

# Written evidence submitted by The Archbishops' Council of the Church of England

## Summary

- The Church of England does not set a central policy for supporting asylum claims; bishops provide leadership and set direction over their dioceses
- Clergy use their wisdom and training to discern the motives of all converts to Christianity as far as this is possible
- Asylum decisions are for the Home Office and tribunals – evidence from church members is “not determinative”
- There is no apparent relationship between the numbers of asylum applications and the number of Church of England adult baptisms
- Asylum seekers can seek baptism through other Christian denominations

## Leadership of the Church of England

With 12,500 parishes, the Church of England has a presence in every community in England.

The Church is led by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York and other bishops organised across 42 dioceses. Each of the diocesan bishops along with their leadership teams are responsible for the care of parishes and clergy across each province. The two archbishops and 24 other bishops sit in the House of Lords; they do not sit as a bloc but as independent members and they do not take any whip.

His Majesty the King is the Supreme Governor of the Church of England.

The Church of England is not a single corporately structured body and the Archbishop of Canterbury is not the equivalent of a Chief Executive. Responsibility for oversight of the work of individual clergy lies with their bishop, and bishops set overall direction and policy in their dioceses, subject to the fact that the majority of clergy are office-holders and not employees. Advice to bishops and to local parishes, on a variety of issues, is given by the National Church Institutions.

### *Church activity*

Church of England churches are heavily involved in social action and community outreach. Seventy-seven percent of churches were involved in one or more forms of social action in 2022 across 31,300 projects. Churches ran 14,100 social action projects themselves, with other projects being hosted by churches, carried out in partnership, or supported with volunteers or donations. Churches were particularly involved in running or supporting food banks, hospitality for older people, and parent and toddler groups.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Church of England: Statistics for Mission 2022](#)

The worshipping community, its number of regular worshippers, was 984,000 people in 2022. In addition, around a third of churches (36%) offered “Church at Home” services, with services and contact provided online, by phone, post, email and other means.

There are higher numbers of asylum seekers in some regions of England than others, with the North East, North West and Yorkshire and Humber taking the greatest share.<sup>2</sup> This means some parishes will be working with asylum seekers but many will not.

## The process of conversion to Christianity

The Church does not convert anyone: conversion is the work of God. The central calling of all our clergy is to be a supportive, listening presence in explaining and teaching what it means to be a follower of Christ Jesus. When anyone seeks baptism, asylum seeker or not, it is a profound undertaking which ministers take seriously.

Church law (Canon Law) requires that clergy should ensure that those coming for baptism have had clear instruction on the tenets of Christianity and guidance in exploring their developing faith, but there is no centrally mandated process for how this is done because the process must be tailored to the individual needs and circumstances of enquirers. Typically, and only after a pattern of regular church attendance, those coming for baptism will attend a weekly class in a small group for a number of weeks leading up to the public declaration of faith made through baptism.

Christian churches of other denominations also welcome converts through baptism and have their own rites and procedures.

## Supporting asylum cases

The Church is not alone in working with asylum seekers; there are over 1,200 charities in England and Wales with the terms “asylum” or “refugee” in their objects and activities.<sup>3</sup> Churches provide a compassionate welcome and practical support with issues like housing and accessing public services. Some clergy also support asylum claims by providing letters of support, providing dates of baptism and descriptions of participation in church life. Some clergy may also offer to attend court with an asylum seeker, often to provide moral support and help with English as much as attesting to conversion to Christianity. This work is not monitored centrally and we cannot quantify it. Clearance of cases by the Home Office is such that currently priests are not often called to give evidence about conversions in court.

