



Uniting Church in Australia Assembly

Pastoral Statement

Providing Sanctuary

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The future of 267 people seeking refuge in our country is weighing heavily on our national conscience.

As many of you are already aware, the High Court of Australia ruled this month that these people, many of them children including 37 babies born here, can legally be transferred from Australia to offshore detention on Manus Island, PNG and Nauru.

While it may be legal, sending people back to the places of their suffering is immoral. Such an action is irreconcilable with Jesus' call to welcome the stranger and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

We have been calling for the closure of the detention centres on Manus Island and Nauru for many years. The centres are breeding grounds for abuse and despair and damage people's health. Those who are here in Australia have come mostly for medical attention. Doctors and psychiatrists have been warning the Government that return to Nauru will cause them immense harm.

Uniting Church members have joined other Christians, our friends from other faiths, and concerned Australians from around the country to call on the Prime Minister to "let them stay". Doctors, lawyers, artists, writers, teachers, unions, comedians and more are raising their voices too.

For everyone who's prayed, petitioned, or raised the Uniting Church banner at Let Them Stay rallies, thank you for your powerful Christian witness.

A growing number of Uniting Church congregations are now offering their churches as a place of sanctuary to people who are at risk of return to Nauru. These decisions are not being taken lightly. The potential legal ramification for individuals involved is uncertain. We cannot know what the Government will do if people choose to seek sanctuary in our churches.

For those congregations who have decided to extend sanctuary, God bless you for your courage and compassion.

The Assembly is working with the Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce and the lawyers who are looking after the 267 people. Our first priority is to ensure that nothing we do has harmful consequences for those people seeking asylum. We are also working to gain clarity about the legal issues involved in offering sanctuary and will keep in close contact with the congregations most likely to have the offer accepted.

For those who, for whatever reason, are unable to offer sanctuary, please pray God's protection for these 267 people that they may be kept safe and find in our country the care, protection and hospitality they seek.

And please pray for God to grant us the strength of character to follow fearlessly Christ's exemplary life of compassion in the days and weeks ahead, that the love of God may be made known.

Grace and peace to you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stuart McMillan', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Stuart McMillan
President
Uniting Church in Australia Assembly

12 February 2016

If your congregation has decided to offer sanctuary, please ensure that you have registered on the Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce website <http://www.acrt.com.au>. We will be in touch with you.

If you are considering offering sanctuary and have any questions, please contact Rev. Elenie Poulos, the National Director of UnitingJustice Australia at ElenieP@nat.uca.org.au.