

# CHRIST CHURCH AND REFUGEES

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## OVERVIEW

There are an estimated 10,000 urban refugees in Bangkok from Pakistan alone, in addition to others from Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam and other nationalities within the city. Their presence here represents an enormous challenge to the international churches, many of which feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of numbers. Any practical support that can be offered by churches, relief organisations, and even recognised UN agencies is minute in comparison with the needs of refugees.

## FINANCIAL SUPPORT FROM CHRIST CHURCH

It is Christ Church policy to give 10% of our regular, church income to charity. This means that every year, 10% of the money received by the church in collections or donations is used to support Christian charitable work outside of the church's own immediate needs.

Of this, in 2016, a major part was given directly to Liferaft, as well as smaller amounts to the Bangkok Refugee Centre and to the ecumenical churches' group supporting inmates in IDC.

As well as the above money, for more than 30 years, Christ Church has supported the Karen ministry, which works amongst the Karen refugee community on the border with Burma: people who have been systematically persecuted and have suffered for up to 60 years, many of whom have seen their homes burned and have fled for their lives due to the ethnic cleansing policy of their own government. In 2016 again, major donations (almost 3 million Thai Baht) have been given to this ministry.

In summary

- We seek to use whatever funds are available as effectively as possible.
- The only way to increase the amount of money given to urban refugees is either by an increase in offerings received by Christ Church or by reducing our giving to other recognised charities, which work amongst underprivileged Thai citizens, or for the propagation of the gospel in Thailand.

- In supporting urban refugees, we seek to be as fair and impartial as possible, and support refugees who are known to us. Our aim is to have some degree of accountability to our giving, and we do not have sufficient resources to respond to individual requests by people who just 'turn up' at the church.

## **OTHER WAYS IN WHICH CHRIST CHURCH SUPPORTS URBAN REFUGEES**

- Refugees are extremely welcome to join Christ Church and to be a part of the worshipping life of the church. Refugees share in our Small Groups and in the regular social life of the church. Refugee families who wish to attend Tiny Tots are not be expected to pay the customary entrance fee.
- Every Sunday, we provide breakfast and lunch at church. Whilst a small donation is suggested for those who are able to pay, it is clearly understood that anyone facing financial need is welcome to free food, as long as the cost of free meals can be covered by the 'paying' participants.
- If ever food is left over from church events, Sundays, or other social activities, it is always offered to refugees.
- Every Thursday, we also offer a free lunch to refugees, on a similar basis to Sundays – the cost is supported by 'paying' members at these meals.
- Also on Thursdays, Christ Church offers both an English Language Group, and Thai language lessons. Whilst not exclusively for refugees – it is open to anyone who wants to improve their spoken English – the reality is that it is almost exclusively refugees who benefit from this group. These sessions offer members the chance to improve their spoken English skills, not just for immediate benefit, but also to help prepare them for a hoped for future in a 'third country' where they may be re-settled, and also to learn some Thai to assist in daily life in Bangkok. Christ Church members act as teachers, whilst childcare is also offered. Recognising that reaching Christ Church is costly and time-consuming, the group is deliberately timed to coincide with the offer of a free lunch, and also a short lunchtime service in church.
- A team of Christ Church members visits inmates in the Immigration Detention Centre every week. New members are always welcome to join this team. By 'calling out' inmates, visitors give them the chance not only to get out of their cell for an hour, but also to meet other members of their family (the sexes are detained separately inside IDC). Visitors also provide small amounts of food for inmates, at their own expense.
- In addition to the 'official' ways in which Christ Church supports refugees, a number of church members offer their own personal support, in

response to their own calling to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The church, in essence, is people, not institutions or structures, so it is hard to quantify precisely how much caring for urban refugees is carried out by church members – more than we can be aware of. (For example, one member has set up the ‘Sock Puppet Project’, which involves several refugee families.) Christ Church welcomes similar initiatives from its members.

- Christ Church also offers ‘one off’ events for urban refugees. For example, we funded a Christmas meal, and gave refugees use of the church kitchen for a day, in order that they could cook for themselves – which they thoroughly appreciated – and gave all refugees families, and children, Christmas presents. We have also organised two trips to the beach, and have given many of our refugees families a day out, including lunch.

All of the above suggests that Christ Church is actually doing as much as is realistic to support the urban refugees in our community.

## **CHRIST CHURCH AND LIFERAFT**

Our partnership with Liferaft is the most significant financial way in which we seek to support refugees.

Liferaft is a charitable organisation that has been created specifically to work with urban refugees. It works by partnering with local churches and supports refugees who are known to be part of a worshipping Christian community. By working with Liferaft, Christ Church seeks to provide accountability and to be even-handed in its support for refugees. Christ Church gives its own allocation of support money for refugees to Liferaft. Liferaft in turn, has a system for registering and assessing the support that is offered to refugees, and then pays back to the Christ Church Co-ordinator the agreed monthly allowances for each of our registered families. Refugee families are asked to work with an Advocate (a friend who is part of the church) to produce a monthly budget sheet, and to be honest in declaring all sources of income, and also to demonstrate that they are willing to share in the Learn, Serve, Teach programme, which asks refugees to state explicitly what they are doing to learn and grow as individuals and to use and develop the abilities that they have – the intention being to encourage refugees to move away from a ‘victim’ mentality, to recognise that they are in Bangkok for the long-term and that even within the confines of being a refugee, they can still be aiming to use their time creatively.

