

HUGH PRICE HUGHES LECTURE

HINDE STREET, LONDON, 12 MARCH 2019

Good evening.

(Powerpoint Slide One: Title)

I greet you all in the name of Christ and wish upon you all the peace and blessings of God.

I am grateful to colleagues here in Hinde Street for your invitation, and to Peter, Helen and Edna for the meal earlier, and hospitality here.

Thank you Lizzie for liaising with me and for finalising arrangements.

Our themes this evening aligns with the Methodist London District theme of migration and moving stories.

I gave a presentation on this theme to the Methodist London District conference in July last year, and some follow up work has emerged as a result, with a number of Circuits and congregations using material I have written on Sanctuary.

Some of you therefore may have heard some of my reflections before.

I speak to you in the context of an acknowledged “environment of hostility” that leads to discrimination and destitution and treats people with distrust, and an environment, of open and blatant racism.

Even as we meet this evening, Parliament is in session and has a few minutes ago voted against a no deal Brexit.

It should never be the intention of a government anywhere to deliberately treat people with hostility, discrimination and distrust.

Our decisions should be determined by openness to each other, not fear.

As a bare minimum we should always treat people decently.

Scriptural texts of all faith call us to be hospitable.

We will work in this environment to be human and call others to be human; to be hospitable and call others to be hospitable; and always challenge hostility and hatred and call on others to do so too.

It is in the shelter of each other that the people shall live.

The real sanctuary is human warmth and relationship within all the fragilities and fractures as well as faithfulness of being human.

My specific angle is the idea of sanctuary, and city of sanctuary.

What I want to do this evening is to share my own personal moving story of migration, and what lessons I have learned about God and the call of God.

Sanctuary sums up my life and ministry and challenge.

God is sanctuary.

God is calling us to build sanctuary.

I can only briefly touch on these themes.

Let me first tell you my story.

MY STORY

(Powerpoint Slide Two: India/Pakistan and Kenya)

I have had a keen and critical interest on immigration matters from the age of 11 onwards. My interest has grown out of my own experience of immigration.

My own parents left their home in Panjab, India, as young teenagers soon after independence, and the partition, in 1947, a situation that led to one of the biggest movements of people across borders in human history. It was a movement that sadly witnessed much violence and bloodshed. Though they never spoke about it, I have no doubt they will have witnessed atrocity and will have been traumatised by it. Their parents will have suggested to them to go elsewhere for safety. They went to Kenya.

I was born in Nairobi where I lived till the age of 11 in 1964. Then, Kenya achieved independence, and with my parents and family I left for Britain, via a nine-month sojourn in what was then Tanganyika. By the time they were thirty, my parents had left their home twice as a result of political decisions of nations. My first home in this country was in Dudley, West Midlands.

From my earliest days of life in the UK people of Asian backgrounds talked with me, because I was fluent in English, about their immigration concerns and paper work.

So I have become familiar with immigration matters, policies and procedures. I am familiar with the fears, frustrations, and pains of people of all backgrounds around the decisions to leave home. I have determined to take simple steps to seek justice, mercy and humility in policy and procedure.

As a Methodist Minister, and Pastor, I have worked with others, especially in churches, and with people of other faiths, to critique and challenge policy and procedure where it has been unjust and discriminatory. I have supported many campaigns to challenge unjust deportations orders. In the 80's I supported people

taking sanctuary in churches. I chaired the Sanctuary Working Group of the British Council of Churches, and helped to produce guidelines to assist churches giving sanctuary to people facing injustice.

In March 1997 I walked from Sheffield where I live, to 10 Downing Street, with a letter to the Prime Minister asking that Asylum Seekers, who are not criminals, are not detained in conventional prisons alongside convicted criminals, and for a fairer deal for Asylum Seekers. I also walked from the Home Office to Campsfield Detention Centre in Oxford for the same reason.

