
Report on Llandaff Richard Seebohm

On 17-18 October 2007 Faith in Europe held a residential meeting at St Michael's College, Llandaff, Cardiff. The theme was **Migrants and Refugees**.

St Michael's is the Anglican Theological College of Cardiff University. It is walking distance from Landaff Cathedral. Some 45 ordinands were around (a gender mix, of course). Its financial future is secure just now; disabled access and en suite rooms are a future priority.

As an introduction to the theme, Aled Edwards, CEO(!) of CYTUN, gave us a run-through of Welsh history, leading up to the benefits and frustrations of partial devolution. Migrants had come to Wales (including Moroccans) ever since Roman times. Celtic Christianity was a feature. The last indigenous Prince of Wales, however, was Llewellyn, ousted by Edward I – he complained of being treated worse than a Jew or a Saracen. Until the seventeenth century Tudor settlements (as in Ireland), women could own land but Jews were persecuted – wearing the yellow star. Under Elizabeth, the Welsh Bible and Prayer Book anchored the language. In spite of Henry VII's Welsh birth, however, all public offices went to the English. The industrial revolution (initially helped by slave trade proceeds) brought prosperity and Irish Catholics to Wales.

Aled skipped over the rise of evangelical dissenting churches, the 1920 disestablishment of the (Anglican) Church of Wales and the early twentieth-century suppression of the Welsh language, also the more recent problem of English second homes. The Assembly at last came into being in 1997, celebrated at its inauguration by a Welsh-speaking Jewish girl and a Somali reading from the Koran in Welsh. Immigrants of all cultures were learning Welsh. Wales had become a melting pot, at least in its conurbations. Sport helped.

In 2001 the devolved administration found itself opposing the Home Office decision to house single male asylum seekers in Cardiff Prison. The immigration officers concerned appeared to be wholly untrained in human skills, but 'in Wales we don't treat people this way'. In 2003, Iraqi doctors were found to be arriving in Wales as refugees, and they were being trained to work there. Aled contrasted the Welsh inclusion policy, taking people as they were rather than as you would like them to be, with Westminster's integration policy. 'Do you want stew or salad?' For every asylum seeker there were some 20 immigrant workers, and the Poles in particular were either bettering themselves or going back home. 'We can't allow ourselves the luxury of borders.... In post-devolution Wales we define ourselves by how we relate to others.'

The 2011 Census would have questions on religion, ethnicity and place of birth but not on 'self-defining Welshness'. But the state ought to be told how people felt about themselves in post-devolution Wales. The Welsh faith leaders had met before the Assembly election and sworn to uphold non-racism.

Although non-believers demonstrably upheld moral values, the Christian witness was unique. But 'secular' didn't have to mean non-faith, it should give space for all.

Of our witness sessions, Themba Moya was a Zimbabwean who had arrived as a refugee. He was now chair of 'Welsh Refugee Community Associations', umbrella body for 54 local groups (unfunded but linked to Home Office dispersal sites) which provided someone to talk to and to offer guidance through the thickets of officialdom. As he knew from experience, immigration officers lacked knowledge of current political realities in countries of origin. They had a presumption of opportunism (as opposed to one of innocence) and showed no interest in evidence from compatriots already here. There were double binds such as the need to sign an agreement to return if application failed, no state recognition until you got the right to stay, no legal

aid unless an official thinks your chance of success is over 50 per cent. He saw a need for a Brussels rather than national focus on entry to the EU. Language was an issue – in England (but not Wales or Scotland) English teaching for immigrants had been cut. We agreed on the risk of creating ghettos, perhaps fostered by an over-readiness to provide translation. (Various speakers spoke of the particular problem of integrating Somali women.)

Our second witness was Norbert Mbu-Mputu, a Congolese who had worked for the United Nations **before** seeking asylum. He reinforced Themba's story. From an African point of view there was no distinction between a refugee and an asylum seeker. Immigration officers had no concept of Africa, where one was 'free' but had no freedom. In Europe one had physical freedom but was bureaucratically at risk. On hearing that he had escaped from arrest, they had asked to see the warrant. They could not grasp the absurdity there of a complaint against the police. They refused to accept supporting evidence in French, although the FCO was ready to do so. He had no way of getting them to check his UN credentials. Eventually, Amnesty International had contacted the UN Kampala office on his behalf. He had learnt how to survive, without drug dealing, sleeping in bendy buses. The UK had still not brought into national law the 1997 EU Dublin Convention (requiring the member state of first entry to process asylum claims).

I can't easily report the subsequent detailed discussion of UK immigration policy, beyond noting the problem of negative and sometimes mischievous press reporting, and the inescapable fact of a racist and xenophobic undertow.

Andy Bruce of CTBI and the Churches' Commission for Racial Justice led us into the wider UK social scene. The Christian Church was necessarily transnational. All of us had immigrant forebears, contacts, or more direct experience. The colonial legacy was a reality, as was the fall-out from wars. Direct immigration was politicised, but faced up to by the churches; they were

strong on human rights. They needed to reflect more on the resulting mix in the population as a whole.

Every country had to have an immigration policy: Spain, facing much bigger pressure, had coped, while Britain had lurched. There were pressures on public services (police, schools, NHS) which Whitehall was slow to acknowledge. Immigrants came with their home cultures, which could include ignorance of queuing manners, knife crime and drink driving. Individual churchgoers had to be ready to greet newcomers – the ‘option for the poor’ required them to be in solidarity with minorities. But before we over-celebrated multicultural richness, we should recall that in Lebanon it was all there was – the country was ungovernable.

Richard Seebohm was formerly Representative in Brussels of the Quaker Council for European Affairs, and is a member of the Quaker Committee on Christian and Interfaith Relations.