

A GUIDE FOR CHRISTIANS HELPING ASYLUM SEEKERS THROUGH THE LEGAL ASYLUM PROCESS

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An asylum seeker comes to your church or project. They are facing the asylum legal process which will decide their future. What can you do?

This guide is provided to help you work out how you can assist an asylum seeker at this critical time. We want to thank the many refugee and religious freedom experts for sharing their wisdom and challenges and thus making this document possible. And we especially recommend this resource from the [GAVE Foundation](#). We hope there will be a continuing conversation to ensure that Christians can be the support that asylum seeking friends need.

First things first. Know your role

Chances are you are not a lawyer and should not try to be one. Your job is to be a friend or pastor, to listen, to pray, and to accompany the asylum seeker through this stressful and probably lengthy process as best you can.

This resource gives you options for more involvement. Simply do what you are able to do. If possible, find others who can help with the rest. Even better, work with others so that, together, you can provide better assistance to asylum seekers.

The asylum seeker may still be coping with the trauma of what happened at home or on the journey to Europe. You may be able to create opportunities for asylum seekers to be able to share together, for counselling, for prayer and for Bible study on fear, hope and suffering.

The Evangelical Alliance was originally created in London in 1846. A number of founding members were representing European countries. The European Evangelical Alliance (EEA) was founded in 1951. The EEA exists to foster unity and evangelical identity and provide a voice and platform to 23 million European evangelical Christians. The mission of the EEA is to CONNECT for com-mon purpose, EQUIP for integral mission and REPRESENT with a united voice. It is a grassroots movement from all Protestant traditions present in 36 European countries. The Brussels office of the EEA promotes active citizenship of its constituency and represents it to the European Institutions.

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Your friend may be crippled by fear of return. Be careful not to give false hope that they will definitely be able to remain. Towards the end of this resource, there are some thoughts on how you might want to help an individual prepare to be sent back to where they came from.

Maybe you will get more closely involved in the asylum legal process. If you are allowed to, you might attend a hearing, make a statement or write a letter of support. Perhaps the asylum seeker will want to show you the official documents about their case and ask for your help in understanding what is going on.

But remember that the immigration officials have their role to play. It is their job to ask tough questions and to check stories carefully. It might be that systems are not always fair. However, it is crucial that you do not make matters worse by interfering in a formal legal process. Maybe you want to speak up for justice. But separate out this campaigning from helping your individual friend while their asylum case is being processed.

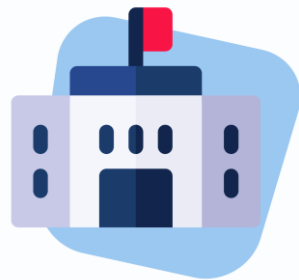
Some basic legal things

According to the 1951 Geneva Convention, a refugee is a person who 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.'

This means that the asylum seeker does not have to show they have already suffered persecution but that the asylum seeker has a well-founded fear of being persecuted if they were returned home and that the government there would not protect them.

International human rights conventions make clear that freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental human right¹. This freedom includes practising as an individual and in community, in private and public.

If the asylum seeker claims asylum on the grounds of religion, the immigration officials will want to test the credibility and genuineness of the individual's faith and investigate how they personally practice that faith. An individual cannot be required



to hide their faith if sent home². But, if they only practised their faith quietly and privately, then maybe they could.

The immigration authorities will need to make an overall assessment of all risk factors, including whether the person has received any threats or that they risk persecution simply because of their belief. They will want to check the risk of persecution in the place where the asylum seeker comes from. However, someone may be deported if they can safely be sent back to a different region of their country, away from the community that might persecute them.

The European Union's³ "Dublin Regulation" says that, within a certain time limit, countries covered by the regulation can send an asylum seeker back to the 1st EU country they entered as they fled their home country. If this happens, you could encourage your asylum seeker friends to use the [REFAID app](#) to find supportive organisations where they will be sent.

THE REFAID APP

<https://refaid.com/>
includes support activities
for refugees and asylum seekers
which are run by anyone,
not just Christians.
Christians ministries are welcome
to record their activities on the
app so that asylum seekers and
refugees can find them.

Finally, it is useful for you to understand the asylum process in your nation as each is different. How many stages are there? Can a church write or give an oral statement of support? Can a friend sit silently in the interview room? What is the appeals process? What is the deportation process? Find out so that you can explain the process to your friend and get ready to help if appropriate. But, of course, only explain what you are absolutely sure about and remember again not to take on the role of their lawyer.

Preparing for the immigration interviews

You can help your asylum seeker friend to understand the process and what to expect in each meeting, e.g. who will be present and the kinds of questions they will ask. You can help your friend to prepare how they might answer questions. But it is vital that you do not go too far!



