
**Refugees as Guests and Hosts:
Towards a Theology of Mission Amongst Refugees and Asylum Seekers**
As presented at the International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS) Conference,
Toronto, 15–20 August 2012
Dr Ross Langmead

Introduction

Refugees and asylum seekers are among the most powerless, marginalised and dislocated people in the world, clearly a high priority for those who follow Jesus. Christian mission and ministry stands or falls on its response of hospitality to such groups.

I want to suggest that, in any sketch of a theology of mission amongst refugees and asylum seekers, hospitality will be a central metaphor for mission. In this context hospitality is a strong concept which includes justice-seeking, political action, inclusion around our tables, intercultural friendship, pursuing a hospitable multicultural approach to church life, practical assistance, long-term commitment, learning from those who are different, sensitivity to the power dynamics of “welcome”, a willingness to “let go” as well as “embrace”, interfaith dialogue and discovering the intertwining of the guest and host roles which is embedded in biblical and theological understandings of God’s activity amongst us.

The context from which I speak is Australia and my suggestions have the greatest relevance for western countries.

Refugees and Asylum Seekers

The global phenomenon of vulnerable people being displaced, persecuted or fleeing conflict and war has grown in the last fifty years to be a major humanitarian challenge.

The political context in which western Christians are responding to refugees is often one of increasing hostility and resentment to numbers of desperate people seeking entry.

In Australia, for example, several factors have contributed to a growth in resistance to refugees, including fear of hordes arriving, political swings to the right and immigration policy focusing on economic benefits to Australia (McMaster 2001: 50–65).

Australia’s resettlement program for recognised refugees and onshore asylum seekers is well regarded. But off-shore asylum seekers—those arriving without papers by boat—have been treated less well.

In the 1980s off-shore asylum seekers began to be classified as “illegal non-citizens” and their legal rights were gradually limited, despite objections from human rights groups. Since 1991 those who arrive by boat have faced mandatory detention, often kept extremely remote from major cities. Several boats have sunk, with the loss of hundreds

of lives, in a political atmosphere that favours immigration control above humanitarian assistance.

For a decade the media in Australia have been dominated by a host of related issues such as indefinite detention of asylum seekers, their mental health, the detention of children, harsh conditions, long processing times and temporary visas with few rights attached.

Many of the refugees I know have been through rape, imprisonment and torture and now face further detention, fear, powerlessness, uncertainty, poverty and the possibility of repatriation in danger. It is clear that refugees and asylum seekers are among the most marginalised people we are likely to meet in the West. If Jesus came to bring life, and to bring it abundantly (Jn 10:10), these people, of all people, deserve to experience the Good News in all of its dimensions.

Fortunately, a strong and focused concern for the most marginalised is deeply embedded within the Christian tradition. I will briefly draw out some strands of that concern, which begins with the Christian understanding of God and God's mission.

The Marginalised Are at the Centre

The centre of Christian faith is Jesus Christ, who himself began life as a refugee.

In his *life* Jesus consistently broke boundaries and reversed the social order in affirming the human dignity and blessedness of those on the margins of his society. In his *death* Jesus was executed alongside common criminals by crucifixion, the form of death reserved by Romans for slaves, rebels and despised foreigners. Jesus' identification with the margins is unmistakable.

His *teaching* centred on the kingdom of God, an upside-down kingdom (Kraybill 2003) which is especially for the poor and excluded.

Of particular relevance to refugees is Jesus' promise that God's realm is especially good news for those who are persecuted for the sake of justice (Mt 5:10), for those who are poor, who weep now and who are hungry (Lk 6:21). This gracious realm is a hospitable tree whose branches give birds a place to nest (Lk 13:19).

