

REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

SERIES: TAKING A STAND

EXPLORING THE ARMY'S INTERNATIONAL POSITIONAL STATEMENTS

STATEMENT OF POSITION

The Salvation Army is gravely concerned for the needs of the millions of people who are refugees and asylum seekers. People are fleeing their homes and countries because of a well-founded fear of persecution. Many of these people have experienced significant grief and trauma, which have potential long-term consequences for their health and well-being.

The Salvation Army recognises that the ability to seek asylum is a basic human right, with all people having the right to life, liberty and security of person. The Salvation Army supports international efforts to eliminate persecution and displacement through the promotion of peace, tolerance, understanding and respect for human life and dignity.

God's hospitable loving concern for the stranger and foreigner are evident in Scripture and therefore, The Salvation Army contends that individuals and governments should act compassionately and humanely towards persons seeking asylum.

The Salvation Army condemns the actions of people smugglers, human traffickers and others who would seek to gain from the plight of refugees and asylum seekers. The Salvation Army recognises the responsibilities of sovereign nations to control their borders but believes there is also a duty to care for refugees and asylum seekers. Therefore, nations working together to address the dire needs of asylum seekers is critical.

The Salvation Army holds that both asylum seekers and refugees should be offered assistance to settle and become contributing members of society as quickly as possible.

Download the complete IPS at salvationarmy.org/isjc/ips

PROMINENT in the definition of the term 'refugee' is the word 'fear':

'Any person who, ... owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.'

(1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, The UN Refugee Agency, unhcr.org/uk/1951-refugee-convention.html)

We have read and heard of flimsy boats with Syrian refugees crossing the Mediterranean Sea, Rohingya refugees crowding into camps in Bangladesh, people in their hundreds of thousands leaving South Sudan, Somalia and Afghanistan for large refugee camps in Kenya, Ethiopia and Pakistan. The risks some people take to get to a safe haven, and the conditions they face when they get there, can give only some indication of the gravity of the fear that drove them to flee.

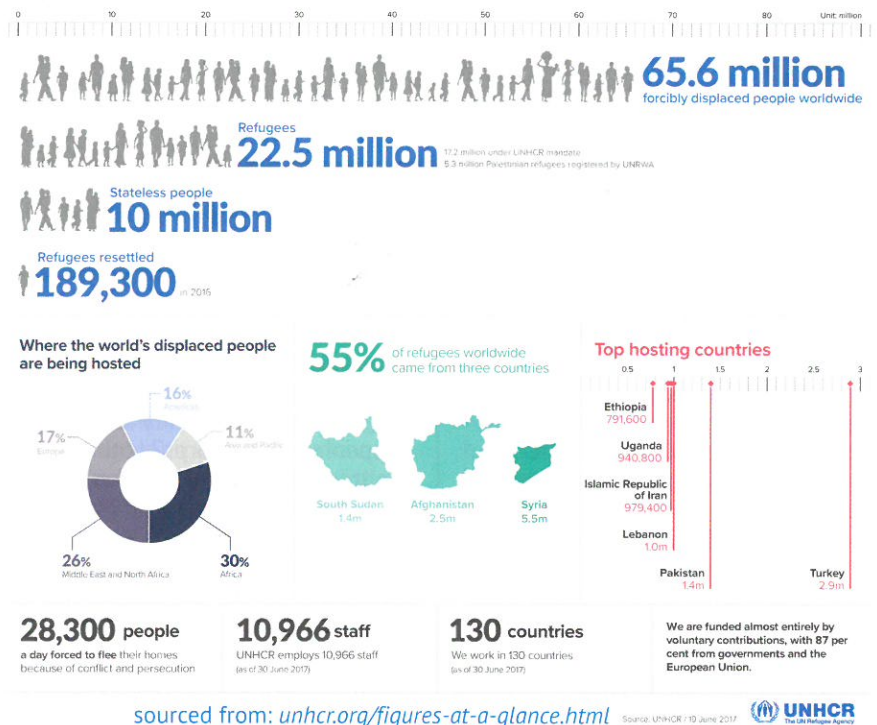
At the same time, fear can also describe a common emotion of some people in countries hosting refugees and asylum seekers. Many carry a genuine fear that refugees will compromise the safety or well-

