

November 2014

## Christian civil disobedience and mandatory, indefinite immigration detention in Australia

Marcus Campbell

**A new movement of Christian activists in Australia is using radical direct action to challenge their country's policy of mandatory detention of asylum-seeker children.**

In late 2013 the Australian government launched 'Operation Sovereign Borders', ceasing all processing of asylum seekers for resettlement in Australia and controversially using the navy to turn boats back before they enter territorial waters. An aggressive military-themed advertising campaign was circulated to inform would-be asylum seekers that there is 'No Way' they would ever be resettled in Australia.

In response to this, a group of Christians appropriated the font style and layout of the government campaign and began the movement 'Love Makes A Way'. Inspired by the legacies of Jesus Christ, Martin Luther King Jr and Gandhi, and compelled to take action for the more than 800 asylum-seeker children held in indefinite detention,<sup>1</sup> the movement seeks to dramatise the issue through non-violent direct action and civil disobedience.

Their actions take the form of 'sit-in' prayer vigils inside the offices of politicians such as the Prime Minister and the Minister for Immigration and Border Protection. Small groups of faith leaders from a range of different traditions enter and occupy a politician's office to say liturgical prayers for asylum seekers and sing hymns, refusing to leave until they are given a commitment or timeline for the release of all children from detention.

Between March and November 2014, 112 faith leaders including 41 clergy, four nuns and a Jewish rabbi occupied the offices of twelve members

of parliament across Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Adelaide, Brisbane, Launceston and Canberra. 95 people were arrested and 25 faced court for trespass but the cases were later dismissed by magistrates. The movement capitalises on these dramatic events by intelligent use of social media, particularly though live tweeting about the

Australia Government

**NO WAY**

**YOU WILL NOT MAKE AUSTRALIA HOME**

**The Australian Government has introduced the toughest border protection measures ever.**

- If you get on a boat without a visa, you will not end up in Australia.
- Any vessel seeking to illegally enter Australia will be intercepted and safely returned beyond Australian waters.
- The rules apply to everyone: families, children, unaccompanied children, educated and skilled.
- No matter who you are or where you are from, you will not make Australia home.

**THINK AGAIN BEFORE YOU WASTE YOUR MONEY. PEOPLE SMUGGLERS ARE LYING.**

www.australia.gov.au/novisa

Authorised by the Australian Government, Digital 199, Canberra

November 2014

sit-ins and arrests, and the religious nature of the movement has no doubt contributed to its growing popularity in many ways.

Firstly, Love Makes A Way has been able to demystify the endless political debate in Australia about how to deal with asylum seekers by reducing the argument down to the basic moral principle that it is wrong to detain children indefinitely. They frame it as an injustice so intolerable that as Christians they are called to action by the 'refugee Jesus' who as an infant had to flee persecution by King Herod.<sup>2</sup> Framing the issue in this way is designed to persuade other Christians to change their views on asylum seekers or to join the movement.

Secondly, the dynamic and decentralised structure of the movement was born out of pre-existing church networks and this has meant that protest actions can be launched quickly and in locations all over the country.

Thirdly, the movement appeals to a sense of unity, with leaders claiming that Australian churches are speaking with 'one voice' on the issue. In reality this is not strictly true but the movement succeeds by having as many church denominations as possible involved – from liberal to conservative – giving the sense that there are major institutions backing them.

Lastly, the word love is targeted as a form of moral leverage to call out politicians who profess to be Christians. Love is rarely brought up in discussions on asylum seekers but anyone with the most basic knowledge of the New Testament would be familiar with its repeated command to 'love your neighbour'. Love Makes A Way activists say they aim to invite the politicians to a more compassionate and loving way, and this ethos makes their influence powerful.

With no sign of slowing down, Love Makes A Way has proven that there is still room for us as global citizens to take practical action after international law has been circumvented, letters and petitions have been dismissed, and street protests have been ignored. There is clearly a growing momentum of people radically committed to the true meaning of loving their neighbour.

Marcus Campbell [mcam2375@uni.sydney.edu.au](mailto:mcam2375@uni.sydney.edu.au) is a Master of Research student at the University of Sydney. [www.sydney.edu.au](http://www.sydney.edu.au)

1. See FMR issue 44 on 'Detention, alternatives to detention, and deportation' [www.fmreview.org/detention](http://www.fmreview.org/detention)

2. See [www.redletterchristians.org/pastor-arrested-easter-refugee-australia-jarrod-mckenna/](http://www.redletterchristians.org/pastor-arrested-easter-refugee-australia-jarrod-mckenna/)



LOVE  
MAKES A WAY

WE SHALL NOT REST UNTIL FREEDOM COMES  
FOR PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM ON OUR SHORES.  
WE WILL WELCOME THE STRANGER.

#LoveMakesAWay