



Briefing

alltogether for Asylum Justice

Asylum seekers' conversion
to Christianity



alltogether for Asylum Justice

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Acknowledgements

The Evangelical Alliance is especially grateful to all who contributed to the information in this report:

The Churches' Main Committee, Bail Circle, Churches Commission for Racial Justice and Churches Together in Britain and Ireland;

The Methodist Church Refugee Working Group for the reproduction of guidelines to ministers;

Christian Solidarity Worldwide and Release International;

The anonymous participants at workshops in churches in Wales and the North of England, and their church leaders;

The participants at the Symposium on the Persecution of Christian Asylum Seekers 7 June 2007.

Introduction: alltogether we are the Evangelical Alliance

The Evangelical Alliance, which was founded in 1846 is the umbrella body that brings together a majority of Britain's 1 million Evangelicals. The 1998 English Church Attendance Survey revealed that 35% of Anglicans, 87% of Baptists, 78% of Independents, 35% of Methodists, 93% of New Churches, 93% of Pentecostals, 21% of URC members, and 63% of those attending other churches identified themselves as Evangelicals. The Alliance exists to promote unity and truth amongst these churches, individuals and evangelical organisations, and to represent their concerns to the wider Church, State and society. There are over 3,300 churches in membership with the Evangelical Alliance. Amongst its many member organisations are well known historic charitable bodies such as the Salvation Army, CARE, the Shaftesbury Society, the Bible Society, Tearfund.

The Evangelical Alliance is accountable to a Council of some 80 representatives, and is managed by a team of executive directors accountable on a daily basis to a Board of Trustees. Its policies are regularly reviewed and tested through frequent publications, reference groups, focus groups.

General Director Joel Edwards says: 'The Evangelical Alliance isn't just 55 people working for an organisation. It's a multitude of Christians, churches and organisations joined by a common drive and passion to see our nation transformed by the good news of the Gospel. We're crammed full of gifted individuals and ministries who together speak for over one million evangelicals in the UK. That gives us real impact.

'We have become very excited by the organic and focused relationships and partnerships among Christians that continue to blossom across the UK, knocking down those barriers between us that have so often caused mistrust and isolation. More than ever, we are committed to an alltogether way of working'.

'alltogether for Asylum Justice' has been produced with the help of Evangelical Alliance member organisations and represents their work together and with others to address injustices in the asylum system.



Introduction: altogether for Asylum Justice

Asylum seekers are in danger of becoming some of the most vulnerable, alienated and demonized members of society. Focus needs to be regained on this as a humanitarian issue which requires a great deal of sensitivity.

Christians believe that refugees should be treated as people, with compassion, understanding and respect. We believe it is time that we welcomed the stranger in the UK. Jesus said, “I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me” (Matthew 25.35–36).

Asylum seekers are often wrongly depicted as ‘scroungers’, cheating the system and threatening our sense of British national identity. Standing with asylum seekers as they are vilified in the press is often an uncomfortable position but one which gives Christians the opportunity to put Jesus’ call into practice and welcome the ‘strangers’ living in our communities.

In 2002, the Evangelical Alliance, jointly with the Churches’ Commission for Racial Justice, published a study of churches’ involvement with refugees and asylum seekers¹. It demonstrated the crucial role that churches play, with stories from 15 churches across the UK who have set up a variety of projects, from crèches to cultural evenings, to help integrate refugees and asylum seekers into the community. Churches are central to community engagement and often provide a first port of call to newly arrived asylum seekers as they provide certain core services such as food and clothing, English language courses, and shelter for individuals at risk. It is for this reason that asylum seekers often become engaged with not only the practical side of church life, but also spiritual aspects. Asylum seekers of other faiths and those of no faith often become attracted to Christianity through the work of churches and Christians offering to help them at times of great need. It is, therefore, unsurprising to hear of stories of asylum seekers who convert to Christianity once in the UK. This, however, can complicate their application for asylum. Having arrived in the UK fleeing religious, racial or political persecution in their homeland and initially applying for asylum on those grounds, a conversion to Christianity can provide reason for a fresh claim to be lodged with the Borders and Immigration Agency.

While there are inevitably a proportion of bogus claims of Christian conversion, there remain many asylum seekers who have genuinely chosen to follow the Christian faith. Having had their asylum application refused, they face being sent back to countries where it is not safe for them to practice their faith.

The case studies included in this report are evidence of a number of asylum seekers who, having applied for asylum in the UK under reasons of political persecution, subsequently applied for asylum on the grounds of religious persecution.

Christian human rights organisations such as Christian Solidarity Worldwide and Release International know it is often unsafe to return a practising Christian to an Islamic country let alone return an apostate (a convert to Christianity) to an Islamic country where conversion is illegal. Therefore, there are grave implications for returning asylum seekers who have converted to Christianity to countries like Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

¹ Haslem, S. and Thomas, B. (2002) *Blessing or Burden? The Churches’ response to the Asylum ‘problem’*, Evangelical Alliance and Churches’ Commission for Racial Justice

Following a Symposium on the Persecution of Christian Asylum Seekers, held in Westminster on 7 June 2007, this report brings together the work done by the Evangelical Alliance, the Churches' Main Committee and others to ensure justice for Christian asylum seekers. Case studies of asylum seekers from churches in England and Wales whose conversion to Christianity has been called into question are included anecdotally, alongside some questions asked in interviews by immigration caseworkers and at subsequent immigration tribunal hearings to test the faith of Christian asylum seekers. For reasons of confidentiality no names of asylum seekers, the identity of their church leaders or details of the church location are given.

The purpose of this report is to bring together work done by various Christian groups to address asylum injustices. It acts as a guide to the issue of conversion by asylum seekers and highlights the sensitivity with which the issue of faith testing much be approached.

Parliamentarians are increasingly aware of the complexities of the asylum system and particularly in assessing claims of religious persecution. Gordon Prentice MP (Labour: Pendle) tabled a written question about Christian asylum seekers in November 2006 and in June 2007 David Burrowes MP (Conservative: Enfield) tabled a question specifically about asylum seekers who converted to Christianity. MPs are often approached by both asylum seekers and church leaders to intervene in asylum cases. For this reason this report includes guidance notes for MPs and for church leaders.

An appendix of contact details and a glossary of terms has been included at the end of this report. This includes:

- Organisation contacts
- Denomination contacts
- Individual church contacts
- Glossary of refugee terms
- Glossary of Christian terms

A list of organisations who work in the area of refugee and asylum seeker advocacy and support is included in the appendices. For more information on specific refugee/asylum support issues or legal concerns please consult one of these organisations.

Asylum Process

The Borders and Immigration Agency of the Home Office (formerly the Immigration Nationality Directorate) is the government department which deals with asylum applications and the support given to asylum seekers.

There are three possible outcomes of an application for asylum:

1. The asylum seeker is recognized as a refugee under the terms of the 1951 United Convention relating to the Status of Refugees² and is granted asylum in the UK.
2. The applicant is refused asylum, but granted exceptional leave to remain for a limited period because there are humanitarian reasons for allowing the applicant to stay in the UK.
3. The applicant is refused both asylum and exceptional leave. In that case the applicant has the right to appeal to the Immigration Appellate Authority. Some applicants may have a further right of appeal to the Immigration Appeal Tribunal. Applicants may also seek a judicial review in the High Court. Once all avenues of appeal have been exhausted, then the applicant must leave the UK.

For more information of the asylum process please visit www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk

² 1951 United Nation Convention on Refugees

Background – working altogether

2004

The Evangelical Alliance, accompanied by Christian Solidarity Worldwide and members of City Church Newcastle, met with the Immigration and Nationality Directorate on 5 February 2004 to highlight concerns around asylum seekers' conversion to Christianity. At that time a conclusion was made by the Evangelical Alliance that an unacceptable level of inconsistency in asylum decisions and a lack of knowledge about Christian conversion resulted in genuine Christian asylum seekers being refused asylum despite facing persecution in their country of origin.

Suggestions that we made included:

- a) Church leaders being called as 'expert witnesses' in appeal hearings;
- b) The sensitive examination of the asylum seeker at appeal hearing: examination of his/her faith to be focussed on a changed life, not necessarily biblical or doctrinal knowledge;
- c) Training of adjudicators, caseworkers and translators in the Christian faith.

Amnesty International published "Get it Right: How the Home Office decision making fails refugees"³ in February 2004. It revealed how asylum decisions were based on inaccurate and out-of-date country information, unreasoned decisions about people's credibility and a failure to properly consider complex torture cases.

Government figures show that the Home Office got the initial decision wrong on nearly 14,000 asylum cases in 2002, meaning around one in five cases are overturned after costly appeals.

