose out on very unique community assets if they all do so. While a degree of scepticism may be justified, charities should rethink their assumptions and proactively reach out to churches in their communities for joint projects.
- **Sharing your expertise.** Many refugee charities are highly specialised and have built up considerable expertise in their field. Local churches, on the other hand, often spend considerable resources trying to develop their own expertise, often with mixed success. When charities proactively share their expertise with churches in their community, they create new partners that are up to standard to help them achieve their charitable goals. They also save churches' resources, which can be reinvested in the

community. Finally, if church members are receptive to their training, charities can quickly gain additional manpower and access to the considerable resources of churches.

For government

- Local and regional government
  - **Focusing on refugee integration**. Resettlement and accommodation alone, especially as temporary solutions, are not sufficient to ensure refugee integration. Local authorities therefore need to focus on sustainable, long-term integration by distinguishing between the tangible and intangible aspects of refugee support, for example by having designated staff on integration. Local authorities also need to proactively engage with asylum seekers while they are still in the care of the Home Office.
  - **Fostering partnership**. Local government is well placed to coordinate local integration partnerships between civil society, faith groups and the local community. By encouraging these actors to work together, we can achieve a more cohesive integration strategy. Keeping communication channels open will also create cohesive support networks that optimise charitable work, reduce pressure on budgets and ensure that asylum seekers and refugees receive the best possible support.
  - **Working with churches**. Churches are not like other charities, but this difference is their strength. While concerns about best practice can be justified, local authorities often miss out on very fruitful cooperation by dismissing churches outright as partners. Rather than

assuming that a church is not up to standard, the local authority should reach out and encourage the church to demonstrate that it is a worthy partner. Local authorities put off by the decentralised nature of churches can often reach out to a Churches Together network or similar to find someone to talk to.

- National government
  - **Making integration a priority.** The lack of a coherent integration strategy across the board, but particularly for asylum seekers and refugees, is a significant policy gap. The Home Office's recent White Paper dated May 2025[24] proposes to foster integration, but does not make any concrete proposals on how to achieve this. The Home Office and MHCLG must ensure that integration is at the heart of all future debates about immigration in general and the asylum system in particular.
  - **Supervising accommodation providers.** Whether in temporary or long-term dispersal accommodation, the Home Office should ensure that accommodation providers comply with the terms of the AASC. They should not be moved more often than permitted, accommodation standards must be more rigorously enforced and providers must be made to fulfil their duty to liaise with local stakeholders to provide support and services to asylum seekers and to promote their interests.
  - **Tackling persistent religious illiteracy.** Senior church leaders of various denominations have in the past offered their assistance to the government in addressing widespread religious illiteracy. These overtures have

often gone unanswered or fruitless. Given the importance of religion to the vast majority of migrants, and the centrality of the churches to any efforts at integration and social cohesion in the UK, the Home Office and other government departments must show a willingness to improve their understanding.

6

Appendix: The language of migration

Who are asylum seekers? Refugees? Migrants? Humanitarian migrants? Forced migrants? Illegal immigrants? What do these words mean and can they be used interchangeably?

There is considerable confusion about the terminology used in discussions about migration, leading to misunderstandings and hindering constructive debate. This confusion is exacerbated by the fact that politicians and main stream media have made little effort in the past to use appropriate terminology and differentiate constructively between types of migration. There is therefore an urgent need for a vigilant and nuanced approach to the terminology used in the migration discourse in order to promote clearer understanding and more productive discussions.

To improve clarity and take a step in the right direction, this report uses terminology according to the official language used in the UK.

Refugee. According to Article 1 of the 1951 Refugee Convention, of which the UK is a signatory, a refugee is any 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 their nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to be under the protection of that country.[1] A refugee is therefore an **involuntary** or **forced migrant.** Someone who has had to leave their home country not of their own free volition, but under duress, and who seeks asylum in another country because they cannot return home.

Because refugee status is so narrowly defined, those fleeing war or famine without persecution on the basis of a particular characteristic are not recognised as refugees under international law and cannot seek asylum in the UK. However, they are still

considered forced migrants since they migrate under duress. Over the years, the UK has created special visas and humanitarian routes to accept forced migrants from certain countries who do not qualify for refugee status, such as Ukrainians and people from Hong Kong and Afghanistan, often out of a sense of a special responsibility to help. Although they are not refugees in the strict sense of the word, the term is often used colloquially to refer to them as well as they have come to the UK through humanitarian routes.[2]

Asylum seeker. Any state welcoming refugees has the right to ensure that those claiming refugee status are indeed entitled to it – this is the raison d'être of our asylum system. The Home Office therefore simply defines 'seeking asylum' as desiring "to be recognised as a refugee under the Refugee Convention".[3] In simple terms, an asylum seeker is someone who wants to be recognised as a refugee and granted leave to remain in the UK, but whose claim to refugee status has not yet been determined as valid. Unlike refugee status, which can be for life, seeking asylum is temporary: asylum seekers are either granted leave to remain if their claim to refugee status is found to be valid; if not, they are normally deported to their home country or a safe third country. Although in many cases asylum seekers whose claims are rejected 'fall through the cracks' and remain in the UK illegally, often becoming victims of modern slavery.

