

Iranian asylum seekers are finding hospitality in the Church of England

Saman's parents disowned him. The church became a new sort of family.

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [July 1, 2020](#) issue



Photo courtesy of [Joshua Centre](#) at Liverpool Cathedral

Saman made his way to England from northwestern Iran in 2018. His home had just been raided and a friend arrested after the two of them took part in a street protest against rising prices in the country. Leaving behind a wife, Saman walked across the border into Turkey. He stayed in a windowless room for a month, then traveled by truck for five or six days, after which he was put in another truck and driven for another two or three days. Then he was told, “You’re in England.” He was advised to introduce himself to a police officer and ask for asylum.

Immigration officials in the United Kingdom sent him to the city of Sunderland in the northeast of the country, and there he found a church doing ministry with refugees. Before long, he was a Christian.

“I asked myself, ‘Why are these British people like this? Why are they serving us?’” he told me in an interview. An Iranian friend named Hamid had already converted to Christianity, and Saman had noticed the difference it made for him.

“We’re both in the same situation: both asylum seekers, but I’m very depressed. He’s warm and happy. I asked him what the reason is, and he talks about believing in Christ, that hope has made him like that.”

Saman, having been baptized, sees “something like a miracle in myself.” He forgives those who have mistreated him and prays for them. His wife in Iran notices that something has changed in him, because he urges her toward prayer rather than anger.

He’s been disowned by his parents. “I wish you die over there,” his father said to him over the phone. “You are not my son anymore.” But the church has become a new sort of family.

Saman’s case is not unusual. The UK has seen an infusion of refugees from Iran and neighboring countries. Many are being welcomed by church groups, and a good many are becoming Christian. The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford says Iran was the number one source of asylum seekers in the UK in 2018, with 3,320 claimants in the country—11 percent of the total. Endemic corruption and rank inequality in Iran, heightened by climate catastrophe and political oppression, are pushing people out of the country.

Refugees in the UK are usually processed in the south of England and then sent north, where the government’s money stretches further. Former industrial hubs like Stockton, Sunderland, and Liverpool have seen an influx of Iranian refugees. They often find their way to churches that are reaching out with help. Saman has no right to work yet, as his asylum case is pending. He says all he wants to do is follow Jesus. He is presently leading courses to help fellow Muslims explore Christianity.

The vast majority of Iranian immigrants are Shi’a Muslims, who are culturally Persian and Farsi-speaking. They are often not welcomed in Sunni mosques in the West, which tend to be culturally and linguistically Arab. Shi’a Islam has some theological resonances with Christianity, including in eschatology: in Shi’a Islam, Jesus is expected to return to earth just before the messiah comes at the end of the world. Like much of Christianity throughout history, Shi’a Islam puts a great deal of emphasis on the role of dreams in the spiritual life—although at the moment this is

more common in Shi'a practice than in Western Christianity.

Liverpool Cathedral hosts a Sunday service conducted in Farsi and led by Iranians. (Like the cathedral's other in-person gatherings, it is currently on hold due to the pandemic.) Some of the attendees, including an Iranian-born priest, are from the post-1979 era of refugees. Then there is a younger generation with no memory of the overthrow of the shah that year and the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini. They just know that life in Iran had become untenable for political, social, economic, and environmental reasons.

A large number of asylum seekers have come to Liverpool—in 2019 more than twice the number who went to London, a much larger city. Liverpool has proclaimed itself a sanctuary city. Industrial cities in the north of England have good reason to accept refugees and asylum seekers. Having experienced a loss in population in recent years, they want to keep their cities inhabited. And Liverpool has a history of welcoming newcomers from other faiths. An Alpha course—a video-based introduction to Christianity—offered in Farsi at the cathedral drew a large crowd.

The emergence of Iranian Christian groups in the UK raises some difficult questions for Christians involved in these ministries. Is it appropriate to celebrate conversions? How does that affect Christians relationships with Muslims? Does it put Christians at risk in Iran? The Church of England has no evangelism program targeting Iranian Muslims, and leaders say their only desire is to reach out to the marginalized.

Liverpool's experience is being replicated in Sunderland, which is like the Detroit of England: a place with a great industrial heritage now struggling to reinvent itself. One of the first casualties of Britain's move toward leaving the European Union was the announcement by Nissan that it would not go forward with a planned expansion of an automobile factory in Sunderland.

Chris Howson, a chaplain at the University of Sunderland and priest on staff at Sunderland Minster, has helped make the church in the center of the city a hub of energy. When I visited a worship service before the pandemic, two-thirds of the people I saw there appeared to be Iranian. The coffee time before church buzzed with conversation and energy. Church started a good 15 minutes late.

"Where is Hussein? Get him in here! Tell them your news!" said Howson. Hussein has received the legal status he hoped for, and everyone cheered. We broke into small groups and reflected on the scripture passage about the disciples' miraculous

catch of fish. Most people hadn't heard it. Some had heard a different version of it. "I didn't know it, but now I want some fish!" someone said.

"There are 90 to 100 in sung Eucharist now," said Howson. "There were 70 when I came, and half of them have died," he said. "We're about 50 percent Iranian now."

Howson has felt some backlash from white nationalists in town. "They'll have a run at me if they see me in the streets," he said. They smashed the windows at the university chaplaincy center one time. But Howson is sanguine about it. He quotes an activist friend: "If you're not in trouble with the law, you're not doing it right." In his case, it isn't the law itself but the informal rule of nationalism.

