

## Written evidence submitted by The Venerable Rick Simpson, Archdeacon of Auckland

*I am the Archdeacon of Auckland, with an oversight role for just over 100 Church of England churches in the Diocese of Durham (including those in Darlington, where I live). In this capacity I am a member of the senior staff team of the Diocese; please note, however, that I am writing this document on my own behalf, not as an official submission by the Diocese.*

1. Matthew Firth was Priest-in-Charge of St Cuthbert's Darlington and Holy Trinity Darlington from January 2018 to April 2020 (legally, July 2020, but he ceased public ministry April 2020). On 12.3.24 **Mr Firth told the Home Affairs Select Committee that he had encountered a "conveyor-belt" of asylum seekers pursuing baptism at St Cuthbert's.** He had made similar claims through interviews with the *Daily Telegraph* published in two articles on 10.2.24. I have written this note because I believe the Select Committee needs to hear the perspectives of other eyewitnesses from this parish and town. **No one else to whom I have spoken who was involved with St Cuthbert's, its baptism ministry and its support for asylum-seekers at this time recognises the picture that was presented; I was personally involved with St Cuthbert's in this period, and I do not recognise it. This picture is also deeply problematic when interrogated in the light of the available evidence.**

2. The facts about the **baptisms that actually took place** can be ascertained from the parish baptism register. In the ten years (2014-2023) before, during and after Mr Firth's brief tenure, I believe that a maximum of 14 baptisms out of a total of 189 (7%) at St Cuthbert's were of refugees. Not all of these were baptisms of asylum-seekers, as some of those baptised had already been granted asylum (directly *contra* Mr Firth's claims - see para 6 below). The number of baptisms of refugees was:

- 2014-16 – 0
- 2017 – 5 (before Mr Firth's tenure)
- 2018 – 5 (during Mr Firth's tenure)
- 2019 – 3 (during Mr Firth's tenure)
- 2020 – 0
- 2021 – 1 (after Mr Firth's tenure)
- 2022 – 0
- 2023 – 0

Note that the register does not record whether a person was a refugee / asylum-seeker; we are working from the names of those baptised and the memory of church members who knew and supported them. It is also worth noting that this number of baptisms is not in any obvious way disproportionate, given the stable presence of a high percentage of refugees and asylum-seekers in the congregation (often c.15 in a Sunday morning congregation of around 60-70 in 2018-19).

3. However, **Mr Firth said to the Select Committee that, whatever the number of actual baptisms, a much larger number of asylum-seekers approached the church seeking baptism.** He said that, having identified a clear pattern of inappropriate baptism applications and then made the process more rigorous, very large numbers nevertheless continued to come to St Cuthbert's asking for baptism throughout 2018-2020. He told the committee repeatedly that groups of six to seven asylum-seekers, mainly Iranian and Syrian, almost exclusively men, were brought by a middle-man seeking baptism every two to three weeks, over a two year period; that he saw money being paid to this middle-man; and that he and/or church members at St Cuthbert's knew in every case that these were individuals who had already had a first failed asylum claim. Mr Firth was asked repeatedly by

Committee members if the numbers he was citing were accurate, and he confirmed that they were. Quantifying this, 6 people every 3 weeks for two years = 204; 7 people every 2 weeks = 364; if for simplicity we average this, we have a figure of c. 284. Taken seriously, then, this constitutes a claim that over the two year period from early 2018 to early 2020 c. 284 asylum-seekers, all of whom were known to have a first failed claim, approached St Cuthbert's for baptism.

4. However, **no one else involved with St Cuthbert's in 2018-20 recognises this picture, or anything approximating to it.** The church had a stable, regular congregation; some of the church members were involved in the support of refugees, and some with baptism ministry (some with both). I have spoken to many of these people and cannot find anyone who was involved with these areas of the church's work who ever saw anything like this number of people regularly coming to (or being brought to) the church, or the church hall, to apply for baptism. Bookings for baptism were taken at a midweek evening office-hour in the church hall at which a lay minister was also present on most occasions along with Mr Firth. She recalls that on one occasion four or five asylum-seekers came, but this was unique and that on most weeks none came. No one else saw anyone acting as a middle-man, or payments being handed to anyone in connection with bringing people to church. The estimate that has been given to me by those directly involved in these areas of the church's work is that approximately 30-35 asylum seekers attended and were involved with St Cuthbert's over the two year period that Mr Firth was here. Not all of these sought baptism here.