When I arrived in London on my walk from Sheffield, and came into Hyde Par, Donald Soper met me there. We both spoke from his box about the “monstrous” immigration policies of Britain.

As President of the Methodist Conference in Britain (2000-2001) I visited all the Detention Centres in Britain and Northern Ireland, following which I wrote a reflection entitled “Unlocking the Doors” (2001). I sent a copy to the Home Secretary.

In October 2005 I called a meeting, with Craig Barnett a Quaker colleague, to launch the City of Sanctuary initiative. In 2007 Sheffield was declared UKs first City of Sanctuary. When others asked how they could follow this idea, to assist, Craig and I produced a short book entitled “Building a City of Sanctuary” (2010) with inspiring practical ideas.

At the time of writing, there are now over 100 Cities/Towns/Areas in Britain and Ireland working with the City of Sanctuary vision, to build cultures of welcome and hospitality, Cities we can be proud to live in. The idea is also being used for example in Schools, Universities, Hospitals, Gardens and Places of Worship. The City of Sanctuary website provides more details, and ideas for action.

In the contemporary society around us, there is considerable hostility towards “the stranger”. We can all take action to move people from these attitudes of hatred and hostility of people seeking sanctuary among us towards attitudes of welcome and hospitality.

All people want to be safe from harm. No one is really safe until we are all safe.

I want to leave you with some lessons I have learned in City of Sanctuary on growing a movement:

- A movement grows from an idea that spreads (sanctuary)
- The idea is easily understood and portrayed in an art form (logo)
- A variety of small groups/community organisations work together and build a network which grows to challenge injustice and to form new life

A movement is a collective enterprise in which social agents work together in prophetic ministry. It is people-led, not politician-led (eg suffragettes/non-violence/civil rights).

The key resources in a movement are hard-working, passionate, small groups and organisations.

BORDER CROSSING IS A CRUCIAL CONTEMPORARY ISSUE

(Powerpoint Slide Three: Migration is not a Crime)

Let me now say a little about the context of sanctuary.

Each year up to 1 billion people cross a border. Every two seconds, a person is forced to flee for safety. Every day 44,000 more people are driven from their homes.

The next twenty/thirty years will see huge movements of people as a result of environmental degradation, climate change, famine, war and persecution. It is a sign of our times, it alerts us that something is not right, and requires our most serious attention. Why are people moving? What are the stories of people who leave their countries and cross borders to go somewhere else?

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) website there were 37.5 million refugees in 2005 and 68.5 million refugees in 2017, a new all-time high, and an unprecedented global situation (at the time of writing). Refugees cross borders for safety.

(Powerpoint Slide Four: Definition of Refugee)

A refugee is defined by the Refugee Convention 1951 (UNHCR online) as a person who:

“owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail him/herself of the protection of that country...”

An Asylum Seeker is someone who has left their home country and is seeking sanctuary in another country. It is not illegal or a crime to make such an application.

The UNHCR Global Trends 2017 Report on Forced Displacements records that wars, conflicts and persecution have forced more people than at any other time since records began to flee their homes and seek refuge and safety elsewhere. Wars make refugees. 90% of the world's refugees were from countries close to conflict. Children constituted 51% of the world's refugees, and there were 98,400 asylum requests from children who were unaccompanied or separated from their families. The UNHCR 2017 Report notes that this is made up of 40 million people displaced internally within their own countries, 25.4 million refugees and 3.1 million asylum seekers in industrialised countries. This means that 1 in every 110 people globally is an asylum seeker, internally displaced or a refugee. Syria (5.9 million), Afghanistan (2.7 million) and Somalia (1.1 million) produced nearly half of the world's refugees in 2015. Turkey, with 3.5 million, Pakistan with 1.4 million, Uganda with 1.4 million, Lebanon with 1 million, and Iran with 1 million refugees were the top hosting countries in 2017. Britain is not the number one destination of refugees.

