

# Sanctuary Stories

**10 STORIES**

of refuge and  
welcome from

**10 YEARS**

of Scottish Faiths  
Action for Refugees

SCOTTISH FAITHS  
ACTION FOR REFUGEES



# INTRODUCTION

Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees is celebrating its 10-year anniversary this autumn. One of our greatest privileges has been walking alongside people seeking sanctuary in Scotland and rebuilding their lives here. As we mark 10 years of working as faith groups to offer welcome and friendship, advocacy and campaigning, we want to most of all honour the voices of those who have made our lives richer and more beautiful by opening their hearts and lives to strangers.

We're all on a journey.

A journey through life, living one day at a time.

A journey away from the difficulties we experience, towards something better.

A journey in the darkness, clinging to God with the little strength we have.

A joyous journey, celebrating new life, accomplishments and victories.

A journey alone; a journey with others.

A journey with God, a journey away from God, a journey towards God.

This Sunday, we want to invite you to take a deeper dive into the journey of people who have arrived in Scotland as sanctuary seekers; who have been on their own journeys of hardship, persecution, loss, destruction of their homes, livelihoods and whole lives. Stories of hope, resilience, endurance, patience, love and strength.



In this year's Sanctuary Sunday resource we share 10 stories that we have heard and collated over the last 10 years. Stories are important; they help us see each other's humanity, they teach us, they help us relate, they inspire, they challenge, they encourage. Sharing stories is a wonderful way to help people in our congregations understand more about the lives of those seeking sanctuary, as well as to inform our prayers and worship.

The stories in this resource have different lengths and different focuses, sharing experiences both from Scotland and further afield. Six of the stories are in writing, and four of them are available to share via video during your service. The videos are accompanied by discussion questions and the stories in writing include a reflection question, action and prayer. We hope there is something for everyone and that your services will be enriched by including the voices of sanctuary seekers in your midst as you worship and pray on Sanctuary Sunday.

If you would like to shape more of your service around the theme of Sanctuary Sunday please have a look at our resources from recent years. You will be able to find prayers, all-age activities and sermon ideas in our [The God Who Sees Me](#) resource, [God With Us](#), and this year's [Weekly Worship](#) resource.



# PHILOMENA'S STORY

Life as an asylum seeker is never an easy one. My experience of living in an asylum hotel was a horrible one – being fed leftovers, and the same food every day: pizza, chips, lentil soup. We had no money to get ourselves something different outside the hotel, causing me to develop a stomach ulcer.

I never expected that my black skin colour would be seen as offensive, disgusting and annoying. But when I discovered my local church, St Aloysius RC Church in Glasgow, some things changed. I was welcomed with open arms and made to feel at home, to have a sense of belonging, irrespective of the colour of my skin. They gave me reasons to be happy, hopeful and strong, alongside the financial and emotional support I needed to pull through, thus keeping my faith alive.

I am now studying to become a nurse/midwife, and I truly appreciate my local church for its support and for helping me believe my future will be greater.



**Reflection:** In what ways does your church support and empower refugees and people seeking asylum?

**Action:** Explore existing refugee programmes in your area and get involved.

**Prayer:** God of all people, we pray for all who suffer indignity at the hands of others. Help us to be good companions as we all journey towards You, as one human family.



# VIDEO: PHILOMENA'S STORY

Philomena is from Central Africa, seeking asylum in Scotland and lives in Glasgow. She speaks powerfully about the struggles people seeking asylum face in Scotland, including the times spent in isolating contingency hotels and the immigration laws which prevent her from being allowed to work. She also speaks about the difference her local church made in her day-to-day life: 'I never expected that my black skin colour would be seen as offensive, disgusting and annoying. But when I discovered my local church, St Aloysius RC Church in Glasgow, some things changed. I was welcomed with open arms and made to feel at home, to have a sense of belonging irrespective of the colour of my skin. They gave me reasons to be happy, hopeful and strong, alongside providing the financial and emotional support I needed to pull through, keeping my faith alive.'

## Watch here



### **Discussion questions**

- What was life like for Philomena in an asylum hotel? (This can be an opportunity to find out more about why people are placed in asylum hotels and the impact it is having on their lives.)
- What brought about change in her life?
- What kept Philomena going? What keeps you going in the struggles of life?
- From Philomena's quote above, what can we learn about how Church can offer sanctuary from experiences of racism? What does that look like?
- How do we encounter God in the support we receive from others?

