

‘THEOS

How to help refugees integrate: **A guide for church leaders**





Man draws the curtains in his new home.

What is integration?

All migrants experience cultural change when moving to a new country, as they strive to belong while preserving their roots. This process is particularly challenging for asylum seekers and refugees who have fled persecution or war and left their country and family behind. They often experience additional trauma on their journey to the UK, are usually less prepared for the move, and require more support once they arrive.

We believe that in a best-case scenario, both migrants and locals develop a positive vision of how to coexist. There are many ways to welcome asylum seekers and refugees, and to make them feel at home in, and part of, UK society. Not all these ways of living together are as intentional or equally beneficial both for those newly arrived and those who already call the UK their home. Without a deliberate strategy, migrants can end up marginalised, losing their native cultural identity and failing to engage meaningfully with British culture.

Integration offers migrants the opportunity to preserve their cultural identity while encouraging them to adopt British customs. It does not require migrants to disown their mother culture and language; nor is it only about key markers of behaviour. It does not view identity as a zero-sum game where one must be sacrificed for the other. Rather, as one interviewee in our research put it, it is about enabling migrants to say, “I belong here. I can serve the community here.”

This approach breaks down the barriers to meaningful relationships between migrants and hosts. Integration also calls on us, as hosts, to create a welcoming environment that removes the obstacles preventing migrants – and asylum

seekers and refugees in particular – from becoming part of British communities and contributing to British society as swiftly as possible. Given that the current asylum system tends to isolate, demean, and inadequately prepare asylum seekers for life in the UK, churches can play a vital role in improving the situation.



Refugees and members of St. Luke's prepare the Maundy Thursday meal together.

After a busy morning drop-in session, a refugee takes a moment to rest.



Why should I be involved?

Scripture calls on us to 'love the stranger' (Deut. 10.19), to see Christ in them (Mt. 25.40), to see ourselves in them, and to recognise our shared humanity. Catholic social teaching also emphasises that to love the stranger as Christ does requires more than just abstract feelings; it involves actively putting ourselves at their service.

If we are to welcome and help the stranger as Christians, integration is the strategy that best acknowledges human dignity and our inherently social nature. We are formed by relationships and engage with others in the search for meaning. If we are unable to belong to a shared community, we deprive migrants, and ourselves, of the chance to give and receive each other's gifts, and of the opportunity to seek each other's mutual and common welfare and flourishing.

Churches are also uniquely placed to assist with the integration of asylum seekers and refugees because of the care, companionship and listening ear they naturally provide to those who cross their threshold. Although many voluntary and statutory organisations across the UK are heavily invested in refugee support, churches can complement this work by offering something more.

Churches contribute an ethical framework, based on Christian teachings, that rejects the othering of immigrants. They are one of the few places within communities where people are still able to build relationships across the social gaps of class, age, gender and ethnicity. They are deeply connected to specific places and communities, and can bridge the gap between locals and newcomers. They are also not bound by charitable objectives and narrow remits.

St. Luke's Methodist Church Hoylake has been set up for the Maundy Thursday service, with chairs arranged on either side of the Way of the Cross.



Man hopes to obtain a driving licence so that he can drive down to London to visit Iain more often.



How do I help refugees integrate?

Integration is a slow, local, relational and practical process that cannot be delivered by large institutional frameworks or national programmes alone. However, at their best, churches can offer asylum seekers and refugees a warm welcome, restore their dignity and autonomy, gently guide them towards full participation in local communities, and support them until they can confidently say, “I belong here.”

It is important to stress that a refugee integration ‘strategy’ is not required in order to become an integration-focused church. Churches can do this simply by fostering connection, community, and personal relationships, which occur naturally when a church embodies the gospel, welcomes the stranger, and sees the image of God in all. If your church already welcomes asylum seekers and refugees, either by participating in a network such as Welcome Churches or independently, or if you offer some service to them – drop-in sessions, clothing bank, English conversation café etc. – then your church is likely already helping them integrate.

While you may not need a strategy, there is a benefit to being aware of this process, as it will encourage your church to reflect on what it is currently doing, consider whether what it does is effective, and identify areas for improvement. In particular, your church should pay attention to whether it creates the kind of environment where equality in relationships can flourish. Some helpful questions to ask yourselves include:

- Are you doing things with and alongside them or to and for them? Do they have a say in any services you want to provide to them?
- Are they empowered to help themselves and offered opportunities to contribute to community and church life?

