

A Quick Guide to Persecuted Christians and Christian Converts

Christians seeking asylum in the UK fall into two distinct categories – those who were already Christians in their own country, and are fleeing persecution for their faith or other reasons, and those who have converted to Christianity in the UK. They face different challenges in proving their claim for asylum.

Persecuted Christians: Most of those fleeing persecution come from countries where Islam is the state religion, particularly Middle Eastern and Asian countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Pakistan. There Christians face discrimination, restrictions in worship and harrassment that goes unpunished. Any form of evangelism is forbidden, and those who are accused of converting to Christianity are subject to arrest, torture and even death as ‘apostates’. There are also a large number of Eritrean Christians seeking asylum here: in their case they are fleeing one of the most repressive communist regimes in the world, second only to North Korea in its severe persecution of Christians.

There are several excellent Christian NGOs that work specifically with persecuted Christians, mainly in their home countries. Their websites and newsletters provide a wealth of information and ways of getting involved. Below is a selection of some of the best known.

[Barnabas Fund](#) is particularly focused on supporting those facing persecution in Islamic countries, and highlights situations unreported in the mainstream press. Its magazine also has regular supplements on Islam. [Open Doors](#), founded by Brother Andrew, author of God’s Smuggler, has a helpful, up to date World Watch list of the worst countries for persecuting Christians. Their country profiles explain how that persecution manifests itself. Unsurprisingly many of those fleeing religious persecution in the UK come from countries at the top of the list. [Release International](#) works worldwide, amongst other things campaigning for those suffering persecution in prison. [Elam Ministries](#) specifically supports and equips the Iranian church in the UK and abroad. [222 Ministries International](#) also works with the Iranian church, seeking to train leaders, plant churches and disciple believers in Iran. [Christian Solidarity Worldwide](#) works for religious freedom through advocacy and human rights, in the pursuit of justice. The [British Pakistani Christian Association](#) helps Pakistani believers both here and in Pakistan through advocacy and practical support, and is particularly helpful with Pakistani Christians seeking asylum here.

Christian Converts: Over the last few years many asylum seekers have come to faith in the UK, especially Iranians. Some churches have found that they suddenly have a group of twenty or more young Iranians, mainly men, in their church. There are also asylum seekers from other mainly Muslim countries like Afghanistan and Iraq now coming to faith. The [Mahabba Network](#) is well worth considering for those wanting to understand more about Islam and reach out to Muslims.

Whilst the influx of new converts is wonderful, it does throw up new challenges for the Church. There is often a language barrier to overcome. Is it best to have a separate service in their own language for the new converts, or provide an interpreter for the services? What about including some worship songs in their language in the main meetings? Some of these issues are discussed in [The Asylum Seeker in Your Church](#).

There are also issues around the asylum system and how cases of religious persecution are dealt with. Back in 2007 the Evangelical Alliance produced a report on the failings of the Home Office to properly

assess Christian conversions entitled *Alltogether for Asylum Justice*. It highlighted issues with the types of questions asked to verify someone's faith, incorrect interpreting, a culture of unbelief amongst caseworkers and a general lack of understanding of what a Christian actually is, and why they could not return home. Virtually none of the six recommendations had been properly addressed until recently.

In 2017 a group of committed Christians began a dialogue with the Home Office around this issue, led by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Persecution. The result is a one-day training manual for asylum caseworkers on religious persecution, which should lead to better decision-making and fewer refusals of genuine Christian converts.

Nevertheless there will still be a great need for Christians to get alongside fellow believers who are trying to provide evidence of their Christian faith. Some of the ways in which they can help are outlined in [Helping Christian Converts with their Asylum Claim](#).

JPIT, the Joint Public Issues Team, has produced a very helpful guide to [Asylum Applications and Christian Belief](#), which is a briefing for ministers called to give evidence in support of asylum applications.

Many Muslims come to Christ as a result of dreams. This is evidence that asylum caseworkers often dismiss as not credible. Evidence of the impact of dreams in leading people to convert can be found in this article on [Dream Conversion](#).

In early 2017 a group of concerned Christians met with representatives from the Home Office to discuss current concerns. The meeting was very positive, and there is good reason to believe that new and improved training and regular reviews involving Christian leaders will bring about much better outcomes, though it will undoubtedly take some time to filter through. It may help to understand how the interview process currently works - or is supposed to work – by reading the [Home Office Guidance to its caseworkers](#). You will find the section on Religion and Belief on pages 45-46.