

ASYLUM SEEKERS – A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

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we have a dream

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That Baptcare has enabled Baptist Care Australia to utilise their original work is testament to the collaboration and good will which exists between Baptist Care Australia and its members.

The document also builds on the work undertaken by the Australian Baptist Ministries and its adopted policy position from November 2011.

It should be noted that this paper represents the views of Baptist Care Australia. It may not accurately reflect the views of individual members.

BAPTIST CARE AUSTRALIA

Snapshot

The members of BCA have an annual turnover of over \$0.5 billion, employ around 8,000 staff, with about 6,000 FTEs, and engage with over 2,000 volunteers annually.

BCA members combined own more than 300 retirement villages, nursing homes and social housing accommodation units, providing homes to over 6000 older Australians.

BCA members are actively involved in the provision of residential care, retirement homes, community care, disability services, asylum seeker services, youth services and mental health programs across Australia.

Our Mission

For the benefit of those who receive our services we seek to provide support and encouragement to each other as care providers and to promote our work as Baptists to churches, the wider community and to government in the name of Jesus Christ.

Our Purpose

As part of the wider Christian response to community need, we as Baptist organisations desire together to develop and maintain our unique contribution through the following:

- Sharing of strategies, resources, research and information to help progress Baptist care across Australia.
- Providing of a unified voice to lobby governments and community agencies on policy issues.
- Reinforcing the credibility of state agencies enabling each to promote themselves as part of a larger network.
- Encouraging Baptists across Australia to support their caring agencies

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1. ABBREVIATIONS, ACRONYMS AND GLOSSARY OF TERMS

AHRC Australian Human Rights Commission.

ASAS Asylum Seeker Assistance Scheme.

Asylum Seeker A person who flees their own country and applies to another country for protection as a refugee.

ASRC Asylum Seeker Resource Centre.

ASP Hotham Mission's Asylum Seeker Project.

CAS Community Assistance Support.

CAT Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984).

CPD Centre for Policy Development.

CROC Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

Community Detention Community detention was introduced in 2005 and is a form of immigration detention where people reside in the community. Conditions of release range from being able to move about freely to a form of home detention, depending on the security or compliance assessment on the individual. Conditions can include having to be accompanied at all times by a designated person or immigration officer, reporting requirements, or being required to stay in approved accommodation.

DIAC Department of Immigration and Citizenship.

Human Rights A basic, universal freedom or entitlement inherent to all human beings.

ICCPR International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966).

ICESC International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966).

IDC International Detention Coalition.

Irregular Maritime Arrivals (IMAs) and non-Irregular Maritime Arrivals Boat arrival asylum seekers in Australia are referred to by the Department of Immigration as Irregular Maritime Arrivals (IMAs). Asylum seekers who arrive by plane are called non-IMAs. Internationally, undocumented migrants are referred to as Irregular Migrants or Irregular Arrivals.

Internally Displaced People Internally displaced people have not crossed an international border to seek protection, but have remained inside their country of origin.

Mandatory Detention An Australian Government policy which requires all unlawful non-citizens (or persons who, if they were in the migration zone, would be considered unlawful non-citizens) to be detained until they are granted or refused a visa.

Migrant A person who chooses to leave their country and settle in another country.

NCCA National Council of Churches in Australia.

PV A protection visa is available to refugees as defined by the Refugees Convention, who pass character, security and health checks and sign the Australian Values Statement. This visa allows a refugee to live and work in Australia as a permanent resident, having access to Medicare and Centrelink services.

Refoulement The forcible return of a refugee or asylum seeker to a country where his/her life or freedom may be threatened. Refoulement is a violation of the Refugee Convention.

Refugee 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/her nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country.

Temporary Bridging Visa A short-term visa that allows asylum seekers work rights and access to health services while the outcome of their immigration status is resolved.

The Refugee Convention United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951).

UNHCR United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

UNRRWA United Nations Refugee Relief and Works Agency for Palestine.

45-day rule A statutory rule introduced in 1997 that removed work rights and access to health services for persons claiming refugee status who did not apply for protection within 45 days of arrival in Australia. This rule was repealed in 2009, but the repeal was not applied retrospectively.

2. INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

Baptist Care Australia has a vision of a transformed society based on Christ's values. Our central purpose is to:

1. *Give a voice to those who are unable to advocate for themselves*
2. *Propose innovative solutions to unmet social need through research*
3. *Advocate for the role of the faith-based, not-for-profit sector in society; and*
4. *Optimise the collective capabilities of its member organisations.*

Our first commitment is to give a voice to those unable to advocate for themselves; recognising and understanding this has to be done in a number of purposeful, intelligent and informed ways. We need to reflect critically on the current power structures in our society, structures with which we have become so familiar we no longer see or question them. Our understanding of power and its uses, and our fundamental willingness, as organisations and individuals to have the courage and willingness to take the risk to challenge and disturb the peace in ways that bring new life, healing and hope to people around us, stands at the core of this commitment and our response.

The Bible presents a coherent and consistent emphasis on justice, grace and neighbour-love toward all who are in need, summed up most profoundly in the biblical concept of shalom, "a picture of community, of life in relationships, in which things are as they are supposed to be [and where people] live in harmony and delight with God, each other, and the world" (Sloane, 2008,p28).

There are many biblical principles of love and justice which apply to refugees and asylum seekers (e.g. Micah 6:8; Matthew 22:34–40; Luke 1:46–55; 10:25–37; Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:1–3; James 2:15–17). In Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats, the king declares that the faithful may enter the kingdom because "I was a stranger and you welcomed me ... whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:35,40). Ezekiel 47:22 demands that refugees be accepted and afforded the foundations of economic security and treated with equality. 'They shall be to you as citizens' (Brett, 2011).

It is important that any society which has a passion for justice should stand up against any system which overlooks injustice, especially when it refers to vulnerable people. From a Christian perspective, such injustice goes further: it denies the very roots of the creation story as affirming each person as made in the image of God and worthy of dignity and respect (Stott, 2006).

While there continues to be a diversity of opinion within the Australian community on the question of how we are to respond to asylum seekers, within the Christian community that diversity will tend to reflect this Christian ethos. Sharing the motivations of Christ is the unique contribution Christians may make to this discussion, and to the lives of the asylum seekers (Fowler, 2011).

The asylum seekers reaching Australia or seeking to reach Australia are amongst those unable to advocate for themselves, through reasons of language and circumstance. In the past decade they have become further entangled in the shifting sands of policy vacuums, as their numbers world-wide have increased.

People flee persecution for many reasons. Some have been persecuted for their religious beliefs or political opinions. Others have been targeted because of their ethnic group or trade union activities. Some are persecuted because they uphold the democratic principles of truthful and responsible independent journalism.

War, civil unrest and persecution in source countries are major influencers on people movements around the globe, and far more influential than the deterrent policies of any one destination country. (Asylum levels and trends 2012)

UNHCR Asylum Levels and Trends in Industrialised Countries, 2012 2013

Asylum seekers experience a multitude of health issues including increased levels of anxiety, depression and isolation, as well as diminished health and well-being (Asylum Seeker Project [ASP], 2010). Further, many are consumed with guilt at the thought they have abandoned their loved ones (ASP, 2011).

Our position and response to asylum seekers, enunciated in this document, is driven by values that acknowledge the inherent dignity and equality of all people regardless of their circumstances, the equality of opportunity and consistency of outcome for all, and consistency between word and deed.

3. BAPTIST CARE AUSTRALIA'S POLICY RESPONSE

In the light of the principles and issues outlined here, and the biblical mandate to care for the 'stranger'; to support the oppressed and to express kindness, mercy and justice in all our ways

1. Baptist Care Australia calls on the Australian Government to
 - (i) Meet its international humanitarian obligations and provide a process for people arriving in Australia seeking protection and asylum which meets our Australian society's accepted Christian standard of humanity and generosity.
 - (ii) Provide humane alternatives including a reception program for asylum seekers that involves a humane standard of living within the community (at significantly less cost than mandatory detention),
 - (iii) Ensure a timely and fair assessment of their claims for asylum and protection,
 - (iv) Reject refoulement (that is, involuntary return to a country where persecution is likely to be faced). Where people are assessed as not having a need for protection they should only be returned in conditions of safety and dignity, with assurances of sustainable reintegration and external monitoring of the conditions to which they are being returned; and
 - (v) To adopt clear, transparent processes for the review of decisions.
2. Baptist Care Australia opposes the practice of mandatory detention both within Australia and beyond our borders while asylum claims are being processed. We call on the Australian Government to provide any asylum seeker awaiting the outcome of a protection order the opportunity to seek work and access essential services and other human rights protection.