Why listening beats good intentions

Upon hearing that asylum seekers had been relocated nearby, a church decided to open a food bank to support them. During an initial planning meeting, the church members volunteering to run the food bank discussed which products to purchase. One volunteer pointed out that asylum seekers would need protein. As many of the asylum seekers in their area were Muslim and halal meat was difficult for the church to obtain, they decided to look for alternative sources of protein that did not require halal butchering. They settled on protein-rich foods that are readily available in any British supermarket: fish fingers and cheddar.

When the first asylum seekers arrived to collect food parcels, the volunteers were surprised to find that none of the Muslim asylum seekers wanted the fish fingers and cheddar that the church had kindly bought for them. After a few weeks and upon further inquiry, it turned out most asylum seekers had never seen, let alone eaten, either before in their lives.

This is when a church member proposed asking the asylum seekers what they would like to receive in their food parcel through a questionnaire. In this way, they learned that in lieu of halal meat, the Muslim asylum seekers wanted fresh fruit and vegetables, oil, rice, nuts and other basic staples, which the volunteers had not considered.

While the church's intentions were good, they made decisions for the asylum seekers, instead of working together with them, and ended up wasting money and providing a lesser service. All the foodbank needed to do to optimise its service and ensure it provided what the asylum seekers needed was to ask them.



A refugee sports a hair pin she was given by the community at Trinity Methodist Church in Ellesmere Port.

Why do I need a ‘seat at the table’?

Another important way in which your church or group of churches could considerably improve integration outcomes is by seeking out partnerships with local authorities and other charities working in refugee support, and by requesting a seat at the table in your local area’s decision-making processes.

Despite providing key frontline services and serving as an essential safety net, churches can remain isolated from strategic partnerships. When this is the case, local authorities and charities miss valuable, and in many respects unique, insights from church communities, while churches lose out on important opportunities to learn from other actors in the sector. More importantly, this often means a lesser service is consequently offered to asylum seekers and refugees.

The reasons for this lack of partnership can include governmental and civil society nervousness around proselytism, religious illiteracy, confusion about how churches operate, and uncertainty around churches’ capacity to meet sector standards. For the benefit of refugees and their local communities, it is essential that churches work towards overcoming these obstacles by actively demonstrating their dependability and proactively seeking out partnerships.

If your church plays an active role in supporting asylum seekers and refugees, whether by offering a warm welcome or providing specific services, it should have a say at any discussions about their integration into the community.

To help overcome some of the obstacles mentioned above, we recommend that you take the following practical steps:

- 1. Be aware of other actors.** When churches duplicate efforts by taking on a particular project – food bank, clothes bank, drop-in centre, etc. – that another dedicated organisation in the community is already doing, resources are wasted and opportunities for collaboration are lost. It also isolates the church from the rest of the local voluntary sector network. By working with local charities as partners, you can create cohesive support networks that better meet the needs of asylum seekers and refugees and, in the process, gain a seat at the table.
- 2. Speak with one voice with other churches in the community.** The highly decentralised nature of churches can confuse many potential partners. This barrier can be overcome by establishing relationships with other churches in the community and identifying credible representatives to participate in discussions with other stakeholders. This approach also has the added benefits of distributing the responsibility of participating in discussions among churches in the community and presenting a united front on refugee action.
- 3. Upskill when specialising.** Not all churches need to specialise in providing specific services. But if you do, you need to ensure that you are seen by charities and local authorities as a reliable partner. This may mean improving presentation and communication. It may also mean seeking and investing in industry-standard training for church members and volunteers.

community-building work.

- 4. Know your limits.** Working with asylum seekers and refugees may involve specialist services – e.g. legal advice, medical advice, mental health support etc. These should not be provided without appropriate training and accreditation. By coordinating with specialists and allowing them to use your church's hard assets, rather than trying to provide the service yourselves, you gain credibility while ensuring that asylum seekers and refugees receive holistic care of the highest possible standard.



Iain first met Man, a Vietnamese refugee, at an English language class in South East London. Man and his family were staying in an asylum hotel nearby and Iain worked for a church in the area. The two struck up a close friendship. In this scene, Iain visits Man and his family in their new home. Iain has brought cake, and his hosts are cooking him a hearty Vietnamese pho.

How can national and regional church bodies support me?

Integration is always local and relational – but the asylum system is national, and many discussions about refugee integration take place at the national and regional levels. For this reason, denominational and inter-church structures at these levels also have a supporting role to play in helping parish and community churches across the country support asylum seekers and refugees.

