

EXCISING OUR WELCOME

Advance Australia Fair

Australians all let us rejoice,
For we are young and free,
We've golden soil and wealth for toil;
Our home is girt by sea;
Our land abounds in nature's gifts
Of beauty rich and rare,
In history's page, let every stage
Advance Australia Fair.
In joyful strains then let us sing,
Advance Australia Fair.

Beneath our radiant Southern Cross
We'll toil with hearts and hands;
To make this Commonwealth of ours
Renowned of all the lands;
For those who've come across the seas
We've boundless plains to share;
With courage let us all combine
To Advance Australia Fair.
In joyful strains then let us sing,
Advance Australia Fair.

Australian National Anthem

Australia is an island nation – a country 'girt by sea'. Since the first Europeans arrived in boats over two hundred years ago, people have continued to cross the seas for this land of 'boundless plains' that seems to promise a new start. Australia has become a place of 'renown' – a place of plenty, a land of wealth and opportunity, and a country successful beyond the measure of its small population.

ARE WE AUSTRALIA FAIR?

While successive waves of immigrants continue to build our country, we have always felt nervous of newcomers. Marion Le, in her contribution to the 2001 Alfred Deakin series of lectures, said,

"Historically, there has always been an ambivalence, an uncertainty, an ambiguity in government approach to migrants, refugees and multiculturalism. A 'them' and 'us' approach that has never quite accepted the refugee as the migrant, as the citizen. Has never quite known when to recognise that the sojourner is now the son or daughter."¹

Australia's immigration policies have always made it very difficult for people to enter without an invitation – from the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 designed to keep Asians out of Australia to the White Australia Policy which was in force until 1972. Australians have, on the whole, wanted it that way. Whether our families have been here for one generation or for many, most of us want limits on the sharing of our boundless plains.

We are particularly threatened by people who arrive by boat. It appears that we react strongly to any demonstration of the vulnerability of our vast coastline. Why do you think this is so?

A dramatic attempt by a Federal Government to win our hearts by making us feel safe began following the controversial Tampa incident in August 2001 when 433 asylum seekers en route to Australia were rescued by a Norwegian freighter. The Government denied that Australia had responsibilities to them under the Refugee Convention on the basis that they were not on our land, even if they were in our waters. In the pre-election environment of September 2001, the Federal Government designated certain Australian island territories as 'excised offshore places', and an asylum seeker who arrived in an excised territory would not be able to apply for refugee protection. Asylum seekers who do not reach the mainland could now be treated as though they hadn't reached Australia.

In September 2001 Australia signed an agreement with Nauru to accommodate asylum seekers for the duration of the processing of their refugee claims. In October, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) replaced this and Australia also signed a MoU with Papua New Guinea for a processing centre to accommodate and assess the claims of asylum seekers on Manus Island. These



¹ *The Alfred Deakin Lectures: Ideas for the future of a civil society*, Sydney: ABC Books, 2001

border protection measures have become known as the 'Pacific Solution'. The excisions meant that both our borders and our role as a responsible international citizen had been reduced!

Since the power to excise parts of Australia was introduced, the Government has continued to make use of it, however further excisions have been repealed – but not before the asylum seekers have been rejected. Despite Parliament repealing new excisions the power to excise remains in place. Why do you think this is?

Truth Protecting the border was a Budget priority in 2002–03, when \$353 million was allocated for this purpose, including funding for coastal surveillance, foreign aid and capital costs. According to the Immigration Department's 2002–2003 Annual Report, \$90 million was spent on offshore asylum seeker management in 2002–03. This compares with \$5 million spent on administering the entry of 4000 refugees under the offshore humanitarian program (assisted passage and medical clearance costs). By late 2002, the so-called Pacific Solution was estimated to have cost the Australian taxpayer as much as \$500 million. The treasurer then announced expenditure of \$2.8 billion on border control...

Up until April 2004, the cost of detaining a refugee on Christmas Island was determined to be \$293 a day, on Cocos Island it was \$236 a day, \$87 at Port Hedland, \$119 at Curtin, and \$102 at Woomera. At the time of writing, for six months, Aladdin Sisalem has been the only person detained on Manus Island. The island is part of Papua New Guinea, but Australia put him there and pays for the detention centre. To date, this has cost over \$4 million, \$1.3 million caring for the lone occupant, the rest to keep the centre at readiness. Aladdin Sisalem's monthly bill is \$216,000, compared with \$4800 per detainee in Australia.²

The Pacific Solution is economically expensive, but is it expensive in other ways? At what cost to our moral integrity is the towing of boats out of Australian waters and the pretence that parts of Australia are no longer Australia?

Only two boats have reached Australia since September 2001: 53 Vietnamese who entered Australian waters near Port Hedland on 1 July 2003 were taken to Christmas Island for processing, and found not to be refugees, 14 Turkish Kurds reached Melville Island on 4 November 2003 and were towed back by the Royal Australian Navy to Indonesia and placed in immigration detention.