5. Mr Firth's narrative is that on arrival at St Cuthbert's he encountered **a permissive conveyor-belt system enabling asylum-seekers to be baptised without due process or preparation.** He said that he initially honoured the bookings that were already "in the system". He must here be referring to the five asylum-seekers whom he baptised on 29.4.18. He stated that he then instigated a more rigorous system including regular attendance at church being a prerequisite for considering applications. He told the Committee that while this did not mean that he simply refused the baptism applications of asylum-seekers out of hand, the steps he took led to all asylum-seeker applicants melting away, so that, he said, "none happened after that period of time". (This is actually not the case: Mr Firth baptised three further refugees in 2019: two on 3.3.19, one on 22.9.19.)

While Mr Firth may indeed have introduced some clear stipulations about applications for baptism, the impression given of the practice at St Cuthbert's before his arrival is disputed entirely by those who were involved with this ministry. They maintain that a careful, diligent approach to the potential baptism of asylum-seekers was already being undertaken before his arrival. Indeed, when asylum-seekers began to come to the church (which had no vicar at the time) in 2016 a lay minister at St Cuthbert's sought the advice of clergy in Hartlepool and Stockton-on-Tees whom she knew had significant experience of work with asylum-seekers. She asked them about good practice in relation to the welcome of refugees, and in responding to requests to both support in asylum applications and for baptism. Their advice included rigorous baptism preparation. She and others implemented the recommendations received at St Cuthbert's. For example, when two refugees applied for baptism in early 2017 the lay minister met with them, and an experienced vicar from Hartlepool, with a Farsi interpreter, to explore the reality of their Christian faith, before proceeding any further with their application. This is clear evidence that this was all undertaken responsibly.

Furthermore, after his arrival Mr Firth did not create a new system for more rigorous baptism preparation, or take any significant personal role in it; rather, he continued to delegate this work to the willing laypeople already involved. They then continued to act diligently, as they had before, though some wondered why Mr Firth did not take a greater personal interest and role in this.

Whatever changes Mr Firth may have made, the volunteers involved deny emphatically that it is accurate or fair to characterise the situation before his arrival as one in which no appropriate care

was being taken about (a) good process around baptism applications, (b) reasonable measures to ascertain (as far as possible) the genuine nature of refugees' faith, or (c) proper preparation for baptism. There is instead ample evidence to the contrary.

**6. The refugees who were baptised at St Cuthbert's do not fit Mr Firth's description of the applicant profile.** Mr Firth claimed to have discovered a clear pattern of exclusively failed asylum-seekers seeking baptism, and that this was known in each case by people in the church. This is not borne out by speaking to those who knew the refugees who did seek baptism. The facts concerning 13 people identified as adult refugees/asylum-seekers baptised between 2017 and 2019, in so far as these can be reconstructed from discussion with these volunteers, are as follows:

Of the five baptised in 2017 (just before Mr Firth's arrival):

- 4 were granted asylum on their first interview; it is not known whether the baptisms preceded these decisions or not, but none had a first failed claim;
- 1 had a failed first claim (we think, but are not sure, after his baptism); appeal was made - result not known.

Of the five baptised by Mr Firth on 29.4.18:

- 1 had already been granted asylum long before baptism;
- 2 were granted asylum, and it is not known if this was before or after baptism, nor whether this was on first claim or appeal;
- 1 had a failed first claim and appealed; the result of the appeal is unknown;
- 1 – information not known.

Of the three baptisms undertaken by Mr Firth in 2019:

- 2 had failed first claims – I think (but am not sure) baptism preceded these first claims; whether they appealed is not known;
- 1 was granted asylum on first interview; I do not know if this was before or after baptism.

This is therefore a mixed picture, but at least 6 out of these 13 people are known to have had a *successful* first asylum application; it is only *known* that 3 out of 13 had a first failed claim. This directly contradicts Mr Firth's assertion that he discovered a pattern that the asylum-seekers applying for baptism all had a first failed asylum claim and that this was known about them.

