

African refugees and the particular role of churches in the UK

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Many churches have the necessary physical and social assets to assist refugees in the community both individually and by bringing them together.

Certain Christian church denominations in the UK have become focal points for providing assistance to refugees from East Africa and the Horn of Africa. The Pentecostal and Coptic (Orthodox) churches in particular – the principal religions of the refugees – are long-established institutions where African refugees have found sanctuary and an opportunity to experience wider community beyond their own groups.

After reaching the UK, the majority of the refugees are dispersed across the country, far from London where their communities are concentrated, due to insufficient accommodation in the capital and the government's dispersal policy for new asylum seekers. In addition to having been traumatised by the experiences that triggered their flight, they face a range of challenges in adjusting to the local culture and the economic norms of their new world. At such a critical juncture, churches and other voluntary charitable organisations are often the ones that come to the rescue. However, there seem to be particular factors that mean that churches and other faith-based groups have been more sustainable in providing assistance than the secular community groups established for African refugees.¹

Volunteering: Volunteer programmes are one of the key assets and strengths of the churches. Without these, it would be difficult (if not impossible) to sustain their various support activities. The secular African refugee community groups appear to lack a long-term volunteer base and the majority of these groups eventually founder.

Physical resources: Buildings, often equipped with valuable resources, are

important assets. Due to the decline of church attendance in the UK, there are plenty of churches with spare space for African refugee community groups for worship and communal activities. Such free facilities are not always available to secular community groups.

Faith-based expectations and obligations: Helping the needy and the disadvantaged is an expected part of Christian faith and practice.

Networks: Extensive contacts and networks help to identify and reach out to those in need and also to those in a position to assist. Furthermore, church leaders can play a powerful role in shaping attitudes and practices.

From this base, the churches in question have been able to provide a wide range of practical community support services, including outreach to newly arrived refugees; drop-in services where people can seek assistance, impartially and in confidence; support services according to age, gender and needs;



At a Habesha (Ethiopian & Eritrean) Pentecostal Church event in Leeds, UK.

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emergency support services to the wider community during crisis, such as food banks and debt-management support; family-befriending schemes; and the less tangible but important support for their Christian faith.

Aside from providing practical assistance, the churches create a platform for volunteering and capacity-building programmes which help communities such as the African refugees to become self-sufficient in the long run. They help revive hope, purpose and dignity for vulnerable members of the community. Unlike

their secular counterparts, many churches both have the necessary physical and social assets and are often uniquely suited to bring people together to address pressing challenges and to empower people to improve their lives.

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1. Based on the author's observations and work experience with support-service providers and recipients over a ten-year period.