2005

In February 2005 the Churches Main Committee presented a submission to the Home Office with detailed accounts of the inadequacies of the asylum process from churches across England. Evidence was drawn from churches from Birmingham, Bolton, Bournemouth, Derby, Newcastle upon Tyne, Oxford and Tunbridge Wells concerning Christians from Iran.

Further to the Evangelical Alliance's 2004 paper, they had concerns:

1. about the inappropriateness of question asked by the Home Office representatives to determine whether or not an Appellant is truly a Christian;
2. about the lack of knowledge of Christianity by Adjudicators and other officers in determining whether Christian faith has or has not been proved;
3. about the Adjudicators' lack of knowledge and understanding of culture in the country from which the Appellant has come;
4. about the lack of credence given by Adjudicators to the informed opinions of Christian clergy and ministers who should be regarded as expert witnesses on matters of determining faith;
5. about the improper distinction drawn in judicial findings between different churches and their commitment to evangelism;
6. about the prejudicial impact of cuts in legal aid and advice available to asylum-seekers in preparing their case to be heard with justice in a land which is foreign to them;
7. about the accuracy of interpreters in courts and tribunals who may be unfamiliar with Christian terms, with the particular cultural background and dialect of the asylum-seeker, and with the proper canons of interpretation necessary for a judicial hearing to be just;

³ Amnesty International (2004) *Get it right: How Home Office decision making fails refugees*, Amnesty International: London

8. about the varying and unpredictable assessment by different tribunals of the risks likely to be faced by Christian convert asylum-seekers on being returned to their country of origin, and the improper distinction drawn between Christian leaders and so-called 'ordinary' converts as (less) likely to attract attention by their communicating of the Christian faith.

In October 2005 the Churches' Main Committee met with Home Office Minister Andy Burnham MP and presented their concerns about the asylum process to him.

2006

A seminar held at Westminster Abbey on 14 March 2006 explored the issue of asylum seekers' conversion to Christianity.

Other Christian organisations had similar meetings with the Immigration Nationality Directorate (IND). Most notable is the meeting between the Churches' Main Committee (representing the views of 39 Christian and Jewish religious bodies to the UK government) and the IND on 24 August 2006. As a result of this meeting the Immigration Nationality Directorate amended guidelines for caseworkers. These are published on the Borders and Immigration Agency's website⁴. Section 8.5 gives revised instruction about dealing with claims of religious persecution and 8.5.1 deals specifically with religious conversion (see Box A).

This amendment to asylum policy instructions is encouraging. However, as the case studies below will illustrate, mistakes and insensitivities still occur despite the implementation of these guidelines in October 2006.

Gordon Prentice MP asked a written question of the Immigration Minister Liam Byrne to ascertain the numbers of people granted asylum on religious persecution grounds. The response was inconclusive (see Box B⁵).

Box A

8.5.1 Religious conversion

Some asylum applicants base their claim on an alleged conversion to a different religion. While the Country of Origin Reports recognise there are countries where conversion from one religion to another is viewed with disapproval, this will not lead to persecution of the convert in every case. Whether or not a convert will be persecuted is entirely dependent on the individual circumstances of the case and the attitude of society/authorities in the country concerned.

If decision makers consider they need to test whether the conversion is genuine, they must ensure that any questions asked during the asylum interview are carefully prepared, are tailored to the individual case and do not expect an unrealistic level of specialist knowledge. For instance, just because somebody claims to have recently converted to Christianity, this does not mean they will be able to remember how many books there are in the Bible or to list Jesus' twelve disciples. If somebody claims to have attended a Pentecostal or Evangelical Church, this does not mean they will be familiar with Catholic traditions and ceremonies. Decision makers should also be aware that some Biblical terms (e.g. 'Trinity', 'Pentecost', 'disciple') which have been translated into English from Greek will not always have a direct translation in the languages of some Muslim countries. Decision makers should check with interpreters before the start of the interview that questions they have prepared can be translated accurately.

If decision makers are in any doubt about the appropriateness of certain questions for testing the genuineness of religious conversion, they should consult a senior caseworker. In addition, the API on Interviewing provides further guidance on good interviewing technique.⁴

Box B

Asylum Seekers

29 Nov 2006 : Column 769W

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were granted asylum on grounds of religious persecution in each year since 1997. [103791]

Mr. Byrne [holding answer 27 November 2006]: The requested information is unavailable and could be obtained only by examination of individual case records and therefore at disproportionate cost.

⁴Immigration Nationality Directorate (2006) *Assessing the Asylum Claim* Asylum Policy Instructions October 2006

<http://www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/asylumpolicyinstructions/apis/assessingtheclaim.pdf?view=Binary>

⁵ House of Commons Hansard 29 November 2006

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmhansrd/cm061130/index/61130-x.htm>

2007

The Times newspaper published a letter from the Very Rev Nicholas Coulton Sub-Dean, Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford to Immigration minister Liam Byrne on 30 April 2007. In the letter, Rev Coulton expressed his concern about the lack of understanding amongst adjudicators of the nature of conversion and the persistence of unreasonable questions to test a person's faith. He rightly highlighted the injustices of an asylum system which, because of poor decision making and a lack of sensitivity often judges it safe for converts to Christianity to be sent back to countries like Iran.

The Evangelical Alliance Public Affairs team accompanied by Release International were invited to meet with the Borders and Immigration Agency on 22 May 2007 in order to highlight these issues before the Symposium in Westminster on 7 June 2007. At this meeting it was agreed that the Evangelical Alliance

would meet with the Central Asylum Senior Caseworker Unit, to discuss how the Home Office "might improve our approach to testing the genuineness of an asylum applicant's faith". This meeting will initiate an ongoing dialogue on faith testing issues between the Church and the newly established national network of regional senior caseworkers.

Furthermore, it was agreed that the Evangelical Alliance and the Country of Origin Information Unit would set up a meeting between the Unit and Christian human rights organisations. This meeting will initiate an ongoing dialogue on country specific intelligence on religious persecution.

The Evangelical Alliance will continue to seek dialogue with the Judiciary to avoid ill-informed and insensitive judgements on religious persecution and the nature of Christian belief.

Box C

The Times (London)

April 30, 2007, Monday

Asylum injustice

Sir, Liam Byrne, the Immigration Minister, says that if Labour fails to address public concern about the level of migration, and its effects on the country and public services, it could lose the next general election ("High immigration is harming Britain's poor, says minister", April 18). He is right, but not in the way he understands.

Working on behalf of the Churches' Main Committee (representing the spread of Christian denominations in the UK), I have studied a great number of tribunal determinations on asylum claims from across the country, especially claims from people whose conversion to Christianity makes it unsafe for them to return to countries such as Iran.

The adjudicators lack an understanding of the nature of conversion and the differing Christian cultures, whether in this country or in the country of origin.

Frequently, ridiculous test questions are asked such as: "What is the number of books in the Bible?" and "What is the birth date of Jesus Christ?" (You have to say December 25.) Failure to produce the required reply breeds a disbelief which prejudices fair judgment.

Many of these applicants are respected members of their congregations and communities, yet evidence by their bishops, clergy and laity who know them best is swept aside by the tribunals.

Dismissal of appeals has led to dawn arrests and deportations at weekends, when it is hard to get preventive injunctions. Legal aid changes have hugely reduced the professional support which can be obtained. On numerous occasions the Home Office has had its fingers rapped by the courts for its refusal to observe due process.

If, as Mr Byrne suggests, Labour does lose the next election, it will be partly because all across the country Christian people have lost faith in a government now obsessed with currying popularity rather than standing for justice.

The Very Rev Nicholas Coulton Sub-Dean, Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford

Source: Times Newspaper (30/04/2007)

In June 2007 David Burrowes MP asked a series of questions about asylum claims on religious persecution grounds (Box D⁶).

Yet again the Home Office was unable to provide an answer about the extent of this problem. It is for this reason that there are no figures published in this report about the numbers of asylum seekers who, having converted to Christianity, claim asylum on religious persecution grounds. The extensive work carried out by the Churches' Main committee and others on this issue and the response from Evangelical Alliance member churches suggests that it is a serious problem.

Box D

Asylum: Religion

6 Jun 2007 : Column 609W

Mr. Burrowes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many asylum seekers sought asylum in the UK on grounds of religious persecution in each of the last three years; [130115] (2) how many asylum seekers who have converted to Christianity while in the UK sought asylum on religious persecution grounds in each of the last three years for which figures are available; [130116] (3) how many failed asylum seekers who have subsequently changed their religion made the basis of their appeal the fear of religious persecution, in the last three years for which figures are available. [130117]

Mr. Byrne: This information is not available and could be obtained by examination of individual case records only at disproportionate cost. Information on asylum applications, initial decisions and appeals by nationality are published quarterly and annually. Copies of these publications are available from the Library of the House and from the Home Office Research, Development and Statistics website at:<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html>.