7. I have an eyewitness perspective on this myself. From March 2018 to October 2019, most of the period when Mr Firth was Priest-in-Charge, I conducted the main Sunday morning service at St Cuthbert's once a month, and some seasonal services (at Easter, Christmas, etc. The Sunday service time of Mr Firth's other church conflicted with that of St Cuthbert's over this period, and I believe he conducted the St Cuthbert's morning service twice a month). **Over 18 months of leading the main service of the church once a month I did not see evidence of what was described to the Select Committee.** The refugees and asylum-seekers at church were a fairly stable group: while individuals came and went over time, I did not see distinct new cohorts of six or seven arriving at church. I never saw anyone "bringing" groups, nor money being handed to anyone. (It is unclear what any such payments could be *for*: no one needs to pay to come to church, see a minister, or apply for baptism). Archdeacons are responsible for ensuring that law and good practice are followed in churches, so are usually attuned to noticing if something is not right or looks suspicious; I saw nothing around the attendance of asylum-seekers that looked inappropriate or organised. I also do not remember ever being asked about baptism by a refugee or an asylum-seeker; as the minister who had taken the

service, greeting people afterwards, I would have been the obvious person to approach, but I do not recall this happening on a single occasion.

**8. The picture presented by Mr Firth is also deeply problematic in terms of its coherence, and in the light of other counter-evidence:**

**8.1. It seems inherently unlikely that numerous asylum-seekers would have continued to approach St Cuthbert's for baptism** for two more years, if from April 2018 Mr Firth consistently refused (nearly) all of their applications. Why keep knocking on a firmly closed door (especially if a middle-man was being paid, as no one would have been getting value for money)? If a conveyor-belt had been running at St Cuthbert's, it was now clearly stuck; if applicants imagined that baptism would be significant in supporting an asylum claim, they would surely have then sought this elsewhere in the town. Other churches were available: there were eight other Church of England churches alone within two miles of St Cuthbert's. However, other churches were not approached (see #8.3).

**8.2. It seems even more unlikely that asylum-seekers would have continued to approach Mr Firth himself**, when other *ministers* were available. Mr Firth claims he was consistently refusing asylum-seeker applications. Furthermore, he had made it clear within his extensive use of social media at this time that he supported stringent measures to reduce immigration, and this was well-known in the town. Of all the Christian clergy in Darlington, Mr Firth was – notoriously – the *least* likely to be seen as a soft target for any asylum-seeker pursuing an inappropriate baptism. Why then would people approach *him*, but not other clergy? And yet, other clergy were not approached (see #8.3).

**8.3. To my knowledge, no other minister or church (of any denomination) in Darlington experienced significant asylum-seeker applications for baptism in this period.** I have checked directly with the Church of England ministers in the other Darlington churches at the time, and all but one have replied to my questions: from January 2018 to April 2020 one minister baptised one refugee who already had permanent leave to remain; *none* received a *single* request for baptism from an asylum-seeker in this period. Mr Firth's testimony therefore demands that the following be accepted: that scores of asylum seekers were seeking baptism in Darlington at this time (indeed, being organised to do that). However, the only Church of England minister they approached here was one who, after April 2018, consistently refused nearly all applications, who was also known to take a right-of-centre stance on immigration. Nevertheless, for two years, in spite of an almost total failure to secure any further baptisms, people kept on coming to him, and only to him, and approached no other ministers or churches when they were refused by him. This seems unlikely.

8.4 Furthermore, in 2019 there were 92 asylum-seekers *in total* in Darlington. In addition to this, some failed claimants will still have been in the town, and some could have travelled from other places (e.g. some Kurdish Iranians who came to St Cuthbert's regularly travelled from Middlesbrough). Nevertheless, **the number of asylum-seekers Mr Firth stated approached him for baptism is out of all proportion to the number of refugees that were actually present in Darlington.**

8.5. In the last question put to Mr Firth the Chair of the Select Committee asked **how he could have known that every one of the c.284 people he claims approached St Cuthbert's for baptism already had a failed asylum claim.** He responded that he or people in St Cuthbert's knew this or were told this in every case. Those who supported asylum-seekers in the church and community dispute that this could be the case, and deny that it was so. As already noted, there were not this

many asylum- seekers in Darlington in total at this time, let alone involved with St Cuthbert's. People at St Cuthbert's report that Mr Firth himself took little interest in the support of asylum-seekers, so could not have had this knowledge personally about numerous people. No one else at the church held this information about so many refugees – especially if, as Mr Firth claimed, this concerns c.284 people who were actually not regularly attending the church (so, logically, could *not* all be known well by church members). What *is* known by church members about those who were actually baptised also directly contradicts this aspect of Mr Firth's claim (see #6).

8.6. Mr Firth said to the Committee (five times) that those who approached him were mainly Iranian and Syrian. There were indeed a number of Iranian asylum-seekers placed in Darlington at this time, and some worshipped at St Cuthbert's. However, those working with refugees locally (who have records of the nationalities of those settled here) tell me that **it is most unlikely that any Syrians would have sought baptism**. None of the asylum-seekers who were baptised at St Cuthbert's were Syrian. Ten Syrian families were brought to Darlington in 2016 through the Home Office resettlement scheme (and other family members joined them later through family reunion). The independent local charity Darlington Assistance for Refugees (DAR) believes that all these families attended the mosque in Darlington which serves the c. 2% Muslim population of the town.