Our policy position echoes the statements made by the Australian Baptist Ministries (2011) as described in Appendix 1.

4. ASYLUM SEEKERS IN AUSTRALIA – A BRIEF HISTORY

Asylum Seekers are not new to Australia. At least 7% of all Australians have either been through the experience of being a refugee or have a parent or grandparent who has. (<http://www.refugeeweek.org.au/resources/background.php>)

Between 1933 and 1939, more than 7,000 Jews fleeing Nazi Germany were settled here.

In the decade following 1947, Australia welcomed more than 170,000 refugees.

In the early 1970's, refugees came from Uganda, Chile, Cyprus, and East Timor.

In the ten years following the Vietnam War, over 90,000 asylum seekers and refugees came to Australia and were resettled here.

The Australian Government's Parliamentary Services Research section provides detailed and historical information about asylum seekers in Australia. Updated in February 2013, the publication provides the following summary:

- Australia has a long history of accepting refugees for resettlement and over 750 000 refugees and displaced persons have settled in Australia since 1945.
- There is a difference between an asylum seeker and a refugee— asylum seekers are people seeking international protection but whose claims for refugee status have not yet been determined. Although those who come to Australia by boat seeking Australia's protection are classified by Australian law to be 'unlawful non-citizens', they have a right to seek asylum under international law and not be penalised for their 'illegal' entry.
- Up until 2009 only a small proportion of asylum applicants in Australia arrived by boat— most arrived by air with a valid visa and then went on to pursue asylum claims. While the number of boat arrivals has risen substantially in recent years, it is worth noting that they still comprise just over half of onshore asylum seekers in Australia and a greater proportion of those arriving by boat are recognised as refugees.
- There is no orderly queue for asylum seekers to join. Only a very small proportion of asylum seekers are registered with the UNHCR and only one per cent of those recognised by the UNHCR as refugees who meet the resettlement criteria are subsequently resettled to another country. As the overall number of asylum applications has continued to rise, states are increasingly taking responsibility for refugee status determination.
- All unauthorised boat arrivals in Australia are subject to the same assessment criteria as other asylum applicants and also are subject to comprehensive security and health checks.
- Claims that refugees in Australia are entitled to higher benefits than other social security recipients are unfounded.
- In recent years, the Australian Government has allocated around 13 000 places to refugees and others with humanitarian needs under its planned Humanitarian Program. Historically, most of these places have been given to offshore refugees referred to Australia by the UNHCR, but some are given to refugees who applied for asylum onshore. Currently, just over 50 per cent of Australia's humanitarian program visas are granted to onshore asylum seekers (both air and boat arrivals).
- The number of people arriving unauthorised by boat in Australia, is small in comparison to the numbers arriving in other parts of the world such as Europe. Similarly, the number of asylum claims lodged in Australia is small in comparison to the USA, Canada and Europe.

- While only about 20 developed nations, including Australia, participate formally in the UNHCR's refugee resettlement program, the vast majority of asylum seekers and refugees are hosted in developing countries (Asylum Facts 2013, Australian Parliamentary Library)

Once found to be refugees, Australia still has the obligation under the Refugee Convention to accept or resettle those held offshore. Under the Pacific Solution (2001-2006), almost two thirds of all applicants were accepted as refugees and were given permanent visas. 62% were resettled in Australia and New Zealand, and 3% were sent to Sweden, Canada, Denmark and Norway, where the refugees were found to have family living outside of their country of persecution .

5. AUSTRALIAN OBLIGATIONS

An asylum seeker is 'a person who flees their own country and applies to another country for protection as a refugee' (Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2011). According to the *United Nations Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees* (UNHCR 2010a), a refugee is a person who is outside their own country and is either unwilling or unable to return to their country of origin due to a genuine fear of being persecuted because of factors such as race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular group.

