

# An ecumenical organisation for asylum seekers in Switzerland

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**An ecumenical organisation provides socio-pastoral assistance for asylum seekers while they go through the first crucial steps of the asylum proceedings.**

Through an ecumenical organisation called OeSA,<sup>1</sup> the Reformed, Catholic and Methodist Churches in Basel offer humanitarian assistance to refugees who have just reached

Switzerland after difficult and dangerous experiences. OeSA provides socio-pastoral assistance for asylum seekers in the period they spend in the Registration and Procedure

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Centre (RPC), while they go through the first crucial steps of the asylum proceedings. The RPC is not a detention centre, so the asylum seekers are permitted to go outside during the day and at limited times on the weekend. With its various services within and next to the RPC, OeSA becomes a resting place in the journey of many asylum seekers.

Pastoral counselling is possible in all Swiss RPCs, thanks to an agreement signed in 1995 by the three main Christian churches in Switzerland, by the Federal Office for Refugees and, in 2002, by the National Jewish Community. Together these form a National Committee, which has elaborated a common 'Overall Concept' for the pastoral work among asylum seekers in the RPCs. According to the Concept, this work should take into consideration the variety of the asylum seekers' religious backgrounds; it defines the pastoral work in the RPCs as "commitment to the human being", and rejects any religious discrimination and any form of proselytism. The principles that lead the pastoral work and which are shared with a larger group of people focus on hospitality, special attention to the most vulnerable, openness to all asylum seekers irrespective of their origins and religion affiliations, and attentiveness to a wide range of psychological and material needs.

The pastoral workers provide information to the asylum seekers about the asylum system and OeSA's services, and about legal counsellors who are situated just next to the Centre. First contacts in the country of asylum are particularly important for the asylum seekers who are very vulnerable and so any small gesture of welcome has a much greater symbolic value than its actual concrete effect.

The OeSA team is not only ecumenical but also multicultural and multireligious. Around 50 volunteers of ten different nationalities cooperate in the different socio-pastoral services. Although the guidelines were developed in a Christian context and OeSA is supported by the Christian churches, people of different religious

and cultural backgrounds easily share the motivating vision and the working style of the organisation.

The place for first contacts and conversations with asylum seekers outside the RPC is a coffee bar run in shifts by a team of 15 volunteers five days a week. During its opening times, trained volunteers (speaking different languages) work in shifts to offer emotional support, counselling and general information on asylum law; they also help to connect asylum seekers when necessary with the Legal Advice Office, or – if the rejected asylum seeker is considering voluntary return – with the IOM office in the RPC. OeSA's volunteers also offer other practical services such as German lessons, child care, etc.

The pastoral workers' respect for each person and their faith has inspired certain initiatives. For example, RPC directors were asked to allow Muslim asylum seekers to stay out of the Centres for longer during the Ramadan period so that they could finish the day in the mosques. Another important aspect of pastoral counselling is networking – establishing contacts within the RPC so that asylum seekers' questions or difficulties can be discussed with staff, security guards and/or officials (including the director).

Raising awareness in favour of asylum seekers is yet another important part of OeSA's mission. It hopes to contribute to the development of a more welcoming society by reducing prejudices and building bridges between asylum seekers and the local population, and by awakening solidarity, dialogue and mutual acceptance across cultural and religious divides.

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1. Ökumenischer Seelsorgedienst für Asylsuchende (Ecumenical Socio-Pastoral Service for Asylum Seekers)