The UNHCR Report 2017 notes that ninety percent of the world's refugees are from countries close to conflict. Two thirds of the world's refugees are from just five countries, namely, Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar and Somalia. They are fleeing war. People flee for safety and security because they are scared, and live through horrors, humiliation and torture. It is not just about persecution.

It is therefore argued (Betts and Collier, 2017) that the very concept of who a refugee is needs to be redefined. The Refugee Convention 1951 which confines a refugee to a person who is fleeing “persecution”, needs updating. Refugees include people fleeing persecution, but also the disorder, danger and insecurity of war and terrorism. Refugees are people looking for safety from danger to their lives, sanctuary while they can also earn a living, until they can safely return home. This was the original role of the UNHCR, to provide protection for refugees and to find long-term solutions to their plight. However, the definition of a refugee by the UN Refugee Convention 1951 is no longer adequate because it does not state who is a refugee today, it does not say who should provide safety, and it does not offer a long-term strategy (Betts and Collier, 2017).

Most refugees are displaced inside their own countries, or cross the border and go into the neighbouring country. There are refugees, of course, who take longer and more difficult journeys, risking life and costing huge amounts of money. We know stories of people holding the undersides of planes to make their journey; many travelling on crowded creaking old boats; others travel in air tight containers on trucks. Many thousands perish on the way and are lost in desert sands or the desolate sea.

People fleeing danger remain vulnerable and in need for safety and protection. Many lose their lives as they search for safety. A newspaper photo of Alan Kurdi, a Syrian boy refugee, whose deceased body was found on a beach became a symbol of this situation.

People will continue to travel from many countries and contexts, overcoming obstacles like walls, frontiers, borders, mountains and waters in search of safety and wellbeing.

Long term, this will only stop when nations will stop wars, stop making weapons and instead invest in, and ensure everyone has access to equality, inclusion, education, homes, and hospitals, and build peace. Everyone wants to live in safety.

There are those, particularly women and children, who get trapped in the scandalous Human Trafficking trade. They get here and then disappear, or are enslaved, in the sex trade.

With the EU closing doors, there are no safe or legal routes for refugees and they are forced into the hands of unscrupulous smugglers and traffickers who charge them enormous sums of money for travel by unsafe and unreliable means. They could travel for a lot less by air if permitted. The EU needs to invest more resources in legal and safe routes for refugees to come here. Why force already powerless and vulnerable people into deserts and oceans to cross unsupported. They end up undocumented, or disappeared or being “illegal immigrants”.

Three hundred people drowned in October 2013 off Lampedusa, Italy. Nearly 3,000 people drowned or went missing in the waters between North Africa and Italy in 2014. Such deaths are a colossal humanitarian catastrophe. The “Mare Nostrum” boat rescue saved over 400 people a day following its introduction after the Lampedusa tragedy. Around 1200 people drowned in the Mediterranean Sea in one week in April 2015. It is the duty of governments to help refugees in need of shelter and sanctuary.

On the day it was announced that the Mare Nostrum was to be withdrawn, with support from Britain, Sir Nicholas Winton was awarded the Order of the White Lion in Prague (28/10/14) for organising the rescue of 669 mostly Jewish refugee children from Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia on the eve of WWII. He organised rescue trains.

Every day hundreds and thousands of people set out to cross whatever barrier is in the way to find safety and a better life. When people are deprived of their homes, their families, and familiar surroundings, they will be grateful for welcome, hospitality, safety. Migration has consistently been the hot potato of politics.

The national debate has centred on the Windrush scandal which has exposed high levels of discrimination and harassment of people from the Caribbean who were invited [1948] to live and work in the UK. The debate has illustrated hostile and prejudicial environment in which powerless “migrants” have to navigate citizenship in the UK, sometimes up to 70 years and more after arrival here. Upon taking her role as Home Secretary in 2012 Teresa May spoke of the aim in the Home Office to

create in Britain a “hostile environment” for people without relevant documents. A hostile environment is a crucible of hostility. It is inhuman and inhospitable. The best response at the local level is to work hard to build cultures of welcome and hospitality. We can all be agents of change, and work with others to make life better. It is hard work that requires tough resolve and steely resilience. This work will help us to connect local stories with global stories.