Australia is obliged to protect the human rights of all asylum seekers and refugees who arrive in Australia, irrespective of method of arrival or whether or not appropriate documentation is presented. Australia is signatory to the *United Nations Refugee Convention* (1951), and is therefore bound to ensure that people who meet the definition of 'refugee' cannot be returned to their country of origin where their life or freedom would be threatened (AHRC, 2011).

Australia also has obligations not to return persons who face risk of violation of their human rights, and who are within Australian territory and jurisdiction, under the following treaties:

- *United Nations Convention Against Torture (CAT)*
- *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)*
- *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CROC)*
- *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESC)*. (AHRC, 2011; Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, 2012)

According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR, 2011a), there are approximately 15.2 million people worldwide who are refugees or classified as being in refugee-like situations.. Of these, approximately 10.4 million are under the mandate of the UNHCR, and another 4.8 million Palestinian refugees are under the mandate of the United Nations Refugee Relief and Works Agency for Palestine (UNRRWA).

It is estimated that there are currently 876,100 persons seeking asylum globally, 17,700 unaccompanied children, and a further 13 million internally displaced people (UNHRC, 2011a). The remainder seek to return to their own home and country when they are able.

The vast majority of the 10 million refugees in care of the UNHCR seek shelter in the least developed and poorest countries of the world (Centre for Policy Development [CPD], 2011). Persons who seek asylum in the industrialised countries mainly seek protection in Europe and North America. The two countries who receive the largest amount of new asylum claims amongst this same group of countries are the United States of America (55,500) followed by France (47,800; UNHCR, 2011b).

6. AUSTRALIAN REFUGEE INTAKE

The Department of Immigration and Citizenship recently reported statistics regarding refugee intake into Australia for the period of 2004 to 2011 (DIAC, 2011a; summarised in Table 1). It is notable that the total intake of refugees into Australia has changed little from year to year and is not related to the visa determination process (that is, offshore versus onshore processing). These numbers are extremely small compared with international counterparts, however much recent political spin and media hysteria would suggest otherwise (CPD, 2011).

Table 1: Australian refugee intake 2004–2011

Year	2004–05	2005–06	2006–07	2007–08	2008–09	2009–10	2010–11
Determination Process							
Offshore	6,585	6,736	5,183	4,795	4,511	3,233	6,000
Onshore	5,511	6,022	6,003	6,004	6,499	6,003	7,750
Onshore (humanitarian)	1,065	1,372	1,793	2,131	2,492	4,534	
Total	13,161	14,130	12,979	12,930	13,502	13,770	13,750

(Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2011a)

Table 2 shows the nations hosting the largest proportions of refugees (in care of the UNHCR), as well as Australia (UNHCR, 2010b). In 2009 Australia ranked 47th worldwide compared to all other countries hosting refugees.

Table 2: Countries hosting the largest numbers of refugees (2009)

Country	Number (n) (2009)	Proportion (%)
1. Pakistan	1,740,711	15.3
2. Iran	1,070,488	9.6
3. Syria	1,054,466	9.4
4. Germany	593,799	5.2
5. Jordan	450,756	4.0
6. Kenya	358,928	3.1
7. Chad	338,495	3.0
47. Australia	22,528	0.2

Table 3 shows the share of asylum seeker applications submitted in 15 major countries. It demonstrates that Australia's asylum applications are not excessive, especially when considered in the context of other western industrialised countries, and especially when viewed against the total populations of these countries.

Table 3: Share of main receiving Countries of Asylum Seekers in total no. of applications

Country	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	Population 2013 (000,000)	Total no. asylum applications lodged 2012
Norway	4%	5%	3%	2%	2%	5	9,785
Switzerland	4%	4%	4%	4%	5%	7.7	29,948
Austria	3%	4%	3%	3%	4%	8.4	17,415
Sweden	6%	6%	9%	7%	9%	9.5	43,887
Belgium	3%	5%	6%	6%	4%	10.8	18,524
Greece	5%	4%	3%	2%	2%	11.4	9,577
Australia	1%	2%	3%	3%	3%	23.1	15,786
Canada	10%	9%	6%	6%	4%	34.9	20,501
Poland	2%	3%	2%	1%	2%	38.2	9,182
Italy	8%	5%	3%	8%	3%	61.3	15,715
United Kingdom	8%	8%	6%	6%	6%	63.2	27,410
France	9%	11%	13%	12%	11%	63.8	54,935
Turkey	3%	2%	3%	4%	3%	75.5	16,725
Germany	6%	7%	11%	10%	13%	81.8	64,539
United States	13%	13%	15%	17%	17%	313.9	83,425