Jesus' mission is to bring good news to the poor, release for the captives, healing for the sick and liberation for the oppressed (Lk 4:18). His parables often describe the switch from the centre to the margins, as in the story of the great banquet (Lk 14:15–24). There is also a dramatic switch in Jesus' biting story of the judgement in Matthew 25. Only when serving those who are hungry, thirsty, sick, naked, imprisoned and foreigners—and what better summary could there be of the extremities faced by so many refugees?—are the people of all nations serving Christ himself and living into God's gracious realm (Mt 25:31–46).

Jesus stands in a rich Hebrew tradition in which God is merciful and just, and as Psalm 9:9 says, "a refuge for the oppressed, a place of safety in times of trouble". God sees the needs of the widows, orphans and foreigners and acts on their behalf (Deut 26:12,

24:21). In the Exodus, God liberates the Israelite refugees from their oppression (Ex 3:7–8).

The prophetic tradition out of which Jesus speaks calls God’s people to worship and fast through justice seeking and standing by the poor (Is 58:6–8).

Christian mission is a response to the mission of God as understood through the lens of Jesus. It is to take up the cross and follow Jesus (Mk 8:34), to live into the gracious realm of God and proclaim the Good News.

Even this brief review of what the Good News of Jesus means in relation to those who are pushed to the margins in persecution, poverty, landlessness, orphanhood, widowhood and statelessness makes it clear why it is at the core of the Christian faith to defend refugees and asylum seekers. If the command to love our neighbour is seen through the eyes of the story of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:29–37), the neighbour is clearly the friendless stranger (Bretherton 2006: 139), one who is beaten up and abandoned by the side of the road, or perhaps left for years in a refugee camp or left to drown on the high seas in a leaky boat.

Mission as Hospitality

The metaphor for mission that most readily suggests itself in response to the plight of those seeking asylum is that of hospitality. Mission as hospitality or friendship has been fruitfully explored by several authors in recent writings. The very concept of hospitality is intertwined with that of the stranger. The New Testament word for “stranger” (*xenos*) also means “guest” and “host”. Whether someone is a stranger or our guest depends entirely on how we respond to them (Pineda 1997: 33).

In this context I am using hospitality to mean much more than offering a meal or bed, or making someone feel comfortable in our presence. It is a strong and multidimensional concept similar to that of public friendship in classical Greek times, which (although only available between peers) involved solidarity and defence of the other (Moltmann 1978: 50–63). As Arthur Sutherland puts it, with particular relevance to refugees, “Christian hospitality is the intentional, responsible, and caring act of welcoming or visiting, in either public or private places, those who are strangers, enemies, or distressed, without regard for reciprocation” (Sutherland 2006: xiii).

The simple act of hospitality in the home is based on creating a safe and comfortable space for our guests. Making room, or creating space, is part of all dimensions of hospitality (Pohl 1999; Ross 2008: 173).

Theologically speaking, extending Christian hospitality is fundamentally a response to our experience of God, “gifting and honoring human beings with the super-abundant hospitality of God” (Byrne 2000: 124).

In teasing out further the dynamics of hospitality let us ground it in the context of welcoming and defending refugees and asylum seekers. My brief comments can be made under ten simple headings, which usually involve both reflective and practical aspects. What does Christian hospitality towards refugees and asylum seekers involve?

Aspects of Hospitable Friendship

1. Defending Human Rights

If friendship involves solidarity we begin by defending the human rights of those whose humanity is denied. Justice is structural love, or the principle of love for all, distributed fairly in a social context. Christian mission involves at least the strong and active support of international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 2007 [1948]).

2. Political Defence of Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Defence of human rights leads to the more specific political defence of refugees and asylum seekers. In the Australian context churches have been the most consistent voice for ending mandatory detention, shortening processing times, restoring legal rights of appeal, improving detention conditions, allowing visitors to detention centres and abolishing temporary protection visas.

These first two aspects of hospitality exhibit the public friendship, or solidarity, referred to above, where Christians seek the merciful justice that characterises the God of the Bible.

3. Settlement Assistance

Hospitality involves making people feel “at home”, and there are many aspects to welcoming as Christian mission. The dislocation that refugees experience in a new and rich country is massive. There are gaps in government settlement services which are filled by churches, often by migrant churches looking after their own.

