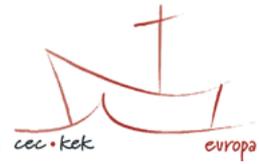


From Strangers to Friends: The Churches in Europe in their encounter with the global South



Author: Rev Darrell Jackson, Researcher in European Mission and Evangelism, Conference of European Churches & Elder in a Church in Central Europe.

In 1954, Methodist and Anglican church members in and around parts of north-west London were asked not to return to the churches they had been attending. Often they would be told by existing members of their congregations, 'This really isn't the kind of church for you,' or, 'You probably won't find this church to be what you're looking for, you know.' The real message was obvious, 'We don't want you worshipping with us!'

What was the reason for these approaches? The Methodists and Anglicans in question were from the Caribbean, invited to the UK by the British government to fill many of the manual jobs for which there were too few British national males in the aftermath of the Second World War. Many of these first generation migrant Christians would form their own 'black-majority' churches, or in a few rare instances find a welcome among a 'white-majority' congregation.

It was one such congregation, Harlesdon Baptist Church in London, that I worked at for the final year of my seminary training. Far from the lively and vibrant Pentecostal-style worship I expected before I went to my first Sunday service there, I discovered a very traditional congregation that seemed to have maintained a 1950s bubble, inside of which they lived and worshipped. The Pastor was white, there were two white deacons, one or two white members, with a congregation of approximately 150 adult Caribbeans.

Working and worshipping with that congregation for a year taught me something about stereotypes and how ill-equipped the churches often are to overcome them.

If the press headlines are to be believed, Europe is currently in danger of being 'flooded' by 'waves' of 'illegal' immigrants who are, 'marching across our lands', and 'stealing our jobs' and 'polluting' our gene pools. I despair at such gross distortions but sadly the discourse has a certain persuasive power even among the Churches of Europe today. When the Baptist Union of Great Britain elected a President formerly from Sri Lanka in the mid 1990s, death threats were received purporting to come from the British Klu Klux Klan.

Here I am not especially concerned to offer a sustained analysis of immigration in Europe, but you may find the following headlines of interest, particularly those of you who are unfamiliar with the situation in Europe.

Some brief headlines of immigration in Europe

Figure 1 demonstrates the varying rates of immigration into the current 25 EU states over the past thirteen years or so. The numbers are an average for all states and are per thousand of the existing EU population. You will notice that the current rate of immigration into the EU is only four and a half people per thousand population. Of course, these can only be estimations based on official

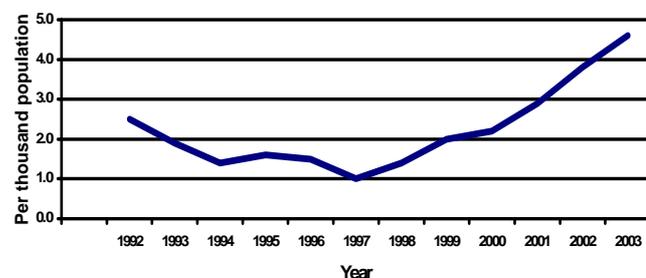


Figure 1: Average net immigration rates of the 25 EU countries, 1992-2003 (Source: Eurostats, 2005)

statistics, but they probably are as good as we can get. Usually the limitations of such statistics reflect the attempt by Government agencies to gather information from groups of people who may not wish to be enumerated.

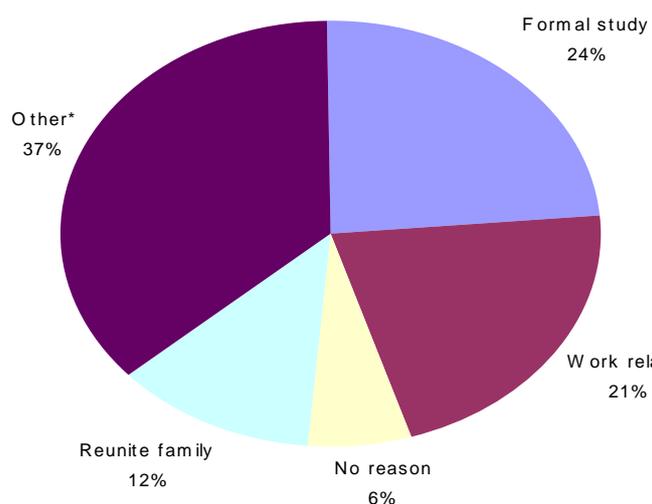
For example, Eurostat, the EU statistical service, has no data later than 1996 for the number of Iranians and Iraqis living and registered to work in Europe. Then there are only some few hundreds registered in Spain and Austria. On a recent visit to Cyprus I was told that there were probably nearly 4,000 Farsi speaking Iranians, Afghanis and others living on the Island. Many are living and working illegally. Life is fragile and they are vulnerable to many forces. Across Europe there are known Farsi-speaking congregations in 31 countries, accounting for a total of 53 congregations (including 7 in the UK and 15 in Germany). There are doubtless many other Farsi speakers who are attending European churches and worshipping in a second-language, often though not exclusively English.

