

CHAIRPERSON'S AGM REPORT 2021/2022

Over the past year, EMBRACE has continued to support the churches in making Northern Ireland a more welcoming place for people who have migrated here, are seeking asylum, or who have been granted refugee status. The need to cultivate a welcoming society for those with different backgrounds, experiences and outlooks remains relevant. We believe EMBRACE occupies an important place as an inter-church group informing and resourcing churches while providing linkages to community groups as well as to non-governmental and statutory agencies. In addition to identifying and supporting ways in which churches can serve newcomers, we want the churches to be blessed by the presence and abundant gifts that they bring to the north of Ireland whether that is in our churches, universities, hospitals, new businesses, restaurants and schools or more broadly into our cultural, social and personal lives.

The Committee has continued to meet, discern and plan ways to engage the churches and to identify and address emerging needs. The Committee decided to commission research to examine the challenges and opportunities that are there for churches in connecting with people seeking asylum and refuge. We intend to be guided by this work and its main findings to set priorities for EMBRACE going forward.

The research found that churches across NI are welcoming asylum seekers, refugees, and migrant workers in a number of ways. Many are using relational models of support

while also addressing the structural barriers that newcomers face to 'integration', including issues of language, housing, and deprivation. A number of churches are working closely with local and national organisations to support newcomers in different areas. Churches are experiencing challenges (as well as opportunities) in how they respond to need, build relationships, work collaboratively, and foster diversity in congregations and local communities.

Relevant recommendations for churches' work in these areas are listed below.

1. Responding to need

- Be proactive about outreach.
- Innovate in mapping and assessing needs.
- Prioritise listening to newcomers' own wants and needs – be wary of broad representations of 'community' needs.
- Respond to structural barriers to integration by advocating for (and alongside) asylum seekers, refugees, and migrant workers.
- Ensure that responses to newcomers are centred on the Biblical mandate to 'love the foreigner', regardless of their origin, rather than on political or media attention towards specific groups.
- Be aware of the impact of different migration statuses on rights and entitlements.

2. Building relationships

- Prioritise relationship-building while recognising the importance of overarching strategy.
- Encourage congregations to invest in relationships while promoting boundaries and cultural sensitivity.
- Move away from depictions of asylum seekers and refugees as inherently vulnerable and in need of 'support'.

3. Working together

- Establish a shared code of practice among churches for welcoming newcomers, while recognising the contingency of 'welcome' on context.
- Partner with churches in rural/urban areas to share learning.
- Signpost newcomers to the work of other churches and organisations.
- Collaborate with organisations outside the church sector, sharing learning and expertise.

4. Fostering diversity

- Adopt 'intercultural' models which promote dialogue with difference.
- Make resources inclusive.
- Consider more engagement in interfaith initiatives.

- Encourage 'story-telling' as a means of challenging stereotypes.
- Recognise and address the conditions in which racism emerges.

We continue to develop, revise and provide resources and information to churches through our website and available printed materials. Our EMERGENCY FUND remains available to selected support organisations, who can request funding for individuals and families in need. We are grateful to all of our friends and supporters, especially the churches which have provided sufficient funds to maintain the organisation. We have been covering the administrative and financial needs of EMBRACE voluntarily as we seek a part-time worker, and are grateful to Tracey Ayre who has continued to assist us with banking and social media matters. Thanks to you all for your prayers and support.

Chairperson

Scott Boldt