Illegal immigrant. Only those who enter the UK without authority, enter with false documents, overstay their visa, or violate the conditions of their visa – in other words, who intend to deceive the Home Office, or who remain in the country after their claim for refugee status has been rejected – can be considered illegal. According to the UN convention on refugees, genuine refugees

and asylum seekers who are in the process of having their refugee status recognised are not 'illegal immigrants', regardless of how they entered the country – including by small boats – and regardless of whether or not they entered through 'safe and legal routes'. This report will later discuss why the misuse of the language of 'illegal immigrants' is detrimental to refugee integration.

Immigrant. This is the broadest term and includes anyone who comes from elsewhere and moves to the UK to live, whether temporarily or permanently, and for whatever reason. Anyone who moves to the UK with the intention of living here is an immigrant. Immigrants can be described as 'economic' if they move for economic reasons to improve their quality of life, or 'humanitarian' or 'forced' if they are forced to move because their lives are in danger, either due to political (e.g. persecution, war) or natural (e.g. climate change, drought, disease) causes.

Alternative terminology. We also recognise that many of our interviewees had legitimate concerns and reject the official language described above. Because of the damaging, inflammatory and misleading discourse of the past several years, which has described asylum seekers as systematically 'illegal' or principally responsible for some of the most serious social problems facing the UK today, the official language around migration now provokes negative associations. As one interviewee noted, "some people find the term asylum seeker quite troubling. It's almost become for some people a pejorative term."[4] In our fieldwork, we therefore came across many examples of organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers looking for alternative, less loaded, terminology, and especially for humanising language that puts the emphasis on the person migrating to the UK. Examples from

our interviews include “people seeking asylum”, “people seeking sanctuary”, “sanctuary seekers, and “friends from abroad”.[5]

We note, as did some of our interviewees, that the legal categories of refugee or asylum seeker fail to capture the multifaceted experiences of forced migrants and can inhibit more nuanced, context-specific responses.[6] To quote from Simone Weil’s essay *The Power of Words*, “corresponding to each empty abstraction there is an actual human group.” Refugees come from very different pre-displacement backgrounds (e.g. rural v. urban, educated v. uneducated, different socio-economic classes) and have very different post-displacement experiences of arrival and integration in the UK (e.g. experiencing xenophobia, losing social ties or finding new solidarity networks), depending on ethnic, religious, social, gender and geographical factors. There is no single refugee story, and therefore also no single integration solution.

Endnotes

Introduction

1 This particular story has been recounted by Refugee Action in a long read available on their website. Refugee Action, 'Heartbreak Hotels' (2023). Available at: www.refugee-action.org.uk/heartbreak-hotels/

2 In January 2025, a poll commissioned by the Refugee Council found that 69% of Britons were very or quite proud of Britain's role taking in refugees since WW2, while a further 57% were found to be strongly or somewhat in support of greater refugee integration. More in Common, *January 2025 Polling Tables: Refugee Council (10-20 January)* (2025). Available at: www.moreincommon.org.uk/our-work/polling-tables/january-2025-polling-tables/

3 Madeleine Pennington, *The Church and Social Cohesion: Connecting Communities and Serving People* (London: Theos Think Tank, 2020).

4 Overall, more than three in four (75.9%) of those born outside the UK have a religious affiliation, compared with two in four (52.9%) of those born in the UK. Office for National Statistics, Census 2021 (2021). See also: Christine Goodall, *Shouting towards the Sky: the role of religious individuals, communities, organisations and institutions in support for refugees and asylum seekers*, UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Service (2015), p. 8.

5 For Catholic Social Teaching resources on the duty to welcome asylum seekers and reforming the asylum system so that it is based on openness and trust, see: JRS UK, *Being Human in the Asylum System* (2020); Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, *Love The Stranger* (2023); Anna Rowlands, 'On the Temptations of Sovereignty', *Political Theology* 12 (6) (2011), pp. 843-869.

6 The discrepancy between the number of interviews and the number of interviewees is due to the fact that several of the interviews were group interviews with two or more interviewees.