Spain	17.6	Austria	4.7
Cyprus	17.2	Malta	4.5
Italy	10.4	United Kingdom	4.4
Liechtenstein	8.8	Belgium	3.4
Ireland	7.8	Greece	3.2
Portugal	6.1	Sweden	3.2
Switzerland	5.7	Czech Republic	2.5
Luxembourg	4.7	Norway	2.5
Slovenia	1.8	Estonia	0
Germany	1.7	Bulgaria	0
Hungary	1.5	Romania	-0.3
Denmark	1.3	Latvia	-0.4
Finland	1.1	Poland	-0.4
France	0.9	Iceland	-0.7
Netherlands	0.4	Lithuania	-1.8
Slovakia	0.3	Croatia	-

Table 1: Net migration by country per thousands population, 2003 Source: Eurostats, 2005

Of course, calculating an average like this is not helpful if we wish to discover what is happening in each country. Current levels of immigration vary widely across Europe, in part reflecting the situation after the accession of the new members States into the EU.

Such a list is helpful at a pan-European level in seeking to determine which national Churches, Councils of Churches, and Evangelical Alliances ought to have in place appropriate responses for working with migrants and refugees. Of course, it is also important to know something of the predominant ethnic or national groups (and their pre-existing religious affiliations) that are arriving in particular countries. Another factor is also the question of whether the migrant communities have a language affinity with the receiving community. French, Spanish, and English-speaking migrants are more likely to build relationships more quickly with receiving country Church communities than are migrants from Asian or Central Asian language groups, for example.



*(asylum, visitors, work-seekers, temporary workers)

Figure 2: Main reasons for UK immigration, 2002 Source: UK Office for National Statistics, 2004

The reasons for the migration will also determine to a large extent the way in which the migrant and the citizen will respectively perceive 'need' and 'ministry opportunity'. Figures from the UK reveal the following reasons for migration into the UK.

The reasons for the migration will also determine to a large extent the way in which the migrant and the citizen will respectively perceive 'need' and 'ministry opportunity'. Figures from the UK reveal the following reasons for migration into the UK.

Responding as churches to the scale and the diversity of migration in Europe requires more than a coordinated effort. The creative and strategic programmes of *The Refugee Highway*, *Hope for Europe*, *Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe*, and the *Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization* are urgent and necessary. But they struggle to offer a picture of the difficult decisions that are faced on the ground. They may also give the impression that such work can be planned, resources marshalled, and decisions taken according to the funding cycles of large donor bodies. Our experience in the church here is that this is far from the case.

The experience of our congregation with migrant and refugee workers and asylum seekers is that in the first stages of migration and asylum seeking there are very few contingencies or plans that one can put in place to ensure a smooth delivery of what these uprooted people are searching for. Provision is piecemeal, unplanned, contingent, under-resourced, often inadequate, and often well-meaning but unsophisticated. The case study from the church in Central Europe illustrates these issues well.

Case Study: St. Mungo's Church of Scotland, Central Europe

The congregation

Up until three years ago the congregation at St. Mungo's Church of Scotland consisted mainly of British, Irish, Canadian, and other English-language nationals. They were joined by a number of people for whom a Church service in English was the only other option to a service in their own language (Swedish & Finnish for example). Additionally there were a few national citizens who chose to worship with their English-speaking spouse. Many members of the congregation were, and still are, working for organizations such as the International Red Cross and other NGOs, a few are in diplomatic service, and some are long-term missionaries. A number of them spend considerable periods working outside of the country. Theologically one might describe the congregation as moderate with an evangelical fringe. It is comfortable with Taizé style worship yet open to more contemporary worship songs. Monthly Bible study and Maundy Thursday vigils sit happily together in its programme.

