

Quoted in *What the Bible Says about the Stranger* by Kieran J O'Mahony OSA. The Churches' Peace Education Programme, Irish Commission of Justice and Peace & Irish Council of Churches, Maynooth and Belfast, 1999.

In helping to build a welcoming community it is important not just to provide a welcome for newcomers but also to help existing populations to adjust to change. Cultural shock is acute for people who are made to feel out of place, but an influx of people who are different can also cause a range of emotions from unease to fear and hostility in local people. It is part of Christian leadership to acknowledge all these emotions and needs, and to find ways of creating mutual understanding and fellowship.

Church responses to issues of immigration, asylum and racism

The main Churches in Ireland have responded in different ways. The **Catholic Church** has a big commitment to refugees through the Refugee Project in Maynooth and [Sr Joan Roddy](#) who co-ordinates of the Churches Asylum Network in the Irish Republic. The work of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People was published in 2004 as *Egra migrantes caritas Christi*. It examines the challenge of human mobility and the pastoral implications. Each diocese in Ireland now has a person in charge of the pastoral care of immigrants and they report to the Bishops' Conference.

The **Presbyterian Church in Ireland** has adopted a document, [Policy on Asylum Seekers and Refugees](#); a Report by the Race Relations Committee to the 2003 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. It is more comprehensive than the title suggests, as it also explores issues of immigration, racism and welcome. The Race Relations Committee has recently become the [Race Relations Panel](#).

The **Methodist Church in Ireland** has adopted the Presbyterian policy document and addresses the issues through their Council on Social Responsibility.

The Church of Ireland is embarking on a 3 year Hard Gospel programme which aims to improve the ways in which the church deals with difference at all levels. This includes the challenge of ethnic difference. One southern diocese, Dublin and Glendalough, has a working group on combating racism which has published a useful booklet: *Welcoming Angels*. Much of this publication (including the material on welcome) is equally applicable in the north, and although aimed at Church of Ireland parishes, other denominations should find ideas which resonate with them.

Welcoming Angels is available from the Diocesan Office, Diocese of Dublin and Glendalough, Church of Ireland House, Church Avenue, Rathmines, Dublin 6. The price is 5.00 euro.

Quakers are raising awareness among their own members through workshops, seminars and the regular exchange of information. They also work closely with other churches and faiths.

Other Christian groups such as the **Evangelical Alliance** have worked to raise consciousness around the issues and the **Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland (CCCI)** (formerly ECONI) have been involved in hosting conferences and building

awareness. For example, see ECONI's *Lion & Lamb, Racism and Religious Liberty*, No 37 Autumn 2004 and Noel Fallows, 'Multi-cultural church life' in *Lion & Lamb, Racism and Religious Liberty*, No 36 Spring/ Summer 2004, pp 10

The **Corrymeela Community** has hosted holiday breaks for refugees and people seeking asylum.

Organisations and resources:

- **Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland (CCCI):** <http://www.contemporarychristianity.net/about%20us/ourhistory.htm>
- **Corrymeela Community:** <https://www.corrymeela.org>
- **Evangelical Alliance:** <https://www.eauk.org>

The Refugee Project at Maynooth, publishes *Sanctuary*, on the Refugee situation in the Irish Republic and the involvement of the Churches.

[Hard Gospel Study](#)

[Methodist Church in Ireland](#)

Inter-church structures

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI, <https://ctbi.org.uk>) is the umbrella body for Christian Churches. It liaises with ecumenical bodies in Great Britain and Ireland as well as ecumenical organisations at European and world levels. It provides a forum for joint decision-making, and enables the Churches to take action together.

The **Churches' Commission for Racial Justice (CCRJ)** is a Commission of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, and includes representatives from the Churches and related organisations. It monitors trends and developments in the field of racial justice in Britain and Ireland, and Europe and seeks to co-ordinate the Churches' response on key issues.

In Ireland, the **Irish Council of Churches (<https://www.irishchurches.org>)** includes the mainstream Protestant churches.

The **Irish Inter-Church Meeting** includes the Catholic Church and the ICC members. That umbrella grouping has combined with the CCRJ, as the **All-Ireland Churches Consultative Meeting on Racism (AICCMR)** and this has enabled 2 major initiatives to take place.

The late Fee Ching Leong undertook research for AICCMR that was published in November 2005 as *The experiences, expectations and aspirations of black and minority ethnic people in relation to the churches' role in tackling racism*. The interviews undertaken for this research reveal the shortcomings within the churches in responding to the needs of minority ethnic people, and are a starting point for progress.

As a further step forward, the AICCMR appointed Dr Scott Boldt to network and organise a conference in November 2005, **Challenged by Difference: Threat or Enrichment**.

- To listen and learn from the experiences of minority ethnic groups and people who have responded to the challenge of difference.
- To encourage all Christian churches to acknowledge racism as a fundamental issue in society that the churches have a significant role in addressing.
- To describe and to present anti-racist initiatives that various churches have undertaken, developed or supported.
- To create the time and space for people to interact, share ideas and concerns, caucus on issues and make a commitment to anti-racist work.