Since September 2001, just over 1500 people have been accommodated in the Manus Island and Nauru offshore processing centres. Forty nine per cent of these asylum seekers (743 people) were recognised as refugees. Resettlement countries included New Zealand, Sweden, Canada, Denmark and Norway, but the majority of these asylum seekers have been resettled in Australia.

As at mid November 2003, 411 failed asylum seekers had accepted the Government's reintegration package and 462 had returned voluntarily to their countries of origin. About 300 remain on Nauru.

BUT WE HAVE A RIGHT TO DECIDE WHO COMES, DON'T WE?

As is often said, Australia is a sovereign nation and has the right to determine who comes here and who doesn't. All countries have immigration policies and border security measures.

As a democratic state we also have responsibilities – as a signatory to international conventions and treaties and as a responsible international citizen. We have a significant history working within and for the United Nations and supporting human rights around the world. All of these rights and responsibilities must be taken into account when we consider our immigration policies, how we enact them in law and legislation and how we enforce them.

Australia is also one of the world's wealthiest and most stable countries. Wealth, whether it is held by individuals, companies or countries comes with social responsibilities and obligations. The Australian Government has cast the arrival of asylum seekers by boat as a major crisis and a significant problem to be solved. It is important that we understand this "problem" in an international context.

² editorial, *The Age*, February 13, 2004

There exists an international crisis of huge proportions involving the mass migration of refugees and displaced persons. At the start of 2003, there were 20.6 million people 'of concern' to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This figure includes refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced people, stateless people, and also refugees who have returned home. Under international law Australia has an obligation to treat people seeking asylum with compassion and dignity, recognising their rights and offering them protection.

The five major refugee-hosting countries are Iran (1.3 million), Pakistan (1.2 million), Germany (980,000), Tanzania (690,000), and the United States (485,000).³ In fourteen years (from 1989 to April 2003) Australia has had 13,540 unauthorised boat arrivals. The vast majority of these people have been granted refugee status. Relative to the numbers of asylum seekers most other countries in the world have to deal with, it seems that our response and the money we spend, is out of all proportion to the problem. There have never been more than about 4000 unauthorised arrivals come by boat in any one year.

WE CAN BE A COUNTRY OF HOSPITALITY!

For many years, even before Tampa, Australian churches, their agencies, congregations and members, have been supporting asylum seekers both through advocacy and service provision. Many churches and church leaders have found themselves arguing against the policies of successive governments (regardless of political party) because the call to hospitality, care of the stranger, and justice for the exile is central to the gospel and an important part of Christian discipleship.

From its very beginnings, the story of Israel was a story of people in exile, of aliens resident in foreign lands suffering oppression and persecution, the story of refugees fleeing famine or enslavement. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph all experienced exile, having fled their homes because of famine, persecution or danger.

But it is the story of Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and their forty-year wanderings in the wilderness, which, more than any other experience, revealed to the Israelites the nature of their God and defined their relationship with God and other people.

The Israelites believed themselves to be a people freed by a God who stands with the oppressed and who calls them to do likewise. The Old Testament contains numerous injunctions to care for the stranger and many warnings about the consequences of God's judgement should aliens and strangers be allowed or caused to suffer:

'You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.' (Exodus 22:21)

'Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice.' All the people shall say, 'Amen!' (Deuteronomy 27:19)

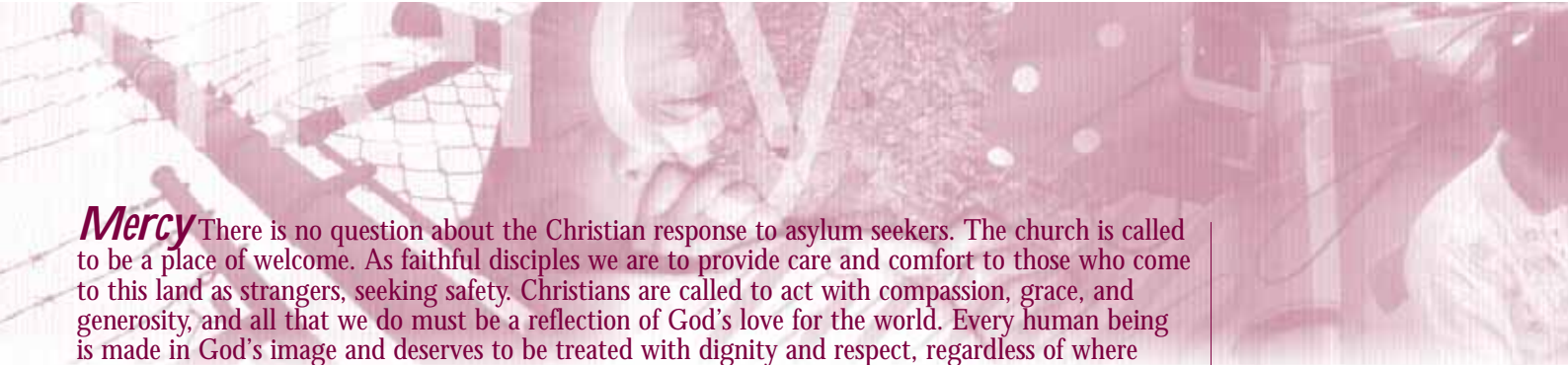
Throughout their journeys, in the midst of persecution and suffering, the Israelites discovered God as one who hears the cries of those in the wilderness, who stands with those who suffer exploitation in a foreign land, who cares for the exiled and the stranger and who calls for justice for the weak and the vulnerable. God calls on the people of faith to care for the strangers and aliens in their midst as they care for each other. Refugees are identified in the Bible with widows and orphans as the most marginalised people, the most at risk, and the test of faithful obedience to God was how a community or individuals cared for these most vulnerable people. To oppress the weak and the powerless and the homeless was to risk the judgement of God. Hospitality to the stranger therefore became one of the strongest moral forces in ancient Israel.