A new arrival

Some three years ago the minister of the church, Willie Hamilton, noticed a visitor one Sunday morning. Over coffee after the service, Willie introduced himself to the new arrival. The rather quiet individual introduced himself as Fahjid, a Persian from Iran. A Farsi speaker, he explained in his heavily accented English that he had left Iran several years previously to seek political asylum in Europe. He had eventually arrived in the country, had been processed through the immigration process and granted political asylum with right to remain in the country. On his way there he had spent some time in Bulgaria where he had come into contact with a Baptist congregation. As a result of the ministry of this church he had taken the decision to leave behind his Muslim background and become a Christian follower of Jesus. As a result of his activities in Iran before he left, Fahjid was systematically tortured and it is obvious that he carries the mental scars as heavily as he bears the long-term physical effects.

More arrivals

Fahjid was well connected among the other refugees in the detention centre and it wasn't long before he started to bring along friends he had made there. The majority of these people were also Farsi speakers with only limited English but they seemed to appreciate the

opportunity to leave the detention centre for the two hour journey to the capital and sit through an hour-long Church service. A practical question soon became obvious, 'How to feed these groups of people for the six hours whilst they were away from the centre?' Fahjid, with one or two others from the group started preparing food before the Sunday services began. When church services got boring and minds began to wander, one was sure to catch the faint smell of the meal of the week wafting from the church kitchen into the church sanctuary!

Christian Instruction / catechesis

Over the course of two years there has been a steady stream of refugees and asylum seekers passing through the church doors. Some of them have asked for baptism and the church has struggled to know how best to prepare them. It has been difficult to instruct people new to the Christian faith (or who may not yet have a Christian faith) in English as only a few of them speak it sufficiently well. The church has access to only a limited range of Farsi language resources and of course those with the teaching abilities are not able to use them because they are English-speakers! Bibles are available in Farsi and the recently introduced Sunday afternoon Bible studies take place with translation from English into Farsi, often via a second or third language; a Turkish-speaking Elder from the congregation is a great help in this regard. Two of the congregational Elders are American mission partners with the PC-USA and have become steadily involved in the refugee ministry over the last two years.

Some of the more able members of the Farsi group speak English quite well and have expressed an interest in improving their English in order to pursue theological study. The practicalities of studying theology in the country are daunting. No English-language programmes of study are available locally. Using material from the United Kingdom has been explored but this is expensive. A Persian PC-USA missionary has visited several times from Berlin and his visits have always been hugely appreciated but he is not able to visit as regularly as he might wish. However, he recognizes the need for properly equipped leadership among the Farsi-speaking group and the need for basic Christian discipleship. More recently, members of the congregation came across the European Director for Persian Ministries of a large evangelical North American ministry who expressed an enthusiastic interest in visiting the refugees. He is keen to explore whether it would be worth establishing a base locally for his Ministry's training programme. The training programme is focused on equipping potential Farsi leaders within their local refugee communities and pays particular attention preparing Persian Christians for evangelistic witness among non-Christian Persian refugees. Some in the congregation are a little uncomfortable with this more conservative approach and wonder whether it might damage relationships with and among the refugee community.

Worship

Worship on Sunday mornings follows a fairly typical Church of Scotland format with a liturgical pattern that allows for the Reformation emphases of orderly worship and the preaching of the Word. Eucharist, or Communion, is celebrated once a month. All the worship is conducted in English. Occasionally it has been the practice of those leading worship to ask a Farsi speaker to read the Bible passage in Farsi, following its being read in English. On Easter Sunday 2005 it was possible to find three hymns in English for which the minister also had a text in Farsi. Fahjid has occasionally offered a solo in Farsi during the period of the offering and one or other of the Farsi group are often asked to carry the Bible into the sanctuary at the start of the Sunday service. They are also keen to help distribute songbooks at the beginning of the service.

Meeting the needs

Once asylum seekers are granted refugee status they are required to leave the refugee centre. Employment and accommodation then become the two most pressing needs for them. The unemployment is already fairly high and salaries for non-nationals without language skills are not very high at all. The National Reformed Church is trying to address this with a number of practical solutions. It is possible that opportunities for manual work can be found in several of the large multinational supermarkets that surround the city. This could prove counterproductive because working on Sundays is likely to be required and so individuals who take such positions will find it increasingly difficult to attend Sunday worship. Some from the refugee community have relatives in other countries within the EU (Sweden for example) and are considering going to work in these countries for higher rates of pay even though they would have to work there illegally. This leaves them highly vulnerable to exploitation.