There was also simply no reason for Syrians to claim a conversion to Christianity or seek baptism to enhance an asylum claim: as the Syrians in Darlington were brought here as part of the Home Office resettlement scheme their asylum claims were based on the already-recognised grounds that they were refugees from war. Therefore, almost all applications were accepted straight away; DAR knows of no Syrian here whose asylum claim failed.<sup>1</sup>

For these reasons, the proposition that numerous Syrians with a failed first asylum claim approached St Cuthbert's for baptism falls foul of very clear counter-evidence.

**9. Mr Firth's claims at the Select Committee about the numbers of baptism applications contradict his own statement in the *Daily Telegraph*:** 'He [Mr Firth] says he personally encountered around 20 cases where failed asylum seekers sought baptisms at his church to support their appeals for leave to remain in the UK.' Which is Mr Firth alleging: that the number of people who had a first failed asylum claim and then sought baptism at St Cuthbert's was "around 20", or that it was c.284?

10. There is **relevant data which the Select Committee were not provided with** which provides a very different view of the refugee membership of St Cuthbert's congregation at the time.

This includes letters written by Mr Firth in which he stated that he recognised the authenticity of the Christian faith of some asylum-seekers and supported their asylum claims on this basis. I have four. In one letter of support for an asylum-seeker written by Mr Firth on 29.6.19 he stated that X has attended worship regularly since July 2018, was baptised on 3.3.19 after a period of instruction, and that, 'From what I have observed I believe that his Christian faith is genuine.' In a second letter written by Mr Firth on 27.8.19 he stated that, 'Y demonstrates the common practices that are associated with living as a Christian including prayer, reading and studying the Bible, regular church attendance and witness.' Mr Firth had also baptised this person himself on 3.3.2019.

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<sup>1</sup> With only exception: one man had been previously been accepted as a refugee in another country, so was threatened with removal on those grounds.

Five Iranian Christian women who came to Darlington as asylum-seekers and who were regular members of St Cuthbert's congregation (three still are) were *confirmed* into the Church of England in a deanery-wide service at St John's Darlington on 25<sup>th</sup> June 2019 at which I was present. This took place after careful preparation for Confirmation led by a retired member of clergy who regularly attends St Cuthbert's. I knew all five of these people well personally. I am in ongoing, regular contact with the three who remain in Darlington, whose reason for seeking asylum was to escape religious persecution for their Christian faith in Iran. I have copies of letters of support from Mr Firth for the asylum claims of the other two, both written by him on 9.8.19. These women had been baptised in a Church of England church in another town before being moved to Darlington, and Mr Firth stated about each of them in these letters, 'I believe that her conversion to Christianity is genuine'. These women later moved to Leeds, and I helped them to make a link with a church there at that time.<sup>2</sup>

All this evidence, including Mr Firth's own letters (of which I have these four – I do not know if he also wrote others), is dissonant with Mr Firth's account. Its inclusion would have created a very different overall account. The omission of all such material from his testimony should be noted.

11. In the *Telegraph* articles and his Select Committee appearance Mr Firth characterised himself as a whistle-blower whose concerns about this matter had been ignored by senior clergy, and who had been mistreated by them as a response to his taking a principled stance on this issue.<sup>3</sup> This construction is deeply problematic. Following the *Telegraph* articles, the Diocese of Durham issued a statement which included the fact that Mr Firth had never at any point brought these concerns to the attention of any member of the senior staff. Mr Firth then accepted this to be the case in a post on social media (significantly undermining the narrative of him being a whistle-blower).<sup>4</sup> The first time that Mr Firth brought this matter to the attention of anyone it was not to a senior church leader but to the *Daily Telegraph*, and this was six years later, in 2024. (Mr Firth also never mentioned this to any fellow member of clergy in Darlington). Mr Firth also said to the Select Committee that he believed the Diocese of Durham senior staff were already aware of this problem from other parishes. To my knowledge, this was not and is not the case: in common with Mr Firth, no minister in the diocese has ever reported a concern about this matter. It is important to be clear about this because **the narrative presented was one of senior church leaders (locally and nationally) ignoring a whistle-blower and exercising a dishonest, defensive denial about a known problem; this is not true in this case, as the evidence, when examined carefully, clearly shows.**

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that a refugee leaving a church does not necessarily mean they had mixed motives in attending. Often, they are simply moved to another town by the Home Office. In other cases, once successful in their asylum claims, they have to find new housing; often at that point they may move elsewhere for work.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. in the *Telegraph*: 'Mr Firth ... said the asylum seekers "drifted away" after he introduced the six-month rule but alleged he was "cold shouldered" by the senior clergy, which culminated in his departure from his post and decision to join the Free Church of England.'

