



# A Welcoming, Compassionate and Diverse Nation

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## **Our Vision:**

We are a nation of diverse cultures, languages, faiths, ethnic groups and experiences. We celebrate and value the strength of this diversity. We see this diversity reflected in our leaders, key decision makers, institutions, industry, sports and media.

We are a compassionate nation, where every person who seeks refuge here is treated fairly and made to feel welcome and safe – regardless of their country of origin or mode of arrival.

## Our hopes:

- All people experience the same rights and can play the role they wish, free from preconceptions, stereotypes and discrimination.
- A person's race, religion or cultural background is no barrier to them living, working and participating as an equal member of society.
- Our society's diversity is celebrated. Racial discrimination and fear are no longer used to win political favour.
- People who come to Australia – either as migrants, refugees or people seeking asylum – are treated equally and fairly.
- Safe resettlement pathways exist in our region for people who seek asylum.
- People who come to Australia seeking asylum are given the opportunity to apply for protection in a safe and timely manner and are provided with appropriate support. Detention is a last resort and length of detention is capped to not more than 90 days.
- Our humanitarian intake is generous and responsive to global needs.
- Our fair and compassionate treatment of people who seek safety on our shores reflects a compassionate and caring nation.
- Our leaders set an example by showing fairness and compassion and enacting policy that is humane.

## Witness from the Bible

- The laws of the covenant regularly require Israel to make room for those who come from outside Israel, to provide for their welfare, and to enable them to join the community and be subject to the same covenant—see for example **Exodus 12: 48 – 49; Leviticus 18: 26; 19: 9 – 10, 33 – 34**.
- The prophets pointed toward a future where those of other nations came to Israel, joining in harmony and worship of God (**Isaiah 14:1; Micah 4: 1 – 3**).
- They also taught the vital importance of acting with mercy and compassion toward those within Israel who were in need (**Isaiah 1: 16 – 17; 3: 13 – 15; 58: 6 – 7**), and that God answers the cries of the poor (**Isaiah 41: 17; Ezekiel 22: 29 – 31**; see also **Luke 1: 46 – 55**).

- This call to compassion is echoed and indeed strengthened in Jesus' life and teaching (**Matthew 25: 31 – 46; Luke 6: 20 – 25**).
- The early church and the writers of the New Testament strongly picked up this theme of care for the needy in the lives of their community and in their own teaching (**Acts 2: 44 – 45; 4: 32 – 35; Hebrews 13: 1 – 3; James 1: 27; 1 John 4: 19 – 21**).

## What the UCA has said

### Statement to the Nation (1977)

“We affirm our eagerness to uphold basic Christian values and principles, such as the importance of every human being, the need for integrity in public life, the proclamation of truth and justice, the rights for each citizen to participate in decision-making in the community, religious liberty and personal dignity, and a concern for the welfare of the whole human race.”

### Asylum seeker and refugee policy (2002)

“We approach the issue of asylum seekers and refugees in the context of the words of Jesus. He spoke of a new community established on righteousness and love, and based on a fellowship of reconciliation — a community in which all members work together for the good of the whole. In essence, working for this kind of society is our contribution to civil society. When we work for freedom, human rights and the common good of the community we are expressing our faith. It is an outworking of the community of God.”

### Dignity in Humanity (2006)

“In Jesus Christ we discern that which is truly human. As we feed the hungry, welcome the stranger and care for the thirsty, the sick and the imprisoned, there is the mysterious possibility that we will discover the life of Christ among us (**Matthew 25: 31-46**), and share the love of God.”

## Shelter from the Storm (2015)

Principles for Good Policy for the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees:

- All people should be treated with respect and accorded the dignity they deserve as human beings.
- As one of the wealthiest, safest and most secure countries in the world, Australia should do its fair share to ease people's sufferings in the context of what is a global problem. We must not shift our responsibilities to poor and developing countries.
- Australia's policies relating to asylum seekers should be driven by bipartisan commitments to a humanitarian response focussed on protection needs and to upholding our obligations under international law.
- The Australian Government must be transparent in the implementation of its policies, open to scrutiny by the courts and the media and to critique and advocacy from civil society.
- The media should not demonise or inflame prejudice against asylum seekers and refugees by deliberately promoting misunderstanding.