A legal process is going on and you must not interfere. However well you know them and whatever you have heard about their country of origin, your friend may not actually have a risk of persecution if they return home. They may only be pretending to have changed their faith in order to gain asylum. And, if you help your friend by guiding them too much on what to say or by over rehearsing so that it does not sound genuine, the immigration officials will sense this and be extremely suspicious. Help your friend find sympathetic legal support⁴. Remember your role.

If the asylum seeker is happy for you to do so, liaise with their lawyer so that you know that any assistance you give is absolutely appropriate.

The person's story

Your friend may be traumatised but encourage them to begin to articulate what has happened and what they fear if they are sent home. If they are a Christian and this is relevant to their asylum claim, they need to find ways of talking about their faith. They may not be used to doing this. Give them gentle opportunities to start sharing their story. If language is an issue, then there may be an interpreter present in the asylum interview process. Perhaps that person originally comes from their nation or the faith they have left? Help your friend to prepare not to feel intimidated.

Once any awkwardness begins to decrease, ask questions so that they get used to being asked to go deeper. Encourage them to share in detail about what their faith means to them and how it has changed them. In the interview, they need to dare to give as much evidence of faith as possible.

Encourage your friend – over time - to articulate to you

- why and how they became a Christian, from the very beginning,
- what their faith now means to them personally, in their heart,

- what exactly they believe or don't believe. The person should not need to have perfect Bible knowledge, but it will help if they can explain their own doctrinal understanding, core beliefs and how it has affected their personal faith,
- how they would explain Christianity to someone who does not know about the faith, who Jesus is and why He is important,
- how they practice their faith – in daily life, in private and during arranged Christian activities,
- how their faith is developing, what difference it is making to them. How have their values, attitudes, relationships or emotional life changed?
- what prayer means to them and what their prayer life is like,
- some favourite Bible passages and why they are important to them,
- what their church is like and the meetings they attend,
- how they celebrate Christmas or Easter,
- what differences they see between Islam and Christianity (presuming they have a Muslim background).
- what they still want to understand more about in Christianity,
- what they know about what it is like to be a Christian in their country of origin.

Actually, it could be hard for anyone to talk about what their faith actually means and how they are changing. You could encourage the individual to keep a written or audio journal in which they record what they are learning and experiencing through their prayer life, bible study, time at church, witness opportunities etc.? Note dates and events. How are their minds and hearts being affected?



If they are happy for you to do this, you can also keep a record of how you see the individual live out their faith. Focus more on things like what they say in conversations or Bible study discussions than on the fact that they did practical things like putting out chairs. You can feedback your observations to your friend. Or your record may prove helpful if you are able to write a statement or speak in the process.

If the individual has left Islam and is an atheist or agnostic or only just exploring Christianity, then they may still face a persecution risk back home. They need to articulate as fully as they can where they are in their belief journey and why they

have changed. If they are happy for you to do so, keep a record of any evidence you have observed which backs up their claim.

In the end, however, it is the asylum seeker who is responsible for speaking up and demonstrating why they should be granted asylum. They need to put the work in to prepare for the interview process. As they do this, hope and confidence will rise.

The Church's formal contribution to the asylum application process

It goes without saying that we must never exaggerate or twist facts in order to try to help a friend win their asylum case. Immigration officials may suspect Christians of naivety and of being too hasty to baptise people. Let's prove them wrong.



If the asylum seeker asks to be baptised or come into formal membership of the church, take care to ensure a through period of preparation and assessment. Document this so that this can be given in writing to the officials. Many Christian denominations have clear policies regarding baptism of asylum seekers. If your church does not have these, it would be wise to ask another denomination if you could see their policy in order to learn from it.

If the asylum seeker asks you and it is possible for you to speak at the immigration hearing or submit a written record of support, it is important not just to say that they have attended church for so many months or helped with practical tasks. You are acting as a witness in a legal process so you need to talk or write about clear ways you have seen that the individual has shown faith through their words, questions, values, behaviour etc. Be concrete and precise, focusing on the individual and giving evidence of everything you claim. That is why it is good to keep a record of what you observe.

If you don't know the individual well enough, find the people in the congregation who do. This underlines the importance of congregations befriending asylum seekers so that faith can be observed. A letter of support should be written by the people who know the asylum seeker best. But put the text on official notepaper and get it signed by the church leaders, as well as any individual friends who gave significant input. Remember the letter of support is a piece of evidence. You are acting as a witness. Your task is to explain all that you have observed.

Deportation

This section is hard.

Depending on where the person comes from, their story and, sadly, the political environment of your nation, there could be a high chance that your friend will be deported.

It is likely that your friend will not want to contemplate this because of fear and the potential for shame or overwhelming disappointment. But it may be the kindest thing you can do for them. And, depending on where they came from, it may well be possible for them to return, to flourish in their faith and to be confident witnesses of Jesus.