Source: UNHCR *Asylum Trends 2012 ; Levels and Trends in Industrialised countries*, 2013

Until 2011-12, the majority of asylum seekers to Australia came by air (Table 4). Primarily, this group are people who can access a visa, have paperwork and over stay their visa. In contrast, those who arrive by boat generally do not have paper work and have therefore been unable to use the usual transport avenues to come to Australia.

Table 4. Onshore Asylum Applications

Program year	Non-IMA (air arrival) Protection visa (PV) applications lodged		IMA (Irregular Maritime Arrival) refugee status determination requests received		Total
	No	Per cent of total applications	No	Per cent of total applications	
2001-02	7026	76.0	2222	24.0	9248
2002-03	4959	98.8	60	1.2	5019
2003-04	3485	97.6	87	2.4	3572
2004-05	3062	95.4	146	4.6	3208
2005-06	3191	96.9	101	3.1	3292
2006-07	3723	99.4	23	0.6	3746
2007-08	3986	99.5	21	0.5	4007
2008-09	5072	88.0	690	12.0	5762
2009-10	5987	56.6	4591	43.4	10578
2010-11	6316	55.0	5175	45.0	11491
2011-12	7036	48.8	7379	51.2	14415

Sources: DIAC, *Asylum Trends Australia 2010-11 Annual Publication*, Canberra, 2011, p. 2; and *Asylum statistics—Australia*, Quarterly tables, September quarter 2012, Canberra, 2012.

7. WHO ARE ASYLUM SEEKERS

Despite the moving policy target, the issue of asylum seekers in Australia remains contentious, with the Australian public divided on the issue. For example, some declare the need to be tough on 'border protection' in order to discourage further arrivals, while others seek to identify alternative solutions that are embedded in the human rights and dignity of each individual who seek protection and asylum from persecution, terror, rape or war in their country of origin.

That the asylum seekers themselves have become political footballs in the ugly game of Australian politics in 2013 is one of our greatest shames. In the absence of bipartisan political intervention, the messages disseminated through the media are often inaccurate and value laden using language such as 'queue jumpers' and 'boat people' without critique (Edmund Rice Centre, 2001).

Asylum seekers coming to Australia are assessed to determine whether they are refugees. It is only when they are accepted as refugees that they are provided with Protection Visas. It is in the space between arrival as an asylum seeker and determination of refugee status where the ground of national policy keeps shifting .

In 2002, the Australian government endorsed the conclusions of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' Executive Committee, which stated:

"Asylum seekers should have access to the appropriate governmental and non-governmental entities when they require assistance so that their basic support needs including food, clothing, accommodation and medical needs are met." (UNHRC, No. 93 (LIII), 2002)

Until 1997, this had been the case. Then, the Howard Government introduced a statutory rule, known as the '45-day rule,' in an attempt to reduce non-genuine refugee applications. This rule removed work rights and access to healthcare for persons claiming refugee status who did not apply for protection within 45 days of their arrival in Australia. In 2009, the Rudd Government repealed the rule with the intention of allowing asylum seekers access to work rights and the ability to support themselves during the application process. It is significant that the repeal of this rule was not retrospective resulting in a cohort of asylum seekers who remain unable to secure work rights or Medicare (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009).

Since that time, the Australian Government's response to the management and processing of asylum seeker applications has been unstable.

The 2002 'Pacific Solution' with off shore processing at Nauru and Manus island continued to cause significant community concern for its four years of operation. A report commissioned by Oxfam and A Just Australia, found that that:

- The Pacific Solution cost the Australian taxpayer in excess of \$1 billion over five years.
- It cost more than \$500,000 per person to process them on Manus Island, Christmas Island or Nauru.
- It costs seven times more to process asylum seekers on Pacific islands than if it was done on the Australian mainland. And
- it failed to reduce the number of people arriving.