Symposium on the Persecution of Christian Asylum Seekers 7 June 2007

On 7 June 2007 the Evangelical Alliance hosted a Symposium on the Persecution of Christian Asylum Seekers in the House of Lords. Lord Anderson of Swansea addressed the event which brought together the Churches Main Committee, ministers from Alliance member churches, representatives from Christian Solidarity Worldwide and Release International, Christian asylum seeker organisations and activists, key Home Office personnel and MPs' researchers. Simon Hughes MP summed up the Symposium by appealing for an end to inappropriate faith testing questions by immigration caseworkers and recognition of the sensitivities required when interviewing converts: "you have to be as sensitive about faith as you are about gender".

Discussion at the Symposium focussed around two issues:

- how is the faith of asylum seekers tested by Home Office caseworkers;
- how accurate is the country of origin information relating to issues of apostasy and conversion to Christianity?

Pastors from two Alliance member churches spoke of their experiences of serving asylum seekers in their congregations. One asylum seeker from a church in Wales had been asked "How do you cook a turkey for Christmas?" This is amongst a catalogue of absurd questions which new Christians are asked in order to test their faith.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide and Release International gave presentations detailing the dangerous situations which Christian asylum seekers could face if returned home to countries like Afghanistan, Iran and Eritrea. The lack of religious liberty in these countries is infamous but those who have converted from Islam to Christianity face not only social exclusion but the threat of punishment under Shari'a law.

⁶ House of Commons Hansard 6 June

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmhansrd/cm070606/text/70606w0025.htm#0706077000004> 2007

Case Studies



*“If you share your faith with others then you are not safe”
“Iran is not safe for all of us”.*

Mrs S

Mrs S became a Christian three years ago after she arrived in the UK from Iran. Her husband is a Muslim. His application for political asylum has been refused. Her fresh application, on the grounds of religious persecution, was refused. The Judge didn't believe that she was a Christian. He accused her pastor, a leader of an Arabic Church, of bias towards her. He is an Iraqi Christian, Mrs S is an Iranian convert.

Mrs S would suffer persecution if she were to return to Iran. Her relatives and friends do not accept conversion. She would be unemployable and subject to physical abuse if returned to Iran.

Mrs S has experienced exclusion for the Iranian community in Wales who can't accept her conversion from Islam to Christianity.



“There is a big problem, not just for me, for all Christians. In Iran there are Christians but they are not allowed to do everything. In Iran being a Christian is difficult. Here we share our faith but in Iran you can't. You must believe the Christianity as the government want”.

Mr F

Mr F was a respected GP in Iran. He worked as a doctor in accident and emergency departments and assessed soldiers for military duty. It was his military job that got him into to difficulties with the authorities. He was imprisoned for two weeks before fleeing Iran after paying a substantial bribe to get day release from prison.

Mr F applied for political asylum on arrival in UK with his wife and children. He was asked how and why they had to flee Iran and he recounted his story of wrongful imprisonment. The time from his arrival in the UK to interview was one month. After two weeks he knew the result of the initial interview. He wasn't offered a caseworker or legal representative. He was given no information about the asylum process. Two months later his appeal was heard in a Manchester court. The same evidence was given and the same solicitor acted on his behalf.

He was given 50 or 60 reasons for rejection which revolved mainly around claims that his story didn't match up. There were apparently inconsistencies between the initial interview and the evidence given at court. His appeal was not accepted.

After one month of being in the UK, Mr F came to live in the North of England. An Iranian family introduced him and his family to a local church and he watched a film about Jesus. Mr F converted from Islam to Christianity after studying the Bible.

Mr F's wife subsequently applied for asylum on religious persecution grounds. She was asked 50-60 questions about the structure of the Bible and specific Bible verses. Mr F said she answered very well. However, she was refused asylum because although she has become a Christian she is not a leader therefore it is deemed safe for her to return to Iran.



"In Afghanistan there is Islamic law and according to this my people. If a person converts to another religion their punishment is death."

Mr A

Before he fled Afghanistan Mr A worked for the Taliban as a Mullah, visiting mosques and giving religious instruction. He became a Christian in England after his claim for political asylum was rejected in 2003. Introduced to a leader of a local Church by an English street preacher, Mr A started coming to church and learning about the Bible. He was baptised in July 2004 and has regularly attended church since then. His faith is not a quiet one, despite facing significant persecution and intimidation as a result of his conversion from the Afghan community in his local area.

Mr A put in a fresh claim of religious persecution. He was told that he "demonstrated a limited knowledge of Christian beliefs when questioned at interview" despite him listing all twelve of Jesus' disciples by name. The only question he could not answer was to do with naming the period before Christmas as "Advent". This is not emphasised within his denomination and is not, by any means, a central tenet to the Christian faith. Therefore the judge found that Mr A was not a Christian. The Judge told him that if he genuinely was an apostate then he would have accepted his application as he recognised it would be too dangerous for him to return to Afghanistan.



"A Muslim cannot convert. If you convert it is legitimate that another Muslim kill you."

Mr and Mrs N

Mr N fled Iran after experiencing problems with the government. He applied for asylum on political grounds in 2000. As a practising Muslim he went to a mosque in the north of England. The Muslims at this mosque were predominantly Sunni and he was Shi'ite. As a result he started going to a different mosque linked to a local university. Muslims at this mosque were Iranian students who Mr N claimed interrogated him and pried into why he was in the UK. Wanting to protect himself he lied about his circumstances and stopped worshipping at that Mosque.

A friend introduced him to a local Baptist church. The first time he went there he felt welcomed and no-one pried into his personal circumstances or asked him why he was in the UK. Instead they asked him whether he needed any help. The minister of the church found out that Mr N's wife and children were still in Iran and encouraged the 150-strong congregation to pray for them. Mr N started to go to church regularly and after going to baptism classes for 2 years, was baptised.

Mrs N

Mrs N remained in Iran when her husband, Mr N, fled to the UK. She was in telephone contact with Mr N who told her about the church that he had started attending. Encouraged to find out more after her husband told her of the 'peace and calm' he had experienced in church, Mr N put her in contact with Christians in Iran. She started to attend meetings and came to know the leader of the church. She found peace in church which she had not experienced since her husband left for the UK.

She became estranged from her family who rejected her because she had had contact with Christians. At that time she did not call herself a Christian but was interested in the faith. She claimed that under Shari'a law in Iran if a non-Muslim comes to your house and sneezes then you are made unclean. Her landlord evicted her and she was made a social outcast.

She fled Iran having suffered this social persecution and joined her husband in the UK, claiming asylum under religious persecution but her application was rejected. The judge in her case did not believe that she was Christian. She had photos of her in an Iranian church (signs in the Church were written in Farsi) but the Judge thought that they had been taken in England. She had strong letters of support from the Iranian church.

Mrs N was asked in an interview with a caseworker:

What does the Christmas tree symbolise?

Who was the mother of Jesus?

How did Jesus die?

Name the 12 disciples

How many books were in the Bible?

When is Lent and Advent?

In addition she was asked how many people she had introduced to the church. She was shocked at this question as she had only, at this stage, been in the UK for four months.

Both Mr and Mrs N have had their appeals refused. They may be returned to Iran at any time.

Country of Origin Information

It is unsafe for Christians to proselytise in a number of countries in the world. Even being known as an apostate can result in imprisonment or worse. The countries which are of most concern, and which the asylum seekers interviewed in this particular study come from, are Iran and Afghanistan.

Iran

The Country of Origin Information Report for Iran produced by the Home Office includes reports from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the United States State Department (USSD) and the Danish Fact Finding Mission (FFM) which warn of the dangers for both apostates and proselytizing Christians⁷. Paragraph 19.19 cites a UNHCR in Background Paper on Iranian refugees dated 2001:

“Apostasy, especially conversion from Islam to another religion, is not acceptable in Islamic law. An innate-apostate (one whose parents were Muslims and who embraced Islam but later left Islam), if a man, is to be executed. If a woman, she is to be imprisoned for life, but will be released if she repents. A national apostate (a person converting from another faith to Islam, and then reconvertng back to the other faith) is to be encouraged to repent and, upon refusal to repent, is to be executed. The most prominent cases of apostasy appear to occur from Islam to Christianity. Proselytizing apostates (converts who have begun preaching Christianity) are likely to face execution.”

The Operational Guidance Note on Iran⁸ used by immigration officials, admits that converts “may face obstacles” (paragraph 3.6.6). It is concluded that authorities do not prosecute converts as long as they practice their religion privately and do not attempt to convert others. It is conceded that applicants who may be seen as ‘high-profile’ apostates or Christians (i.e. leaders of churches) ought to be granted asylum. Additionally, those applicants who are known to the authorities for a different reason and also have converted to Christianity may be granted asylum because of the heightened risk.

