

You can help refugees here and now

By Beverly Goldsmith, [Christian Science practitioner and teacher](#) in Brisbane, Australia.
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[Notes: During 2009/2010 boats carrying mainly Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka have been arriving again in Australian waters.]

As I watch the nightly news on TV and see reports of war and destruction in Iraq, my heart goes out to the people who have lost their homes and loved ones. Watching their plight from the safety of my suburban house, I can only imagine the utter desperation and fear that drive people to leave their homelands in search of a more peaceful life.

Yet I know that when there's conflict, maltreatment by a dictator, or ethnic or religious persecution, many people want to come here, to Australia. The country's stable democracy and multicultural lifestyle is understandably attractive to oppressed and war-wearied individuals. The issue of persecuted people finding a peaceful place to call home is not confined to Australia. According to the New York-based Human Rights Watch, in 2001 an estimated 14.9 million refugees crossed an international border to seek safety, and 22 million internally [displaced persons](#) were uprooted in their own countries. These figures show there is still a need for solutions.

Getting here and living here

For most refugees, gaining entry to Australia through regular channels is often extremely difficult. That's why over the past few years, asylum seekers from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, as well as Palestine, Sri Lanka, and China, have paid "people-smugglers" to bring them directly here. Some haven't made it. They've been killed, or "dumped" by these human traffickers in countries where they now live in worse conditions than those they left behind.



Refugee boat

Asylum seekers who have made their way into Southeast Asia have tried to reach Australian territory on overcrowded fishing boats, believing they will be allowed to stay as refugees. But since 2001, federal government law has stipulated that the people on board these vessels be placed in mandatory detention behind barbed-wire fences either on Nauru - a South Pacific island nation paid by Australia to house refugees - or Manus Island in Papua, New Guinea.

The living conditions in such detention centres are unsatisfactory. Detainees are locked away for years, isolated and deprived of freedom until their status is determined by immigration officials. This kind of treatment of adults who have already been traumatized by persecution and war continues to sadden me. My concern, and that of other Australians, is not only for these individuals but also for the children who accompany them. Detention children have no semblance of a normal life. Cut off from the rest of Australia, these children are unschooled and despairing. As many as 163 children are still in detention.



Detention Centre

The steps forward

Last year I wrote about the plight of [refugees](#) around the world. Since then I've been glad to hear that some progress has been made in assisting asylum seekers here in Australia. Among the examples:

- Welfare and advocacy groups such as [Children out of Detention](#) have lobbied for changes to Australian government refugee policy and the treatment of detained children.
- Former Australian cricket captain Ian Chappell has spoken out on national television. A patron for 'A Just Australia', Chappell told viewers, "It's time for children and their families to be healed in the community, for refugees to be allowed to get on with their lives here with permanent protection, for people stuck on Nauru to be brought here, and for people rejected from Australia to be helped to find dignity and security" www.ajustaustralia.com.
- This May, 61 Afghan men, 19 women, and 51 children detained on Nauru were granted refugee status, and most will be resettled in Australia.
- On May 20, the last of the 433 asylum seekers rescued at sea in international waters off Australia in August 2001 by the Norwegian freighter *MS Tampa* were declared refugees. Twenty-seven were resettled in Australia; the others in New Zealand, Sweden, and Norway. And another 186 were returned to their homes in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan.

Is the crisis over?

While the boatloads of asylum seekers trying to come to Australia have now stopped, many people still remain in detention on Australian soil. Those who have been granted refugee status and released into the community are only on a three-year temporary protection visa. While this is at least a step forward out of mandatory detention, it doesn't resolve the long-term fate of those now classified as refugees.

Prayer - can it help?

Prayer is beneficial. No matter what the scale of the problem, when you and I pray by declaring with all our hearts that God is loving and caring for each of His children, this helps bring resolution and healing.



Beverly singing in Vietnam

I have never been a refugee, but there was a time when I found myself not living under the protection and shelter of a trustworthy government.

In 1969 I worked in Vietnam when it was a war-torn country. As far as the authorities were concerned, I was there as a civilian, together with the others that I worked alongside. As such, we were responsible for our own food, housing, transportation, health - and personal safety. I didn't know this until I arrived there. With no expectation of help from military or government powers, I realized that I would have to rely on God, the one power that I knew loved and cared for me.

Each day I prayed for my safety and well-being. I affirmed that God, who is divine Love, was sustaining me, meeting all my needs, and keeping me safe from harm. As a result of this prayer, I was unexpectedly given food when I had none left. At another time, I was provided with transportation and a place to sleep. And when my life was in danger, I was protected.

Was I the only one praying for my well-being? No. Although I didn't know it at the time, family members, church friends, and others back home were praying, too. Now, as I think back over the experience, I'm convinced that their prayers helped. For the 133 days that I worked in Vietnam, I certainly found that God's powerful, protecting presence was with me.

Suggestions for prayer

What I learned in wartime helps me now pray for asylum seekers and refugees here and elsewhere. I know that the magnitude of their problem can seem daunting. But that does not change the fact that God does not abandon His creation. The God of love is with every individual. I believe that prayerful agreement with that fact can help those who are displaced find sanctuary.

I've received e-mails from refugees and asylum seekers pleading for my prayers - and yes, even financial assistance. Sometimes their tremendous hardship has made it seem impossible to help them in any practical way. Yet I can't give up on prayer for them. I want to help those who are displaced find sanctuary.

That's why I draw comfort and strength from these words written by Mary Baker Eddy: *"There is to-day danger of repeating the offence of the Jews by limiting the Holy One of Israel and asking: 'Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?' What cannot God do?" (Science and Health, p. 135).*

Those questions, while challenging my spiritual conviction, say to me, "If you really believe in God's love and care for others, then you will keep praying for a resolution to this crisis." God loves each and every person. He never abandons anyone. That's why, despite the pictures of suffering and hardship, I continue to:

- pray with conviction and not give up
- believe with all my being that no situation is too big, or too impossible, for Love to heal
- trust that God has a home for each displaced person
- expect God to provide an answer and a willingness in others to find and implement it
- be convinced that bureaucratic indifference or government red tape can't hinder the power of prayer for the resettlement of asylum seekers or refugees.

Each person's prayers are effective. You and I can say in our hearts to all those who feel lost and afraid right now, *"Pilgrim on earth, thy home is heaven; stranger, thou art the guest of God" (Science and Health, p. 254).* This heavenly home is not a far-off place to be gained at some unknown time in the future. Heaven is harmony, peace, goodness, and love, and it's here right now for everyone. God's love surrounds us all. We can each find safety and peace.

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