



**REFUGEE
CARE
HANDBOOK
HONG KONG**

Refugee Ministry in Hong Kong

Many Christian churches and organisations serve refugees and asylum seekers in the city. The underlying mission is to demonstrate care for these most vulnerable brothers and sisters in our midst, to uphold the dignity of refugees and asylum seekers who bear the image of God, and to work towards a more inclusive and just Hong Kong community.

In March 2009, church representatives started meeting and expressed their concern that the churches' assistance was unevenly spread and their desire to work together to support the refugee community more effectively. Since 2014, some churches have organised joint annual celebrations of World Refugee Day in June. Other projects have included the "Food with Dignity" campaign and research on "Discrimination against Ethnic Minorities and Asylum Seekers in Seeking Private Accommodation Rentals".

VULNERABLE REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN HONG KONG

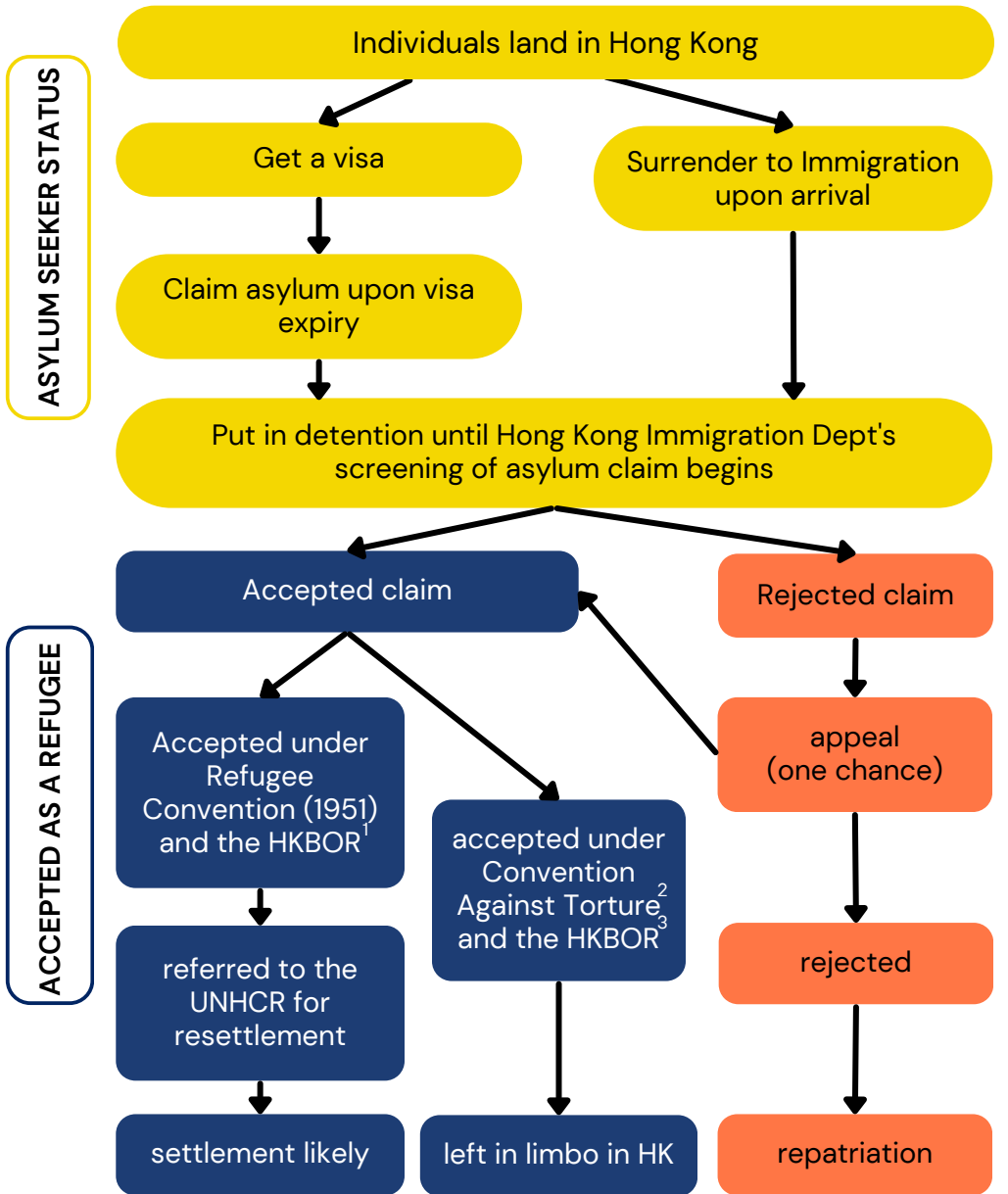
The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that global forced displacement has reached 103 million at mid-2022. Of those, 37.4 million sought safety across international borders as refugees and asylum seekers. According to the Refugee Convention adopted by the United Nations in 1951, a refugee is *"someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion."* Hong Kong is one of the few developed countries or regions yet to sign this convention.