The evidence is clear: Christians face persecution in Iran. Christians who were formally Muslims face imprisonment and even death, according to Shari’a law. It is not safe to send Christian converts back to Iran. The system which tests their faith must be robust to avoid sending back Christian converts who will face persecution, at all costs.

⁷ Country of Origin Information Report: Iran 27 October 2006, Home Office
http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/country_reports.html

⁸ Operational Guidance Note: Iran, 27 February 2007, Home Office
<http://www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/countryspecificasylumpolicyogns/>

Afghanistan

The Country of Origin Information Report for Afghanistan produced by the Home Office includes evidence from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the United States State Department (USSD) and the Danish Fact Finding Mission (FFM) and World Evangelical Alliance which warn of the dangers for both apostates and proselytizing Christians in Afghanistan⁹. Paragraph 19.31 cites the USSD 2006 Religious Freedom Report which states that:

“Conversion, which was generally held by many citizens to contravene Islam and Shari’a, garnered much public attention due to a high profile case that occurred during the reporting period. Due to societal pressure, most local Christians hid their religion from their neighbors and others. As a result, little information was available about this community or the challenges it faced...

“While not legally prohibited, conversion is strongly discouraged since it is considered by many to be against the tenets of Islam. During the reporting period, there was one arrest of a convert to Christianity. In March 2006, Abdul Rahman, who converted to Christianity while living abroad during the Taliban regime, was detained for approximately one month and could have faced the death penalty for apostasy, but he was deemed not fit to stand trial before those charges could be brought against him. He was granted asylum in Italy due to potential threats on his life. There were no reports of abuse while in custody..”⁹

The case of Abdul Rahman was widely reported in the UK¹⁰. The Afghan man had converted to Christianity from Islam and was sentenced to death after being found guilty of apostasy in Kabul. He was eventually granted asylum in Italy where he now lives.

The Operational Guidance Note on Afghanistan¹¹ advises that due to a lack of information about the treatment of apostates in Afghanistan, owing to converts keeping a low profile when in the country, and the lack of evidence of direct persecution, that applicants are not granted asylum in the UK on these grounds. It does admit that in some circumstances, where there is evidence of the prospect of persecution, asylum may be granted.

There is clear evidence of persecution of apostates within Afghanistan. Converting to Christianity from Islam contravenes Shari’a law and puts individuals at risk not only of societal discrimination but also of the death penalty.

⁹ Country of Origin Information Report: Afghanistan 17 April 2007, Home Office
http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/country_reports.html

¹⁰ BBC News 31 March 2006 Afghan convert 'would be killed'
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/4863742.stm

¹¹ Operational Guidance Note: Afghanistan 20 April 2007, Home Office
<http://www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/countryspecificasylumpolicyogns/>

Faith Testing Questions

A sample of the same questions previously asked of asylum seekers to test the genuineness of their faith was asked of Evangelical Alliance members in July 2007. The survey sampled members from across Christian denominations.

In order to get a representative sample of the survey, seven people's responses to the questions have been selected at random. Their responses are recorded below:

How do you prepare a turkey for Christmas?

- A. My wife cooks the turkey. I guess you stuff it with sage and onion stuffing and put foil around it. Am I supposed to say I lay hands on it and pray a blessing or something? We don't usually do that kind of thing, being thoroughly biblical and not superstitious.
- B. Depends a bit, as a British Christian I would probably say "this is an entirely irrelevant question, having a turkey for Christmas dinner is a relatively modern invention and has nothing to do with Christianity". However if I were an asylum seeker and wanted to get on the good side of the interviewer, I would say "take out the giblets, wrap in foil and put in the oven".
- C. This has nothing to do with Biblical Christianity. But - I simply buy a ready stuffed Turkey breast from the supermarket, and put in the oven.
- D. I go to Tescos who have hopefully done the messy bits for me!
- E. Cut off the head, eviscerate, wash out the cavity, stuff with thyme and parsley stuffing and sausagemeat, baste with oil, wrap in aluminium foil, roast in oven for 20 minutes for each lb in weight.
- F. I don't eat turkey
- G. Roast in the oven

What were the names of the thieves either side of Jesus as he was crucified?

- A. The Bible doesn't say so I wouldn't like to guess.
- B. The Bible does not give their names, any traditional names which may have been ascribed to them are purely tradition and irrelevant to Christian faith.
- C. No idea. I'm not aware that the Bible tells us.
- D. I wasn't aware they were named in the Bible. When I finish this test, I will go and have a look in the gospels.
- E. No idea.
- F. Not given in the Bible
- G. Don't know

What were the names of Jesus' disciples?

- A. Peter, Judas Iscariot, the other Judas, Thadeus, Bartholomew, Matthew (or Levi), James and John (the sons of thunder), Thomas, three more I can't remember off hand.
- B. Well first of all there is a difference between the lists given in various gospels. For instance Nathanael is sometimes called Bartholomew, others are: James & John Simon (Peter) & Andrew Judas (not Judas Iscariot) Judas Iscariot Matthew. And after that I would be in trouble!
- C. Off the top of my head - Peter, James, John, Matthew, Judas Iscariot, Judas, Andrew, But I know where to look up the answer.
- D. Peter, James, John, Judas, Andrew, Thomas, Thaddeus, Levi/Matthew and I would have to look the rest up.
- E. Simon Peter, John, Thaddeus, Judas Iscariot, Simon the Zealot, Matthew, Andrew, Thomas, Nathaniel,
- F. Which ones?
- G. TOO MANY TO NAME

What will happen around the world in the second coming?

- A. Well now, it depends if you're a pre-millennialist, a post-millennialist or whatever. There will be a thousand years of suffering (which you may think is yet to come, but I think we're already in). So, in the end, Jesus will come again in judgement, the dead will rise and the world will come to an end. Those who own Christ as saviour and Lord will go straight to heaven. Those who do not will go to hell, where Satan will be eternally captivated, rather than roaming the earth as he does at the moment.
- B. First thing to say is that we cannot be absolutely sure. The Bible gives some hints but it does not give a detailed plan. Generally speaking it tells us that there will be wars and famines (the implication being that these will be worse than those which have been happening for the past 2000 years). It tells us that the Antichrist will be more active, but again is not explicit about how this will manifest itself. Finally it tells us that Jesus will reappear and be visible to all people. Again how this happens is not made explicit, but it would almost certainly not mean that he appears on television! The implication is very clear that all will see him, whether or not they have television.
- C. Christians are divided on this issue. We simply know that it will happen, and everyone will know about it. Maybe there will be increased wars famines and natural disasters....
- D. The answer to this question depends on your theological position. Does one need to be a pre or post millennialist to pass?
- E. The dead believers will be raised and will meet with the living believers with Christ in the air.
- F. It will end
- G. Every eye will see Jesus & confess he is Lord

What is your favourite part of the Bible?

- A. Judges - great humour... or is it Romans for its theology, or 1 Samuel for its great characters. I can't decide.
- B. To some extent this depends on how I feel at the time. But probably Galatians or Romans as they contain some very clear and explicit definitions of the Christian faith. But as a Christian you cannot pick and choose one particular book, the Bible needs to be read as a whole to fully understand.
- C. The gospels
- D. I love it all but have a particular enjoyment of the Book of Isaiah.
- E. Ruth
- F. The whole lot
- G. Psalms

What is the period running up to Christmas called?

- A. Advent
- B. Advent. But I have been to churches who never mention the word "Advent" or indeed "lent". Again this is a piece of terminology which while applicable to most churches is not actually applicable to all and is not really a necessary piece of Christian understanding.
- C. Advent
- D. Advent.
- E. Advent
- F. Advent
- G. Advent

In response to the question “Did you feel these questions could be used to prove your faith?” over 90% answered “No”.

The answers included in this sample of a survey of Evangelical Alliance members reflect the whole sample. Evangelical Alliance members were appalled at both the content of the questions and the use of questions to test a genuine conversion.

Those surveyed suggested better questions to ask. These included:

- “What difference does being a Christian make to the way you live your life?”
- “How has becoming a Christian made a difference to you?”
- “How does Christianity differ from other religions?”
- “What do Christians believe?”

Other ways of testing faith were suggested. These included:

- “Gentle questioning by a known practiser of that faith would elucidate better results, including body language.”
- “Personal conversion testimony. Evidence of change in lifestyle and behaviour after coming to faith. Understanding of the gospel.”
- “For the Home Office to use this questionnaire is ridiculous. Just as translators are engaged so they would be better off hiring those recommended by E.A. to interrogate the asylum seekers - if their faith is deemed important to asylum claim”.
- “Make sure the government has informed and committed Christian advisers devising its programme for helping asylum seekers”

Poor questions

“Preparing a turkey for Christmas, and the trick questions about the names of the thieves in the crosses alongside Jesus, are frankly banal and insulting” – response to the Evangelical Alliance’s ‘Faith testing’ survey, July 2007.

