

Written evidence submitted by The Reverend Dr Robert Stephen, General Secretary of the Free Church of England

Asylum decision-making process and conversion to Christianity

The Free Church of England is an Anglican Church with its origins in the 19th century. The FCE withdrew from the Established Church in protest against the increasing influence of the Tractarian Movement and the introduction of increasing catholic practices. It is generally low Church in practice and blue-collar in its demographic. It would describe itself as Episcopal, liturgical and evangelical.

The FCE is a small Christian Denomination, split into two Diocese with Parishes across the UK. It has experienced significant growth in recent years and has been revitalising previously abandoned buildings and engaging in Church planting.

I have required all Clergy to respond to me on the issues raised under this topic. There have been no irregular applications for baptism from asylum seekers. There is one congregation, our Church in Sheffield where we have a Farsi-speaking congregation, where two asylum seekers have been baptised. They had been members of the congregation in advance of their baptism and have remained regular worshippers since. They have not requested a reference in support of their application for permission to remain.

The FCE would not expect to have significant numbers of applications for baptism from asylum seekers as it does not carry or assume the same status as the Established Church of England.

There is no written guidance given specifically with regard to an application for baptism from an asylum seeker. The clear expectation of the Denomination would be that anyone seeking baptism would be expected to be a member of the established worshipping community for a period of six month. During that time any candidate would be expected to undergo a period of instruction based on the Catechism of the Free Church of England (fcofe.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/FCE-Catechism.pdf) so that they had a clear understanding of the Christian faith, their responsibilities as a Christian and an understanding of the Church of which they would become a member. There is also a clear expectation that all adult candidates for baptism would then prepare for confirmation.

Beyond that Canon G.5 expects that all members of the Church shall receive Holy Communion regularly or their membership shall end:

The Roll of Communicants shall be amended immediately before the holding of the Annual Congregational Meeting in each year and the names of those Communicants who, without reasonable cause, have not partaken of the Lord's Supper, at least three times during the preceding twelve months, shall be removed from the same.

There is also a Canon outlining the approach to Baptism of both infants and adults, where sponsors are required. These sponsors would be expected to know the candidate, especially an adult candidate, better than a casual acquaintance:

I.11 OF HOLY BAPTISM It is desirable that every minister having a cure of souls shall normally administer the sacrament of Holy Baptism at public worship when the most number of people come together, that the congregation there present may witness the receiving of them that be newly baptised into Christ's Church, and be put in remembrance of their own profession made to God in their baptism. The minister shall, to the best of his ability, ensure that the parents or guardians of a child brought for baptism, together with such fit persons as they shall choose to be sponsors, are instructed in the responsibilities required of them by the service of Holy Baptism. No minister being informed of the weakness or danger of death of any infant within his cure and therefore desired to go to baptise the same, shall either refuse or delay to do so. The name of any child so baptised shall be entered in the Baptismal Register of the parish. If any infant which is privately baptised do afterwards live, it shall be brought to the church and there received into the congregation of Christ's flock.

In common with non-conformist Denominations, regular attendance at worship would be closer to weekly than the definition accepted in the Established Church of once a month. An evangelical understanding of faith would require a personal faith, a disciplined life that would include daily prayer and Bible study and a demonstrable relationship with God and his Church. It would become fairly evident if an individual, especially one from a different context or culture, were becoming integrated into the worshipping community and the social life of the Church. If there was no evidence of any of this, it is unlikely that a candidate could proceed to be baptised.

To be baptised as a Christian and accepted into a Christian community would require a demonstrable and life-changing commitment to God as he is made known in Jesus Christ. This would be universally the case with the FCE.

If I may be permitted to make a personal contribution, I would like to draw on my experience as a minister of 39 years experience. My ministry began in Kings Cross and then Stoke Newington, areas very well known as entry points for immigrants. My parish, prior to being appointed General Secretary of the FCE, was Handsworth in Birmingham. At no point have I ever received any guidance on baptismal policy from any Church authority, nor has anyone ever monitored what has happened in practice. Decisions have been left to a local incumbent with little accountability. To my knowledge, I have only baptised one Iranian young man who rejected that faith as soon as a reference was denied to support indefinite leave to remain. I have baptised many, converting from Islam, for whom that decision was costly (including rejection from their family and death threats made explicitly). I have also tried to have some integrity on whether or not I would supply a reference for any individual and the contents of that reference. On occasion I have attended court when there has been an appeal against a decision where an application has been denied: I have never attended unless I was convinced of the honesty of an applicant and a demonstrable knowledge of the and their circumstances.

I remain convinced that any application would be processed and examined in keeping with the expectations of the Bishops. We will review whether written guidance may be required, but I am assured that robust processes are in place to ensure that conversions are genuine.

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