



St Dominic's Welcome the Stranger Asylum Seeker Support Program

## **Meeting on 24 November 2020 with the Canterbury Council of Churches to share experience and aspirations in providing support for people seeking asylum.**

### **A brief report.**

Further to recent email discussion, and following up on discussions a few months ago, grateful you extend to members of the Canterbury Council of Churches this invitation to meet to share our experience and aspirations in providing support for people seeking asylum.

### **Background**

Support for asylum seekers, in various ways, has been a priority across the members of the Canterbury Council of Churches, and there have been various forms of cooperation between our various churches over the years.

Asylum seekers are among those in our community who have a particularly difficult time at the moment. Many are in crowded and insecure housing; many do not qualify for any of the income support benefits; and all are faced with the uncertainties relating to their future in Australia but also their options elsewhere. It is therefore important that we do not lose our focus on support for these near neighbours.

As we face ongoing issues and needs in changing times, this topic is one where it was thought that it could be fruitful for the member churches to share our current situation and current thinking.

### **An invitation**

Representatives from a number of Churches met by Zoom on Tuesday 24 November. Technology glitches prevented some others from joining.

Those who participated were

- Peter Charles, Chair of the St Dominic's 'Welcome the Stranger' group, who chaired the meeting
- Lyn Jerram, East Camberwell Baptist Church
- Rosemary Hicks, St Dunstan's Parish
- Cathie Sheehan and Denis Fitzgerald from St Dominic's Parish.

Those who were excluded by the technology were

- Alan Ray, Highfield Road Uniting Church and Acting Chair, Canterbury Council of Churches
- Sr Margaret Fields, St Dominic's.

Participants spoke about the involvement of their congregations with people seeking asylum:



St Dominic's meets accommodation costs for one family, and has supported a number of other families with specific cost items. There is also an annual appeal for dry goods, the proceeds for which are distributed to families through the Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project. This particular appeal is very well supported.

East Camberwell Baptist has as a major focus support for a number of missionaries. However, one member is an English tutor to a refugee family, and there might be potential for collection of food etc.

St Dunstan's has been involved in various ways over time, including guest speakers. They are currently awaiting the assignment of a new priest.

Highfield Road Uniting (Alan had earlier reported) share the costs of a house for asylum seekers provided by Camberwell Uniting Church.

A question arose about penpals. Denis noted that the number of people in Papua New Guinea and on Nauru has fallen to less than 300, and they are not now incarcerated there. However, there are significant numbers of asylum seekers in various types of incarceration in Australia. Denis was to follow up on the openings for pen pals.

The meeting agreed to look at a further gathering sometime in 2021.

Peter opened and closed the meeting with readings from the following prayer, which accompanied the 2015 Social Justice Statement from the Catholic Bishops of Australia:

## FOR THOSE WHO'VE COME ACROSS THE SEAS ...

God of mercy, help me to remember:  
My ancestors came across the seas!  
Help me keep in my mind  
Those who came long ago  
And those who now come to our shores.

As I face you in prayer, God of Compassion,  
I remember my country's words:  
*Send them back or Stop the boats.*  
Then I fear, not your anger  
But the steady gaze of boundless love  
and unlimited compassion  
That impel me to hear Jesus' command:  
*Love one another, as I have loved you*  
Or Pope Francis' call to open our hearts  
To a universal communion  
Which excludes nothing and no one.

Daring to step into such relationship, I pray  
For those forced to leave family,  
home and all they hold dear;  
May they find safe passage and helping hands.

I pray for an end to the wars and oppression  
that forced them to leave;  
I pray that those who welcome them  
are blessed in abundance.

And with deep humility  
and a heart hungry for justice,  
I pray that we Australians, citizens and leaders,  
Open our eyes, our minds and our hearts  
That we may see, understand and welcome  
our brothers and sisters.

May our change of heart penetrate to our beginnings  
As strangers in this land.  
May we allow those we displaced  
– the First People of this land – to welcome us.  
Then knowing, in humility, what it is to be welcomed,  
We will know how to welcome  
the strangers who come to our shores.

This we ask in the name of Jesus your Son,  
In whom we are no longer strangers. Amen.