The questions asked of asylum seekers to test their faith are inappropriate, insensitive and do not accurately assess the nature of an appellant’s conversion. With over 90% of those asked in a recent survey of Evangelical Alliance members saying these questions could not prove their faith, it is understandable that new Christians, from different cultures, struggle to give the ‘right answers’ to these questions.

One asylum seeker was asked “What was the forbidden fruit?”. The reason the Home Office gave for their refusal of asylum status was because the individual failed to identify the fruit as an apple. There is no reference to specific fruit in the Bible.

Stories of Christian asylum seekers and their experience of the asylum process give an indication of the fear and trepidation with which they apply for asylum in the UK, knowing that admitting apostasy will result in imprisonment or the death penalty in countries like Iran and Afghanistan. Given the stress they are under, it is entirely understandable that they struggle to give the right answer when met with a long list of questions (in some case 50-60) about their new Christian faith.

Interpretation

Poor interpretation and the impartiality of interpreters is an issue which is a big concern. Church leaders and others have examples of how poor interpretation disadvantages appellants. In one example from the appeals stage, an appellant told the adjudicator that her brother would slit her throat if returned to Pakistan. The interpreter translated this as “she’d be in trouble”. Thankfully a court clerk spoke the same language and intervened, correctly translating her statement. The adjudicator suspended the hearing.

The religious and cultural knowledge of interpreters is concerning because of the lack of understanding of Christian terminology in the appellant’s language. Despite a shared language, religious or denominational ignorance frequently produces nonsensical transliterations, instead of coherent translations, of crucial names and Christian terms at hearings and interviews. The Churches’ Main Committee raised this issue in 2006 and proposed that the Home Office selected interpreters for religious impartiality. At the Symposium on 7 June 2007 BIA officials thought it was unnecessary for interpreters to be selected for religious impartiality since they all had to pass professional standards of impartiality.

The progress in accepting gender guidelines in assigning interpreters has been recognised as a major step towards ensuring women in particular, are fairly treated by interpreters. This model of sensitivity also ought to be applied to sensitive faith cases.

Understanding Conversion

“Being a Christian is about inner change that is worked out in how people live and behave” – response to the Evangelical Alliance’s ‘Faith testing’ survey, July 2007.

The BIA tests the faith of appellants by asking objective questions and assessing individual accounts of conversion objectively according to policy guidelines. While this is understandable and should be praised for seeking a consistent approach to testing faith, it is important to highlight the nature of religious conversion. The choice to become a Christian needs to be

seen within its' wider psychosocial context. Officials do not have the means by which to test, assess or address the emotional and subjective component of conversion. If officials are not Christians themselves they will always struggle to understand the subtleties involved when a person decides to become a Christian. The only people who may begin to recognise a genuine convert from one 'faking it' is a church leader, preferably one who has had substantial contact with the appellant. They ought to be able to give a witness statement recalling a change in behaviour (for example, someone who had previously taken recreational drugs had stopped), an interest in familiarising themselves with the Bible and a willingness to share their new faith with others. Appellants from countries with poor literacy rates, teaching resources and low rates of education may lack the understanding and the ability to reason publicly. Women from these countries receive poor education and therefore are the ones who are disadvantaged most by a system which requires them to recount in great detail Biblical knowledge, doctrine and Christian culture: none of which is required for them to convert to Christianity. Furthermore, poorly educated appellants or those from Islamic countries where religious instruction is very different to Christian teaching, tend to familiarize themselves with the four gospels of the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) and cannot be expected to have knowledge of the Old Testament. In order to address the psychosocial aspect of conversion, the Home Office must give greater credence to church leaders' statements and evidence of appellant's faith.

People become Christians for a number of different reasons. Whether the applicant has become a Christian because they believe it will help them to stay in this country or because they have been attracted to the values expressed through the service of those with whom they have had contact in the church, a decision has been made and a public declaration of faith expressed.

It is dangerous for people from Iran who were formally Muslim to express an interest in Christianity, let alone claim to have converted. Therefore this is not a decision they will have taken lightly. They can be subject to persecution within the refugee community in the UK and if authorities in their country of origin hear that they have converted, their families may be socially excluded or subjected to persecution.

Country Information

There is a need for up-to-date and accurate country information, especially relating to the persecution religious converts face. There need to be ways of sharing information from Christian human rights organisations, who receive updates on a daily basis on how safe it is for Christians in Islamic countries, and the Home Office's Country Information Unit.

Conclusion

While recognising that the issue of faith testing is complex, there is room for improvement in the current system used to determine the genuineness of an appellant's conversion. We recognise that the Borders and Immigration Agency use objective questioning to determine the faith of an appellant. There are a number of problems with this system.

Firstly, many of the questions used cannot give a true representation of the appellant's faith because they are:

- a) based on western Christian culture (e.g. 'How do you cook a turkey for Christmas?');
- b) insensitive to the particular type of Christianity that the appellant has been exposed to (e.g. asking a Pentecostal convert about Anglican liturgy);
- c) asking things which aren't even in the Bible (e.g. such as knowing the names of the thieves crucified on the crosses alongside Jesus or the name of the forbidden fruit).

Secondly, questions of this nature are insufficient to grasp the genuineness of an appellant's faith. This can only be fully understood if the leader of the church which the appellant has been attending gives an account of their conversion and Christian faith. The church leader ought to be able to give evidence of a changed lifestyle and/or behaviour, an interest in the Bible and in sharing their faith with others.

Thirdly, country information used to determine whether it is safe for a practising Christian to be returned to countries where apostates are persecuted is often inaccurate.

In conclusion, while the Evangelical Alliance welcomes the opportunity to work with the Home Office to ensure that those asylum seekers who having converted to Christianity now fear persecution in their country of origin are granted asylum on grounds of religious persecution, we are keen to ensure that the system recognises the sensitivity with which this needs to be treated.

Recommendations

The Evangelical Alliance recommends that:

1. Church leaders are called as 'expert witnesses' at appeal and tribunal hearings and that the evidence they provide of the faith of a new convert is given due credence;
2. guidelines are drawn up which recognise that faith is as sensitive an issue as gender is;
3. caseworkers and adjudicators are given some basic training in the Christian faith and have an understanding that conversion is a complex psychosocial decision and not one which necessarily results in detailed Biblical knowledge or doctrinal understanding. Christians who know the appellant should be consulted in cases of conversion to verify a genuine conversion;
4. the interpreters used in interviews of converted appellants are carefully selected so that situations where the appellant is faced with an interpreter from a conflicting religious or ethnic group are avoided;
5. up-to-date and accurate country information from Christian human rights organisations is included in BIA country information reports and operational guidance notes;
6. the BIA recognises that an integral part of a living Christian faith is the willingness to share the gospel with others. Decisions about whether a convert will be safe if returned to a country where it is illegal to proselytise must take into account the fact that although not formally known as an evangelist, Christian converts will almost certainly wish to share their faith with, for example, family, friends and co-workers.

In order to meet these recommendations the Evangelical Alliance welcomes the opportunity to work with the Senior Caseworker Unit to provide better training for caseworkers. The Alliance also welcomes the invitation from the Country Information Unit to Christian human rights organisations to include their information about religious persecution in subsequent country reports. This meeting will initiate an ongoing dialogue on country specific intelligence on religious persecution.

Advice to church leaders

“I’m a church leader. There are asylum seekers in my congregation and I’ve been asked to give evidence of their Christian faith. What do I do?”

The following guidelines were drawn up by a solicitor specialising in asylum law who is also a member of the Methodist Refugee Working Group, to support people called to give evidence at Home Office hearings. They have been reproduced with kind permission from the Methodist Church.

We consider references to Methodist ministers as applicable to church leaders from all denominations, as none of the advice contained in the document applies exclusively to Methodists.

Asylum Applications and Christian Belief

The **Methodist Church** 

A briefing for ministers called to give evidence in support of asylum applications

A number of asylum seekers enter the UK as Christians or experience a conversion to Christianity after they have arrived. Some of these people will find a home within our churches and we shall share their experience of the asylum process.

As a result some ministers are being called to give evidence at Home Office hearings in support of asylum applications, particularly with regard to the basis of the applicant’s Christian faith.

1. The asylum process

It may be helpful to have some background information about the asylum process.

On entry to the UK, an asylum seeker should state their claim as soon as possible. A late claim may need to be explained. They will be ‘processed’ at the port of entry in terms of an initial interview with an interpreter present if necessary. They will be fingerprinted, given temporary admission, financial provision to cover the first weeks (and it is fairly frequently the case that there is then a gap before the commencement of regular payments). They will then be dispersed to a different part of the UK where accommodation will be provided together with access to English lessons and medical treatment. Legal advice should be available, but due to a change in funding in April 2004, it is often extremely difficult to access legal advice. Subsequently an appointment will be made to receive an Asylum Registration Card (ARC).