What simple actions can we all take?

Poet Laureate Andrew Motion’s words adorn the side of a Sheffield Hallam University building. The good sighted can read the words of the poem as they walk to the City from the Railway Station:

“O traveller from somewhere to here...to wander through the labyrinth of air,

Pause now, and let the sight of this sheer cliff become a priming place which lifts you to speculate...

What if...?

What if...?

What if...?”

What if we could all work together to bring our diverse population into shared conversations, even if difficult conversations, on how we can work together to build better understandings, deeper relationships of mutual respect and trust, and come to genuinely accept each other as human beings?

(Powerpoint Slide Five: Three Challenges)

My three challenges in response to the what ifs are:

Be human, and always call others back to their humanity.

Be hospitable, and always call others to express hospitality.

Always challenge hostility. This is done by challenging inhumanity and inhospitality.

The way ahead is to widen and deepen relationships across different cultures, creeds, colours and identities, to end hatred and together to build cultures where all are welcome, valued, belong equally together and have sanctuary and are safe. In words that come to us from the past, together we can seek the welfare of the city for in its welfare lies the welfare of all. We can be united in building hospitality. All people are human beings with names, stories and deep relationships. All want empathy more than sympathy, respect more than pity. We have fantastic opportunities in our multi-ethnic and plural societies to meet and eat with each other, to share our stories and discover our interconnectedness, and link the local with the global. We belong to each other. As the old Celtic proverb reminds us: it is in the shelter of each other that the people live.

We all want the best for ourselves. We can work together to ensure the best for all.

There is a challenge here to consider working to make your city, town, village, church, school, college, university, club or place of work, a sanctuary committed to building cultures of welcome and hospitality, especially for those in greatest need and danger. Primarily, this is a commitment to helping make the most vulnerable people safe from harm.

How we all relate to each other, and in particular to people seeking sanctuary and safety will be central to humanity. How we all treat those who are in greatest need for safety will be the measure by which we shall judge personal, national and international morality and spirituality.

So, what do I want to say about where God is in all this?

GOD TAKES SANCTUARY AMONG US

The Bible places God at the centre of all creation (Genesis 1). The existence of God is taken for granted. The question that the Bible wrestles with, and illuminates is, how is God with us (Sobrino, 2004)? God is not confined to space. The entire created order is the sanctuary of God. Heaven and heavens heaven cannot confine God (1 Kings 8:27). Yet God asks for sanctuary (Exodus 25:8).

God is revealed in the Bible as a companion, with people in all their journeys, and present with them in all contexts (Psalm 139:8-10). It is in their journeying that

people encounter God, and particularly in the context of hospitality to “the stranger”. For example, in the story of Abraham and Sarah sharing a meal with three travelling strangers, they find they are entertaining angels (Genesis 18).

The Bible discloses God as a Migrant God (Song, 1982), and a God of a migrant, travelling, people.

- The first instruction of God is for people to “go and fill the earth”
- God instructs Abraham and Sarah to go out on a journey
- Joseph’s brothers go to Egypt because there was “corn in Egypt”
- God calls Moses to lead people out of bondage in Egypt and to embark on a new journey
- God chooses to dwell with the people, to take sanctuary among them. A simple Ark is built for the travelling, dynamic God (Exodus 25:8)
- Many of the key biblical texts are reflections of a travelling people
- Jeremiah instructs the exiled community to seek the welfare of the City where they find themselves “for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jeremiah 29:7)

This is the astonishing reflection in the Bible.

God migrates.

All creation is in migration every day: the earth, dust, water, planets, meteors, people, every cell in our bodies. This is the order of all creation. God migrates too.