7 A School of Sanctuary is a school that has been recognised for its commitment to creating a culture of welcome, understanding and belonging for those forced to flee. It supports children seeking sanctuary in the UK, raises awareness of their experiences and plays a key role in building a culture of kindness and compassion. Schools of Sanctuary is part of the City of Sanctuary network. More here: schools.cityofsanctuary.org/

8 The interviews spanned: Cardiff and Swansea; Greater Glasgow and Paisley; Liverpool, the Wirral, and Cheshire West and Chester; and the West London boroughs of Brent, Ealing, Hillingdon, Hounslow, and Westminster. Denominations or non-denominational groups represented include Anglican (Church of England and Church in Wales), Baptist, Church of Scotland, Eastern

and Oriental Orthodox, Free Church of Scotland, Methodist, Roman Catholic (including Eastern Catholic), United Reform Church, and Vineyard churches and a number of non-denominational or independent churches.

The asylum system

1 ONS, *Analysis of population estimates tool for UK* (2024). Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/analysisofpopulationestimatestoolforuk

2 Home Office, *Immigration System Statistics for the year ending December 2024: Asylum and Resettlement – Summary tables* (2025). This includes 304,000 Ukrainians since 2022 on special Ukraine schemes; 219,900 British National (Overseas) passport holders from Hong Kong since 2021 on BN(O) visas; 94,300 people through family reunion visa grants; 53,600 Syrians and Afghans since 2015 on resettlement schemes; and a further 16,400 through community sponsorship and other resettlement routes. We do note there is a discrepancy between the number of people *offered* humanitarian visas, and the number of people actually known to have arrived under those visas. An estimated 84,600 Ukrainians and 58,700 BN(O) holders with visas have not yet arrived.

3 Over the years 2023-24 alone, 178,800 people claimed asylum in the UK, of which an estimated 4 in 5 (79%) were successful, either as an initial positive decision by the Home Office, or after appealing that decision in court. Available at: Home Office, *Immigration System Statistics for the year ending December 2024* (2025).

4 Erika Feller, 'Refugees are not Migrants', *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 24 (4) (2005), pp. 27 – 35. See also: David Scott FitzGerald & Rawan Arar 'The Sociology of Refugee Migration', *Annual Review of Sociology* 44 (1) (2018), pp. 387 – 406.

5 UNHCR, *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* (1951), Articles 31 – 33.

6 Christian Dustmann et al. 'On the economics and politics of refugee migration', *Economic Policy* 32 (91) (2017), pp. 497 – 550.

7 Although the UK government maintains that both Acts comply with international obligations, UNHCR warned in 2023 that the Illegal Migration Act breaches "the UK's obligations under the Refugee Convention, the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, the 1961 Convention for the Reduction of Statelessness and international human rights law and would significantly undermine the international refugee protection system." UNHCR, *UNHCR Legal Observations on the Illegal Migration Bill* (2023), p. 2. Available here: www.unhcr.org/uk/media/

unhcr-legal-observations-illegal-migration-bill-02-may-2023. Northern Ireland's High Court has also struck down parts of the Illegal Migration Act in 2024 for breaching ECHR rights. NIHRC, *Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission Responds to Illegal Migration Act Judgment* (2024). Available at: nihrc.org/news/detail/northern-ireland-human-rights-commission-responds-to-illegal-migration-act-judgment

8 The Immigration Salary List replaced the Shortage Occupation list in 2024 following a review by the Migration Advisory Committee. While the Starmer Government has stated its intent to decrease reliance on foreign skilled workers, it has also not explicitly outlined, at the time of writing, a specific policy to abolish, maintain, or reform the Immigration Salary List. Migrant Advisory Council, *Rapid review of the Immigration Salary List* (2024). Accessible at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/rapid-review-of-the-immigration-salary-list/rapid-review-of-the-immigration-salary-list-accessible

9 Home Office, *Integrating refugees: What works? What can work? What does not work? A summary of the evidence. Second edition* (2019). Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/812891/intergrating-refugees-2019.pdf

10 Ben Ryan, 'Migration, Morality and States', in Ben Ryan (ed.) *Fortress Britain? Ethical Approaches to Immigration Policy for a Post-Brexit Britain* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018), p. 40.

11 John W. Berry, 'Acculturation and adaptation in a new society.' *International migration*, Vol. 30 (1992).

12 Nick Spencer, *Asylum and Immigration: A Christian Perspective on a Polarised Debate* (Cambridge: Jubilee Centre, 2004).

13 Berry, *Acculturation and adaptation in a new society.*

14 Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, *Love The Stranger: A Catholic Response to Migrants and Refugees* (2023). Available at: www.cbcew.org.uk/love-the-stranger/

15 Commission for the Integration of Refugees, *From Arrival to Integration: Building Communities for Refugees and for Britain,* (Cambridge: The Woolf Institute, 2024). For the cost of the asylum system, see the National Audit Office, *An Overview of the Home Office for the new Parliament 2023-24* (2024). Available here: nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/home-office-overview-2023-24.pdf

16 Frank Kalter, 'Stand, Herausforderungen und Perspektiven der empirischen Migrationsforschung', in Frank Kalter (ed.) *Migration und Integration. Kölner*

Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie, Special Edition 48 (2008), pp. 11 – 36.