FOR REFLECTION

- * What attributes do we share as human beings?
- * Does fear or compassion rule my heart as I try to understand the refugee crisis?
- * What examples of unhealthy rhetoric about refugees and asylum seekers can be found in my context?
- * What opportunities have I recently been given to love my neighbour as myself?
- * Is authentic community already happening at my corps?

being of their families, communities or themselves. This kind of fear has recently come to the forefront in movements and political parties all over Europe building on anti-refugee rhetoric, and can also be traced in the discussions about setting up internment camps for refugees off the coast of Australia, or in the debate about the so-called 'travel ban' to the USA – among other examples.

The reflections below reiterate the international positional statement's (IPS) call to action, and try to provide some ideas of what a response might entail. Awareness is one place to start – informing ourselves, and informing others. In this process, we need to reject xenophobic rhetoric, and challenge politicians and others who choose to offer simplified solutions, rather than help us comprehend complex reality and dilemmas. »



#WITHREFUGEES PETITION

Each day war forces thousands of families to flee their homes. People like you, people like me. To escape the violence, they leave everything behind – everything except their hopes and dreams for a safer future. The UN Refugee Agency UNHCR believes all refugees deserve to live in safety. Its #WithRefugees campaign expresses solidarity with people forced to flee and encourages governments to take action.

When you sign the #WithRefugees petition, you are asking governments to turn their commitments into action – and make sure the three petition asks become a reality:

- every refugee child gets an education
- every refugee family has somewhere safe to live
- every refugee can support their family and make a positive contribution to their community.

Add your name to the #WithRefugees petition to send a clear message to decision makers that they must act with solidarity and shared responsibility: unhcr.org/world-refugee-day.html

We stand together #WithRefugees. Please stand with us. The campaign continues until a global compact for refugees is adopted in 2018.



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» PERSONAL REFLECTION FROM COMMISSIONER HEIDI J. BAILEY

Providing a safe environment, meeting immediate needs and advocating for just, effective policies as a response to the greatest global refugee crisis in modern history is a daunting task for The Salvation Army. In the United States, images and news reports break our hearts and unite us, but heated political rhetoric and incomplete facts harden our hearts and divide us. However, remaining uninformed, confused and fearful in a messy world, is not an option for God's Army.

We are presented with tough questions, as we attempt to evaluate our intentional or unintended reactions to the present situation. Will fear or compassion rule our hearts? Will unawareness or intentionality guide our actions? Will self-absorption or sacrificial service be our hallmark?

Jesus breaks it down to an awkwardly simple Kingdom value for the Church to imitate: 'At about this same time he again found himself with a hungry crowd on his hands. He called his disciples together and said, "This crowd is breaking my heart ... If I send them home hungry, they'll faint along the way – some of them have come a long distance"' (Mark 8:1-3 *The Message*).

Refugees and asylum seekers are people like you and I, but they 'have come a long distance'. We *all* want a safe environment where our needs can be met. We *all* desire to be valued and respected. So, we pause to ask ourselves: is authentic, God-inspired community already happening at my corps? Is there a culture of kindness in my corps, evidenced by open hearts and open arms? Are we ready to welcome those who 'have come a long distance'?

General Linda Bond (Rtd) once said, 'When we use the *name* of Jesus, we need to make sure that the *nature* of Jesus shines through. Salvationists, we are called to love, not to tolerance, which can be void of love. God is giving us an extraordinary opportunity to love our neighbours as ourselves. God has equipped the Body of Christ with the gifts needed for such a time as this. This is our mission. This must be what we do, because if we send them away, they will faint.'

So, arise Salvation Army! Let's open our eyes and see our neighbours; let's have open conversations around the table; let's create safe spaces in a world where people are being left out; let's reach for extra chairs; let's move over; let's squeeze in; let's not sit down until everyone else has a chair...and let's watch God move!

