

UK: Home Office asks clergy for asylum help

By Rebecca Paveley

Church Times (17.05.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2J0u3Jb> – Clergy have been drafted in to teach religious literacy to [Home Office](#) case workers tasked with deciding on asylum claims that involve religious conversion and persecution.

The new training for hundreds of case workers began last month. In March, it emerged that an unnamed Iranian Christian convert's asylum application had been rejected on the basis that his or her claim to have converted from Islam to Christianity because it was a "peaceful" faith was "inconsistent" with passages of the Bible ([News, 22 March](#)). The decision was criticised for exhibiting a superficial understanding of biblical texts.

The training has been a year in development, and is in response to an earlier report from the All Party Parliamentary Group for International [Freedom of Religion](#) or Belief, which said that caseworkers were routinely making poor decisions. The training was developed with the support of Church House, Westminster, and the involvement of other faith groups.

The Revd Mark Miller, Vicar of Stockton, has advised the Home Office on the training and attended the first session for case workers in April.

He said: "Home Office case-workers have a really difficult job. But there have been a number of bad decisions over the years, highlighted as far back as 2004 by an Evangelical Alliance report, *All Together for Asylum Justice*."

He said that case-workers were allowed to ask questions testing basic religious knowledge, but in a culture of low religious literacy, determinations of what is "basic" knowledge were usually wildly inaccurate, and resulted in "Bible trivia"-type questioning that tested "head knowledge" but not the depth of someone's faith.

He said: "I have been involved in training to share some of my experiences of working with Christian conversion, and how to go about assessing whether someone is genuine. In the session, I asked staff what they thought was basic knowledge, but most of what they suggested back to me wasn't basic knowledge, it was 'Name the Ten Commandments', rather than the significance of a faith in Jesus."

In Mr Miller's parish, Stockton-on-Tees, is a principal dispersal centre for those seeking asylum, and over the past five years, he has baptised 250 adults, many of whom are Christian converts who have claimed or are claiming asylum. The area has a large Iranian population, and the church translates the Sunday morning service into Farsi through wireless headsets, and, every fortnight, holds a Farsi worship service.

Mr Miller has been involved in 40 court cases appealing an asylum decision on the basis of conversion, almost all involving Iranian Christians, and said that all but one of the decisions refusing asylum had been overturned on appeal.

The national refugee welcome coordinator for the Church of England, Nadine Daniel, said that the training put an emphasis on empathetic listening, allowing people to tell their story.

She said: "The training is a good step forward, but it needs to be repeated frequently, as there is a high attrition rate among Home Office case-workers. It also needs to be properly funded, and the training updated regularly, as the situation in countries can change and deteriorate rapidly."

A Home Office spokesperson said: "The UK has a proud history of granting asylum to those who need our protection. We are committed to improving the quality and accuracy of decision-making to ensure we get decisions right the first time.

"The Home Office is working closely with members of the APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, as well as representatives from a range of faith groups, to provide specialist mandatory training. The aim of this is to ensure decision-makers appropriately consider all the available evidence where religion or belief is raised in an asylum claim."

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