

Quick Guide to the asylum seeker in your church

Make friends first

It is fairly easy to spot someone who is new in your church from a different ethnic background, but it is not so easy to know their status. That can only be done by talking to them. Sensitivity is key.

Most people go to church to worship God, not to solve immigration issues or relive trauma. Some are reluctant to open up about their circumstances, and may even feel ashamed or embarrassed by them, so tread carefully. A good rule of thumb is to welcome everyone in the same way, and to treat the foreigner in the same way that you would a fellow Brit (Leviticus 19:9).

A few general questions on the first visit should establish some basics about where they live and perhaps something about family and country of origin. As you get to know them, they will open up more, and then you may be in a position to help – *if* they need or want that. You may even find it's them helping you! Often it will be in an informal setting like home or in a coffee shop that you will find out more, rather than a Sunday morning in church.

For some, just being in a loving, supportive church will be all they need. Others will need a great deal of practical help and emotional support. Whatever the need, having friends is the most important thing. Many asylum seekers would have been spared years of heartache and struggle, if only they had had friends at the start of their time in the UK.

Mind your language!

Churches are notoriously bad at using appropriate language. Sermons are littered with words and expressions that the working class Brit doesn't understand, much less the foreigner with less than perfect English. Hymns are still sometimes sung in ancient English, and even modern songs contain biblical themes that half of the congregation doesn't understand. If your church uses rituals and liturgy (and even the newer 'streams' have their idiosyncrasies), they may leave the guest from abroad totally bewildered. These are useful tips:

1. Avoid ecclesiastical language. Words like 'christology' and 'episcopal' are not helpful. Even terms like 'advent' may mean nothing to seekers and new converts unless they are explained.
2. Use simple language. That's not the same as 'dumbing down' the message, it's just using words that everyone will understand. That will also make a huge difference for the less educated in your church.
3. Explain concepts, even difficult lines in songs. You will be surprised how many who have been coming for years didn't know what they were singing!
4. If the new arrival has real difficulties with English (not just the long words!), then think about how you can help with that. Is there someone who can interpret quietly? If there are several speakers of the same language, you could set aside an area with an interpreter, or follow up the service with a language-specific meeting. That way you will also find out what else might need changing to make you service foreigner-friendly.
5. If you use liturgy regularly, why not have a basic translation available in the most commonly used languages? You could even get your new attendees to help with the translation if their English is good.

Include and involve, but don't patronise!

Sometimes, in the desire to make the service accessible, churches will include a song in a foreign language, and think they have done their bit. Beware of tokenism! While it's good to introduce a few new songs from abroad, involve the asylum seeker or refugee in the process, and don't limit their involvement to that. They may be established Christians with a great deal to contribute, especially in terms of their faith. Sharing stories of God's faithfulness will encourage others and give them encouragement too.

Ask, invite, reciprocate

It's easy to assume that we know what people need. Getting to know new people and asking their opinion may change your assumptions and lead to more productive ways of helping.

Sometimes foreigners are in the UK for many years before they are ever invited into a British home. A social invitation says a great deal about how you value someone. It makes them feel welcome.

If they come from a culture where hospitality is important, be prepared to be invited back – and be prepared for the invite to include food (even if they have little or no money). Accepting the invitation and making time to eat with them makes a huge difference to their sense of self-worth.

They may also offer to help you in other ways. Asylum seekers in the system are not allowed to work: that is a big problem for men from cultures where work is what gives them dignity. If they can help with practical tasks in your church or home it will greatly ease the problem. Including people on church rotas and teams is a great way to get to know people. One word of warning – make sure that they are clear about how you want things done, otherwise you may regret accepting their willing offer of help! Standards and ways of doing things are vastly different in some countries, where there is no such thing as gloss paint and ‘fixing the electrics’ may mean attaching a few wires here and there!

Helping refugees understand British culture is important too. Many refugees come from countries where the extended family or local community takes responsibility for children. That can cause problems, for example when refugees pay attention to children whose parents they are not familiar with, or take photographs of them. Helping refugees understand the UK safeguarding culture will help avoid potentially difficult situations.

Similarly, the way that British people do hospitality and friendship can really seem very strange, or even rude to refugees. Helping refugees and asylum seekers mix more in the church is important. Things like joining mixed home groups and activities can really help even if there are ethnic small groups in the church. Inclusion in practical tasks and church rotas also adds a sense of being treated like everyone else. In the long term it is far better for people to learn English and integrate into British churches than start a separate church: their gifts and strengths enrich our churches, and second generation children are much less likely to disengage as they get older.

Welcome Churches is an organisation which helps equips and resources churches to welcome, disciple and fully integrate refugees into the life of the local church. Every church in the UK can be involved in helping welcome refugees in some way. For more information see www.welcomechurches.org