## The State of the Nation

### People seeking asylum are detained indefinitely in offshore detention

- Despite the release of children from detention, there remains a large number of refugees held in offshore facilities.
- There have been numerous cases of deteriorating mental and physical health, self-harm and suicide among adults and children detained on Manus Island and Nauru. From February to November 2015, 239 detainees were assessed as being at 'high imminent' risk of suicide or self-harm.<sup>20</sup>

#### Key Actions:

1. An end to the policy of indefinite, mandatory detention for people seeking asylum, starting with an end to offshore processing.
2. Adults and children seeking asylum can live in the Australian community with access to essential services, while their refugee status is processed in a timely manner.

## No fair process and permanent protection for people seeking safety in Australia

- The current 'fast-track' process for assessing people's claims for protection deliberately discriminates against people who came to Australia by boat. It's created a complex system that's incredibly difficult for people in the community to navigate.<sup>21</sup>
- Since 2014, people who arrive by boat and do not have a valid visa have no right to meaningful, independent review of their case.<sup>22</sup> As a result of this process, many more people seeking asylum are being denied protection and face a greater risk of being sent back to danger.
- Around 15,000 people, including children, are currently in the community waiting for their claims to be processed under 'fast track' or are having the outcome for their claim reviewed.
- Those found to be refugees are currently placed on Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) for three years or Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEV) for five years. They must reapply for their visas every three or five years for the rest of their lives.
- Those on a TPV or SHEV live in a state of limbo – they do not have the same access to family reunion, services, support, education and employment as those with a Permanent Protection Visa.

#### Key Actions:

1. A fair, robust and timely process for assessing the protection claims of people seeking asylum.
2. Those found to be refugees are granted permanent protection so they can begin to rebuild their lives and contribute to Australian society.

## **People seeking asylum in the Asia-Pacific region are not provided with adequate pathways to protection**

- There were some 9.5 million persons of concern to UNHCR in Asia and the Pacific, including 3.7 million refugees, 2.4 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 1.6 million stateless persons – according to the UNHCR 2017 Regional Update.<sup>23</sup>
- Current policies of the Australian Government undermine a sustainable global approach to managing the global crisis of displacement of people.

### **Key Actions:**

1. Australia should work proactively with nations in Asia-Pacific and with agencies working on the ground to ensure that refugees and people seeking asylum moving through the region are safe, have access to services, have their claims assessed and can begin to rebuild their lives.
2. Increase Australia's humanitarian intake.

## **People are vilified, abused and discriminated against for being different.**

- 18 per cent of Australians say they have experienced discrimination because of skin colour, ethnic origin or religion.<sup>24</sup>
- Around one in three (35 per cent of) recent migrants said they faced hurdles in finding their first job.<sup>25</sup>
- The Federation of Community Legal Centres reported a 50% increase in racist attacks in Victoria in areas with high migrant populations.<sup>26</sup>
- Australian muslim women who ventured out on their own were almost three times more likely to face harassment of an Islamophobic nature.<sup>27</sup>

### **Key Actions:**

Explore and implement strategies which address racial and religious discrimination in Australia and build harmony among diverse communities.

## **Discussion Starters**

You may like to ask one or more of the following questions in a small group discussion or select one or more to put to MPs or community leaders.

1. What are your policies to support the fair treatment and processing of people seeking asylum?
2. What will you do to create a more responsive humanitarian intake program?
3. What leadership can Australia take in Asia-Pacific to respond to the unprecedented movement of people in our region and globally?
4. What will your party or organisation do to combat racial and religious discrimination and promote social cohesion and harmony in the community?
5. What initiatives are currently in place or could be used within your local community to make it a place of welcome and support for refugees?

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## Thanks go to...

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See also

<https://nswact.uca.org.au/social-justice/the-social-justice-forum/>

<http://unitingearthweb.org.au/>

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Uniting Church members are encouraged to visit the websites of all the above groups to further explore the issues and questions that arise as we consider what it means to live and act justly.