

refugees: aliens & strangers

WAITING FOR
REFUGE

Lyn Pound

REFUGEES,
RESPONSIBILITY,
RESPONSE

Libby Hore-Lacey

TIME TO GO

Souvanna
Thianesysavanh

MONEY FOR
LIP GLOSS

Diane Robertson



Woman (Hebrew *ishah*). Woman, with man, was made in the image of God. 'Male and female he created them' (Genesis 1:27).

welcome...

In playgroup this morning one of the mothers was in tears telling us of her refugee experience. Her father had died two days after returning from helping her to a neighbouring country to apply for refugee status. Remembering it was all too much for her. Suddenly the issue I'd been hearing about in the news and thinking about for this magazine was confronting me in a woman sitting across from me in tears. I was reminded that refugees are literally our neighbours, living a few streets away, not just in remote detention centres or refugee camps overseas.

The issue of our treatment of asylum seekers has become very politicised in recent years. Christians are found on both sides of the political divide, but our first loyalty is to the teachings of Jesus and the principles of the Old Testament. These teachings remind us never to forget the actual people behind the news stories, as I was in danger of doing before playgroup this morning. We are called to go out of our comfort zone and to welcome the stranger into our community. Our writers suggest many practical ways of living out our faith in regard to refugees. The challenge to us is to act on our good intentions.

Cathy Altmann

Those of you who received the last edition of ishah will know that the magazine has just become free, supported solely by donations. A big thanks to all of you who have responded with donations and requests to receive ishah – our readership has already grown substantially, which is very encouraging. We'd still love for even more women to receive ishah free, so please spread the word among friends, family or at church. If you'd like extra copies to give away, just let us know.

ISSUES TO COME...

ISSUE 14:
Women, Men
and Ministry

ISSUE 15:
Hope

our aims

1. To value the Bible as God's inspired Word to us and the ultimate authority on matters of faith and practice, through thinking hard about how the Bible applies to our everyday lives.
2. To encourage women to grow in godliness and maturity in Christ.
3. To equip Christian women to be creative, confident and effective in communicating the gospel.
4. To give women in a variety of roles and situations the forum to think about contemporary issues from a framework of Biblical theology and to articulate their thinking in a manner that stimulates themselves and others to live lives that are more faithful to God's Word.

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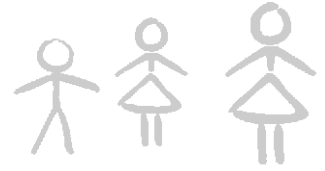
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The views expressed in the articles are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the *ishah* editorial committee.

> Waiting for refuge



BY LYN POUND

► Esther's Story

Esther ushers me in and hands me an official looking letter, stammering, "I'm not sure what it means." We wander out of the presbytery into the cool evening air and perch on a bench against the church wall. She crouches low, buries her face in her knees and begins rocking. Her shoulders heave as I confirm her suspicion that the government has just rejected her application for refugee status in Australia. The ensuing silence is broken by deep sighs and jagged words that haunt me for months to come, "I just want some rest... I've been running for too long... Is there no home for me in this world?" And the poignant affirmation, "God has big ears; He will hear my cry."

Beside me is a young woman who feels utterly alone in this world.

This incident precedes regular walks and talks in the park where our mundane chatter paves the way for occasional snippets of past information: "...before father was dragged off to prison... fled by myself at nineteen... after the torture... my years underground..."

It also becomes clear that her story is all she has to call her own and that any innocent probing into this intensely private world is likely to stymie conversation. Hence, after two years of friendship, there are still glaring gaps in the jigsaw puzzle. But it reveals what I need to know: her needs for permanent protection, a fresh take on life, and community support that nurtures both independence and belonging.

This background of torture and trauma shapes the lives of many asylum seekers and refugees reaching our shores, highlighting the need for greater compassion from government. The purpose of this article, however, is not to debate the issues politically but to offer a biblical perspective and personal experience in the hope that they might engender a response to these marginalized people. While not in any way denying the long-term rigours of resettlement for refugees (authorized arrivals, who have been accepted off-shore), this article will focus on the struggles of asylum seekers (unauthorized arrivals, who are appealing for refugee status), as my experience dictates.

