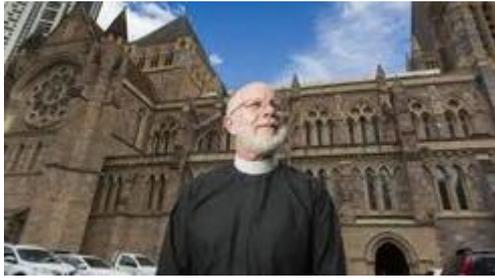


CHURCHES OFFER SANCTUARY



Thu 4 February 2016

Photo: The Very Revd Dr Peter Catt, Dean of St John's Cathedral, Brisbane.

In response to the High Court's decision on Wednesday 3 February to uphold the legality of offshore detention centres in Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island, churches around Australia have responded by offering sanctuary.

Following the decision, 267 people, including 70 children about 37 of whom were born in Australia, are now at risk of deportation in the coming days.

Dr Peter Catt, Dean of St John's Cathedral in Brisbane, said the likelihood of further damage against vulnerable people "fundamentally goes against our faith, so our church community is compelled to act, despite the possibility of individual penalty against us."

Concerns about safety on Nauru for women and children are high. Not only is the number of serious sexual assaults reported worrisome, including a five year old boy, but the level of self-harm and psychological trauma is overwhelming. A Senate inquiry has raised serious concerns about conditions on Nauru, where infant children are being held.



Australia's own Human Rights Commission has continually pointed out that such mandatory detention 'is contrary to Australia's international obligations' and profoundly traumatises those who have already fled deeply abusive governments.

As the Commission noted in its **2015 report on children in detention**, 'as the medical evidence has mounted over the last eight months of the Inquiry, it has become increasingly

difficult to understand the policy of both Labor and Coalition Governments. Both the Hon Chris Bowen MP, as a former Minister for Immigration, and the Hon Scott Morrison MP, the current Minister for Immigration, *agreed on oath before the Inquiry that holding children in detention does not deter either asylum seekers or people smugglers. No satisfactory rationale for the prolonged detention of children seeking asylum in Australia has been offered* [emphasis added].'

Churches and cathedrals in Australia are offering sanctuary to asylum seekers who have suffered trauma and abuse to prevent their return to offshore camps.

The right to sanctuary is a biblical concept that had legal basis during the middle ages where churches were recognised as places of protection, especially when kings and princes were arbitrary in their decisions and punitive in their actions. Although the concept has some recognition in British law, its validity in Australian common law remains to be tested.

The Anglican Dean of Brisbane, the Very Reverend Dr Peter Catt, said he was prepared to be charged with an offence for obstruction and harbouring non-citizens by trying to prevent federal authorities from entering the cathedral grounds.

“We offer this refuge because there is irrefutable evidence from health and legal experts that the circumstances asylum seekers, especially children, would face if sent back to Nauru are tantamount to state-sanctioned abuse.”

Anglican and Uniting churches that are offering sanctuary include:

- St Cuthbert’s Anglican church, Darlington, Western Australia
- Wesley Uniting church, Perth
- Gosford Anglican church, Sydney
- Pilgrim Uniting church, Adelaide
- St John’s Uniting church, Essendon
- Paddington Anglican church, Sydney
- Pitt Street Uniting church, Sydney
- Wayside Chapel, Sydney

The federal government has emphasised its desire to prevent people smuggling and to destroy their business model. It seems that locking up passengers indefinitely at a cost of over **\$1.2 billion**. To date, it seems that in a country with a long history of government corruption that the only people imprisoned are the impoverished fishermen who pilot the boats.

Sign the GetUp petition: [**https://www.getup.org.au/campaigns/refugees/refugee-x/let-them-stay**](https://www.getup.org.au/campaigns/refugees/refugee-x/let-them-stay)

The Diocese is hosting a Q&A night to further explore the challenges associated with refugees, particularly how the Anglican community might be able to assist with resettlement should Syrian asylum seekers be relocated to Canberra.