- 1. Provide feedback to local churches.** Churches are often highly decentralised, but many denominational structures have mechanisms for oversight. If a local church is delivering a service to forced migrants, but is not up to standard, has taken on more than it can handle, or is pursuing a project inappropriately, it needs to be held accountable for its work. A local church that provides sub-optimal services can discredit the work of their denomination and other churches in the community.
- 2. Enable mutual learning.** Even within a given region (e.g. diocese, circuit or synod) there are churches with very different experiences of welcoming and supporting asylum seekers and refugees. In particular, regional church bodies should provide opportunities for local church leaders to share their experiences and learn from each other, both within and across denominations.
- 3. Identify credible representatives.** Churches can only gain a seat at the table if they have credible representatives. While many denominational structures have natural regional and national leaders (such as bishops),

churches should draw on their wealth of lived grassroots experience. It may be appropriate for regional and national church bodies to offer the church's seat at the table to particularly experienced local church leaders, making use of churches' unique community assets and making their contribution to strategic meetings all the more valuable.

- 4. Make resources available.** Churches can become more reliable partners if they have easily accessible and up-to-date (inter) denominational resources for congregations, clergy and for asylum seekers or refugees. This will also help church leaders avoid duplication of effort and save considerable resources currently spent on searching for accurate information and materials for their congregations.

A refugee prepares food for the Maundy Thursday meal at St Luke's Methodist Church Hoylake. Refugees who were once welcomed by St Luke's travelled to spend the afternoon catching up and cooking a variety of dishes from their home countries for the local community.



FAQs

Do I have to create a separate charity structure to deliver services to asylum seekers or refugees?

No – it is perfectly acceptable for churches to set up a drop-in session or foodbank as churches, though it may take some work to build up trust with local authorities and other refugee charities. Churches can make certain unique contributions that cannot be made through separate charity structures. However, setting up a separate refugee charity can have some benefits, particularly if you work closely with non-church stakeholders or specialise in delivering a particular service.

Do I have to remove any Christian imagery to make asylum seekers comfortable?

No – in the vast majority of cases, non-Christian refugees view church-based support positively. They either appreciate assistance irrespective of religious context or are particularly grateful that their Christian ‘cousins in the faith’ go out of their way to help them. In many cases where churches have removed Christian imagery and literature from their premises for fear of alienating non-Christian asylum seekers and refugees, church leaders and members were projecting their own fears onto refugees. This reflects a broader discomfort in British society with openly expressed Christianity rather than genuine concerns among refugees. There may of course

be cases where Christian symbolism makes refugees anxious if they have experienced persecution at the hands of Christians in the past. However, before ‘sanitising’ your church hall, first consider whether there is a genuine risk of alienating someone.

I am burnt out from supporting asylum seekers, but I don’t want this to distract from helping them. What do I do?

Church leaders and volunteers can experience great emotional strain from providing regular psychological and pastoral support to asylum seekers and refugees, as they become second-hand witnesses to the trauma these individuals have experienced. If you feel you are not adequately equipped to handle severe and complex issues presented by refugees, involve experts who are better equipped to do so. Reach out to other churches or charities that work with asylum seekers and refugees for support. Use denominational and interdenominational networks to find support and advice. If necessary, it is better to take a break, scale back, or to involve more people, than to persevere and cause long-term harm to yourself and potentially to the people you are trying to help.

This how-to guide was produced as part of the Theos research project ‘From Strangers to Neighbours: The Church and the Integration of Refugees’.

Integrating refugees and asylum seekers into British communities is essential in building social cohesion, reducing isolation, and allowing refugees who want to belong to feel settled and able to contribute to our society.

As the government’s strategy on migration shifts towards a focus on integration, we need asylum and immigration systems that encourage migrants to integrate into British communities.

Alongside voluntary and statutory organisations, churches are already well-placed to integrate refugees into their local areas through practical and pastoral means. However, there is more work to be done to acknowledge this.

Theos calls for the contribution of churches in refugee integration to be fully recognised by policymakers and stakeholders. Integration can be best achieved if churches to be offered a seat at policymaking tables and proactively involved in both local and national collaboration.

Theos
77 Great Peter Street
London SW1P 2EZ

+44 (0) 20 7828 7777
hello@theosthinktank.co.uk
theosthinktank.co.uk