This Migrant God takes another journey, a self-emptying journey, to be revealed in human form (Philippians 2:7), incarnate in Christ. This is the heart of the good news declared in the New testament. God is revealed in Christ, as God who comes to us, dwells with us and is with us in the journey of life.

God is revealed in Christ.

The face of Christ is seen in those considered to “the least important” (Matthew 25: 40).

In John 1:14 the good news disclosed in Jesus is summarised:

“And the Word became flesh...and dwelt among us”.

The Greek word translated as “dwelt” comes from a root verb and its corresponding noun meaning “tent”, a word used also for the “Tabernacle” where the Ark of the Covenant was housed.

The “Tabernacle” was the portable sanctuary constructed at Sinai and primarily associated with the wanderings of the Hebrew people in the wilderness. It was the sacred space where God dwelt among people: “Make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among you” says God (Exodus 25:8).

The first one for whom human beings are required to provide sanctuary is God.

This sanctuary for God was not a house, not a mansion, not even a stable, or anything solid and permanent. It was mobile, and represented the mobility of the travelling God, accompanying a travelling people in all their journeying.

The nativity stories reveal God taking sanctuary among people with the vulnerability and dependency of a child.

The first requirement, for the birth of Christ, is a sanctuary, to make a little room (Song, 1982), challenging the idea that there was “no room” (Luke 2:7).

Not long after Jesus’ birth Mary and Joseph flee with him to Egypt as refugees for sanctuary (Matthew 2:13-15).

The stories surrounding Jesus and the early church, in Luke and Acts, continue the theme of journey, with a key story being the encounter with the risen Christ who meets and walks with his disciples as a “stranger” on the road to Emmaus, and how he was known “in the breaking of the bread” (Luke 24: 13-35). Jesus is often described as an unrecognised stranger (John 1:10-11; 6:20; 8:14,25; 21:12; Luke 24:13-35)

That’s lesson one.

God takes sanctuary in humans in the midst of creation and human life.

The migrating God puts migration at the core of created order.

The second lesson is:

HOSPITALITY TO THE STRANGER

The christian faith is rooted in the practice of hospitality with a Table as a central image (Pohl, 1999). The Table, and the food shared here is a foretaste of the Heavenly Banquet that God prepares for all people. God is the Host at the heavenly banquet where all are welcome, all have a seat, no one is excluded, and each guest is personally served, and treated equally with respect and dignity. At this table no one is ignored, or passed by without acknowledgement, no one has to reach out or beg to be noticed. All receive equally. No one merits or earns such inclusion. The realm of God is revealed as a feast where all are welcome.

The table is a symbol of hospitality in a world of migration.

It offers respite, refreshment, resources for people in transition, on the move.

We are called to practice hospitality on earth, modeling the hospitality of heaven.

Hospitality is the key to interpret this.

Hospitality is also a good point for entry into dialogue with people of different faiths and beliefs, for hospitality is valued in all cultures. Hospitality reveals the heart of God. Hospitality transcends borders and cultural divides.

Hospitality is the frame of reference for interpreting the ministry of Christ. Jesus said to his followers, “whenever you meet in my name have some food and remember me”.

Holy Communion at its best reveals the new world we are called to build. God’s people are called to reflect God’s grace and generosity, to adopt an attitude of hospitality and spread the table, and symbolise the feast of God. Hospitality is the basis for building human community. The very meaning of compassion is to share bread with others.

One story Jesus used to illustrate hospitality is the parable of the Good Samaritan. Here it is a complete stranger in a hostile environment who shows the hospitality that

reflects true faith with Jesus' instruction to "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10: 25-37). What it means to "love your neighbor as yourself" is best seen in the offering of hospitality.

Jesus insists in his teaching to serve those in the greatest need. He said that is where his followers will see him and serve him. Those in the greatest need are not simply people who are to be recipients of service. They are prophets and offer the amazing gift in that they reveal Christ, and so give a greater gift back. This service is not just about feeling good – "I have served Christ". It is a mutual sacrament of giving and receiving.