The deportation process may take a long time for both political and legal reasons. Often countries of origin do not cooperate. Your friend may be relieved that they still have not had to leave. However, the season of waiting, of uncertainty, hope or dread can place a huge mental and emotional burden upon people.



[“Standing strong through the storm”](#) is a fantastic devotional resource to help Christians prepare spiritually and biblically for persecution. There is a book (in several languages), YouTube webinars and the potential for tailor made training for groups.

If your friend faces imminent deportation and wants to connect with Christians back home, contact specialist Christian organisations who support the persecuted church in their home nation and ask them if they will be willing to find a safe way to reach out to your friend.

Of course security will be a crucial issue. Provide the specialist organisation with a written reference about your friend and their contact details. Be detailed as if they were the immigration officials. Make it clear how well you know the individual, be precise in evidence of their faith and what level of security rating you feel comfortable giving them. It is vital that you do not exaggerate this or you may put suffering Christians in danger.

ORGANISATIONS SUPPORTING DEPORTEES

These organisations will be happy to hear from you about an individual who faces deportation back to a country where they risk persecution. Provide them with a clear reference and contact details and they will consider what support they can offer.

[Elam \(for those from Iran & surrounding nations\)](https://www.elam.com/page/contact-us)
<https://www.elam.com/page/contact-us>

[Middle East Concern](https://meconcern.org/contact)
<https://meconcern.org/contact>

[Voice of the Martyrs Canada](https://store.vomcanada.org/contactus)
<https://store.vomcanada.org/contactus>

Your final task will be to commit to praying for your friend as they go home and beyond. Depending on the security situation, communication might stop.

When the system is unfair

It may be that the asylum system in your nation is unfair. Perhaps immigration officials don't seem to know how to assess faith. The problem could be political pressure, funding, training or ignorance.

Justice for the most vulnerable is a biblical priority. Praying and influencing are important.

Let's start with prayer. It's a biblical command to pray for the authorities⁵, whoever they are.

There's a place for criticism and protest – although it probably won't progress the cause if you focus your criticism on individual officers.

There is also a place for genuinely trying to help to reform the system. Immigration services may be ill equipped to do their job. It is immensely difficult to assess the genuineness of someone's faith. Someone with no experience of faith may really

struggle to know what to look for. They may know full well how critical Christians are of their work.

Of course, the separation of powers means that political and legal processes must not mix. Politicians cannot interfere in asylum cases, although they do of course set the framework for immigration officials to work in. You can seek to influence the political atmosphere and broad policy decisions.



But you can also approach the immigration service in an attitude of wanting to help them do a good job. This does not always lead to real change but keep praying and trying. Some European immigration authorities, for example in the United Kingdom, have been on a learning journey of understanding how to assess faith and persecution risk, how to train their staff and interpreters and how to do quality control e.g. by recording all interviews.

Encourage civil servants to talk to civil servants in other European nations to find better practice. It will help if you remember that it is not just Christian asylum seekers who may be unfairly assessed but are in need of protection from persecution because of their identity. What about atheists, Muslims or LGBTQ+ people? Check out EEA's [good practice document for immigration officials](#). You might want to pass this on to officials or write your own text. And pray for the new EU Asylum Authority⁶ as they develop training materials for officials and work to improve standards.

And finally

As you love the widow, orphan and foreigner, you are doing God's will. Be blessed as you seek to help your asylum seeker friend.

Many of the ideas in this text may be beyond you. Where possible, can you work with other churches or organisations so that you can provide more support and also influence the system better?

But remember that you cannot guarantee that your asylum seeker friend will be granted the right to remain. Nor should you take responsibility. Just remember your role as a friend, pray and do what you are able to do.

More resources

Go to <https://www.gave.nl/> for resources and support, for example “In geode aarde” – a baptism guide. GAVE is open to their Dutch resources being translated, provided an acknowledgement of GAVE is given and you send them a copy. Contact GAVE first.

Other resources can be found at <https://www.europeanea.org/resources-refugees/>

National and future editions of this text

The European Evangelical Alliance is happy for this resource to be translated and adapted for national level use, provided the following phrase is included, “This document is adapted / translated from an original resource created by the European Evangelical Alliance and which can be found on this webpage <https://www.europeanea.org/resources-refugees/>”

EEA also welcomes more good practice ideas which can be included in a future new edition of this resource.

Bibliography

¹ The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights art. 18, UN Convention on Civil and Political Rights art. 18, The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) art. 9 and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights art. 10

² Germany vs Y&Z Joined Cases C-71/11 and C-99/11 April 2012 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A62011CC0071>

³ The EU’s Dublin Regulation is applicable in the EU plus Norway, Iceland, Switzerland, and Liechtenstein

⁴ A list of lawyers can be found on <https://refaid.com/>

⁵ 1 Timothy 2: 1-4

⁶ <https://www.euaa.europa.eu/>