Clergy are expected to uphold the law, just like any other citizen, and so the highest standards are expected of them in making truthful representations of character and standing firm against any dishonest manipulation of formal legal processes. Clergy might seek their colleagues’ advice if they have doubts about whether a case should be supported.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/where-do-migrants-live-in-the-uk/>

<sup>3</sup> Charity Commission register of charities

Names of people being baptised are recorded by local churches in their baptisms register, but this information is not collated centrally. Parishes do not record the immigration status of those being baptised or any prior religion if people have converted from another faith. The post-pandemic surge in asylum claims (from 35,566 in 2019 to 74,751 in 2022) was not accompanied by a rise in adult baptisms; in fact, regrettably for the Church, the number of adult baptisms carried out by Church of England churches fell slightly from 7,000 in 2019 to 6,700 in 2022. (The 2022 adult baptisms figure is probably slightly elevated by postponed baptisms as a result of church closures and other pandemic-related restrictions.) We cannot see anything in the available statistics that suggests a relationship between the number of asylum claims and the number of adult baptisms by the Church of England.

The Home Office and tribunals are responsible for deciding whether or not to grant asylum on the basis of the information before them, including that from church ministers. Home Office guidance states that:

***“Ultimately, evidence even from a senior church member is not determinative. The task of drawing conclusions on such evidence rests with the decision-maker.”***

In the case of MH (review; slip rule; church witnesses) Iran - [2020] UKUT 00125 (IAC)<sup>4</sup> the Upper Tribunal held that “Written and oral evidence given by ‘church witnesses’ is potentially significant in cases of Christian conversion (see TF & MA v SSHD [2018] CSIH 58)” but that ***“such evidence is not aptly characterised as expert evidence, nor is it necessarily deserving of particular weight, and the weight to be attached to such evidence is for the judicial fact-finder”***.

We have not seen the details of the analysis, but according to the Times newspaper, only 1% of the cases heard by the Upper Tribunal since January 2023 cited conversion to Christianity as a reason to be granted asylum. The Times reports that of these 28 cases, 13 were dismissed, seven were approved and new hearings were granted in eight cases. Even if all eight new hearings result in leave to remain, that would mean that 0.5% of cases heard by the Upper Tribunal resulted in asylum being granted with conversion to Christianity cited as a factor. It is unclear how many, if any, of the individuals involved had connections to Church of England churches, as opposed to any other Christian denomination.

#### *Church of England Guidance for Clergy*

The document *Supporting Asylum Seekers – Guidance for Church of England Clergy* has been publicly available on the Church of England website for around seven years. Written originally in response to the conflict in Syria, the guidance sets out how clergy can support asylum applications, if they choose to. It is not policy; the Church does not centrally mandate an approach to supporting asylum seekers. The document refers to the need to be “wise as serpents” (Matthew 10:16) in discerning motives and to use evidence of

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bailii.org/uk/cases/UKUT/IAC/2020/125.html>

commitment such as attendance at church beyond Sundays; commitment to Bible study; and changes in behaviour.

We know that after an asylum seeker has received leave to remain, they are required to leave Home Office accommodation, often at short notice. At that point, many have little choice but to leave the parish in search of housing or work or to be nearer family elsewhere in the country. Although some do stay in touch, parish priests cannot reasonably “monitor” refugees who have moved away.

Given the changes in migration legislation and policy since then, the guidance is under review by the Faith and Public Life Department, within the Archbishops’ Council.<sup>5</sup>

A number of allegations have been made by politicians, press and political commentators that the Church of England is converting asylum seekers for immigration purposes on a mass or industrial scale.<sup>6</sup> Home Affairs Committee member, Tim Loughton MP, asked at PMQs on 7<sup>th</sup> February whether “the taxpayer was being scammed by the Archbishop”.<sup>7</sup> To date, we have not been able to establish the evidence for these claims nor have we been provided with any. We understand the Home Secretary has asked for a review of the role of conversion in asylum cases and we welcome the opportunity to review any evidence if it is forthcoming.

March 2024

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<sup>5</sup> The Archbishops’ Council is one of the National Church Institutions; it co-ordinates, promotes, aids and furthers the mission of the Church of England.

<sup>6</sup> *Church aiding asylum claims on mass scale, say Patel and Braverman*, Daily Telegraph, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2024

<sup>7</sup> <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2024-02-07/debates/F9890E24-6D9C-4CAE-B0AF-88E31042D41E/PrimeMinister#contribution-C779C9FD-709F-45A3-9339-CAB67625E861>