"In as much as you did it to the least of these you did it to me" (Matthew 25: 40).

The many meals Jesus shared express hospitality, especially to those considered to be the least important. His followers are called to give and receive hospitality. We are challenged to see the Image of God and to serve Christ in those who are different to us.

We give leadership when we, individually and communally, reflect the spirit of Jesus in service and hospitality.

In the story of Jesus and the two Disciples sharing conversation and food on the Road to Emmaus, Jesus is the stranger, the host and the guest. That is us too. We are all strangers, guests and hosts. In this story it is the stranger who offers hospitality and in whom Christ is revealed.

True hospitality is never a one-way process. It is mutual. We all give and receive. We all serve and are served. And all of us enriched in the process.

God is calling us all to spread the table and to build hospitality and sanctuary for all.

Let me now say a little more about sanctuary.

CITY OF SANCTUARY: CULTURES OF WELCOME AND HOSPITALITY

The concept of sanctuary is thousands of years old and rooted in the Bible.

It is a development from Hebrew wisdom of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”. This is the code that established the principle still used in the idea of “proportionality”, a principle used for example in the Just War theory. Do not use more force than is used against you. But there were, and are, people who will go beyond this principle, and for example, take life in revenge for smaller crimes. To prevent such harm Cities of Refuge were established.

According to the legislation set out in the Joshua 20:1-9, six Cities of Refuge were established (see also Numbers 35:9-15; Deuteronomy 4:41-43).

Cities of Refuge were about giving protection to people whose lives were in danger. These Cities were to give refuge, or sanctuary to anyone, including a “foreigner”, who was accused of manslaughter, to prevent the automatic use of revenge as a rough, and unfair route to justice, while they waited for their case to be processed, and “until there is a trial before the congregation” (Joshua 20:6).

Cities of Refuge were about giving protection to people whose lives were in danger. The purpose of Cities of Refuge in the Hebrew tradition was the prevention of revenge, not the avoidance of law. The Rabbinic teaching is that roads leading to these Cities were to be kept in good repair, with clear finger posts, so that a refugee may be free to escape the hands of the avenger of blood and find safety.

City of Sanctuary is a contemporary expression of the City of Refuge idea. It progresses the idea to providing safety and hospitality to vulnerable people, for example - Asylum Seekers who are not criminals, children whose lives are in danger, victims of domestic abuse and older people who suffer indignity.

Sheffield became UKs first City of Sanctuary.

(Powerpoint Slide Six: Sheffield)

SANCTUARY AND CHURCHES

City of Sanctuary reflects the belief that the most effective change comes from a mobilised grass-roots movement. This is a politics in which the lead comes from people by acting collectively for social cohesion and change. It is located in an easily understood idea that lights up their passion leading to conversations that can grow to change cultures, and is accessible to all. It links local and global concerns across neighbourhoods and networks, and begins to go across geographies giving political meaning to space and place.

To work towards City of Sanctuary is to build a shared vision, and provide a positive common goal and aspiration for a variety of organisations, groups and individuals. Many people are familiar with the “Fair Trade City” recognition granted when a number of organisations agree to buy, sell or serve Fair Trade goods. Similarly, City of Sanctuary embodies clear goals and is recognised when a significant number of local organisations sign up to the initiative, agree to provide welcome, hospitality and safety, and make a commitment to broaden support for the idea in order to gradually influence the culture of the city as a whole. To achieve recognition as a City of Sanctuary is only a marker on an ongoing journey. It is to arrive at a point where large numbers of organisations and individuals are committed to continue to work towards a shared vision of a city/town/place where all are welcome, valued, belong equally, have sanctuary and are safe.