(Refugee Council of Australia)

In 2008 the 'Pacific Solution' was revoked, along with the abolition of Temporary Protection Visas. There followed a period of varied policy responses, including, in 2011, the attempt to establish off-shore processing as well as a four year 'swap deal' with Malaysia. The proposal was to send 800 unprocessed asylum seekers from Christmas Island in return for Australia accepting 4,000 refugees from Malaysia. This arrangement was almost immediately challenged by human rights lawyers and was thwarted in the High Court.

More recently the government commenced a process of discharging some asylum seekers from mandatory detention into community placement. These people were provided with a 'revised' temporary bridging visa (TBV) which offers a mechanism that releases asylum seekers from detention whilst their claims are completed and their status is resolved. However, although the bridging visa allows the right to work (and access to health services and financial assistance), in practice it often leads to poverty and homelessness (ASP, 2010).

Those asylum seekers who are released from detention into the community receive Community Assistance Support (CAS) for 6 weeks. A re-assessment then determines if they will be provided with ongoing support or will be transferred to the Asylum Seeker Assistance Scheme (ASAS) program or will have all government support severed. While asylum seekers released from detention have work rights, they are not eligible for Centrelink support.

As of June 2013, the Australian Government had not yet started processing any claims by asylum seekers who had arrived after 13 August 2012. The Australian Government had announced at that time that all asylum seekers who arrive by boat (whether they are sent to a third country or remain in Australia) will be subject to the 'no advantage' principle.

The Australian Government has said this principle means that even if those people are determined to be refugees, they will not be granted a protection visa until they would have been resettled 'under normal regional arrangements' – that is, if they had not taken a boat to Australia. The Australian Government has said it expects this waiting period may be in the order of five years. (Australian Human Rights Commission July 2013)

Most recently (22 July 2013) the Prime Minister announced that asylum seekers who arrive by boat will be taken to Papua New Guinea (PNG) for processing effective immediately, and if they're found to be genuine refugees will be resettled there or elsewhere, but not Australia. This policy response is clearly a political position rather than a humanitarian one, and in breach of our UN International commitments.

Many of the asylum seekers who live lawfully in Australia while awaiting resolution of their claim by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) have no access to healthcare or welfare support, and are blocked from labour force participation (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). The consequences of this are profound, and include likely homelessness, poverty, ill-health and destitution.

8. THE CONSEQUENCES OF AUSTRALIA'S POLICY

Being unable to work or access healthcare and welfare services while living in the community places those asylum seekers on a bridging visa in an untenable situation. This has the adverse effects of potential homelessness, poverty and destitution (ASP, 2007; Shaddick, 2011a).

The Asylum Seeker Project (2007) indicated that the policy to withhold work entitlements from asylum seekers has triggered a welfare crisis, including homelessness, health and dietary problems, isolation and depression. A consequence of the federal policy is that asylum seekers living in the community on bridging visas experience a life of abject poverty and social exclusion (ASP, 2010; Baptcare, 2010). Being denied the right to work or secure welfare support leads to homelessness, the inability to purchase food due to a lack of income, a deteriorating sense of personhood and increased anxiety.

Even until recent times, the housing needs of persons seeking asylum have been excluded in public policy debate on homelessness. For example, the Victorian Government's *Homelessness Strategy Action Plan and Strategic Framework* failed to make reference to homelessness amongst community-based asylum seekers. In 2008 the Federal Government's White Paper *The Road Home* completely ignored the plight of homelessness for asylum seekers (ASP, 2010). This is despite the Federal Government acknowledging that those who are homeless are amongst the most marginalised and vulnerable groups in our community, and that even short periods of homelessness can have enduring detrimental impacts (ASP, 2003; DIAC, 2009).

Despite the removal of the 45-day rule, it is not anticipated that extending work rights for asylum seekers will have a positive impact to secure housing. This may be attributed to factors such as:

- Bridging visas are short term, therefore placing a barrier on employer's opportunity to offer a permanent job
- Limited language, education, unknown work history and the absence of local references serve as barriers to gaining employment
- Complex health needs which may hinder labour force participation
- Difficulties experienced by asylum seekers accessing private rental accommodation, due to a lack of local rental and employment references, racism and other forms of discrimination (ASP, 2010).