Christ Church encourages members who wish to support urban refugees financially to do so by donating to Liferaft. Although any organised system is far from perfect, it is much more equitable to work through an organised system than to give money randomly by responding to personal pleas with no assessment. Such random giving of money by private individuals simply means that the most vocal or persistent refugees receive much more money than those

who remain quiet. Liferaft offers accountability for both donors and recipients and seeks to be fair to all parties as far as possible.

Another concern of random payments, is that we do have vulnerable church members, as well as church members who themselves have limited financial means. Such people can feel intimidated by personal approaches, even to the extent that they can feel too frightened to come to church. Christ Church has as much responsibility to protect these 'vulnerable' members as it has to assisting refugees.

We are constantly working with Liferaft to improve their systems, and so serve the needs of refugees as well as we are able.

## **FREQUENT QUESTIONS THAT ARE ASKED**

*'Christ Church is not doing much to assist the refugees'*

The information given above demonstrates that Christ Church takes the needs of urban refugees very seriously. Within the congregation there is a great deal of compassion for refugees. Both corporately and individually there is much caring and practical support that takes place.

*Christ Church has a school as well but doesn't support the refugee children in getting admission in the school.*

Christ Church doesn't have a school. The Thai congregation has a kindergarten which is run and administered solely by the Thai congregation, and is run for Thai children, using the Thai language. It is not appropriate for refugee children with no knowledge of Thai. The English congregation has no authority over, or responsibility for, this kindergarten.

*The small support that refugees receive is through Liferaft but none is being given by Christ Church.*

Christ Church gives its financial support to refugees through Liferaft. The support may be small in comparison to the need, but the issue of refugees is so vast that even major government organizations have difficulty to cope with it.

*Christ Church should do more / should have specific mechanism in order to make its reach out program more effective.*

Christ Church has sought to respond to the huge issue of refugees in Bangkok, which has occurred over a relatively short period of time. Do we do enough? Of course not – the issue is far too big for us ever to do enough. We should always be looking for ways to make our program more effective. By working with Liferaft, we have a system in place by which we can do that. The reality is that Liferaft, too, is a young organization and is learning how to cope with the enormity of the refugee situation. There are lessons to learn, and we feel that Liferaft represents our best way of offering systematic support to our refugee families.

*A better thing that could be done is try to involve people in the church work.*

Christ Church is not in a position to offer paid work to refugees. We already receive frequent requests for work, but we need to be aware that we are a small organization and do not have the funds or the capability to take on extra workers. It is illegal to work in Thailand without a work permit (and very difficult to obtain one).

This said, Christ Church makes every effort to involve refugees in our regular church activities. Refugees sing in the choir, serve in The Lighthouse, and act as Ushers. We encourage them to take their Christian discipleship seriously, just like all other church members. The ethos of Liferaft is to encourage refugees to be actively involved in church and other community activities as much as possible. Many refugees offer their services in the church kitchen on Sundays, and these are appreciated and encouraged.

*Christ Church has a good reputation in Bangkok and they can use their platform to be a liaison between schools and refugees deserving scholarship.*

No-one on the Christ Church staff has the knowledge or experience to co-ordinate such a scheme. If a church member with the necessary experience to assist in this way should become available, then we would happily invite that person to co-ordinate such a scheme. Until that time, this is a task better suited to the professionals – Bangkok Refugee Centre and UNHCR.

*The food that is leftover could also be given to the refugees.*

Whenever food is left over after church events, it is offered to refugees (e.g. sandwiches after Sunday lunch; after church Bar B Qs etc.)

**Christ Church takes its refugee community very seriously, and is always open to more church members getting involved in this ministry and actively helping.**

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The reality of urban refugees in Bangkok is a challenge for all of us. How do we take our Lord's command 'to love our neighbour as we love ourselves' seriously when we are faced with a problem that simply leaves us feeling overwhelmed? As a church, we have a duty to express compassion. The following responses offer some suggestions for what we can be doing:

- We continue to welcome all who come to worship at Christ Church, whatever their motives may be, with open arms.
- We encourage all Christ Church members who wish to support urban refugees to do so by giving their money to one central point within Christ Church in order that there may be total co-ordination of money that is given to refugees.
- We continue to offer breakfasts and lunches to refugees after Sunday worship.

- We encourage use of the English language group on Thursdays, and look at ways in which this group may be developed. We seek to find more volunteers who are willing to act as teachers within the group.
- We encourage church members to join the IDC visiting team.

*Revd Tim Eady     March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2017*