

A Very British
Nativity





A Very British Nativity

If Mary and Joseph came to the UK seeking refuge this Christmas, what sort of welcome would they receive?

This is the question that lies at the heart of 'A Very British Nativity' – a short film produced by four major Christian denominations in the UK.

Whilst the film is intended to be a humorous reimagining of the Nativity story, life for asylum seekers in the UK is anything but amusing.

It was over 2000 years ago that Mary gave birth to Jesus in a stable, but A Very British Nativity asks how far we've really come; are we treating the most vulnerable people in our society with the dignity they that deserve?

During a period when refugees and asylum seekers experience much hostility, the nativity story is a stark reminder of the importance of showing hospitality to those who come seeking refuge.

As Churches, we want to highlight three ways in which the UK asylum system degrades those who encounter it, and remind the Government that offering asylum is not an 'optional extra' but a legal commitment under the 1950 European Convention on Human Rights.



SO YOU'RE NOT FROM SYRIA?

Your country of origin matters

The first factor that would affect the type of welcome Mary and Joseph would receive today is their country of origin.

The scale of the conflict in Syria means that people are more likely to be aware of the reasons why people are seeking refuge, and possibly more sympathetic to their needs. However, there are many people experiencing other, more invisible conflicts around the world.

We are facing a global humanitarian crisis. 1 in every 113 people in the world finds themselves a refugee, internally displaced, or seeking asylum [1].

Even before the civil war broke out in Syria, ongoing crises in Eritrea, the Central African Republic, Nigeria, South Sudan and elsewhere, contributed to the soaring refugee population. Over 18 million people in this region are now of concern to the UNHCR.

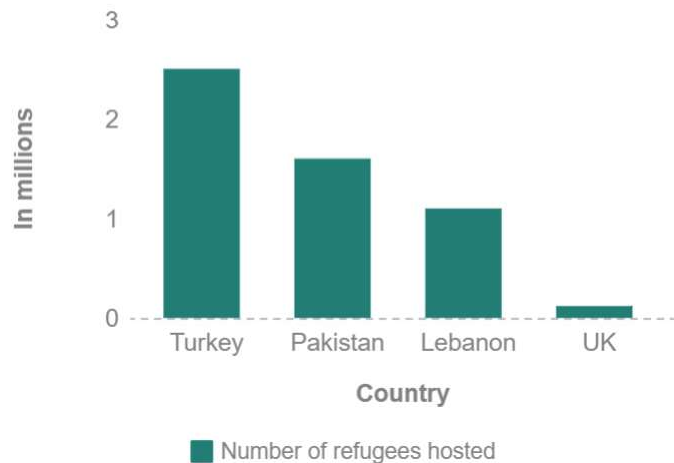
As part of the UK Government's Syrian 'Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme' (VPR) the Government has committed to resettling 20,000 Syrian refugees over five years.

In light of calls to resettle unaccompanied minors stranded in Calais, the Government recently started processing an unspecified number of children who have been evicted from the Calais refugee camp.

People who have not been selected under a resettlement programme, such as the Syrian VPR scheme, have to make their own way to safety, and seek asylum under harsh rules and conditions. Are we in danger of promoting the idea that there are "deserving" refugees and "undeserving" asylum seekers?

Unless they were two of the 750 people resettled annually by the UK via non-Syrian resettlement programmes, Mary and Joseph would need to find an alternative means of getting themselves safely to the UK and then make an individual application for asylum here, a process that is difficult, lengthy and with an uncertain outcome.

Who hosts the world's refugees?
(UNHCR)



**1 in every 113
people in the
world finds
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No room at the Inn

The hostile environment that awaits them

At Christmas, we often sing about 'the little Lord Jesus' who 'laid down his sweet head' in a stable. The Greek word used in scripture, - kataluma- means guest chamber of lodging place. Historians believe that Jesus could have been born in some sub-standard accommodation, as elderly relatives received priority over the young couple.

Whether there was a 'stable with a donkey' or not, Christians believe that the birth of Jesus took place in a hostile and uncertain environment, far from the warm welcome we would wish for ourselves.

The Government has created what it describes as a "hostile environment". While the hostility is intended to deter people with no permission to be in the UK, in practice it extends to many others who have good and legitimate reasons to be in the UK. The asylum system is bewildering, intimidating and complex. Those exposed to it report often report a "culture of disbelief".



After the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act (2012) restricted the cases which qualified for legal aid, many asylum seekers now face greater financial barriers and are increasingly forced to represent themselves. Cases which no longer are entitled to legal aid funding include family reunion claims and those who face removal or deportation.

Asylum seekers are not entitled to mainstream benefits. Those who need support and accommodation may make an application to receive support from the UK Border Agency.

But accommodation is provided on a "no-choice" basis outside of London and the South, which often has the effect of cutting asylum seekers off from their immediate support networks. Refusal of accommodation, or failure to comply with other conditions, can result in support being withdrawn and asylum-seekers being left destitute.

The contracts for asylum accommodation are held by a number of private UK companies, including Serco and G4S, and are referred to as the COMPASS contracts.

Numerous parliamentary enquiries and reports have drawn attention to the 'poor standards of accommodation' which await asylum seekers[3]. At the beginning of this year, G4S admitted that the front doors on houses accommodating asylum seekers in Middlesbrough and Stockton were conspicuously painted red, which tenants claimed made them a target for abuse.