Whereas Howson represents a liberation perspective in Anglicanism, Mark Miller is on the church's evangelical wing. At Stockton Parish Church, just south of Sunderland, Miller sees his calling as one of growing churches and "making disciples who make disciples." Stockton is another depressed northeastern city with few economic prospects and great need. Miller borrows a phrase from the charismatic movement to describe his ministry: "We are going to speak the name of Jesus, to glorify it, and to expect signs and wonders."

The building was filled with some 250 people when I attended one of two worship services that day. I guessed that about half were Iranian. Words to the songs were shown in English and Farsi, and a man in a headset in the front row offered live interpretation into Farsi for the dozens of worshipers wearing headsets. "We only have one translator into Sorani, so we can't have translation every week yet," says Miller, referring to one of the other languages spoken in Iran. "God is bringing the nations to Stockton."

Miller has been written about in the *Church Times* and secular media for baptizing refugees. He also advises the home office on how to evaluate asylum claims of converts. Both Howson and Miller know that introducing refugees to Christianity is "a mixed thing," as Howson put it, because many come to church precisely to get help with asylum. Miller used to baptize whomever asked, but "the reality is not everyone tells the truth." So he raised the bar: someone seeking baptism has to attend all the sessions of Alpha.

Baptism helps with people seeking asylum because being a convert to Christianity in Iran means prison or worse. And if a family member abroad becomes a Christian, the family back home may be harassed by the government. The UK government knows

all this and hesitates to send the baptized back to Iran. But the government is also trying to tighten the application process—sometimes asking theological questions in interviews, for example. Both pastors agree that it is hard to keep tabs on Iranians once they achieve asylum status and move away, and this saddens them.

Both Howson and Miller have sometimes arbitrated issues in Christian life that seem to come straight out of the New Testament. For example, as churches grapple with the integration of refugees, pastors describe seeing people fuss about whether some eat more than their share and folks from different parts of the world argue over what to cook and serve.

Glancing at a £20 note in the offering plate, Miller looks around at the folks at the midweek meal for the homeless and refugees and pockets it. “No need to tempt anybody,” he says. He’s likely breaking some rule against pastors handling cash, but he still thinks it’s the right thing to do. The commandment in Ephesians 4:28 urging those recently converted to “give up stealing” is quite relevant in Miller’s church.

The presence of new cultures tends to refresh the existing culture of a church in unanticipated ways. Iranian Christians often speak of Jesus appearing to them in dreams—a Shi’a phenomenon, but through them a Christian one as well. Miller has presided over the Eucharist before a midweek meal for refugees and street people—and then served the consecrated bread and juice as part of the meal. I’ve never seen this practice before, though it follows New Testament patterns quite closely.

Meg Gilley is a vicar nearing retirement after eight years leading St. Chad’s Church in Gateshead, across the river from Newcastle, a more prosperous city in the north.

“We’ve had as few as 11 people here on a Sunday,” she told me, sweeping her arm over a full room for Bible study. “Look at this now. We prayed people would come, and here they are. This is our future.”

Some 35 people were there for a midweek Bible study on the atonement and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They were all Iranian, except for the woman working in the kitchen. They all claimed to be Christian—some already baptized, some eagerly seeking baptism. They all needed translation into Farsi.

Gilley knows she is sought out partly as a potential asset in their search for asylum. Speaking to the group, Gilley detailed her days off, apologizing that there might be

days she could not attend court. At regular intervals during the Bible study she stopped to suggest, “this might be something the home office asks about.”

“You can’t claim your conversion came too soon after your arrival,” she insisted. “We can’t baptize you too quickly, if you want it to be believable to the home office.” To a degree, she was teaching to the immigration office’s asylum test.

Gilley frowned at the group’s decision in her absence the week prior to show Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ* (with Farsi subtitles). “It’s not suitable for kids, and I’m not sure it’s helpful for you. There has to be a balance between your own language and suitable teaching.”

Gilley created her own Bible study. When I mentioned the Alpha course and wondered why she didn’t use it instead, she replied, “I won’t do Alpha. This is a high church, I won’t teach from that tradition.”

So she taught with reference to the Christian year, the liturgy, and the wood relief panels in her magnificent building, which were originally designed to teach the faith to unlettered Englishmen. Her work on the Bible study paid off. Her teaching was deeply personal and connected directly to her congregation. Why does Jesus say in prayer that God has abandoned him? “We all know what it feels like to be abandoned by God, don’t we? God feels that too.”

Gilley admitted that working with asylum seekers can be exhausting. “It can feel overwhelming, advocating for all 56 people”—the number she has written letters for already. There are financial tensions in the parish, because the refugees “haven’t got a bean.” Yet one Sunday she had 66 people at the liturgy, six times the number at the church’s low point. She counted them all, like the woman in Luke’s parable of the lost coin, and rejoiced over each.

“I wanted to retire with more than 50 people in worship,” she said, having raced past that ambitious goal of 500 percent growth. Last year on Mother’s Day, the Iranians surprised her with cards and flowers, calling her “Mother Meg.”

Gilley invited me to listen in on some of her interviews with those for whom she is to write letters soon. One man was evangelized, invited to Wakefield Cathedral, and found himself coming back. He felt differently if he didn’t attend church. “Christianity is different than I thought; I found prayer solved problems, and I felt called.”

“Called?” she asked.

“Called. Drawn in, like to a home and family that had missed me. I felt drawn by forgiveness and sympathy. My faith increases every day. He’s my Lord, crucified for my sins. He saves us.”

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