The next significant event will be an interview which will take place with the Home Office at one of a number of Immigration and Nationality Department (IND) offices. Legal support is not available and these interviews are extremely important. A recent case has confirmed that asylum seekers may tape such an interview for later consideration if they wish. Asylum seekers can be represented at such interviews but public funding is very rarely available. They can be accompanied with the consent of the IND, requested in advance and

in writing. Such consent depends on a rationale being given and no comments may be made during the interview. Some clarification or correction may be made at the end of the interview and will be noted. It will become part of the evidence as will any lack of correction.

The Home Office then makes an initial decision, and this procedure may take anything from a few weeks to years. Decisions are now being made much more quickly.

If the decision is adverse, an appeal may be made. A live hearing will then take place before an Immigration Adjudicator or Judge a few weeks later which will require all evidence to be in place to support what the asylum seeker is saying. Legal representation is permissible, and legal aid is available. However the public funding system is such that it is difficult to find a Solicitor who will undertake this work. Evidence can include statements and academic or medical information. When the decision is made at this point, this is often the end of the process unless there is a point of law which can be appealed.

If an asylum application is refused, and the asylum seeker can return to their country of origin, then this will be arranged by the Home Office. The asylum seeker will often be detained immediately before the removal. If the asylum seeker's return cannot safely be arranged, they move to "hard case support" which allows for hostel-type accommodation together with approximately £10 per week for personal needs and clothing etc.

2. The Minister as witness

If the asylum seeker states that they were Christian at the time they fled, or have since become Christian, and that this is a part of their case to explain why it is unsafe for them to return to their country of origin, then the minister will be needed to make a statement and give evidence.

The minister is regarded an expert witness as to the "veracity" of the faith of the asylum seeker. This is attested to by considering various issues such as

- Attendance at worship
- Involvement in other features of Church life
- Knowledge of aspects of the Bible, liturgy etc and attendance at such groups as Alpha etc
- Baptism (often the Home Office will suggest this is a baptism of convenience – the statement should show why this is not so)

a. The Statement

The Minister should prepare a statement covering these areas and taking the following issues into account. This statement will be requested by the solicitor representing the asylum seeker, but if the asylum seeker is not represented, it should be prepared nevertheless. (See appendix 1 for an example of how such a statement could be put together. It is vital that this example is not copied wholesale, but is constructed in your own words.)

It is important not to assume any knowledge in the Home Office. The interviewing and presenting officers of the Home Office can make unreasonable assumptions of Christians – for example that a true Christian would be able to recite the books of the Bible.

It will be necessary to explain the worship pattern of the Church and indeed the theology of the Church in order for the Home Office officials not to use their own preconceptions to

misjudge the asylum seeker. For example, an asylum seeker in a Church which does not use the Worship Book may naturally have less knowledge of liturgy.

It is helpful to avoid phrases which are meaningful within the Church but may not be outside the Church, for example that the asylum seeker “knows Jesus Christ”.

It is crucial to explain the Methodist Church position in relation to evangelism. The Home Office frequently argue that a Christian may safely return to their country of origin if they do not announce their faith or seek to be an evangelist, and officials may argue that, unlike members of other churches, Methodists do not evangelise. It is therefore of vital importance to be clear that the Methodist Church is an evangelising Church. Ministers will find the Methodist Church website (www.methodist.org.uk) helpful and should append relevant extracts to the statement. The statement in Our Calling that “Christians are called to make more followers of Jesus Christ” is useful, as is the phrase from The Priorities of the Methodist Church that “the Methodist Church will give particular attention to the following....Developing confidence in evangelism and in the capacity to speak of God and faith in ways that make sense to all involved”.

The layout of the Statement should commence with the name and address of the minister, the minister’s professional qualifications and length of time in ministry and the name of the relevant Church

Thereafter, the minister should deal with the issues in numbered points and add any factual information about the asylum seeker. The statement should be signed and dated. The statement should not be too long (two pages of single spaced A4 paper should be enough)

b. The Hearing

At the hearing of the appeal, the minister will be required to give evidence. This will initially be responding to the questions of the asylum seeker’s representative, then of the Home Office Presenting Officer and the Adjudicator.

Re-read the Statement through carefully before the hearing. Although the questioning should be confined to the Statement, it will be likely that there will be significant questioning on evangelism. It is important to be clear about this, since many people will be unused to hearings and are likely to be nervous and ill at ease.

When questioned, make sure the question is understood and that the answer is complete without being unduly lengthy. If necessary ask the questioner to repeat the question or allow you to complete your answer. Do not be despondent if it is felt that the evidence is not complete – the asylum seeker’s representative can ask further questions if they feel that further information needs to be made available.

For further information contact:

The Methodist Refugee Working Group, c/o David Bradwell, Public Issues Research Assistant, Methodist Church House, 25 Marylebone Rd, London NW1 5JR tel 020-7467-3784, email BradwellD@methodistchurch.org.uk

Alison McDonald/Refugee Working Group
September 2005

Example of a Statement of Evidence

This is an example of how a statement of evidence could be put together. You may find it helpful to use a similar structure; however copying it word-for-word will undermine your case and those of other Methodist ministers.

IN THE MATTER OF THE IMMIGRATION AND ASYLUM ACT 1999
Appeal Number: HX/07952/2003

B E T W E E N:

Ali Mohammed
Appellant

And

Secretary of State for the Home Department
Respondent

STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF THE APPELLANT

Reverend Mary Smith of 1 Epworth Avenue Wesleyville will say as follows:

- 1. I am the Methodist Minister of Wesleyville Methodist Church. I have occupied this position since September 2001 and I have been a Methodist Minister for eight years. I hold the qualifications of BA in Theology and I am an Ordained Minister of the Methodist Church for which position I undertook three years training. I continue to undertake training in respect of professional development*
- 2. The Methodist Church is a mainstream denomination of the Christian Church in the UK and worldwide. It has certain emphases in terms of faith and the practice of faith and these are published nationally in a document entitled 'Our Calling'. I attach this document and I have marked it as 'MS1' It will be seen that Methodists believe in the duty to 'make more members' - that is to say that we believe that we must share our faith with all other people that they may have the opportunity of becoming Christian. This is described more fully on the Methodist Church website (www.methodistchurch.org.uk) and I attach an excerpt from that which I have marked MS2. Our worship is of various forms including the use of the Methodist Worship Book which may be used in terms of whole services or part services and worship which derives from other material and from the extemporary prayers etc of the worship leader. When I take worship at Wesleyville, I use most of the Order of service in the Worship Book for Communions, but use resources from other sources for other services. I always use hymns and the Bible, but do not often use such statements as the Creed or the Gloria. It is not my experience that the congregations have a knowledge of liturgy in terms of technical language or that younger members of the congregation would have an intimate knowledge of the layout of the Bible (although they would be likely to have a fair knowledge of its contents)*
- 3. I first met Ali Mohammed in February 2002 when he was dispersed to Wesleyville. He came to a Sunday morning service. He told me that he seeks refugee status in the UK and he had come to the Church because he had been interested in Christianity, but it is impossible to explore this in Iran. On that occasion, we spoke for about twenty minutes and I gave him a Bible to have a look at. His English reading was not very good, but he was able to read a little of it. I understand that he returned to the Sunday morning service for the next few weeks, although I myself was only at the Church on one of those weeks, having preaching appointments at other Churches in the Wesleyville area on the other Sundays. Wesleyville holds one service each Sunday and has various midweek meetings of a devotional nature.*
- 4. After a few weeks and by about April 2002, Ali was asking me if there was a way he could find out more about Christianity. We were beginning an Alpha course in the Church and I invited Ali to attend. This course is an eight-week course of two to three hours each week in which a group of people will consider the basics of Christian faith. It is a course which is nationally recognised in most of the Christian Churches and upon which 1.5 million people each year embark and complete in the*

UK. Ali attended this course enthusiastically and on each occasion. At the end of the course, a challenge is put out to participants to consider their next step in terms of faith and in terms of commitment to the Church with which they are involved. Ali (with four other members of a the group of nine) asked if he could explore becoming a member of the Methodist Church. This is a step in which individuals make their own commitment to the development of their faith and its practice within the Methodist Church.

5. When people ask to pursue this, it is my practice to commence membership classes. These are about six in number and consider various issues such as a development in faith; a deepening understanding of who God is; a sense of what worship in Methodism is about; an understanding of the distinctive features of Methodism. I use various resources for this - both those I have developed myself and some of those provided by the Methodist Church.