<sup>4</sup> Mr Firth claimed that he had not done so because (a) he had addressed the problem locally and (b) because he did trust the senior staff due to their handling of other concerns raised by him (a claims vigorously disputed by the diocese). He repeated this at the Select Committee, saying, "I had experience in that particular diocese of reporting quite serious things ... to do with bullying, you know, and my experience was that those disclosures were just sort of ignored and poo-pooed really, so there wasn't much confidence

that I could have shared something like that and been taken very seriously.” The problem with this argument is that Mr Firth says he noticed issues that concerned him about baptism applications at the start of his time in Darlington, in early 2018, and took measures to address these almost immediately. However, the unrelated concerns to which he refers were I believe raised by him in 2020; this significantly post-dates and therefore cannot have influenced a decision made by him two years previously *not* to report serious concerns about baptism applications at that time. Why did a minister who claims he was encountering hundreds of suspicious baptism applications, and who says that he believes senior church leaders should have taken action about this matter, not at any time report this to those leaders so that they could both be aware of it and take steps to address it?

12. Mr Firth characterised St Cuthbert’s church to the Committee as being **one of a number of churches “positioning themselves as centres where lawyers are working from” to help overturn failed asylum-claims**. He also spoke of the **Justice First** organisation as partly “basing itself out of” St Cuthbert’s in order to work to overturn refused claims. I suggest a more accurate, evidence-based picture is as follows:

A welcome is extended to refugees by St Cuthbert’s church. Many congregation members make refugees welcome on Sundays and at other church events. Some help asylum-seekers with practical matters, translation, completing forms, etc.

In addition to the church’s own work, Darlington Assistance for Refugees (DAR), a registered charity, hires St Cuthbert’s church hall to hold a weekly drop-in for asylum-seekers there. A few of DAR’s volunteers are St Cuthbert’s members; the majority are not. Justice First is an independent charitable company seeking to help asylum-seekers to find necessary legal advice; it is OISC-registered, and so is monitored by the UK Government Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner. Justice First is invited by DAR to attend the DAR drop-in so that asylum-seekers in Darlington do not have to claim travel expenses to Stockton in order to receive immigration advice: there are no OISC-registered organisations in Darlington. (Also, Justice First does not deal exclusively with failed asylum cases, as was implied, but supports asylum-seekers in a number of ways). The British Red Cross, Home Office accommodation officers (Mears Group), and the local authority Refugee Support team are all also invited to attend the DAR drop-ins. All of this work is conducted transparently and is entirely appropriate.

With these facts established, I suggest that Mr Firth’s speculative characterisation both of the support for refugees offered by St Cuthbert’s church itself and of support work undertaken by others on St Cuthbert’s premises was misleading.

13. **Conclusion:** I am not, of course, denying the possibility that some inappropriate requests for baptism may have been made by asylum-seekers in some Church of England parishes. If abuse of baptism for the ends of strengthening an asylum claim has taken place at any church, this should be recognised, clearly evidenced and action should be taken.

If there is *evidence* of this taking place in Darlington, that should be produced; however, it has not been. The picture presented to the Select Committee of very large numbers of failed asylum-seekers systematically applying for manifestly inappropriate baptisms at St Cuthbert’s in 2018-2020 in support of appeals in their asylum claims is not recognised by anyone locally and is profoundly problematic when examined.

Mr Firth stated to the Committee that his observation of c.284 people applying / being brought for baptism over two years was his “lived experience”. I cannot comment on that. However, this was *not* the lived experience of anyone else at St Cuthbert’s who worshipped there regularly, assisted in baptism ministry, and supported asylum-seekers. Therefore, as these matters affect the lives, reputations and well-being of numerous people deeply, the testimony of others who do not recognise Mr Firth’s narrative should be heard by the Select Committee alongside his.

*The Venerable Rick Simpson, 5.4.24*



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I believe the facts in this statement to be true. (Where information is unknown, I have tried to indicate that clearly.) I am aware that the contents of this statement may be made public.

April 2024