4. Sanctuary and Temporary Accommodation

Asylum seekers, who by definition seek sanctuary, often face long periods of application and assessment. Christian churches have a real role to play in providing “asylum”, here meaning a place of safety more broadly. I’m aware of several churches or Christian agencies who offer sanctuary (technically illegal) or accommodation and practical assistance to those who await decisions.

5. Welcoming Multicultural Churches

Christian hospitality involves being a sign of God’s welcome by being hospitable multicultural churches. A hospitable faith community is intentional in its welcome, embracing difference as gift. It makes space for people’s unique stories. It works to ensure diversity in worship styles, music, leadership, committees and ways of gathering. Food and laughter figure highly. It is more event-centred and celebration-oriented than program-centred (Foster 1997: 100–115).

When a congregation is offering hospitality well it is extending God’s hospitality in the way Jesus did and therefore is a holy place, a place of healing, of belonging and of shared meals. As such it is a sign of the gracious realm of God.

The first five aspects of hospitality outlined here emphasise the initiative and responsibility of the host, and carry the danger of assuming that the dynamics are one-way, in which “we” open up to “them” as gift. The next five complement them, by

reminding us that hospitality always involves a two-way relationship, one that at times can become transformative for both parties.

6. Intercultural Learning

Christian hospitality involves not only opening up to “the other” but also to their world. Genuine hospitality involves genuine interest in guests, and refugees have amazing stories to tell of challenge, suffering and persistence. If we are open to it, we discover the holy and the divine in each person’s story.

7. Interfaith Dialogue

Most refugees happen to be religious, so the opportunity for intercultural learning is matched by openings for interfaith dialogue. Much of the church’s service to refugees is to those who are Christian, but it is a challenge to care for those who belong to other faiths. A dialogical approach is the most appropriate for crossing great barriers.

8. The Ethics of Welcoming

Creating space for vulnerable people involves being aware of the power we hold. A deliberate strategy is usually needed for people in power to become aware of it and to counter it as much as is possible (Russell 2009: 43). As in the act of embrace, after the invitation, the response and the embrace there is appropriately a letting go—symbolising respect and a recognition of difference (Volf 1996: 140–147). These are the ethics and dynamics of hospitality and embrace.

9. Meals and Personal Friendship

Christian hospitality nearly always involves eating together and the development of personal friendship. Table fellowship goes deep. If it is an inclusive table it is a potent symbol of the diversity and richness of the gracious realm of God.

Despite the need for public and political friendship of refugees, all solidarity must contain a personal element. When we are friends, we lose the distinction between host and guest, which leads to the final and perhaps most important observation.

10. Unexpected Divine Presence

Perhaps the greatest mystery of Christian hospitality is that in extending God’s welcome as a host we so often become the guest, both because our guest becomes our host or because, more profoundly, the Jesus we serve through the poor and hungry (Mt 25) becomes our host. Hospitality often becomes a holy or divine moment and the occasion for the transformation of all involved (Russell 2009: 82), as the story of the road to Emmaus shows, and Hebrews 13:2, which speaks of entertaining angels unawares.

Conclusion

In seeking to frame a theology of mission towards refugees and asylum seekers I have turned to the metaphor of mission as hospitality. It is based on the character of God and the special concern of the gospel for the most vulnerable and marginalised.

I’ve suggested that mission as hospitality has a strong, public character, with many dimensions, from justice seeking to opening our homes and being welcoming faith

communities. The last of these noted that hospitality is often the occasion for unexpected divine presence, for in responding in love to the world's most vulnerable people we are responding in love to Jesus Christ himself.

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Dr Ross Langmead is Professor of Missiology at Whitley College, Melbourne, Australia, in the MCD University of Divinity.

This presentation, and the longer paper on which it is based, can be downloaded from the Resources page at www.rosslangmead.com.