6. At the end of this series, which again Ali attended completely and enthusiastically, he and six of the other eight people asked to be received into Membership. Ali and the other people were received into membership and (in Ali's case) baptised. Of those six people, four had been part of the Alpha course and had not previously had much experience of being part of the Church. This did not surprise me. The Alpha course is designed to be of assistance to people in this position.

7. The promises of Membership include making a commitment to worship and development in prayer and study and in the activities of the Church. Since that time Ali has been part of the next Alpha course at Church in terms of leadership. He has also attended a series of Bible Studies which we undertook in December 2002 and December 2003. He has become a member of our Men's Fellowship which meets weekly from September to April each year. He attends many of the social events of the Church. He has attended worship virtually every week.

8. Wesleyville has an average congregation of 150 and a membership of 170. I see Ali on average between one and three times a week. This is comparable with other active members of the congregation.

9. In my view, Ali has fulfilled the promises he made at his reception into membership. He has eagerly pursued knowledge of the Bible and he and the Church shared the cost of a Bible for him in Farsi. His English is now very good although in fact this has not been a problem at any time since he was always able to understand most of what was said. He has learned to read English quite well, but we took the view he would get more out of a Bible in Farsi. He attends worship and participates in terms of assisting with Communion. He joins me at the Communion service in order to distribute the bread and wine to the congregation. He has begun to be involved with our Youth Club and its leadership of worship which is undertaken on a regular basis. I anticipate this will continue and it seems to me that it is likely he will undertake training for either Youth work or Worship leadership. Both these forms of training are nationally developed and locally delivered. He has developed an understanding of worship including finding his way around the Bible, knowing and developing favourite hymns and knowing his way around the major services. He has told me the story of how his faith has developed. He was and is enthusiastic about his faith and its development and he will sometimes come to me and others to tell us of discoveries he has made about faith and theology. It is my view that his faith is a very genuine one and one which has developed during the time I have known him.

I believe the facts stated in this written statement are true.

Signed.....

Dated.....

Advice to asylum seekers

“I’m an asylum seeker. I would like to write to my MP about my case. What do I do?”

Writing to an MP

To find out who your local MP is enter your postcode at www.theyworkforyou.com

When writing to your MP about your asylum case it is important to include:

Formal details of your case: Home Office reference number
 Port reference number
 Full name and date of birth
 Where you came from (including postal address), when and
 why you originally fled that country

UK information: Address where you have been living in the UK
 Full name and address of church
 Name and address of personal references (i.e. church leader)
 Details of children’s school

It is important to keep any letter to an MP short and to the point. Keep the letter focussed on the facts of your case. If possible give factual accounts of what might happen to you or your family if you were to be returned to your country of origin having converted to Christianity. A short reference from your church leader is appropriate and will help your MP understand your case. Photocopies of lots of previous documents and immigration papers are not particularly helpful and will not help your case.

An MP cannot necessarily intervene directly in your case. He/she can write to the Borders and Immigration Agency on your behalf and ask them to reconsider the asylum decision.

Advice to MPs

“I’m an MP. I have received a letter from an asylum seeker whose claim has been refused despite evidence that they have converted to Christianity. What do I do?”

Asylum seekers who have converted to Christianity will generally contact their MP on recommendation from their church leader and after they have been refused asylum. They are appealing to you to intervene in their case. Legitimate converts may fear for their lives as converting from one religion to another may be illegal in their country of origin. Therefore, the letter you receive may be highly emotive.

There are a number of details you may need in order to forward their letter to the Secretary of State or to write to the Borders and Immigration Agency on their behalf. These include:

Formal details of their asylum case: Home Office reference number
Port reference number
Full name and date of birth
Country of origin (including postal address),
when and why they originally fled that country

UK information: Address where they have been living
Full name and address of church
Name and address of personal references (i.e.
church leader)
Details of children’s school

- Contact the Borders and Immigration Agency to get a full history of their case. These details may not be clear from the applicant’s original letter.
- The letter may contain an account of how they became a Christian (commonly known as a Testimony – see the Glossary of Christian terms for definitions of other words they may use in describing their conversion).
- The genuineness of the applicant’s conversion to Christianity may be ascertained done by contacting those who are in direct contact with the individual including the church leader(s), support workers or befrienders who may have noticed a change in attitude or behaviour.

The letter may contain details of religious persecution in their home country. The following organisations may be able to provide up-to-date briefing material on specific incidences of human rights abuses:

Christian Solidarity Worldwide
Release International
Open Doors
Forum 18
CLAAS

The contact details of these organisations, including website addresses, are included in pages 27-28.

Organisations

Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID)

BID works with asylum seekers and migrants detained under Immigration Act powers, in removal centres and prisons in the United Kingdom.

Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID)

Main Office

28 Commercial Street

London

E1 6LS

Tel: 020 7247 3590

www.biduk.org

British Red Cross

Provide practical and emotional assistance to vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees in the UK.

British Red Cross

UK Office

44 Moorfields

London EC2Y 9AL

Tel: 0870 170 7000

www.redcross.org.uk

Centre for Legal Aid, Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS)

CLAAS is an interdenominational organisation working for Christians who are being persecuted because of their faith in Pakistan.

CLAAS UK

P.O.Box81

Southall

Middlesex

UB2 5YQ

U.K

Tel: 0208 867-9180

www.cltf.org.uk

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW)

CSW is a human rights organisation specialising in religious freedom. CSW works on behalf of those persecuted for their Christian beliefs and promotes religious liberty for all.

Lists religious liberty concerns in countries throughout the world.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW)

PO Box 99, New Malden,

Surrey KT3 3YF

Tel: 020 8942 8810

www.csw.org.uk

Churches Commission for Racial Justice

Policy network lobbying Government on behalf of the church on asylum and refugee issues

3rd Floor, Bastille Court.

2 Paris Garden

London

SE1 8ND

Tel: 020 7654 7254

www.ctbi.org.uk/ccrj

Church Action on Poverty

Church Action on Poverty is a national ecumenical Christian social justice charity, committed to tackling poverty in the UK. It works in partnership with churches and with people in poverty themselves to find solutions to poverty, locally, nationally and globally.

Church Action on Poverty

Central Buildings

Oldham Street

Manchester

M1 1JQ

Tel: 0161 236 9321

www.church-poverty.org.uk

Enabling Christians Serving Refugees

Assisting and equipping Christians to express God's love in practical and informed ways to asylum seekers and refugees in the UK.

Provides a focal point to access information and resources to be better equipped to serve asylum seekers and refugees.

ECSR

The Welcome Centre

105-107 Maple Rd

London, SE20 8LP

Tel: 0208 778 7788

www.ecsr.org.uk

Forum 18

Forum 18 campaigns for the right to believe, to worship and witness; the right to change one's belief or religion; the right to join together and express one's belief

Forum18

Postboks 6603

Rodeløkka

N-0502 Oslo

NORWAY

www.forum18.org

Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees

The Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees in the UK (ICAR) is an academic research and information organisation situated in the School of Social Sciences at City University. They collect and make available independent information on asylum in the UK.

School of Social Sciences
City University
Northampton Square
London
EC1V 0HB
Tel: 020 7040 4596
www.icar.org.uk

Jesuit Refugee Service

The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is an international Catholic organisation with a mission to accompany, serve and defend the rights of refugees and forcibly displaced people. JRS undertakes services at national and regional levels with the support of an international office in Rome.

Rue du Progrès, 333/2
B-1030 Bruxelles
Belgium
Tel: +32 2 250 3220
www.jesref.org

Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI)

Campaign for justice, by combating racism in immigration and asylum law and policy.

Offers free legal advice on asylum matters.

Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants

115 Old Street
London
EC1V 9RT
Tel: 020 7251 8708
www.jcwi.org.uk

Refugee Action

Refugee Action is an independent national charity that works with refugees to build new lives in the UK.

Refugee Action
Head Office
The Old Fire Station
150 Waterloo Road
London
SE1 8SB
Tel: 020 7654 7700
www.refugee-action.org.uk

Refugee Council

The Refugee Council is the largest organisation in the UK working with asylum seekers and refugees. Not only gives direct help and support, but also work with asylum seekers and refugees to ensure their needs and concerns are addressed.

Refugee Council Head Office
240-250 Ferndale Road
Brixton
London
SW9 8BB
Tel: 020 7346 6700
www.refugeecouncil.org.uk

Refugee Legal Centre

Providing legal advice and representation for those seeking protection under international and national Human Rights Asylum law

RLC Central London (Head Office)
Nelson House
153-157 Commercial Road
London
E1 2DA
Tel: 020 7780 320
www.refugee-legal-centre.org.uk

Release International

Release International serves persecuted Christians overseas through physical and spiritual support that will help them to survive persecution, strengthen the church (equipping them for continued evangelism) and provides a voice for them by making their circumstances known to Christians in the UK and undertaking political advocacy on their behalf.

