

The Quick Guide to speaking up

We live in a high-tech age where information is shared at a speed that would never have been believed even 50 years ago, and where the media is arguably more powerful than it has ever been. A great deal of misinformation and even downright lies about asylum seekers have been spread by certain newspapers in the past few years. Asylum seekers have been blamed for the lack of school places, longer hospital waiting times, terror attacks that were actually carried out by British nationals, and even eating the Queen's swans. We are told that we are being 'swamped' by them, that they are being given rooms in luxury hotels when they arrive, and that they are cheating the taxpayer by making futile and expensive appeals.

Politicians have done little to address these untruths, clearly worried that any show of support for those seeking sanctuary will incur the wrath of the press, and lead to them losing their seat at the next election. At the same time, the avowed intention of government to 'reduce net immigration to thousands' and the fallout from Brexit has made the situation more difficult for immigrants in general. Now Theresa May's determination to create a 'hostile environment for illegal immigrants', encapsulated in the new Immigration Act, has led to an increase of xenophobia across the UK.

In this environment, it has never been more important for Christians to stand up for the truth, and to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves (Proverbs 31:8-9). Although there are now more attempts being made to give asylum seekers and refugees an opportunity to share their stories and speak up for themselves, through organisations such as [NACCOM](#) and [Asylum Matters](#), it is difficult to find many who are brave enough to speak out. Language barriers, fear that it will affect their asylum claim or lead to their enemies finding them, or simply the desire just to live a stress-free, normal life all contribute to only a small number being willing to share their stories and opinions.

So, how can we speak up for them? Here are a few simple ideas:

1. Be ready to give an answer

Even if you don't know all the statistics and arguments that will counter and hopefully bust the myths (see [ABOUT UK REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS](#)), there will be opportunities to stand up against prejudice towards asylum seekers in your day-to-day life. It may be a comment at work, at home, in the hairdressers, or even in your church – a sensitive but firm answer can often make people realise that what they have said is unfair, or lead to further discussions and opportunities. This is particularly true if you have personal knowledge of asylum seekers that can refute the comment made.

2. Invite people to see for themselves.

Nothing has the potential to change an opinion faster than meeting a refugee or asylum seeker. It doesn't take long to realise that someone is not a terrorist or criminal, and an invitation to meet someone (or perhaps to an event like a [City of Sanctuary](#) Conversation Club) will at least determine whether the person you invite has an open mind or not. For those who you think may be open-minded, how about an invitation to a meal for six at your house, where an asylum seeker or two are also invited?

3. Share information

If you use Facebook, Twitter or another form of social media, why not sign up to get news from some of the organisations working with asylum seekers? When you find something that's worth sharing, share it and add a comment. It doesn't take much effort, and makes others aware of the issues. The key is to share it with those who are not the usual suspects, but those who may not know or even be antagonistic. Be prepared for some comeback, but be careful not to get

into a slanging match! As it says in Proverbs 15:1, “A gentle answer deflects anger, but harsh words make tempers flare.”

4. Respond to media articles

This isn't for everyone – you will need wisdom and a thick skin!

Often our newspapers misrepresent asylum seekers and refugees; sometimes they tell blatant lies. While it is not easy to combat this, if there is a letters page or an opportunity for online comments, do consider taking the time to write. You may find yourself in a small minority and the object of some nasty responses, but it's the only way of counteracting misinformation. Know your facts, be courteous and above all, don't get drawn into a slanging match, which can make things worse!

5. Use speaking opportunities

If you get invited to speak somewhere, why not choose something about asylum as your topic? It may be a church sermon, a prayer breakfast, a leaders' lunch, a book club event or discussion group – something will fit your event! Be creative: maybe bring an asylum seeker with you and interview them or let them share their story.

6. Write or blog

It's not for everyone, but if you are a writer, then use your talent to get the word out. It may just be something for the church or parish magazine, an article for a Christian or secular publication, a blog or even a book! Words are powerful, whether they are spoken or written.

7. Contact your MP

If it's appropriate, and requires some action in Parliament or support for someone you know, why not go and meet your MP in his or her surgery? It may simply be something you want them to be aware of. A meeting face-to-face is always best, but you can also contact them via [They Work for You](#), the parliamentary website. If nothing else, it will give you an insight into your MP, and perhaps whether you may be able to garner their support in the future.