The church has also found that it is becoming involved in working to obtain necessary legal documents for those seeking refugee status. To assist with these practical matters a local liaison officer has been made available by the National Reformed Church. However, the legal obstacles are still huge and local bureaucracy is constantly frustrating and moves very slowly, consuming large amounts of time.

Language training

The church has been working with the Farsi group to provide English language training. The argument for this is that English is a useful common language for the refugees of different language groups to use among themselves. It also seems to be the case that some members of the church feel that it would be better to teach the local language to enable the Persians to integrate more rapidly into local communities and society at large. Some of the refugees are also taking language classes in the indigenous language. Church members are helping to teach English after Sunday morning worship.

Help, we're sinking!

The Church has now realized that work in this way is making huge demands on their limited resources. The Elders have had to meet several times to think about the range of issues that this work raises. They have very few answers that seem to satisfy everybody. How would you help them think through the range of issues. What would be your advice in this situation?

Discussion point one: Baptism

It is likely that some of the Farsi group see baptism as a possible means of speeding up the process of gaining refugee status. For others, their investigation of the Christian faith has prompted a genuine search for personal faith and discipleship. Some members of the church are unhappy with baptizing those who request without a genuine experience of Christian conversion. Others wonder whether baptism can be seen as a step towards genuine faith. How can the church leadership best respond to the pastoral issues raised by this? What might it mean for the Farsi community if some of its members were denied baptism whilst others were offered it?

Discussion point two: Priorities for ministry and mission

The church has limited financial resources and a lack of people who are readily available.

Some members feel that encouraging the Persian Ministries Director to help the Farsi community evangelise other refugees is a priority. They argue that this is important and highlights the reconciling work of Christ, bringing people into a vital relationship with God.

Others in the congregation highlight the need for a counselling service for those in the refugee community who have experienced various traumas, anything from family separation to torture. They argue that these people need to experience psychological and spiritual healing from the wounds caused by the trauma they have suffered.

Yet others believe that a priority should be to integrate the refugees more closely into the host society. This involves finding appropriate housing, teaching the local language, and finding employment. In this way the church can work towards reconciled relationships between refugees and nationals.

What do you believe the priorities to be? Would you prioritise something not already mentioned here? Using the criteria of reconciliation and healing how would you decide what to prioritise?

Discussion point three: Worship

Some members of the church think that it is wrong to encourage the refugee community to provide the text of hymns and read the Bible in Farsi, or indeed the other languages spoken by the refugees. They emphasise the tradition of the Scottish church and feel that the refugees should be given every assistance to 'fit in'. Teaching English to the refugees is given a high priority by this group of church members. Some of them have volunteered to help. They do not want to encourage members of the Farsi community to seek Sunday work because they will not then be able to attend weekly worship.

Other members think it is only fair to learn songs sung by Farsi Christians even though the music is definitely not European! They would like to make greater use of songs and hymns that can be sung simultaneously in more than one language. They also think it's a good idea if we can occasionally read the Bible in more than just English.

A small minority of members look forward to seeing a fully functioning Farsi congregation with its own leaders. For this reason they are very supportive of plans to provide theological training for potential leaders. They want the church to channel limited funds towards training future leaders and argue that these people should have priority in the securing of accommodation for refugees.

Which of these, or another option, do you think most closely reflects the nature of the Christian church as a reconciled and reconciling community of 'every tribe and nation' engaged in the worship of the one triune God?

Discussion point four: Language learning

What are the respective advantages of teaching English and the indigenous language as a second language? Some in the congregation think that teaching English merely encourages refugees to think about moving further westwards with a view to re-settling in England. Does the teaching of English serve to further de-stabilise the refugee community by creating a

sense of continuous impermanence, with the family upheavals this implies? What language learning policies best serve the ends of a 'healthy and reconciled' family and community life?

Summary

The issues in the case study are simply the issues we have been wrestling with in our church. Many people throughout Europe are wrestling with similar issues and attempting to answer these issues in different ways. Some of the initiatives that I have come across through my work are highlighted in my paper *'Migrant churches in Europe: towards an overview of activity and resource – some examples'* (please email mission@redcliffe.org if you would like a copy). These are some of the ways in which the churches of Europe are learning to become friends of strangers.

If you would like to respond to this article, please use the 'Voice your comments' form on the Encounters website (www.redcliffe.org/mission). Alternatively, you may prefer to email your response to mission@redcliffe.org, in which case please remember to include your full name, your organisation/role and whether you would like your comments posted on the Encounters discussion board.