Because of this, Hong Kong does not accept refugees for resettlement. Before refugee status is granted, those seeking international protection are known as asylum seekers. Those seeking protection may also apply for asylum through the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which Hong Kong did sign in 1992.

As of September 2022, there were nearly 15,000 persons seeking asylum in Hong Kong, including those with pending claims, those who had filed an appeal, and those who have remained for other reasons. Among these , most of them are from South and South East Asia, with the rest coming from Africa, the Middle East, and other places of the world.

Beginning in March 2014, the government initiated the Unified Screening Mechanism (USM). Since then, applicants for protection under either convention are screened by the Immigration Department.

SEEKING ASYLUM IN HONG KONG



THE WHOLE PROCESS TAKES 3 TO 10+ YEARS

during the process there is no durable solution for recognized refugees (i.e. there is no integration in society for individuals who have been accepted as recognized refugees during the years of their asylum claim processing)

If an application under the Refugee Convention is substantiated, the applicant becomes the responsibility of the UNHCR, which after verification will then seek a country willing to accept the certified refugee for resettlement. However, even recognition does not guarantee resettlement. Successful applicants under the Convention Against Torture will be allowed to remain in Hong Kong, but have no chance of resettlement through official channels. Less than 1% of asylum seekers have been successful in obtaining recognition as a refugee.

The United Screening Mechanism can be a lengthy process. Asylum seekers wait for the expiry of their visa. They then must surrender to the Immigration Department, which will issue them a Recognizance document. With this document, they can apply for social assistance and will obtain legal assistance services of a lawyer through the Duty Lawyer Scheme.

The whole process is not an easy one. It can take a few years or even more than a decade. This means that asylum seekers face additional challenges such as daily survival, mental stress, cultural differences and powerlessness in regard to their future.

Life Pressure

Asylum seekers do not have the right to work in Hong Kong. Even if they have professional expertise in their own country, here they are unable to contribute to society through employment. The Hong Kong government gives a monthly allowance through the International Social Service, but it is insufficient. With the high living cost in Hong Kong, \$1,500 for housing, \$1,200 in food coupons, \$200–\$300 for transport and \$300 for utilities is not nearly enough. Some refugees and asylum seekers have to live in squatter huts or tin-roof shacks in remote areas in the New Territories under poor living conditions. In addition, monthly transportation expenses become another burden as they commute for refugee verification

and other procedures with government agencies. Some asylum seekers fled their country with their children and some are middle-aged. They are vulnerable to malnutrition and health problems in Hong Kong. Long-term mental pressure builds up from being uprooted to a foreign land, being subject to prejudice, coping with the lengthy review procedures, and dealing with cultural differences encountered in Hong Kong.

Prejudice against Refugees

It is no easy thing to leave one's homeland. If you add living in Hong Kong with minimal allowance and facing social discrimination and misunderstanding, the situation is even harsher. Hong Kong people are not familiar with refugees. Most residents only gain knowledge about them through news reports. However, the mainstream media often use terms such as "fake refugees" and "illegal immigrants" to refer to refugees, furthering the impression that these people are associated with "crime", "unauthorized employment" and "welfare cheat". Rarely is there mention of the difficulties they face, which is unbalanced and unfair. Refugees and asylum seekers suffer various degrees of discrimination due to their skin colour and ethnic identity, and lack of trust from their neighbourhood and the community. Thus, they are pushed to the brink of despair. Being of a different race and unknown status in the society, along with the difference in language and culture, it is hard for them to communicate with local people and often they receive a lower standard of service.

Caring and Sharing

Refugees and asylum-seekers have great needs in terms of body, mind and spirit. Sadly there are very few local support groups for them. At present, there are only a small number of churches and non-governmental organizations that provide them with basic clothing, food, and financial assistance, as well as spiritual and pastoral care.

BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS

A. Biblical Background for Welcoming Strangers

One consistent theme in the Bible is the need for God's people to welcome strangers. This emphasis naturally arose from the nomadic life of the ancient Near East, which was the setting of the Old Testament, and it continued as the Church spread throughout the Roman Empire, which was the setting of the New Testament. Travellers far away from home needed protection and provision in order to survive in often hostile environments. In both the Old and New Testament periods, hospitality to strangers was expected not only as a moral obligation but also as a sacred duty.