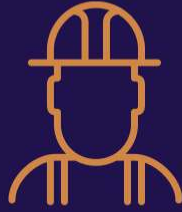
The Joint Public Issues Team received this report of a family's experience in Dudley whose flat is managed by G4S:

"The beds in the flat are broken. My friends have been sleeping on blankets on the floor. The mother has back pain, and G4S did quickly provide her with a mattress when they were told of this. However, no bed frame has been forthcoming. Her 16 year old son still has no mattress or bed frame."

"They have also had problems with rats...G4S have done nothing, despite repeated phone calls to them and promises by them to send someone round...there are visible holes in the wall which enabled rats to get in and out."

Such conditions are totally unacceptable in the 21st Century. It is clear that provisions for a basic quality of life are not being met for some of the most vulnerable people arriving into the UK.

"There are visible holes in the wall that enabled rats to get in and out."



Prevented from working

The right to work

Whilst awaiting a decision on their claim, asylum seekers are not allowed to work in the UK. This is unless they have waited over 12 months for an initial decision on their asylum claim. If this is the case then they are permitted to take up jobs on the UK's official shortage occupation list [4].

The benefits of allowing asylum seekers to work are clear; it would help promote positive social relationships between asylum seekers others in the community, but would also improve asylum seekers integration and employment prospects in the event of a positive asylum decision.

Allowing asylum seekers to work would reduce the chances of exploitation and illegal working, alongside these benefits, it's likely this would also reduce the cost to the Government.

£36.95

└ The support rate provided for asylum seekers in the UK. (Per week) [5]

"Surviving on less than £6 a day is degrading"

Surviving on just £36.95 per week, less than £6 per day, is degrading and affects the physical and emotional wellbeing of these individuals. The longer people are unable to work, the more difficult it is for successful asylum seekers to reintegrate should their claim be accepted.

It is also a fundamental human right: Article 23 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 says 'Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.'

Many countries in the EU with similar employment rates to the UK do give asylum seekers permission to work within a much shorter time frame than the UK. Sweden offers immediate access to the labour market for asylum seekers. Germany and Austria provide access after three months, whilst Belgium, Italy, Cyprus, the Netherlands and Poland all provide access after six months [6]. The available evidence suggests that permission to work does not act as a pull factor [7].

Lack of decency affects us all

We live in an increasingly connected world. Historically this has brought great benefits to the UK both economically and culturally. But our gain has often contributed to the instability of other nations; instability which is at the heart of this crisis.

There has understandably been growing public concern about the impact that mass movement has had upon community and livelihoods. Unfortunately, the political response to this concern has been to take a far more hard-line approach to asylum and immigration, to consolidate the 'hostile environment' which already provided a wide ranging set of obstacles and challenges for those hoping to make the UK their permanent home. Those asylum seekers who face deportation after having their claim rejected have no recourse to public funds, meaning that they will be more at risk of homelessness and poverty the longer they remain in the UK.

As things currently stand, it appears the UK asylum system punishes individuals who have a legal right to have their claims heard by due process and to be supported in a humane way whilst this takes place.

Ultimately, the way we treat asylum seekers affects all of us. It undermines the UK's standing internationally and devalues the human rights which we rely on. Their rights are our rights, and as Churches, we can do far more to ensure these rights are recognised and upheld.

Notes:

[1] <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/press/2016/6/5763ace54/1-human-113-affected-forced-displacement-hits-record-high.html>

[2] See Gina Clayton, (2016) Textbook on Immigration and asylum law. P.56

[3] <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/home-affairs-committee/news-parliament-2015/160122-asylum-accommodation-evidence/>

[4] https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/486107/Shortage_Occupation_List_-_November_2015.pdf

[5] <https://www.gov.uk/asylum-support/what-youll-get>

[6] http://www.asylumineurope.org/sites/default/files/shadow-reports/aida_annualreport_2014-2015_0.pdf

[7] <https://asylumwelfarework.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/is-access-to-the-labour-market-a-pull-factor-for-asylum-seekers-short.pdf>

How can you help?



The first way is by sharing this film on social media, or playing it in your Church service in the run up to Christmas. If the asylum system is to be more just, we must encourage a culture of compassion and understanding.



Pledge to support the #1daywithoutus day of action on February 20th. On Monday February 20, the UN World Day of Social Justice.

Across Europe citizens alongside immigrants from outside the European Union are invited to take part in a nationwide day of action and to show how much they have given to our society.

British born citizens are also invited to stand alongside migrants and asylum seekers in a day of protest, solidarity and celebration. Find out more about the initiative at www.1daywithoutus.org.uk



If you haven't already sent your Christmas cards – why not send #averybritishnativity as an e-card to your family and friends, and donate what you would have spent to a local asylum support charity?

Produced by the Joint Public Issues Team

The Joint Public Issues Team brings together the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Church of Scotland, the United Reformed Church and the Methodist Church. The Team aims to enable our four Churches to work together in living out the gospel of Christ in the Church and in wider society. We aim to promote equality and justice by influencing those in power and by energising and supporting local congregations.

Find out more about our work at www.jointpublicissues.org.uk

Photo and film credit: Sarah Weigold:
<http://sarahweigold.wixsite.com/mysite>



The Methodist Church 



The Church of Scotland