Leaders and representatives from the churches, minority ethnic communities and from various agencies came together for this event. Follow-up sessions have been held to assist networking, including one in Belfast.

Conference papers

- [AICCMR Conference Intro](#)[MSWORD]
- [AICCMR Conference Challenged by Ignorance](#)[MSWORD]
- [AICCMR Conference Fee Ching Research](#)[MSWORD]
- [AICCMR Conference Affirming Identity](#)[MSWORD]
- [AICCMR Conference Racism - Up Front and Ugly in Belfast](#)[MSWORD]

AICCMR has issued [advice for welcoming new residents and responding to a racist incident](#)[RTF]

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Building welcoming congregations

Liturgical expression can ... be very mono-cultural with music and movement (or lack of it) from one tradition. In the parish where I now serve as Parish Priest, we have three choirs, a “folk” choir, an African choir and a Filipino choir. The Filipino choir sings at the main Sunday service on the second Sunday of the month and the African choir on the last Sunday of the month. There would always, however, be at least three hymns in English on those days. This aspect of affirming identity needs to be mainstreamed so that it pervades all that we do. **Rev. Philip T Sumner** from Oldham in England speaking at the All Ireland Churches’ Consultative Meeting on Racism (AICCMR) conference, **Challenged by Difference: Threat or Enrichment** at Dromantine, November 2005. [Full text](#)[RTF]

Pastoral Considerations

Many people who come here will adjust easily. However, we need to bear in mind that some people find a change of country very difficult. In addition, people who have been forced to flee here, destitute migrant workers, or undocumented people all have special difficulties. It is not always easy to understand people’s feelings of insecurity, bewilderment, loneliness,

suspicion, fears, hopes and needs, when their stories are so different from ours. We need an attitude of openness, respect and sensitivity.

- You may need to research where to access *expertise*– legal, social, and medical.
- You may be pressed to find a lot of *time* for people whose multiple problems leave them very emotionally dependent.

- You will need to be aware of special sensitivities, for example,

regarding *confidentiality*. Someone left a church permanently because he felt shamed at being introduced as an asylum seeker by someone who probably only wanted him to be made especially welcome.

- In responding to a racist incident the natural instinct to make public your sense of outrage should always be overridden if the victim of the attack needs *privacy*.
- In some cultural backgrounds women should never be visited by a single man so it is helpful to make at least initial *pastoral visits in pairs*.
- Be aware that immigrants and *minority ethnic groups are not homogeneous*; there is great diversity, and sometimes animosity, within and between ethnic groups.
- It is important to *listen empathetically*. It can be a challenge to hear what someone is feeling and not just the words they are saying. Different cultures invariably express things in different ways, even similar words can be understood in different ways, and body language can be significant.
- *You may never know if what people tell you is completely true*, and it is hard to measure up a story when the normal parameters do not apply. You have to take a certain amount on trust, and you may find *cultural signals confusing*. A failure to make eye contact may appear a sign of untrustworthiness or trauma, when in reality it may only be what is regarded as respectful in the country of origin.
- We all make *cultural mistakes*, whether in your assumptions, language or behaviour, such as simply forgetting to remove your shoes in an Asian house.
- You may be confronted by *new unpleasant issues* such as child prostitution and people trafficking
- You may find yourself *factoring at or beyond the edge of the law* and uncertain where the moral and legal boundaries lie.
- Above all you will not be human if you do not experience *frustration and anger, pain and guilt*, as there is often little which can be done to assist in immigration cases which are governed by procedures which seem beyond influence.

The words we use... We need to find out what people want to be called, and to expect change – at one time ‘coloured’ was acceptable for African or Caribbean people, now, in almost all cases, it is not. People became proud to be ‘black’, but some may now prefer to be ‘people of colour’. People from the far East were once happy to be called ‘Asian’ or ‘British Asian’ or ‘Irish Asian’ but now some prefer other, more precise, religious, ethnic or national names.

Refocus on the life God calls you to live in your community: ‘live a life of love’.

Assess your emotional involvement with the issue: ‘Before Hlaleleni from Zimbabwe described the hell of racist abuse she had been put through in an estate in East Belfast, I felt

emotionally detached from the problem of racism. After hearing her story of windows smashed, doors kicked in and dog’s dirt shovelled in piles on her doorstep, I changed.’

Change your lifestyle: ‘Become more socially inclusive. If you rarely have people from a different ethnic, religious or cultural backgrounds to your home for a meal, why not adopt a different approach? Open your heart and your home. ... There is nothing more powerful than your neighbours seeing you enjoy the friendship of people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds.’

Open up the issue in your church: ‘Compile a dossier of racial attacks in your area. Share this material with your friends in church. Present it to your minister and church leaders. Ask them to discuss it and initiate a positive response in your area. ... Would Jesus be passive if he lived in your neighbourhood? He does!’

From *lion & lamb: racism and religious liberty*, Autumn 2004