City of Sanctuary builds on the history and spirituality of sanctuary. In the contemporary expression of Cities of Refuge, City of Sanctuary moves the idea towards a vision where local communities and organisations work together to challenge sectarianism, racism, hatred and bigotry and to build cultures of welcome, hospitality and safety for all residents. No one is safe until we are all safe. It recognises that the work of reconciliation and peace is not complete without the integration of all residents of the City. It builds a positive image of the City/Town/Village. The vision can be applied in many different contexts, such as Schools and Places of Worship, and not just confined to Cities.

City of Sanctuary is a contemporary expression of an ancient tradition. As in the past, it is about respectful manners, behaving well towards others with welcome and hospitality, and being safe to be with. Good manners precede law. It is only when

manners fail that we have to create laws to provide protection. The original cities of refuge were set up to encourage good manners while people waited for the processes of law.

The City of Sanctuary Logo is a wordless portrayal of a simple idea. It shows people reflecting mutual welcome, hospitality, shelter, sanctuary.

(Powerpoint Slide Seven: City of Sanctuary Logo)

People from these Islands have benefitted from the hospitality of other nations and people when we have travelled abroad, and continue to do so.

“Brexit” has come to symbolise a focus across Britain, Ireland and Europe on immigration and the freedom of movement. This is an important conversation, and requires open, informed and respectful discussion. The City of Sanctuary idea is a contribution to this debate. It calls for hospitality as a way of challenging hatred and hostility.

There may not be refugees or people seeking sanctuary in your City/Town/Village/Area. But news reports form opinion everywhere. It is important to be informed and to correct/challenge ill-informed, or prejudiced opinion everywhere.

There is a human, legal, moral and spiritual obligation on us all to provide safety and sanctuary to each other, and especially to those whose lives are in danger. This is important and urgent in our times of open hostility and hatred particularly towards people from other countries seeking security and sanctuary among us.

So let me move to a close.

In doing so I want to leave you with a challenge to build Churches of Sanctuary, and to mark Sanctuary Sunday 23rd June 2019.

(Powerpoint Slide Eight: Church of Sanctuary)

BECOMING A SANCTUARY CHURCH (OR GROUP OF CHURCHES)

Sanctuary, or hospitality-with-safety, is a long-standing theme of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, the foundation for which is found in the Law-books of the Hebrew Scriptures, and echoed in Jesus' teaching about how we treat the neighbour and the outsider.

Now we need Sanctuary Churches who wish to meet and greet new arrivals fleeing from war and hunger. We need sanctuary for vulnerable people.

I am encouraging churches to develop the idea of a Church of Sanctuary.

The City of Sanctuary works by three steps to being a School, Church, University of Sanctuary.

The three steps to being a Church of sanctuary are:

One, learn about what it means to be seeking sanctuary, and be actively involved in awareness raising. Be intentional.

Two, embed – take action positive action to make welcome and inclusion part of the values of your congregation or community, to support those seeking sanctuary and refuge, and to include them in your activities. Involve the congregation.

Three, share – with pride, your vision and achievements: let others know about the positive contribution refugees make to society and the benefits of a welcoming culture for everyone. Take pride in your work.

I have been invited by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) to provide resources which give biblical grounding to approaching these steps. This material is now complete and will be available from CTBI.

Involve people seeking sanctuary, and refugees, in helping you to progress and achieve these principles.

Talk about how you will sustain this work in meaningful ways.

Use this work as a learning process for the whole congregation. Do not regard the suggestions above as prescriptive. Each context is different. How congregations engage with these issues in rural contexts will be different from those in urban and city environments. Explore best ways forward in your context.

So, what about Hinde Street and the West London Mission putting the idea of Church of Sanctuary into practice, with all the good work you already do supporting vulnerable people?

When you feel you are ready, you can apply to City of Sanctuary for recognition as a Church/Place/Meeting of Sanctuary. Application forms are not complex or cumbersome, and are available from City of Sanctuary.

I assure you of my support.

Thank you, and bless you.

Inderjit Bhogal

12 March 2019