In Genesis 18, we read the story of Abraham and Sarah welcoming three mysterious visitors into their homes. After receiving lavish hospitality from the patriarch and his family, the visitors return the favour with the good news that Sarah would bear a son in the coming year. This unexpected blessing was the result of divine presence in their midst through strangers who turn out to be heavenly visitors. Thus, Abraham and Sarah receive divine blessings and the confirmation of God's promises through an act of hospitality. This occasion is recalled in Hebrews 13:2: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

In the Parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25, hospitality to strangers takes on a new meaning for followers of Christ. Here the Son of Man as king is shown at the end times separating people into two groups like a shepherd dividing sheep and goats. The righteous are those whom he praises for taking care of him in his time of greatest need – "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (v.35). They are welcomed into the kingdom. Asking when these reported acts of mercy were performed, the king responds, "Truly I tell you,

just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (v. 40). Those on the left side are sent to eternal punishment for refusing to help the king in his time of greatest need. They express surprise and claim never to have encountered him in such circumstances. The king answers, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me" (v. 45).

B. Theological Reflection on the Care for Refugees

Among the strangers in urgent need of hospitality are those fleeing their homeland because of imminent danger to their lives. The issue of refugees and asylum seekers poses a great challenge to society and the Church. How should Christians respond?

Luke Bretherton,⁴ a British ethicist, argues that a faithful response must acknowledge refugees near and far as God's gift, God's judgment and God's promise.

- Refugees as God's *gift*: every human being is a unique individual created in the image of God. Each possesses a distinct identity, dignity and the right to communicate and relate with others. The Church's duty of care involves creating places where persons seeking asylum are treated with respect and given opportunities to act on their own behalf.
- Refugees as God's *judgment*: calls into question the human tendency toward exclusion as a response to those who are different. The Church makes a counter response of welcome and inclusion to those who have been rendered bare life due to our sins of greed and idolatrous security.
- Refugees as God's *promise*: includes the lives of refugees and asylum seekers in the hope of the kingdom of God. The Church reconfigures former social relationships and develops new public friendships to witness the in-breaking of God's reign here and now. This promise requires mutual sacrifice and change on the part of both the Church and the refugees and asylum seekers.

Refugee ministry can be a challenging endeavour. Yet, the task becomes clearer when we realize that refugees and asylum seekers as children of God are also subjects of divine justice and forgiveness, regardless of their immigration status. Welcoming the stranger then is not so daunting when we remember that the hospitality and home we offer are not our own. They belong to God. Therefore, refugee ministry is simply the extension of God's hospitality in Jesus Christ to the 'least of these' as an act of faith, a sign of hope, and a time to love.

C. Christian Roots in the Institution of Asylum

Finally, it should be noted that there is a historic relationship between Christian ministry to refugees and the secular institution of asylum. While modern states hold the legal right to grant asylum to persons seeking protection, the tradition of asylum and its religious counterpart – sanctuary – can be traced back to biblical times. In the Hebrew scripture, there were six cities of refuge where those guilty of certain acts like manslaughter (crimes without intention) could safely flee to in the region.⁵ These cities had links to former religious sanctuaries and were designated as places of refuge.

Modern Christians continue to follow this tradition by protecting and sheltering those fleeing persecution, slavery and death. Churches work to create places of safety, welcome and inclusion for those in search of refuge in their city or country. By offering welcome to the neediest of strangers, Christians seek to bless the encounters between nation-states, communities, citizens and unprotected persons in the name of the Lord. And in so doing, the two questions that churches must always ask are: "Did we see Christ in them? Did they see Christ in us?"⁶

Testimony 1– Henry

When I came with my family to Hong Kong from the Middle East, I did not know anyone or anything. I had zero English proficiency. It took me a long time to adapt to the new living environment. How schools educate in Hong Kong is also very different compared to my country. In an attempt to maintain my level of academic achievement, I suffered and felt upset and frustrated.

I have worked hard to overcome difficulties. I try my best to learn the language so I can communicate with people around me. I have developed harmonious relationships with many people in this new city. I see all these difficulties as challenges because I think this is a challenge for me and I want to win it.