► A Biblical Response: What light does Scripture cast on these issues?

Faced with yet another pressing need in our world and the easy slide into numbing compassion fatigue, what can we glean from scripture to guide our attitudes and actions? The Bible is consistently vocal on this issue and is peppered with people, whole races and individuals, who confront us with their otherness and need for refuge.

Take the Israelites. They habitually grew complacent and forgot that their past as refugees was to guarantee their protection of the landless sojourner. We find this concern in the three main law codes: "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22: 21 NRSV); "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you..." (Leviticus 19: 34); "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10: 19). For Jeremiah, Israel's repentance needed to extend to her treatment of refugees in order to receive God's blessing: "If you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place..." (Jeremiah 7: 6-7). We also have uncomfortable stories that we would rather ignore in Ezra and Nehemiah of backlash and scapegoating of the stranger, reminders of our default mechanism to exclude those who are different.

It is Christ's embodiment of inclusion in all his dealings with people that is our supreme example. The New Testament sheds further light on a Christian response to the alien. In Matthew 2 we catch a glimpse of the Christ child as asylum seeker, the infant Jesus with his parents fleeing to Egypt to escape Herod's murderous threats. Later in chapter 25, we have further identification of Jesus with the stranger in his well-known parable of the sheep and the goats where Jesus turns to the goats: "I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me" (Matthew 25: 43). And the incredulous goats facing damnation plead: "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" And the reply comes strong: "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of

these, you did not do it to me” (Matthew 25: 44, 45). This idea of welcoming the divine in the stranger is picked up in Hebrews: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13: 2). The writer goes on in the next verse to stress our Christian responsibility to those in extreme suffering: “Remember... those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.”

It appears clear that one of the fundamental characteristics of Christians is to welcome the stranger in our midst.

► **Personal experience of working with asylum seekers**

I will never forget watching the bombing of Baghdad with my Iraqi friend, Tariq. As the first barrage of bombs struck and I was stunned into silence by the raw immediacy of the war, his reaction struck me as oddly unemotional. He located his house for me on the

screen, just twenty minutes walk behind the bombed site. His extended family was holing up together there rather than hiding in a bunker because of false promises during the last war when bunkers had been bombed. He pointed out landmarks and questioned the network’s camera angles. The tour guide comments and interest in cinematography seemed like inappropriate banter to me.

If people assisting refugees keep strictly to promises and appointments, it helps build feelings of worth and importance.

The shock set in for him, however, over the ensuing weeks as all contact with his family was severed. Although I had been initially disturbed by his response to the telecast, on reflection, I began to understand. Tariq had been asserting his sense of identity – this was his turf, his people, his world and he wanted me to see it and validate it.

Asylum seekers frequently feel invisible and isolated, pushed to the periphery of society. Community life and networks are greatly desired and yet the threat of awkward questions or demands that could lead to further rejection are off-putting. Finding non-threatening, yet stimulating, social situations is challenging.

Then there is the support needed to refute the common labels of “illegals”, “queue-jumpers”, “forum shoppers” and “economic migrants”. It is hard when members of the public make these allegations and harder still that they take their cues from government. For useful further reading, many websites, cited in this issue of ishah, have sections devoted to dispelling these myths.

Asylum seekers often feel they have lost all power over their lives. In situations where control can be regained

– in steering conversation, in cooking or teaching how to cook a meal, or in organizing an outing, a much-needed independence and interdependence can be built. Engaging in free community events and activities together engenders mutuality, and opportunities for choice can be created through simple things like making op-shop purchases.

Issues of trust and shame frequently loom large. The sense of having broken the family’s trust, in their failure to provide, results in enormous shame. Plus, their feelings of being mistrusted by the community at large and their experiences en route of misplaced trust result in high levels of stress. If people assisting refugees keep strictly to promises and appointments, it helps build feelings of worth and importance.