Release International
PO Box 54
Orpington
BR5 9RT
Tel: 01689 823491
www.releaseinternational.org

United Nations High Commission for Refugees

The UNHCR helps world uprooted peoples by providing them with basic necessities in emergencies, and in seeking long-term solutions, including voluntary return to their homes or beginning afresh in new countries.

Service de liaison de l'UNHCR pour la Suisse et le Liechtenstein
94, rue de Montbrillant, 1202 Genève
Suisse
Tel: +41 22 739 8111
www.unhcr.ch

Christian Denominations

Information about the distinctives of Christian denominations can be found by contacting these addresses:

Baptist Church
Baptist House
PO BOX 44
129 Broadway
Didcot
OX11 8RT
Tel: 01235 517700
www.baptist.org.uk

Church in Wales
Church in Wales
39 Cathedral Road
Cardiff
CF11 9XF
Tel: 029 2034 8200
www.churchinwales.org.uk

Church of England
The Church of England National Offices
Church House
Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3AZ
Tel: 0207 898 1000
www.cofe.anglican.org

Church of Ireland
Church of Ireland House
61-67 Donegal Street
Belfast
BT1 2QH
Tel: 028 9032 2268
www.ireland.anglican.org

Church of Scotland
121 George Street
Edinburgh
EH2 4YN
Tel: 0131 225 5722
www.churchofscotland.org.uk

Methodist Church
Methodist Church House
25 Marylebone Road
London
NW1 5JR
Tel: 020 7486 5502
www.methodist.org.uk

Elim Pentecostal Church
International Office
P.O. Box 38
Cheltenham Glos
GL50 3HN
Tel: 01242 519904
www.elim.org.uk

Roman Catholic Church
Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales
39 Eccleston Square
London
SW1V 1BX
Tel: 020 7630 8220
www.catholic-ew.org.uk

United Reform Church (URC)
Church House
86 Tavistock Place
London
WC1H 9RT
United Kingdom
Tel: 020 7916 2020
www.urc.org.uk

In addition to these larger denominations, there are many other churches in the UK. Some of the larger New Churches include:

New Frontiers

The Matrix Complex
91, Peterborough Road,
London SW6 3BU
Tel: 0845 8380 858
www.newfrontiers.xtn.org

Ichthus Christian Fellowship

7 Greenwich Quay
Clarence Road, Greenwich
London SE8 3EY
Tel: 020 8694 7171
www.ichthus.org.uk

Vineyard

The Vineyard Centre
23 Blagdon Road
New Malden
Surrey
KT3 4AH
Tel: 020 8336 1734
www.vineyardchurchesuk.com

Pioneer Trust

32, The High Street
Great Bookham, Surrey
KT23 4AG
Tel: 01372 459413
www.pioneer.org.uk

Individual Churches

For contact details for individual churches who are members of the Evangelical Alliance, please visit www.eauk.org/churchsearch or contact:

Evangelical Alliance
Whitefield House
186 Kennington Park Road
London
SE11 4BT
Tel: 0207 207 2100

A useful general database of churches of all denominations across the UK is www.findachurch.co.uk

Glossary of terms

Asylum terms

Adjudicator

The person who considers and makes a decision in immigration appeals

Asylum Seeker

Someone who has exercised the right to apply for asylum having arrived in a country after fleeing persecution in their country of origin

Deportation

The removal of a person from the UK

Detainee

A person held inside a holding facility under the Immigration act.

Economic immigrant

Someone who has moved to another country to work

Failed Asylum seeker

Someone whose claim for refugee status has been turned down and are awaiting return to their country of origin

Illegal Immigrant

Someone who has arrived in another country but has not claimed asylum.

Indefinite Leave to Remain

Leave to enter or remain in the UK without any time limit.

Leave to enter

Permission to enter the UK

Leave to remain

Permission to stay in the UK

Refugee

A person who, because of fear of persecution on grounds of religion, race or politics is outside their country of origin and is unable or unwilling to return.

Someone whose asylum application had been successful and is legally allowed to stay in country other than their country of origin

Christian terms¹²

Baptism

The washing or immersion of a person in water as a public sign of commitment to God and as a sign of the promises from the New Testament to God's people of forgiveness and renewal.

Bible

(sometimes also called the 'Scriptures')

A collection of books written over a period of many centuries, which are recognized by the Church as having God's authority.

Born-again

(see 'conversion')

'Came to faith'

(see 'conversion')

Charismatic

A Christian who particularly stresses the importance of the Holy Spirit in Christian life, worship and witness. Charismatics have much in common with Pentecostals.

Christian

One who follows the teachings and life of Jesus Christ.

Confession

The acknowledging of sin, either individually or corporately. Christians admit sin and ask for forgiveness from God.

Conversion

Turning to Christianity from some other faith or world-view or from none. It involves repentance and faith but in all other respects each person's conversion is unique to him/her: no fixed sequence of events is required.

Cross

The wooden gallows on which Jesus was nailed to die (crucified). The cross has become the central emblem of Christianity.

Denomination

Organized grouping of congregations, with similar beliefs, church order and/or liturgy.

Disciple

One who follows Jesus in order to learn from him and to grow to spiritual maturity.

Doctrine

A belief carefully formulated based on the Bible's teaching.

Evangelical

Someone who believes that Jesus is both God and man; that the Bible is the ultimate authority in all that it addresses; and that the traditional beliefs of the Church, such as the bodily resurrection of Jesus are true.

Evangelise

The act of sharing the Christian faith with others, with an aim that others will become followers of Jesus Christ

¹² Adapted from The Lion Handbook of Christian Belief
English, D., Fackre, G., France, D., Gitari, D., Kirk, A., Nicholls, B., Packer, J., Padilla, R. (1982) *The Lion Handbook of Christian Belief*, Lion publishing: Tring, Herts

Evangelist

A person involved in sharing the Christian faith with others.

Evangelistic

A description given to an activity which has the aim of communicating the Christian faith with others.

Faith

Personal belief and trust in a person or an idea such that loss will be inevitable if the object of faith proves untrustworthy. Christian faith in Jesus Christ is therefore more than intellectual assent to beliefs: it is personal commitment to Jesus.

gospel

The good news of what God has done through Jesus, and especially his death and resurrection. It is through hearing the gospel that people can come to follow Jesus.

Gospel

One of the four accounts by the saints Matthew, Mar, Luke and John of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus found in the New Testament of the Bible.

Happy Clappy

A derogatory term often used to describe evangelicals. However, many evangelicals are not charismatic and worship God in a more conservative style of worship

Holy Communion

The service in which the church members take a piece of bread and sip of wine as a token that they owe their spiritual life to the death of Jesus Christ.

Holy Spirit

The personal presence of God, active in the church and in the world. He is the third person of the Trinity. In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit was given to particular individuals for special tasks. But at Pentecost God gave the Holy Spirit to every believer.

House groups

Small groups of Christians meeting together outside of the main church meeting for worship, prayer and Bible study. Often held midweek in believers' homes.

Mission

Activity to bring the love of God to people in their need. This includes evangelism as central, but also service and care together with helping people to overcome political and other circumstances which reduce their humanity.

Pentecost

The Jewish festival during which the Holy Spirit was first given to the church.

Pentecostal

Member of the world-wide fellowship of churches which stress gifts of the spirit and personal experience of the Holy Spirit in a Christian's life.

Proselytise

To convert someone of another religion, or no religion, to your own faith

Repentance

A complete turning round, from any way other than Jesus' way to following Jesus. Repentance may be accompanied by feelings of remorse, but the key is the actual change of heart and life. Without repentance there is no real conversion.

Resurrection

The action of God in raising Jesus to life from death.

Revelation

God's action in making known to humanity his character, his will and his ways. This revelation has been made through history, through specific acts of revelation supremely in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Salvation

The rescuing of someone from danger. In the Bible it means bringing someone from sin into the fullness and freedom of God. A believer has been saved through the death of Jesus.

Sanctification

(literally 'being made holy') The progressive conforming of a believers' life and character to that of Jesus through the inward work of the Holy Spirit.

Sin

Carries a range of meanings, including breaking God's law and falling short of God's intention for human life. Sin includes both specific wrong actions and a condition, a fatal flaw in everything human beings do, even their best endeavours.

Speaking in tongues

(sometimes called 'glossolalia')

Using languages unknown to the speaker, usually in praise to God, although sometimes carrying a message to others.

Testimony

A believer's description of his or her personal experience of the impact that following Jesus has had on their life. Often used as part of evangelism



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Parliamentary Research Assistant
July 2007

Evangelical Alliance UK
Whitefield House, 186 Kennington Park Road, London, SE11 4BT.
Tel: 0207 207 2100 Email: info@eauk.org Web: www.eauk.org

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