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. (Leviticus 19:33-34)

The Christian story continued to uphold God's call to solidarity with the homeless. Mary and Joseph were forced to take Jesus and hide in Egypt as Herod sought to kill the baby Jesus. As an adult, Jesus understood himself as one of the outcasts: 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' (Matthew 8:20).

³ *Refugees by Numbers*, 2003 edition, UNHCR, www.unhcr.ch





Mercy There is no question about the Christian response to asylum seekers. The church is called to be a place of welcome. As faithful disciples we are to provide care and comfort to those who come to this land as strangers, seeking safety. Christians are called to act with compassion, grace, and generosity, and all that we do must be a reflection of God's love for the world. Every human being is made in God's image and deserves to be treated with dignity and respect, regardless of where they came from and how they arrived. Asylum seekers are our neighbours and we can do no less than the Samaritan as he went out of his way to care for his Jewish neighbour. We can do no less than offer the love of God and the compassion of Christ to everyone we meet, but especially to the stranger, the exile, the poor and the oppressed. In God's love we shall all find freedom and peace and in the face of a stranger we shall see the face of Christ.

Australia is one of the world's wealthy countries. We have spent a considerable proportion of that wealth, keeping asylum seekers out of our country. We have excised territories from our migration zone to make it impossible for asylum seekers to access our refugee determination processes. We have made it clear that our nation's hospitality does not extend to those who come seeking our care without an invitation.

But there is another way. Rather than close our country off to the world's asylum seekers, we can act with justice to fulfil our responsibilities.

Justice Australia can reverse the excision of territories from our migration zone and end the costly Pacific Solution. It would be cheaper and more humane for Australia to take on the responsibility to care for those who come seeking our help. There are alternatives to offshore processing and detention which are both more humane, more just and more cost effective. *The Better Way*, prepared by an alliance of churches and community organisations in Victoria, outlines one such viable alternative.

Community Australia could also redirect the funds saved by ending the Pacific Solution to help address root causes of refugee flows to create peaceful, inclusive and safe communities. We could help to alleviate poverty and reduce debt, provide expertise in local peace-building, promote effective governance, and offer direct assistance to countries which host large refugee problems.

It is not uncommon for people to feel that, with problems of such magnitude, and with Government policy so firmly set, there is nothing that can be done. But the reality is, in fact, the opposite. Governments set the policies that they believe will get them elected. If there are enough people calling for a change, they will change their policies. You can write to your local member of parliament expressing your dissatisfaction with the current policies and encouraging them to consider the system outlined in *The Better Way* as an effective alternative. You could also become involved with local church or community agencies who are supporting asylum seekers in detention and in the community.

Australia is a special place, rich in resources and opportunities. The challenge is for us to make this land a sacred space. Each of us has our own sacred space where we can be 'still' in the presence of our God. Let us aim to create a national environment which acknowledges the presence of God and the activity, dignity and rights of all who dwell in this land.⁴ We can make Australia fair once more.

FINDING OUT MORE

- Read *Tampering with Asylum* by Frank Brennan, Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2003
- Find out more on the website of the National Council of Churches in Australia National Program on Refugees and Displaced People
http://www.ncca.org.au/christian_world_service/at_work_with_refugees
- Get involved by supporting activities for Refugee and Migrant Sunday in your church – materials are produced every year by the NCCA National Program on Refugees and Displaced People. Refugee and Migrant Sunday is celebrated by Australian churches on the last Sunday in August
- Find out about an alternative system for the reception and processing of asylum seekers by reading *The Better Way: Refugees, detention and Australians* produced by the Justice for Asylum Seekers (JAS) network available from <http://www.thebetterway.info/> or from The Ecumenical Migration Centre, Brotherhood of St. Laurence, PO Box 1389 Collingwood, VIC, 3066. Phone: 03 9416 0044.

⁴ Jubilee Justice, Social Justice Sunday Statement 1999, p.14