There are many vital ways people in the community can lend support. Some involvement calls for more time and some may mean a one-off phone call.

► **Standing with Asylum Seekers**

Keeping the issues alive through prayer and the communication of factual information, helps to dispel the myths. Calling a support centre to offer material aid, corresponding with a person in detention through the “Spare Rooms for Refugees” website (www.spare-roomsforrefugees.com), pro bono professional assistance, advocacy, teaching English conversation, writing to the media and activism through rallies, marches and protest forums are valuable means of involvement. As followers of Jesus who constantly identified with the outsider, our challenge is to find a personal way of welcoming the stranger in our midst.

► **Esther’s Story continued**

I contacted Esther last week to hear about her Refugee Review Tribunal Hearing. She described it in disastrous terms. Despite the approachability of the interviewer and support of her lawyer, she had felt so intimidated by the process that all she could do was cave in to tears. The dredging up of traumatic details, coupled with the possible affront to her credibility for the second official time, was too much to bear. She felt wretched in betraying herself and acting as her own worst enemy.

So her life, along with many others, continues to be defined by waiting. Waiting to be deemed unworthy or worthy. Waiting for rejection. Waiting for welcome.

■ *All personally identifying details in this article have been changed.*

Postscript – since writing this article, Lyn has been informed of the good news of Esther’s acceptance for permanent protection, but many others are still waiting.

Lyn Pound is a teacher of English as a second language, and part-time refugee liaison person for the Brunswick Baptist church. She is closely involved with the Asylum Seeker Welcome Centre in Brunswick. Contact: gpound@whitley.unimelb.edu.au

IF THE TRUTH HURTS

BY ESTHER KENNEDY

CD REVIEW

Monique Lisbon – *If the Truth Hurts*.

If The Truth Hurts is one of the least comfortable CDs I've ever listened to. But, then again, open discussion about abuse and its ongoing effects is rarely a comfortable experience. Monique engages the listener and invites us to share in her journey through obviously deep pain and struggle to a new understanding of hope, and revelation of God's sovereignty and faithfulness.

The journey begins with the edgy rock of *Can't* and the soulful saxophone appeal of *If the Truth Hurts*, highlighting the human condition and the futility of ignoring emotional wounds in the hope that they'll go away: *If the truth hurts/ just think what a lie can do*. Our attention is firmly directed to those things that we'd rather not have to deal with, but this is the only way to begin the healing process.

As the pathway winds through awareness of the problem and deals with the associated shame and anger, the work of God is central. The stirring crescendo chorus of *For You* acknowledges the provision of love through other people, and *Broken* points to the suffering that Jesus endured to provide us with the ultimate hope. The writer's heart is laid bare and we can see her struggle with forgiving. *Unthinkable* is the showcase of Monique's vocal abilities, exploring the depths of her mellow lower register and the lilt of her higher notes. It makes for some tender, emotive moments, and links seamlessly into *I Remember*.

In a time when sexual abuse, especially within the Church, is receiving more and more media attention, it's encouraging to have a constructive example of dealing with consequences of human sin. Monique doesn't shy away from exposing the reality of how hard it can be to go through the process of acknowledging the wounds and participating in the healing. She has found that God's answer to suffering in the world is to suffer with us: *What kind of God is this/ who enters into suffering/ who, during all the violence/ is nailed to a tree?*

The final songs on the album are filled with hope, providing a balance and a fitting place of rest at the end of the journey. Her adaptation of Psalm 46 is a well-arranged duet with Rebecca Watkins. It lifts the listener's heart to trust in God's eternal promises and in his enduring strength, justice and love.

This album is more than just a collection of songs; it is a series of signposts for pilgrims who are seeking hope and restoration. True peace and comfort are unearthed through a fresh handling of a very distressing topic.