At Union Church Hong Kong, I joined the ALPHA course and I learnt more about Christianity. The Christian community in Hong Kong has good contacts with refugees and helps them as best they can. I have a very good relationship with Union Church Hong Kong. This church has become part of my body because they help me and I am very happy. I feel that there is one eye looking after me and caring for me and being honest. This has helped me make changes and I have learned about the humanity that we missed in my country. And I believe that these values come to us – love, peace, support and freedom – from God and from those in the Christian community.

We need to educate people around the world about Christianity, especially in the Middle East, because there is a misconception about what we have learned about Christianity. What I mean is that there is a false image of Christianity. What I have seen is that they call for peace, love, and want to help, which is what we need in the Middle East. I am willing to work on spreading love and peace throughout the world. For me, humanity goes first and if we have humanity we will find love and peace will be easy. This is what I want to share. God bless you all.

Testimony 2– Lakony

It's commonly not easy to comprehend what happens in the world of refugees as they take their own space amongst the many. But after going full circle of refugee life, I can humbly state that the life of refugees is sandwiched with both PAIN and JOY. The reason for becoming a refugee is NOT only the striving to escape and survive to see another sunrise, but it's much more than that. It involves a lot of emotional war games and puzzles to solve.

It's ironic to say that although refugees go through untold sufferings like rejection, and non-acceptance by some section of the community that they are forced to interact with, they still find some JOY and meaning in life as the result of finding new homes, meeting new friends, finding and building new hopes, new cultures and readjustment to a new life altogether and above all feeling of SECURITY & SAFETY.

As for me, I have always caught myself meditating on how great our God is and how he has been doing his work in me. I can testify that those who wait for the LORD, they shall always find rest and fulfilment of their dreams. St. Andrew's Church walked with me through the valley of darkness and made me fear no evil. I faced my problem of asylum-seeking and refugee with courage because of the abundant love and support I got from the members of the congregation. My Christian faith has also become much more stronger and as I write now, I'm so joyful to be with my little kids, that I hadn't seen in a decade. Finally, God said, let them be reunited, and here we give him all the glory. You can't imagine that the tears of pain have been replaced by tears of joy. And my childhood dream of flying a plane has become real plus many other golden opportunities that I'm exposed to right now!

It's so amazing that God's plan is indeed to prosper us. He will definitely accomplish the great work he has started in you; therefore don't waver—he will be there for you; just believe!

LIST OF HONG KONG CHURCHES AND ORGANIZATIONS SERVING REFUGEES

AOG Tai Po Church



AOG Tai Po Church (PCHK) welcomes people of all nationalities to join us in worshipping God. We celebrate diversity and strive to create a welcoming and inclusive environment. We desire to reach out and support refugees and asylum seekers with practical and emotional assistance.

Our Sunday Services offer an opportunity to connect with God and grow in faith. Come experience God's love for yourself.

Email: eng@aogtaipo.org

Phone : 2651 1601

www.english.taipo.church

Bless Vision



We are a charitable organization that provides support to vulnerable groups, including asylum seekers, refugees and marginalized families in Hong Kong. We believe life should not end in a valley or a momentarily desperate situation. What they need is not only food and living support but also healing of their heart and restoration of hope. Our Center is a place to prepare and assist them in setting a foundation for rebuilding their lives by providing services including ongoing emotional and mental health support, emergency living support, training and empowerment.

Facebook:

https://www.facebook.com/blessvisionfoundation/about?locale=zh_HK

www.bvf.world

Branches of Hope



Our Refugee Opportunity and Development (ROAD) Programme aims to empower and develop the skills and talents of refugees and asylum seekers through education, leadership training, community engagement, befriending refugees, and financial support. The ROAD Programme works with refugees for resettlement, local integration and voluntary repatriation. We run weekly gospel fellowships on Wednesdays and Thursdays aimed at giving Christian refugees the platform to be spiritually nurtured in a community setting. Our ministry also provides opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers to engage with the community through outreach programs.

www.branchesofhope.org.hk

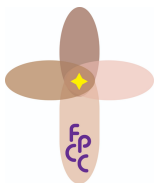
Christian Action



Christian Action's Centre for Refugees was established in 2004 and is the only community centre for this vulnerable group in Hong Kong. Each month we serve 600 families and individuals by providing them with comprehensive support where they can access shelter, food, education, counseling and tools in a place where their voices are heard with dignity and compassion.

Email: ckmsc@christian-action.org.hk
cfr.org.hk

Fairview Park Christian Church



Fairview Park Christian Church helps asylum seeker and refugee individuals and families on a case-by-case basis with financial, spiritual and other physical needs.