The length of time it takes for granting asylum status has a detrimental impact on the health of asylum seekers, which in turn, has a direct correlation with the outcome of their immigration status and their capacity to satisfy the requirements of the protection application process. In 2006, DIAC implemented the Community Care Pilot which examined the impact of long term destitution on asylum seekers' health and immigration status. Findings of this study reported that 'when health and welfare issues are stabilised, clients are better able to think clearly, exercise choice and participate in the resolution of their immigration status' (DIAC, 2006).

As is widely accepted, increased levels of anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues are prevalent amongst those on a bridging visa (ASP, 2007; Shaddick, 2011b).

The impact of the current policy on asylum seekers results in a high level of family breakdown and it is particularly stressful for single mothers and younger asylum seekers. The only means of support for asylum seekers who are ineligible to work or secure welfare services is community and charitable church groups. However this is both unsustainable and inadequate for asylum seekers with high level needs (ASP, 2004).

By refusing the right to work or access to welfare services, current government policy prevents community-based asylum seekers from securing funds to purchase food and secure accommodation, as well as obstructing access to basic healthcare (ASP, 2007; Shaddick 2011b).

To this end, the current Australian policy fails to meet several international obligations for the provisions of basic, adequate standards of living and health care for people in our community (NCCA, 2006).

9. CONCLUSION

The government (and opposition's) responses to asylum seekers arriving in Australia are both inhumane and irrational in their continued strident opposition to an issue of international concern.

The failure of both government and opposition to consider the matters affecting asylum seekers from a rational and Christian perspective is perhaps the most worrying aspect of the public debate . Through this behaviour, our political leaders are undermining the Australian cultural norm of a 'fair go' and contribute to a lack of journalistic rigour in reporting matters surrounding asylum seekers accurately and impartially.

The facts and figures speak for themselves.

Around 90% of asylum seekers who arrive by boat are proven to be genuine asylum seekers who have been granted refugee status in Australia.

Until recently, the majority of asylum seekers came by air. Policy responses have continued to propagate a 'some asylum seekers are more equal than others' mentality and more recently reject the presumption of innocence as a basis for commencing an investigation. (Liberal party policy 19 August 2013)

Until recently, Australia had a good and positive record around its treatment of asylum seekers. In the 20th century, asylum seekers from all parts of the world were welcomed, bringing with them the essential mix that contributes to the vibrant and multicultural country we are today. The continued ramping of draconian measures we now see, including re badging asylum seekers as economic refugees, or presenting policy 'solutions' as being in the best interests of the asylum seekers (we need to save them from themselves) speaks of a country that has lost its moral compass.

10. APPENDIX ONE – AUSTRALIAN BAPTIST MINISTRIES' POSITION 2011

The National Council of Australian Baptist Ministries:

1. Affirms the right of all persons to:
 - a) live in dignity and peace in their homeland;
 - b) seek asylum and claim refugee status owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.

2. Calls on the Australian Government to:
 - a) reduce the rate of asylum claims by addressing human rights violations in countries of origin and disempowering people smugglers;
 - b) pursue policies that seek to strengthen regional cooperation and expand protection of asylum seekers and refugees in the region;
 - c) further increase the annual quota of UNHCR-registered refugees over the next five years;
process claims for refugee status expeditiously and within 90 days;
 - d) place child asylum seekers in appropriate community care while their claims for refugee status are assessed;
 - e) cease the practice of sending unaccompanied minors to third countries.

3. Calls on all Australians to oppose xenophobia and discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, culture and religion.

4. Calls on all Australian politicians to demonstrate their moral convictions and to exercise ethical and non-partisan leadership in political and policy debates on immigration and refugee policy.

5. Encourages Australian Baptist churches, groups, families and individuals to consider how they may further:
 - (a) promote quality teaching and learning on immigration and refugees;
 - (b) act as advocates for asylum seekers, refugees and migrants;
 - (c) oppose offshore detention of asylum seekers and refugees;
 - (d) oppose mandatory detention of asylum seekers and refugees;
 - (e) develop ministries of welcoming, reconciliation and social integration;
 - (f) extend hospitality through intentional friendships and relationships;
 - (g) freely share resources with those in need.

Adopted by ABM National Council 23 November 2011

11. APPENDIX TWO - REFERENCES

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