■ *Esther attends St Jude's Estates Community Church (where everyone is a part of the music team) and works as a speech pathologist. In her spare time she aspires to be a world famous jazz singer.*

The Music and Ministry of Monique Lisbon can be found at www.monomusic.com.au

*To order the CD *If The Truth Hurts*, send a cheque for \$30 (including GST and postage) payable to MonoMusic at PO Box 324 Ashburton VIC 3147, or order securely online at www.monomusic.com.au*

write of reply

*ishah welcomes reader responses to topics dealt with in previous issues. These should be no more than 200 words long and can be emailed (to ishahmag@hotmail.com) or posted (to *ishah*, c/- 56 Collier Cres, Brunswick West, VIC 3056).*

Thank you for my [free] copy of *ishah* and I would like to receive it. I used to be a subscriber but had to stop, so many outreach needs through my church and we are pensioners. I am enclosing money for postage in the future and I do enjoy the magazine. Congratulations and God's richest blessings to you all. He loves you all, and so do we although we don't know you physically we are sisters in Christ.

May the Holy Spirit guide you continually,

Maureen McLeod (Belmont, Vic)

I thoroughly enjoyed the [free *ishah* launch]. It gave me a real insight into what you are trying to achieve and have been able to achieve over the years with some great support. It's a really great magazine so the decision to keep it going for free is powerful.

Claire Rogers (via email)

Thank you. I love the magazine...find it the most intelligent Christian writing I have come across in a while.

Carolyn Atkinson (via email)

3 R S : refugees, responsibility, response

‘Free the refugees!’ reads the graffiti. The issue of refugees and asylum seekers arouses passion, criticism and aggressive protests. While many people act with compassion to meet the needs of refugees, others show open resentment and distrust. Most of us are either confused by the issues or just too busy to get involved. I will outline some ways to think about refugees and share some of my thoughts.

Refugees have left their home country because their life or freedom was under threat. They are comparable to the vulnerable and dependent aliens living amongst the Israelites (Deuteronomy 24:14-22). Australia has an acceptance rate for refugees that is third in the world and generous provision is made to assist them to settle here. But how many people can or should Australia support?

Asylum seekers present a more complex situation. They arrive hoping to be classified as refugees after arriving in Australia. These people have bypassed Australian law, are very determined to stay, have frequently left family members behind, physical and emotional needs are high, and they often lack personal identification. Management of asylum seekers requires emergency accommodation, access to medical and legal support and a long process to establish identity. The government’s dilemma is how to accommodate these needs while being fair to refugees in the established programme and how to be wise in who is accepted. Balancing these demands means more than responding to the loudest protest.

I believe there is a Biblical precedent for receiving asylum seekers with compassion, immediate needs taking precedence over legality. But justice and wisdom are Biblical virtues too, so I commend the government’s caution in ensuring that those who are not genuine refugees

do not take advantage over those who are. While it is reasonable to expect that humane living conditions are provided I think it is also reasonable to detain those who have evaded due process.

► Suggestions for becoming informed and being involved

Christians have a particular responsibility to be engaged in the world. But to speak and act with integrity requires wisdom and a careful approach and how we inform ourselves is vital. If you decide to get involved with refugees and asylum seekers, you need to reconcile what the Bible has to say with accurate information of the situation. This may include examining historical background, relevant policies, structures and organisations responding to refugees and how human rights fit within a nation’s sovereign responsibilities.

Whatever the level of your research, try to ascertain the source of information and the reliability of the speaker based on their experience, reputation and the logic of their argument. Consider potential bias. There are many useful web sites and books but take care to evaluate statistics and policies. Read widely, both for and against the issue and discover what support and advocacy groups are doing and saying. Discussing issues with others, especially if they are well-informed, also helps form your view.

There are many levels of response possible. We can be confident that because God has called us to be his representatives on earth, He will guide us as we respond to the Micah challenge: “act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God” (Micah 6:8). As you think prayerfully and creatively bear in mind your own abilities, commitments and available resources.

You might decide to participate in

one of the programmes run by World Vision, TEAR, or Anglicare in their support of refugees. Or maybe there is a family in your neighbourhood you can befriend. Lobbying or affirming politicians in their search for solutions, and raising awareness in your church or community are other options, or working to improve conditions in the countries of origin and restricting the work of “people smugglers”.