Facebook:
<https://www.facebook.com/fairviewparkchristianchurch>

Island Evangelical Community Church



Island ECC welcomes refugees to become a part of life in the church. We assist refugees with practical needs if possible but believe that encouragement, fellowship and spiritual guidance can make all the difference in their lives.

www.islandecc.hk

Jubilee Ministries



The refugee ministry of Jubilee Ministries seeks to be friends and family to people of all ethnicities and religions, laughing, learning, growing together, sharing, and serving each other. In so doing, we fulfill the Great commission, empowering disciples so that they in turn can make disciple of all nations.

Email: jubilee@jubileehk.org

Phone: 9216 2521

Kowloon Union Church



Kowloon Union Church
WHERE ALL ARE ONE

Kowloon Union Church supports refugees through the Peacemaking Programme which includes pastoral care, advocacy, and empowerment activities. We host a fellowship every Tuesday morning to build a community of faith where refugees support each other through prayer and sharing God's word. We support different needs such as education, rental, and health. KUC provides different opportunities for them to serve in churches and the wider community in Hong Kong. The Peacemaking Programme aims to connect refugees with the Hong Kong people to bring mutual understanding and support under the umbrella of God's love.

Email: peace@kuc.hk

Phone: 2367 2585

RiverGrace International Hong Kong Evangelical Church



RiverGrace Church was founded in 2011 and meets at United Christian College in Shek Kip Mei. While we assist a few asylum seekers attending our church with meals and transportation costs, our main aim is to include them in the life of the church and in fellowships. In our training, we give them tools so they can be effective ambassadors for Christ.

www.rivergrace.org

St. Andrew's Church



St. Andrew's welcomes refugees and asylum seekers to be part of our church family, joining our Sunday services and regular ministries. We provide free English classes twice a week and host many other events that seek to serve the asylum-seeker community. These include 'World Refugee Day' events, winter clothes distributions, and eye-sight screening.

www.standrews.org.hk

St. John's Cathedral



ST JOHN'S CATHEDRAL
聖公會聖約翰座堂

Our work with refugees is on a drop-by basis with assistance with food coupons, referrals to other organizations such as Christian Action and sending volunteers to Christian Action to prepare meals for refugees. We do not have a dedicated ministry programme for refugees.

www.stjohnscathedral.org.hk

The Church of Christ in China Wan Chai Church



Wan Chai Church supports refugee students' education through our Education Subsidy Scheme, in which we also provide emotional and spiritual support to their families. Our volunteers visit our supported families regularly, sharing love, materials and friendship.

www.wanchaichurch.org

The Hong Kong Christian Kun Sun Association



The Association partners with international and local churches and Christian organizations to visit asylum seekers and refugees in prison and detention centres, providing the gospel message in Christian outreaches, services, classes and counseling.

www.ksa.org.hk

The Hong Kong Society for Asylum-Seekers and Refugees



The Hong Kong Society for Asylum-Seekers and Refugees (HKSASR) is the first independent organization jointly managed by the asylum-seekers and refugees and the local people. It was established in 2014 to support the asylum-seekers and refugees in Hong Kong on all fronts. Its aims are: 1) to improve the conditions of the asylum-seekers and refugees, 2) to promote co-operation among the asylum-seekers and refugees and 3) to promote asylum seeker and refugee rights.

www.hksasr.com

Union Church



UNION
CHURCH
佑寧堂

Union Church Hong Kong currently is helping a number of asylum seekers financially and in other ways. It is a very difficult adjustment for them as individuals and for asylum seekers as a group, especially since they are not allowed to work in Hong Kong. So we feel called to do what we can to help make their daily lives a little less painful and stressful.

www.unionchurchhk.org

Youth Global Network



YOUTH GLOBAL NETWORK
青年全球網絡

In 2013, Youth Global Network launched the first refugee ministry called Global Youth Connect under the Endowment for Youth Global Development (EYGD). Throughout the years, our aim has been to promote awareness and respond to their needs in creative ways. Initiatives such as annual CARtREFugee Postcard Design competition, Project One Identity Cantonese class and Project I Dignity, in which local merchants and service providers offer exclusive discounts in support of refugees and asylum seekers.

Email: eygd@ygn.org.hk
eygd.ygn.org.hk

Footnotes

- [1] The HK Bill of Rights (Article 3)
- [2] Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT, DIDTP) -- 1992
- [3] Individuals at this stage are officially categorised as "Substantiated USM Claimants" (i.e. given refugee status).
- [4] Luke Bretherton, Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 145-152.
- [5] See Num. 35:6-34, Joshua 20:1-9, and Deut. 4:41-43.
- [6] Esther de Waal, Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1984), 121

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