

Churches challenge policy on asylum in Australia

by [John Power](#) in the [April 27, 2016](#) issue

*(The Christian Science Monitor)* In a recent sermon, Mark Dunn asked his congregation to recall the prodigal son as they considered the plight of 267 asylum seekers facing deportation.

Australians, he said, should emulate the father in the parable and embrace the refugees, whom the government has vowed to return to two controversial offshore detention facilities after arriving in the country for medical care.

Dunn has offered to house the asylum seekers—who are originally from Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iran, and Bangladesh—should immigration authorities try to deport them. Such a move would risk jail time for harboring unlawful residents.

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you’ includes asylum seekers,” said Dunn, who presides over St. John’s Uniting Church in Essendon, a Melbourne suburb.

St. John’s is one of a dozen Anglican and Uniting churches in Australia to have publicly offered sanctuary, bolstering a nationwide campaign against the government’s crackdown on asylum seekers.

Across the country, 115 churches have offered support for the asylum seekers and pushed the government to let them stay, according to the National Council of Churches in Australia, which represents 19 denominations. On Palm Sunday, some 50,000 protesters rallied in cities from Sydney to Perth to call for more compassionate treatment.

The debate over asylum seekers in Australia echoes the migrant crisis that has embroiled Europe for more than a year. It also reflects the plight of refugees across the globe.

The latest flashpoint in Australia’s long-standing asylum debate comes after the High Court in February upheld the constitutionality of detaining and processing asylum seekers in foreign countries. The ruling has cleared the way for the return of

the 267 asylum seekers to Manus Island in Papua New Guinea and Nauru, a small Pacific island nation.

The Australian government has outsourced the processing of asylum seekers who arrive illegally by boat or are intercepted at sea to the two islands. The potential returnees include 37 babies born in Australia after their mothers were transferred for the births because the detention centers lacked adequate medical facilities.

The Australian Human Rights Commission and international advocacy groups such as Amnesty International have blasted the government for its reliance on far-flung detention centers. Critics have warned about the centers' squalid conditions and the effects of prolonged detention on children. Staff members and independent monitors have reported attempted suicides and multiple cases of sexual assault, including against children.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull says offshore processing saves lives by deterring asylum seekers from attempting to reach Australia in boats.

An estimated 1,900 asylum seekers died en route to Australia between 2000 and late 2013.

"The government needs to look and develop other options because there is more than this one binary proposition being fed to the public," said Misha Coleman, executive officer of the Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce.

The government has also vowed not to allow even certified refugees to live in Australia if they arrive illegally. It has tried to recruit other countries to take them in. Those efforts have mostly failed because of roadblocks in Australian courts and pushback from asylum applicants.

Coleman said detention has now become effectively indefinite. In January, the average length of stay for asylum seekers at both onshore and offshore centers hit a record 445 days, according to the government.

"Until and unless the Australian government in its own policy thinking finds a resettlement scenario, they just can't keep people locked up," Coleman said.

Robert Manne, politics professor emeritus at La Trobe University in Melbourne, said Australians' attitudes about asylum seekers largely hinge on whether or not they arrive through official channels.

Australia, where more than a quarter of the population is foreign-born, currently accepts 13,750 refugees annually. The public had little objection to a recent influx of 12,000 Syrian refugees who arrived in addition to the annual quota, Manne said. In contrast, unofficial arrivals by boat have been a major political issue since the Vietnam War, he said.

“It’s a feeling that we have either lost or have retained control of the borders that seems to be the animating political factor,” Manne said.

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