For me, preparing this article has thrown me into a level of reading I normally only reach while a student. Being better informed I have now chosen to pray for our political leaders in their decisions and the unfolding of God’s plan; that He be known to all people. I feel more confident to express my opinion and that it expresses in some measure the mercy and justice of God, as well as being sympathetic and supportive of government policies.

I am conscious that living wisely and responsibly is far easier in theory than in practice. Ultimately, the response you make will be personal. Being informed and applying Christian ethics is integral to living responsibly in our increasingly multicultural nation. A great vision to sharpen our focus is the ultimate realization of God’s purposes: “the great multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne crying out: ‘Salvation belongs to our God...’” (Revelation 15:4). What does the Lord require of you as we move towards this Day?

■ *Libby Hore-Lacy is a 50-something mother of four children on the cusp of independence and a part-time wife of Ian who commutes to London. Her sanity is maintained by a new love (‘cello), fresh air, fabulous friends, and a very patient God. She belongs to a great church family at St Alfred’s, Blackburn North. Contact: libbyhl@bigpond.net.au*



time to go

A PERSONAL STORY BY **SOUVANNA THIANESYSAVANH**

After Communism came into power in Vietnam and Cambodia, it swept into Laos, bringing with it enormous changes in people's lifestyles. There was a dead calm over the streets – deserted by cars, as petrol was no longer supplied. It was especially quiet at night as there was now a curfew in place. Food was a scarcity, people having to go to the body corporate to buy their rations. Everything was controlled by the Communist system. But worst of all was the fear which everyone felt. Fear to say anything to anyone lest what you said would be reported to the Communist leaders. No one could trust their neighbours or friends. Yes, it was time to go. It was for freedom that my parents planned their escape – to cross the Mekong river from Laos to Thailand.

At the riverbank of the Mekong we could see a boat approaching. It pulled alongside the boat house and we all climbed aboard. The boat floated downstream. We could see in the distance an enormous spotlight at the top of a hill, guarding the riverbank. The man at the back of the boat pulled on the cord to start the engine. The engine did not catch. The boat was edging ever closer towards the spotlight when the man made his second attempt with the engine. No, it refused to start again.

We were getting nearer the danger of being spotted and shot at by the communist guards. My mother thought about all the times she had heard the distant rumble of gunfire when she had been in her home. The times when she had sunk in despair as she knew that someone else trying to flee the country was having their life taken.

The cord was pulled a third time and, at last, the engine spluttered to life. Our boat quickly made its way upstream and, heading away from the danger, it began to make its way to the opposite bank. The journey lasted half an hour. We were on the other side and safe at last.

Once in Thailand we were able to stay with my father's brothers and sisters for one and a half years. After that we went to stay in a refugee camp. The refugee camp consisted of rows and rows of one-roomed bamboo huts cramped together, with public toilets at the end of each row. There was no running water at the camp. We had to buy our own supply and use it to drink and wash with.

The United Nations gave money to the local Thai people to buy food to distribute to everyone at the camp. We would receive a ration of rice, with small amounts of fish, beans, oil, pork, salt, fish sauce and milk powder. When the UN came to inspect what we were being given they discovered how poor the quality of the food was and how it was given in such small amounts. We were in the camp for seven months. We waited as the process for sponsorship took place so that we could come to Australia. My father's niece was our sponsor.

We arrived in Australia in May, 1978 and went immediately to the migrant hostel in Maribyrnong. My mother attended English classes at the hostel, eventually finding work in a factory after about 3 months. My father studied English at RMIT and found work as an interpreter with the Commonwealth employment service after four months. The hostel had a canteen where we had to eat. We used to buy meat pies there and fill them up with rice. Moonee Ponds Baptist Church had an outreach to the people in the hostel at the time. That was how my parents became Christians and began to take us to church. We stayed at the hostel for about five months, before we moved into our own home, a commission house in Maidstone.

