



Theological Statement

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me (Matthew 25:35).

Christianity has a long tradition of hospitality. This includes care of family, the individual and care of outsiders. In the Gospel According to Matthew, Jesus commends those who welcomed the outsider and offered food and drink to the hungry and thirsty. In caring for others they care for him. Through hospitality Christians express God's welcome and presence combined with advocacy for the marginalised and creation of community. It is an expression of God's overabundant generosity.

The Hebrew Scriptures contain references to Israel as both a pilgrim people and a wandering nation. The experience of the Hebrews as strangers in the land of Egypt fuelled the belief that they should offer care to the stranger (or 'alien') from other lands and cultures who came into their midst and God is often identified as the God who cares for the exiled and the stranger – God is a refuge to the poor and the needy, a shelter to those who are away from home (Isaiah 25:1-5). God brings justice to the oppressed and calls on the people of faith to extend the rights of citizens to refugees in their midst.

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. Leviticus 19:33-34 (New Revised Standard Version)

If a stranger lives with you in your land, do not molest him. You must count him as one of your own countrymen and love him as yourself – for you were once strangers yourselves in Egypt. Leviticus 19:33-34 (Jerusalem Bible)

Refugees are identified in the Bible with widows and orphans as the most marginalised people and the test of faithful obedience to God was how a community and individuals cared for these very vulnerable people.

The Christian story continued to uphold God's call to solidarity with the homeless. Mary and Joseph were forced to take Jesus and hide in Egypt as Herod sought to kill the baby Jesus. As an adult Jesus travelled through strange lands, choosing to spend time and share meals with the most marginalised and oppressed people of his society. Jesus called on people to love their enemies, give all they had to the poor, and offer hospitality to strangers. He taught that faithful obedience to God was marked by such deeds and that it would be how well people responded to strangers and to the poor that would identify them as people of faith.

Coupled with this concern for outsiders, who are often marginalised and persecuted, is the strong call to care for all who are in need without distinction. Even once they have received the protection of the state, refugees and asylum seekers can experience isolation and marginalisation as they settle into their new country.

This care for the most vulnerable in our world, should not, according to the Christian tradition, confine itself to people who are 'like us'. Jesus' point in telling the powerful story of the Good Samaritan is that God calls us to care for all in need, those who are different and even those who are our enemies.

It is out of these beliefs and traditions that churches in Australia have consistently spoken out against government policies that are harmful to asylum seekers and refugees.

At a time when policies relating to asylum seekers and refugees are increasingly harsh and the public debate lacks compassion, generosity and hospitality, the churches have recognised that a common action and voice are necessary. It is hoped that this will add strength to the already committed service and advocacy of so many churches, agencies and church leaders.

As well as participating in the public conversation in support of refugees and asylum seekers, there is also a need to for more practical support for local churches and community-based church agencies as they seek to respond in their own contexts.

Our Christian commitment to care for refugees and asylum seekers acknowledges that such support is an important way of visibly demonstrating the seriousness which we, as churches working together, regard this part of our ministry and engagement with the community.

As churches, we are encouraged and commanded by our biblical tradition to be caring communities, sharing God's love through Jesus Christ to all without distinction. We are called to share the generosity, compassion, hospitality and grace of the God of all, the God of the exiled and the homeless, the persecuted and the poor.

The Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce looks forward in hope to the time when violence and persecution are no more. Until then, we commit ourselves to care for, walk with and speak out for those who come in need, seeking our care and protection.