

Uniting Church calls for compassion for refugees

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The Uniting Church believes the government's hardline stance against refugees is unhelpful.

"There seems to be a ground swell of anti-refugee sentiment that I find really disappointing," says Andrew Clarke.

Andrew was recently appointed Project Officer Multicultural Ministries within the Uniting Church SA. His role is to review what congregations are already doing to support refugees and migrants and to explore opportunities for collaboration.

Andrew is part of a growing network of churches of all denominations and other community groups who are offering practical support to refugees and migrants.

Andrew believes that misinformation is driving fear.

"In the past, 90% of all asylum seekers have proved to be genuine refugees. We know that because, over time, 90% of those people who have arrived by boat under both the Howard and Rudd governments have been accepted.

"Recently there has been an increase in the number declined. However, it is worth noting that people who come by air with valid visas and then seek asylum are only accepted at a rate of 30%. So all the attention on boat people is really unhelpful.

"Why have we given up on our United Nations commitment to look after refugees?"

Andrew is also critical of our policy of detaining refugees.

"Detaining people for long periods of time, when such a high proportion are found to be legitimate refugees, is inhumane.

"I know people who have been detained in Australia for six or seven years. This leads directly to on-going mental health issues."

"The present government has aimed for 75% of refugees to be moved from detention within three months. We now have a situation where the government says if you are Sri Lankan they won't assess you for three months. If you're from Afghanistan, the wait is six months.

"Why are we punishing innocent people who are simply trying to find a better life for themselves?"

In 2009, Australia received 1.6% of the total applications for asylum received in industrialised countries. That reflects just 6,170 people. We ranked 21st on a per capita basis, well behind the United States, France and Canada.

"Australia has a population of 22 million – why are we so scared of accepting a few thousand people?"

"The fear is that it will open the floodgates but we are talking about people who have no-where else to go."

Andrew believes that if everyone knew a refugee then we wouldn't be so frightened of them.

"People think "this won't happen to me so it doesn't matter" but if we don't think about the whole of humanity then we fail ourselves."

So why does Andrew keep working for a better deal for refugees?

"Going to the airport to meet a refugee family is like seeing Lazarus rise from the grave.

“People who have been in danger, who don’t know if they are going to survive, who have jumped through all sorts of hoops to get here – and then you see their faces as they finally get to Australia. That makes it all worth it.”

Note: June 20 marks World Refugee Day.

Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Convention and Protocol relating to the status of refugees (1951 and 1967). The 1951 convention related to European refugees. The 1967 protocol is world wide.