17 Ryan, *Migration, Morality and States*, p. 43.

18 Cultural integration: the adoption of the cultural norms, values and behaviours of the host society. Social integration: the establishment of social relationships and networks within the host society and with natives. Emotional integration: the sense of belonging and identification with the host society. See more here: Irena Kogan & Frank Kalter 'An Empirical–Analytical Approach to the Study of Recent Refugee Migrants in Germany' *Soziale Welt* 71 (1–2) (2020), pp. 3 – 23.

19 Adrian Pabst, 'Mutual Obligations: A Common Good Approach to Immigration', in Ben Ryan (ed.) *Fortress Britain? Ethical Approaches to Immigration Policy for a Post-Brexit Britain* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018), p. 28.

20 Barry R. Chiswick, 'Are immigrants favourably self-selected? An economic analysis' *IZA Discussion Papers*, No. 131 (2000), pp. 63 – 82.

21 Yuliya Kosyakova & Irena Kogan, 'Labour market situation of refugees in Europe: The role of individual and contextual factors', *Frontiers in Political Science* 4 (2022).

22 Commission for the Integration of Refugees, *From Arrival to Integration*.

23 Jens Hainmueller et al. 'When lives are put on hold: Lengthy asylum processes decrease employment among refugees', *Science advances* 2 (8) (2016).

24 Hannah Rich, *Disunited Kingdom? Local churches and the riots of summer 2024* (London: Theos think tank 2024).

25 Refugee Council, *Integration and employment*. Available at: www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/who-we-are/our-impact-report/integration/

26 Christian Dustmann et al., 'On the economics and politics of refugee migration', *Economic policy* 32 (91) (2017), pp. 497 – 550.

27 Kogan & Kalter, *An Empirical–Analytical Approach to the Study of Recent Refugee Migrants in Germany* (2020).

28 Giacomo Solano & Thomas Huddleston, *Migrant Integration Policy Index 2020* (2020). Available at: mipex.eu/

29 Though the UK has some of the strongest anti-discrimination laws in the world, it is also important to stress that immigration status is not a protected characteristic under English law and that successive governments have

developed laws and policies that marginalise people on the basis of their immigration status.

30 We learned from an interview with Home Office staff that, due to practical constraints on data collection, they are mainly interested in easily quantifiable indicators such as: the types of jobs migrants hold, the types of jobs held by their dependants, their language levels or the type of housing they live in. The nature of the data collected creates a bias towards economic indicators, to the exclusion of relational, emotional or cultural – i.e. human – aspects of integration. For more, see: Home Office, *Home Office Indicators of Integration framework 2019* (2019). Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/627cc6d3d3bf7f052d33b06e/home-office-indicators-of-integration-framework-2019-horr109.pdf

31 The 2021 Census includes under "UK identity" the following national identities: British, English, Welsh, Scottish, and Northern Irish. Office for National Statistics, 'National identity', *Analysis of social characteristics of international migrants living in England and Wales: Census 2021* (2023). Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/articles/analysisofsocialcharacteristicsofinternationalmigrantslivinginenglandandwales/census2021

32 Spencer, *Asylum and Immigration*. 'Recent migration' includes the ways in which Windrush people, migrants from the Indian subcontinent and other significant waves of migration since the Second World War have deeply transformed and enriched British culture.

A Christian welcome

1 Spencer, *Asylum and Immigration*.

2 Susanna Snyder, 'Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Migration', in Ben Ryan (ed.) *Fortress Britain? Ethical Approaches to Immigration Policy for a Post-Brexit Britain* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018), p. 99.

3 Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, *Love The Stranger*

4 Interview #3, Church leader.

5 Interview #22, Church leader.

6 Interview #54, Church leader.

7 Interview #34, Church leader.

8 Interview #55, Local authority staff.

9 Interview #42, Church leader.

10 Interview #13, Church leader.

11 Interview #51, Church leader.

12 Warm Welcome Spaces are an initiative of the Warm Welcome Campaign, hosted by the Good Faith Foundation. It began as a seasonal campaign supporting communities through the coldest time of the year. It is now an all-year-round campaign, bringing connection, friendship, and human warmth to communities every day, helping people feel less isolated and lonely and boosting wellbeing. More information at: www.warmwelcome.uk/about-us

13 Places of Welcome is a partnership of Near Neighbours, the Together Network, and CUF. It is a network of local community groups providing their neighbourhoods with places where all people feel safe to connect, belong and get involved. More information at: www.placesofwelcome.org.uk/

