

Called to be God's feet, hands and presence: Geelong Lutheran congregations' ministry to asylum seekers, refugees and migrants

Jan Baker*

What started as a 'grass roots' response to the needs of a few local asylum seekers quickly grew as more asylum seekers moved into the Geelong community. The outreach ministry of St Paul's Lutheran Church Grovedale to the local community has evolved to become an intentional targeted ministry shared across four Geelong Lutheran congregations and Geelong Lutheran College.

The initial call came in 2013 when a group of Tamil asylum seekers knocked on the church door, knowing that a church was a place they could go to for help. Pastor Tom Pietsch¹ opened the door and invited them in. He led the congregation in welcoming and accepting these strangers and addressing their needs. His vision became the shared vision of the congregation.

Asylum seekers from other cultural backgrounds were identified in the community and support offered. The initial support involved supplying physical needs, such as culturally appropriate food, groceries, support with rental properties, furniture, bedding, and household goods. As relationships were built social and emotional support was given, fellowship and friendships were developed over shared meals, helping with English, filling out forms, support with medical issues, transport, advocacy with real estate agents, medical facilities, and local government agencies.

Increasing numbers of asylum seekers needing support became overwhelming for the small congregation. A grant was received, allowing a part-time coordinator to be employed in 2014 to prevent burnout of the volunteers and to efficiently utilise the contributions, gifts and skills of the congregation and wider community, and to network with the other church and community groups and agencies who also supported asylum seekers. Identifying the objectives for the grant application formed the basis of an intentional ministry.

- To respond to the needs of our community in the way Jesus does with a heart of compassion.
- To encourage a spirit of service within the hearts of the members of our congregation.
- To open the doors of our church and to share the message of Christ's love and His saving grace to those from different cultures, languages, and backgrounds.
- To partner with other local churches for the sake of those we seek to serve.

* In consultation with Michelle Filipovic, LCA Lay Worker, Ministry Support, Geelong Lutheran Parish.

¹ All persons identified by name in the article have granted the author their permission.

Michelle Filipovic was employed in the role. Visiting asylum seekers and refugees, determining their needs, listening to their stories, sharing the gospel, and praying, assigning volunteers, building relationships, enlisting, supporting, and encouraging volunteers, and identifying their gifts and skills, are still key parts of her role. The ministry has benefitted from Michelle's ongoing professional training and skills in areas such as 'ministry to asylum seekers', 'supporting volunteers' and 'cross-cultural ministry', and her membership of the Cross-Cultural Ministry Committee.

An important part of Michelle's role is networking and communicating the needs of our vulnerable people and the work of the ministry, with the Lutheran congregations, and other denominational congregations, community groups, local government agencies and charitable organisations, enlisting more support and volunteers.

Pastor Colin Simpkin, the present pastor of St Paul's, works closely with Michelle, providing supervision and weekly support. He is involved in the ministry; baptising families and individuals, visiting, sharing the gospel, and praying, developing relationships with those who attend worship enabling them to feel comfortable.

We have learnt the importance of prayer. The collective and individual prayers of the church involve and unite the congregations in the shared ministry, giving a sense of ownership. Shared stories of prayers answered, people growing in faith, a Muslim woman requesting prayer, one of our young men being released from detention after three years, needs being provided, problems solved, baptisms of asylum seeker families, new babies, two Tamil weddings, people improving their English, people becoming self-reliant, gaining employment, setting up businesses, independently engaging with agencies, all highlight God's work, encourage continued prayer and builds trust and reassurance that God listens and provides.

We have learnt that the bible is a wonderful tool in multicultural ministry. The families have a variety of faiths; Christian, Muslim, Hindu. Michelle uses Farsi or Arabic bibles along with an English bible when visiting to allow people to access God's written Word in their own language, which enables discussion about meaning and cultural similarities and understandings.

We have learnt that nurturing relationships with people is vital. Meeting and connecting with people personally at home, where they are comfortable is important. The challenge is having the courage to keep reaching out, keep visiting so the ministry continues. It is equally important for congregations to be ready to welcome people, to include and intentionally build relationships with them, listening to their stories and speaking with them. The church can be an unfamiliar environment with strange unknown customs. When relationships are developed and people feel comfortable, and experience genuine love and care, they will trust you and listen—then faith can be shared.

Only a few asylum seekers and refugee families attend worship, which is difficult for some in the congregations to understand. But we are learning that as God's workers, our work is to sow and cultivate the seeds; the germinating and growth of the seeds is God's amazing work (Mark 4:26–27).

We are learning to be patient, not give up, and in God's time, be ready to gather the harvest, to welcome them (Galatians 6:9).

We have learnt that whatever the challenge, God provides. Covid presented many challenges. Many of our people became more isolated and vulnerable during Covid, navigating the restrictions was confusing for them and with job losses and no income more assistance was needed. There was the added stress of the impact of Covid on the families and friends overseas. At least one lost a family member to Covid. While Michelle could not visit Geelong during lockdown, she found ways to communicate via phone or zoom to vulnerable families, giving them reassurance. Church bulletins and streamed recorded messages across many congregations enlisted help and increased the monetary donations needed to cover the reduced grocery donations. Her role as coordinator became even more vital during lockdown; coordinating volunteers to do shopping, making and delivering food packs and household items, letting families know they were still cared for.

Many of the families and people supported are vulnerable and fragile, suffer from past traumas and experience physical and mental health issues. The deaths of refugees or their family members, through ill health, accident or suicide is extremely difficult and challenging. The pastors and Michelle, as a qualified lay worker, have been invaluable in their ministry to these families, as well as supporting the congregations and volunteers through some particularly tragic times.

Many asylum seekers struggle with the expensive and difficult process of visa applications. Waiting for news and the uncertainty causes high levels of stress and anxiety. Hearing their stories is emotionally challenging. We have learnt the importance of listening, being a caring presence, being God's presence of love and comfort.

Shared ownership of the ministry across the congregations has been a real blessing. It has strengthened relationships between the Lutheran congregations and the Geelong Lutheran College and has given our churches a local mission, an opportunity to evangelise through love and service, care, and concern. This mission is generously supported throughout the year with donations of money, household items, food, and groceries, providing much needed food hamper packs. At Christmas time families receive a food hamper and personalised gifts, delivered by volunteers who share the joy and love of Christ at Christmas.

God has blessed and provided for this ministry over nine years. The challenge is determining the pathway forward. What next? Where to next? A shared ministry with a shared challenge in continuing to discern God's call.

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