PERSONAL REFLECTION FROM COMMISSIONER MARIE WILLERMARK

I assume we have all done it. We have referred to the greatest commandment that loving God involves heart, soul, strength and mind and we have preached on the challenging message of recognising who our neighbour is. On top of that, Jesus challenges us to act as that selfless neighbour. I'm referring, as you most likely recognise, to the Good Samaritan. If I mention 'the sheep and the goats', you will also remember that Jesus identified himself with hungry, homeless and imprisoned people. His expectation is clear and sharp – we are judged by our lack of compassionate action towards these people (Matthew 25:31-46).

I reflect on the risk of being so familiar with Bible passages and their interpretation that they become the tools of my trade as a teacher and preacher, rather than the sword of the Holy Spirit that leads and empowers me into action.

It is easy to proclaim that God loves everyone without discrimination and to joyfully celebrate that the Holy Spirit made it possible for a variety of nationalities to hear the Good News on the day of Pentecost. However, it can be a real challenge

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for me to put that into practice by actually going out to the people and being the neighbour who helps generously and builds relationships.

Refugees and asylum seekers are first of all people – families and individuals in need of love, practical assistance and the help necessary to settle and grow new roots. They also need opportunities to contribute to society and enrich our lives. They might even turn out to be like the Good Samaritan to us, given the opportunity. We should expect God to surprise us by the upside-down logic of his Kingdom.

Jesus is clear about what is expected of us when it comes to situations described in the parables above. He is equally clear in promising us his presence and his help when challenges seem to rise like mountains before us.

In Europe, many corps had to improvise when the wave of refugees arrived in 2015. Although the challenges have been great, the blessings have also proven to be many. We were challenged to leave behind our pre-planned programmes and seek God's guidance of what to do and not to do. The outcome has been renewal in ministry as we experienced God's provision and shared the pain and grief of new friends sent back to their countries of origin.

PERSONAL REFLECTION FROM CHRIS BREKKE

I appreciate statistics because they allow us to see a wider context, to analyse and understand. In 2015, statistics indicated that we were seeing the largest flow of refugees since World War II. Eyebrow-raising, but perhaps a bit abstract – until a photograph emerged of Alan, a little Syrian boy washed up dead on a Turkish beach. The picture was brutal, heartbreaking and, for many, a wake-up call. Behind the refugee statistic was now the story of Alan and his family, desperately trying to find safe harbour.

For a while, the picture was front-page material around the world. Now front pages are filled with politicians advocating closed borders, to keep 'them' from coming 'here' and threatening 'our' way or quality of life. The political dilemmas deserve due discussion, but the rhetoric can be frightening.

Similar sentiments have existed since biblical times. As humans, we can empathise, but also categorise and generalise. Labels allow for statistics and overview, but can also create distance. In the worst case, categorising can be the first step to xenophobia. Once a category is created, it can be endowed with characteristics understood to apply to all within it – potentially the cheapest and most dangerous trick in the political toolbox. Sadly, the 'refugee'

and 'asylum seeker' labels have, many times and in many contexts, been filled with misrepresentative content and assumed, undesirable connotations, and words can shape attitudes – and actions.

As Salvationists, we strive to be the hands and feet of God's practical love in a world where every refugee is known, valued and loved by the same Creator who created us. How?

The IPS on Refugees and Asylum Seekers suggests we meet immediate needs and advocate for just, effective policies. We also find practical responses in other positional statements:

- the IPS on Peacemaking: we need to be peacemakers to address the causes that drive people to flee.
- the IPS on The Use of Power: whatever power we possess, it must be exercised so as to promote Kingdom values of love, justice and mutual respect.
- the IPS on Racism, which urges us to reject racism both in blatant and more subtle expressions.

We need to keep our eyes on the big picture, but also engage with the individual stories behind the categories and labels. Perhaps this engagement can help us all contribute in response to the global refugee crisis by intentionally rejecting simplified and potentially dangerous xenophobic language about refugees and asylum seekers.