14 National Churches Trust, *The House of Good: The economic and social value of church buildings to the UK* (2020).

15 Migrant Help is an independent charity providing advice, guidance and support to asylum seekers, refugees, and victims of modern-day slavery and human trafficking. It is the only charity contracted by the Home Office to provide advice and assistance to asylum seekers in understanding the asylum support system in the UK under the AIRE (Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility) Contract. More information about Migrant Help: www.migranthelpuk.org/what-we-do. More information about the AIRE Contract: asylummatters.org/app/uploads/2019/11/The-Advice-Issue-Reporting-and-Eligibility-Contract-A-Guide.pdf

16 Interview #27, Local authority staff.

17 Interview #13, Church leader.

18 Interview #54, Church leader.

19 Pennington, *The Church and Social Cohesion.*

20 Interview #58, Charity leader.

21 Interview #5, Church leader.

22 Interview #59, Church leader.

23 George Lapshynov, *A Bleeding Atlas: How the COVID–19 pandemic affected volunteering in the UK* (2023). Available at: www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2023/08/15/a-bleeding-atlas-how-the-covid19-pandemic-affected-volunteering-in-the-uk

24 Interview #4, Charity leader.

25 This group included a diversity of Christian denominations, including Baptist, Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and non-denominational churches (in no particular order).

26 Interview #1, Charity leader.

27 The human needs listed here mirror those in Maslow's categorisation – love, belongingness, and self-esteem – all of which are necessary for a fulfilling life, once the more basic needs of shelter and sustenance are met. For more, see: Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and personality* (New York: Harper, 1954).

28 Nick Spencer, 'Human as Gift', *Comment Magazine* (2022). Available at: comment.org/human-as-gift/

29 Anna Rowlands, *For our welfare and not for our harm* (London: JRS UK, 2019). Available here: www.jrsuk.net/news/for-our-welfare-and-not-for-our-harm/. See also: Refugee Action, *Waiting in the Dark: How the Asylum System Dehumanises, Disempowers and Damages* (2020). Available here: www.refugee-action.org.uk/waiting-in-the-dark-how-the-asylum-system-dehumanises-disempowers-and-damages/

30 Interview #12, Church leader.

31 Interview #24, Church leader.

32 A Home Office worker told us that they do not have the luxury of humanising migrants: they are judged by the media and the government on the basis of numbers in one-page reports, so their reasoning in dealing with migration cases is also based on numbers. They are also very concerned to treat migrants with absolute fairness, which, it would seem, they believe is best achieved by anonymising and depersonalising them. Interview #62, Expert.

33 Interview #25, Church leader.

34 Interview #36, Church leader.

35 Interview #42, Church leader.

36 Interview #46, Church leader.

37 Interview #50, Church leader.

38 On the basis of interviews conducted in Ellesmere Port and Chester.

39 It is socio-economically a very diverse local authority, and has, according to the latest available data, for the year ending September 2024, a very average density of asylum seekers and refugees for the UK – Homes for Ukraine, Afghan Resettlement Programme and supported asylum seekers combined – of 0.42% of the total population. See more:

Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, *English indices of deprivation 2019: mapping resources* (2019). Available at: www.gov.uk/guidance/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019-mapping-resources; Home Office, *Regional and local authority data on immigration groups* (2024). Available at www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/immigration-system-statistics-regional-and-local-authority-data

40 Council of Sanctuary accreditation recognises a council's efforts to go above and beyond to welcome people fleeing conflict seeking a safe place to live and thrive. See more: Cheshire West and Chester Council, *Council of Sanctuary Award* (2025). Available at: www.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk/residents/housing/council-of-sanctuary

41 Interview #36, Church leader. For previous Theos research on how churches tend to favour 'with and alongside' models of community, see also: Paul Bickley, *People, Place, and Purpose: Churches and Neighbourhood Resilience in the North East* (London: Theos think tank, 2018).

42 Interview #13, Church leader.

43 Interview #46, Church leader.

44 A 2024 report by British Future, Belong, and the Together Coalition noted the power of football to bring together those who participated in or sympathised with the summer 2024 riots and those who opposed or were affected by them. For more, see: British Future, Belong and the Together Coalition, *After the riots: Building the foundations for social cohesion* (2024). Available at: www.britishfuture.org/publication/after-the-riots/

45 Interview #5, Church leader.

46 Even in dispersal accommodation, where asylum seekers are housed in flats or houses in multiple occupation, kitchens can be so rudimentary that cooking is impossible. During our fieldwork we came across dispersal accommodation where the kitchens were completely inadequate and asylum seekers were forced to cook their food in a kettle. Many charities and churches are focusing on providing slow cookers, which only require electricity and have an inbuilt pot, to enable asylum seekers to do some basic cooking.

