



Uniting Church in Australia  
North Belconnen Congregation

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## **Inquiry into immigration detention in Australia**

By way of background, our church has been involved in refugee support since 1980, though this has become increasingly difficult over the past decade.

We have had serious concerns at the policy of detention of asylum seekers in particular, and more broadly of people who the government or departmental officials want to remove from the community. We also have concerns at the staffing of the detention centres and the lack of openness and accountability of those involved in the detention regime.

### **Asylum seekers**

Our experience of genuine asylum seekers is that conditions must be extreme in their home country for them to risk their life and those of their loved ones to flee to another country where the language and customs are so different. Settling into Australia is very difficult and the families we have helped have required countless hours of support from a team of people. On top of these social difficulties is the unseen damage to their psyche that they have suffered prior to leaving their homeland. Two of the people we have helped have committed suicide when confronted with obstacles here which normally healthy people would ride through.

### **The infrastructure and physical environments of detention centres**

#### **Types of detention (including residential housing and community detention) and other alternatives**

To have a policy which puts asylum seekers in prison conditions or on a remote island, and leave them there for an indeterminate period without proper legal recourse to having their case heard is not only heartless and cruel, but displays an abysmal lack of understanding of the needs of suffering people. The dismantling of the former government's 'Pacific solution' detention centres is a welcome sign of a new approach. Detention centres are not the place for people who come here in need of our help and support. They are not suitable for children and they are not suitable for adults. The use of community based facilities for families with children while they are assessed offers a more humane approach that will be less likely to inflict further trauma. Access to legal advice to speedily resolve the status of asylum seekers and linking them to local support services is also necessary.

The only role that we can see for immigration detention centres is to hold people who must be deported.

### **Determining who are suitable to stay in Australia**

The Department responsible for immigration and refugees has received a considerable amount of bad publicity over the past decade, with Australian citizens and permanent residents wrongfully imprisoned or deported, and with asylum seekers accused of not being refugees being deported, only to suffer physical violence or even death when returned to their own country. This has happened more often than the wider community is aware of. Our own experience of the Department has been cause for considerable anger on the part of some of our most dedicated carers, causing them to walk away from refugee support and to take on other humanitarian causes.

Of the many failings of the Department, the lack of consistency in refugee determinations, the overly narrow definition of who is a refugee, and the indifference to the needs of the people who clearly need our help, have been our greatest concerns. As an example, one family that we have tried to help included two adult brothers, one of whom was granted refugee status, while the other was declared not to be a refugee, because they were assessed by different staff.

### **Accountability and transparency in immigration detention processes**

A periodic reporting process that gives regular information in a public way on the numbers of people being held in detention, the status of their cases and the availability of medical and support services would assist in making the system more accountable.

### **Detention centres**

Fundamentally, we are opposed to detention centres being run as prisons. We are opposed to the centres being staffed and run by private security services, with the conditions of operation being shrouded in secrecy, and journalists and other concerned people being denied access. If we call ourselves a civilized country, how can we justify the inhumane treatment that has been meted out in the hell-holes that our government has created?

We are opposed to mandatory indefinite detention for asylum seekers.

### **Visas**

We are also concerned at the use of visas which allow people to stay temporarily in the community without financial support or access to medical facilities, and at the same time being prevented from working. The indifference of administrators to the suffering that this regime causes is beyond belief. In the same way, the temporary protection visas that the previous government introduced were a cruel joke: people were recognized as refugees but were not given the residency that the refugee convention implied, causing them to live in a continuing state of uncertainty for their future, always in fear of deportation despite the recognition that they were genuine refugees.

We welcome the recent abolition of TPVs by the Labor government and trust that access to either employment or the financial support mechanisms available to all Australians who are in dire financial straits will be made available to those who are granted refugee status.

### **In summary**

What we are seeking is humanity in refugee policy, a concern for the well-being of the people who come here seeking our help and support.

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