Back in the early 80's my family were very much a minority at our school. There was one other Asian child in my class. While I made friends easily enough, I was teased a lot by other children. I was called names and taunted with "ching chong". Growing up in this environment, I hated being Chinese and would often baffle other children by saying I wasn't Chinese and that I was Laotian (they didn't know that Laos existed). It was not until I reached University that I truly took interest in my Chinese identity.

Despite the strain of being teased and the pressure of growing up poor, I think my family have been most fortunate to have come out of Laos and lived in Australia for these 26 years. Growing up with two cultures has been a rich experience. God has blessed us with lots of wonderful opportunities and, most important of all, the opportunity to hear the Gospel.

■ *Souvanna Thianesysavanh works as a psychologist in primary and special schools in the Department of Education and Training. She attends St Jude's Estate Congregation in Carlton.*

FURTHER READING AND USEFUL WEBSITES..

> From Lyn Pound:

TEXTS

- Brennan F. (2003) *Tampering with Asylum*. UQP.
- Mares P. (2001) *Borderline – Australia's Treatment of Refugees and Asylum Seekers*. UNSW Press: Sydney.
- Marr D. & Wilkinson M. (2003) *Dark Victory*. Allen & Unwin.
- Tyler H. (2003) *Asylum: Voices behind the Razor Wire*. Lothian Books.

WEBSITES

- Hotham Mission - The Asylum Seeker Project: www.hothammission.org.au
- Justice for Asylum Seekers (JAS): www.ajustaustralia.com
- National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA): www.ncca.org.au
- Rural Australians for Refugees: www.ruralaustraliansforrefugees.org

> From Libby Hore-Lacy:

TEXTS

- Burnside J.P. (2001) *The Status and Welfare of Immigrants: the place of the foreigner in Biblical law and it's relevance to Contemporary Society*. Jubilee centre: London .
- Nichols A. (1993) *Refugees, Religion & Politics*. Acorn Press
- Preece G. (Oct. 2002) *We are all Boat People*. Interface Magazine.
(Available at Ridley College Library)
- Wright C. (1995) *Walking in the Ways of the Lord*. IVP.
(Also his lecture: "Welcoming the Stranger", available at Ridley College library)

WEBSITES

- Department of Immigration: www.immi.gov.au
- TEAR Australia (many good links and resources): www.tear.org.au/advocacy
- World Vision: www.worldvision.org.au
- Centre for Independent Studies: www.cis.org.au

Starting Point is a regular column that aims to encourage readers to engage with a contemporary issue in the media.

Money for lip-gloss

My daughter is now old enough to find a part-time job. A job teaches responsibility, initiative & budgeting (or not). No more arguments over whether we'll shell out money for lip-gloss, music and shoes that cost more than what I spend on clothes in a year. Sounds great. But wait – there's more!

As a Christian family we're trying to encourage our kids to think about how their faith impacts on their decisions. Are there jobs a Christian shouldn't do?

Newsagencies sell pornography and lotto tickets. Chemists sell condoms and exchange needles. Movie theatres and video stores promote movies about violence and horror. Clothes stores often sell products made by people who are effectively slave labour. Bookstores sell material about other religions, witchcraft and numerous other topics Christ stood against.

These questions raise the wider issue of our own involvement as consumers. If we stand against pornography then should we avoid buying petrol from a station that sells it? If we believe in fair wages for all then do we sew our own clothes? Are there certain brands of coffee we're not to buy to avoid contributing to exploitation of low paid workers overseas? Books we're not to read if we want to keep our minds on things of God?

How do we live out our new lives in Christ whilst still living in a world that stands against him? We've had conversations about free will, being salt in the world, and making choices that help us to grow in godliness. Whilst we haven't come up with any clear answers we hope we've been encouraging our daughter to think analytically and struggle to apply the bible in her everyday life.

Mind you, I'm beginning to wonder if an increase in pocket-money may not be easier!

■ *Diana Robertson lives in Canberra and is married to John. They have three children who enjoy a good debate!*