47 Interview #22, Church leader.

48 Interview #54, Church leader. This echoes Theos research on churches and the homeless, where we found similar power dynamics and noted the need to challenge them. For more, see: Hannah Rich and George Lapshynov, *Volunteering After the Pandemic: Lessons from the Homelessness Sector* (London: Theos think tank, 2023).

49 One such charity is the Jesuit Refugee Service UK. One of the aspects of their mission is to "advocate for the rights of refugees and the forcibly displaced." Their advocacy involves "creat[ing] space[s] where people can encounter refugees as whole people with hopes and dreams, interests and gifts, just like any other; and seek to encourage *authentic human relationships to grow*" (our emphasis). More information on: JRS UK, *Advocate*. Available at: www.jrsuk.net/advocate/

50 Interview #21, Church leader.

51 Ibid.

52 Welcome Churches, *Welcome Network*. Available at: welcomechurches.org/welcome-network

53 Interview #3, Church leader.

54 Interview #57, Church leader.

55 Recent research suggests that religion can play a key role in enabling refugees to cope with the challenges they face, so that even refugees who were not religious before migrating adopt their national or cultural religion abroad. This is supported by the evidence of religious revival among migrant groups in Western Europe. For more, see: Ayse Guveli & Lucinda Platt, 'Religiosity of Migrants and Natives in Western Europe 2002-2018: Convergence and Divergence' *European Journal of Population* 39 (9) (2023); Kathrin Maier et al., "Spiritual Needs, Religious Coping and Mental Wellbeing: A Cross-Sectional Study among Migrants and Refugees in Germany" *International journal of environmental research and public health* 19 (3415) (2022).

56 Interview #41, Church leader.

57 Francesco Fasani et al. '(The Struggle for) Refugee integration into the labour market: evidence from Europe', *Journal of Economic Geography* 22 (2) (2022), pp. 351–393.

58 Emma S. Stewart, 'UK Dispersal Policy and Onward Migration: Mapping the Current State of Knowledge', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 25 (1) (2011), pp. 29 – 31. Note: In the cases where dispersal *was* successful, the success was very strongly correlated (82%) to the individuals building community connections in their new place of residence, mainly through religious or community organisations.

59 Hansard HL Deb 6 December 2024, vol 841, col 1395. *Social Cohesion and Community during Periods of Change*. Available at: hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2024-12-06/debates/7BB00D76-D522-4D0B-AAB2-A260CF3553E3/SocialCohesionAndCommunityDuringPeriodsOfChange

60 Interview #18, Church leader.

61 Interview #36, Church leader.

62 Interview #50, Church leader.

63 According to Home Office statistics for the year ending June 2024, asylum claims that included sexual orientation as part of the basis for the claim accounted for 2% of all asylum claims. The proportion has fluctuated annually between 2% and 7% of all asylum claims over the last 10 years. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-june-2024/asylum-claims-on-the-basis-of-sexual-orientation-2023

64 Interview #33, Church leader.

65 For the bogus conversions row, see: www.reuters.com/world/uk/church-england-agonises-over-asylum-seekers-bogus-conversions-row-2024-03-12/. For the conveyor belt row, see: www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/uk-politics-68539143

66 Home Affairs Committee, *Oral evidence: Asylum decision-making and conversion to Christianity* (12 March 2024), HC 595, Q93.

67 Interview #59, Church leader.

68 Interview #25, Church leader.

69 Our own findings overlap significantly with research undertaken by Katheryn Spellman on Iranian presence in British churches, and how they arrived there. Available here: Katheryn Spellman, *Religion and Nation: Iranian Local and Transnational Networks in Britain* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), p. 181.

70 Interview #38, Church leader. Similar words are also expressed in interviews #13, #25, #40, #50.

71 Interviews #16 & #40, Church leaders.

72 Interview #19, Church leader.

73 Interviews #13 & #51, Church leaders. Most churches in the UK have issued guidance for clergy on supporting asylum seekers. The latest guidance dated January 2025 for Church of England clergy, called *Supporting Asylum Seekers*, can be found here: www.churchofengland.org/about/social-transformation/migration-asylum-guidance

74 Interview #40, Church leader.

75 Interview #25, Church leader.

76 Interview #38, Church leader.

77 The quote, of course, does not refer to the financial cost of baptism, but rather to its spiritual, symbolic, sacramental and redemptive value. Interview #54, Church leader.

78 Interview #50, Church leader.

79 Interview #56, Church leader.

80 Interview #57, Church leader.

81 Home Affairs Committee, *Oral evidence: Asylum decision-making and conversion to Christianity* (12 March 2024), HC 595, Q91.

82 Interview #38, Church leader.

83 Home Affairs Committee, *Oral evidence: Asylum decision-making and conversion to Christianity* (12 March 2024), HC 595, Q91.

84 Interviews #3 & #54, Church leaders.

85 Interview #21, Church leaders.

86 Home Affairs Committee, *Oral evidence: Asylum decision-making and conversion to Christianity* (12 March 2024), HC 595, Q115.

87 Commission for the Integration of Refugees, *From Arrival to Integration*.

88 Regarding schools, we note that, according to Policy Exchange research, there is a problem of clustering in many schools across the country, with over 40% of ethnic minority pupils attending a school that is less than 25% white British. So that, in other words, while schools may be intrinsically good at integration, the reality is that integration is often not happening. See: Brendan Cox et al. *Whatever happened to integration?* (London: Policy Exchange, 2022), p. 57.

89 Interview #12, Church leader.

90 Bickley, *People, Place, and Purpose*. See also Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

91 While subject to academic debate, the *British Social Attitudes* survey (2008, 2013, 2018) has found recurring evidence that fewer people feel a strong sense of belonging to their local communities and are less inclined to participate in local or voluntary activities. The ONS's *Community Life Survey* has also found a repeated reduction in membership of traditional civic organisations such as local clubs, parish councils, and neighbourhood groups.

92 Robert D. Putnam & Lewis Feldstein, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003).

93 Interview #5, Church leader.

94 Alastair Ager & Alison Strang, 'Understanding integration: a conceptual framework', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21 (2) (2008), pp. 166 – 191.

95 Interview #50, Church leader.

96 Interview #48, Church leader.

97 Interview #27, Local authority staff.

98 Ibid.

Barriers to church engagement

1 For more see: Migration Exchange, *People, Power and Priorities: Insights into the UK refugee and migration sector* (2023); Refugee Council, *Impact of the Illegal Migration Act – Briefing* (2023); Public Law Project, *Access to Immigration Legal Aid in 2023: An Ocean of Unmet Need* (2023); British Red Cross, *Far from a Home: Refugee and Asylum Seeker Housing* (2022).

2 Goodall, *Shouting towards the Sky*, p. 2.

3 Interviews #32 & #36, Church leaders.

4 Interview #51, Church leader.

5 Pennington, *The Church and Social Cohesion*.

6 Interview #42, Church leader.

7 Interview #13, Church leader.

8 Interview #38, Church leader.

9 Interview #19, Church leader.

10 Interview #42. See also: Rich, *Disunited Kingdom?*

11 Rich and Lapshynov, *Volunteering After the Pandemic*. On the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on church outreach, see: Hannah Rich, *A Torn Safety Net: How the cost of living crisis threatens its own last line of defence* (London: Theos think tank, 2022).

12 Interview #42, Church leader.

13 Interview #54, Church leader.

14 Interview #41, Church leader.

15 Interview #46, Church leader.

16 Interview #42, Church leader.

17 Interview #18, Church leader.

18 Interview #13, Church leader.

19 Interview #58, Charity leader.

20 Interview #42, Church leader.

21 Interview #58, Charity leader.

22 Paul Bickley, *The Problem of Proselytism* (London: Theos think tank, 2015).

23 Interview #44, Church leader.

24 Interview #34, Church leader.

25 Interview #45, Refugee.

26 Interview #54, Church leader.

27 Interview #13, Church leader.

28 Interview #44, Church leader.

Recommendations

1 Cox et al., *Whatever happened to integration?*, p. 57.

2 Brandon Lewis, 'Strategic Migration Partnerships', *UK Parliament: Written answer*, 15 November 2017, HC 112032. Available at: questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2017-11-07/112032

3 Interview #61, Local authority staff.

4 Strategic Migration Partnerships also have the potential to be reviewed and updated to provide regional oversight and advice to local partnerships within the context of a radically devolved in a "New Settlement for Refugees". This reform proposed by the Commission for the Integration of Refugees, which we strongly support, would seek to put local integration partnerships – partnerships between local authorities, civil society, faith communities, and local people – in the driving seat of refugee integration, with a significant new role for SMPs. For more, see: Commission on the Integration of Refugees, *From Arrival to Integration*, p. 22 – 23.

5 Interview #59, Church leader.

6 Interview #54, Church leader.

7 We recognise that identifying credible spokespeople and leaders will be a challenge for churches. On the basis of our research, we recommend that churches should seek to identify within their midst someone who is well connected in their geographical area, has a serious job in the community, has several years' experience of working with asylum seekers and refugees, and has a recognised position within their denomination.

8 Refugee Council, *Our Response to Latest Immigration and Asylum Statistics* (2025). Available at: www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/stay-informed/articles/our-response-to-latest-immigration-and-asylum-statistics-2/

9 The Home Office spent £3 billion on hotels in the year 2023-24. Asylum support inclusive of accommodation was £4.7 billion, or £12.9 million a day. Available at: National Audit Office, *An Overview of the Home Office for the new Parliament 2023-24* (2024), nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/home-office-overview-2023-24.pdf

10 Rich, *Disunited Kingdom?*

11 The contracts that govern the relationship between the Home Office and the companies that provide accommodation for asylum seekers limit the latter's ability to move asylum seekers without their consent to a maximum of twice a year. However, this is often breached. The British Red Cross reported in 2021 that "nearly all" asylum seekers they interviewed had been moved multiple times within their first year in the system, often with little explanation or notice. Already in January 2017, the Home Affairs Select Committee received, "evidence of people being moved three or more times within a year, with some examples of individuals being moved from a property within a week of arriving there." The Home Affairs Committee also recognised that these movements at very short-notice affect any support networks that may have been established. See more here: Home Affairs Committee, *Asylum accommodation*, 24 January 2017.

12 Refugee Council, *Top facts*.

13 Refugee Council, *Our Response to Latest Immigration and Asylum Statistics*.

14 Home Office, *Asylum Accommodation and Support: Statement of Requirements* (2019). Available at: data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2018-1112/AASC_-_Schedule_2_-_Statement_of_Requirements.pdf

15 Interview #6, Charity leader. Interviews #14 & #24, Church leaders.

16 Interview #14, Church leader.

17 In 2023-24, 57% of asylum claims were initially granted by the Home Office. Of the 43% refused, an estimated further 51% – the latest available appeal success rate as of March 2023 – were allowed following a successful appeal in court. Available at: Home Office, *Immigration System Statistics for the year ending December 2024*.

18 Spencer, *Human as Gift*.

19 Unlike volunteering, work for remuneration in the UK is strictly regulated under the Immigration Rules. See more at: UK Visas and Immigration, *Guidance: Permission to work and volunteering for asylum seekers* (2024). Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/handling-applications-for-permission-to-take-employment-instruction/permission-to-work-and-volunteering-for-asylum-seekers-accessible

20 One of the primary reasons why Government has resisted relaxing the ban to employment for asylum seekers is because a broader right to work could act as a 'pull factor' for migration and encourage more forced migrants to seek asylum in the UK. More on this at: Melanie Gower & *al. Asylum seekers: the permission to work policy* (Briefing Paper No 1908, House of Commons Library 26 July 2024). researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN01908/SN01908.pdf

21 Commission on the Integration of Refugees, *From Arrival to Integration*, p. 11.

22 Hannah Lewis & al., 'Precarious lives: experiences of forced labour among refugees and asylum seekers in England', *Migration Yorkshire* (2014). Available at: www.migrationyorkshire.org.uk/research-entry/precarious-lives-experiences-forced-labour-among-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-england

23 Jesuit Refugee Service, *Destitute and in Danger: people made homeless by the asylum system* (2024). Available at: www.jrsuk.net/destitute-and-in-danger-report/

24 Secretary of State for the Home Department, *Restoring Control over the Immigration System* (May 2025), Paras 238-243. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6821aec3f16c0654b19060ac/restoring-control-over-the-immigration-system-white-paper.pdf

Appendix: The language of migration

1 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*. Available here: www.unhcr.org/media/convention-and-protocol-relating-status-refugees

2 This is not to say that all asylum seekers and refugees are the same or that their experiences are homogeneous. They come from different parts of the world, from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, and with different levels of formal education. Most asylum seekers in the UK (using the strict definition above) come from countries in the Global South, as opposed to those from Ukraine and Hong Kong who come through special routes and have different backgrounds, English language skills and political and economic rights in the UK.

3 Home Office, 'Definition of asylum applicant', *Immigration Rules*, Art. 327, paragraph i. Available here: www.gov.uk/guidance/immigration-rules/immigration-rules-part-11-asylum.

4 Interview #1.

5 Interviews #1, #4, #8, #21, and #27.

6 Interviews #20 and #48.

6

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From Strangers to Neighbours
The Church and the Integration of Refugees

Migration dominates political discussions, but the focus typically remains on reducing net migration rather than enabling those who have already arrived to settle and flourish. What if we told a different side of the story?

From Strangers to Neighbours explores the significant yet frequently overlooked role of churches across the UK in supporting the integration of refugees and asylum seekers. Addressing misconceptions and challenges surrounding church activities, the report highlights how churches complement the work of voluntary and statutory organisations. It identifies the strengths that enable churches to play a pivotal role in refugee integration, particularly their ethical framework based on Christian teachings that rejects the alienation and commodification of immigrants.

Ultimately, it calls for an improved national integration strategy, urging policymakers, charities and churches to collaborate more effectively. By recognising and supporting the unique contributions that churches can make, Britain can better welcome refugees – not merely as strangers living on this island, but as neighbours who belong, thrive, and contribute meaningfully to our society.

“

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Front cover image: John Boaz

ISBN: 978-1-0682488-0-1

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