# RANIA'S STORY

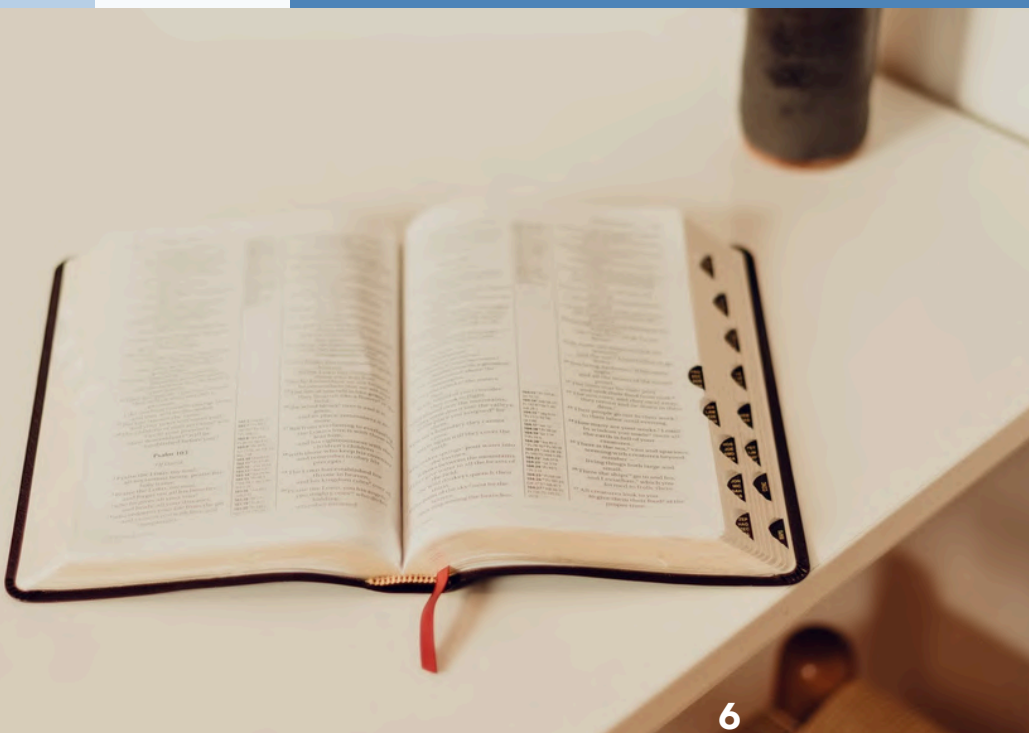
Rania and her parents did not know anyone when they arrived in Glasgow from Kurdistan, but before they left, someone told them that if they ever ended up in Glasgow, they should find St Rollox Church and the people there would help them. So that is what they did.

I still remember the day we first met. Rania was keen to show me something she had brought from home. Carefully taking a small package from her bag and unwrapping it, she showed me a Bible in her own language. Faced with leaving so much of her life and possessions behind, this young woman chose to make room in her bag for her Bible, which she valued so highly.

**Reflection:** If you had to leave your home, what would you take with you?

**Action:** Look for ways to include prayers with and for refugees and people seeking asylum in your daily and weekly worship.

**Prayer:** Welcoming God, we pray for those who must leave all they've known, that they would find a place where they can feel at home again.





# TRISTAN'S STORY

*This story was included as a part of 'A Heart for Refugees' a series of paintings based on photographs from the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR).*

I studied to be a teacher, but I'm young, so I knew I'd be forced to fight. I don't like fighting. I don't like blood. But I was the only one working so I couldn't leave, or my family would go hungry. But my mother begged me to leave. She kissed my feet. She said she wouldn't mind starving if she knew that I was safe.

I hired a smuggler, but he took all my money and left me at the border. He told me that he'd call me when the passage was safe, but then he turned off his phone. I was all alone and stuck without money. I called my mother and she said that she'd pray for God to send someone to help me.

Then I met this man. I told him my story, and he loaned me the money I needed to get to Europe. He treated me like one of his family. I'll pay him back, but until then I'm trying to return the favour by helping him carry his children.

**Reflection:** Read the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10), what parallels do you see with Tristan's story?

**Action:** Open yourself up to encounters with strangers. How could you be a friend to someone in need, or maybe receive the help you need?

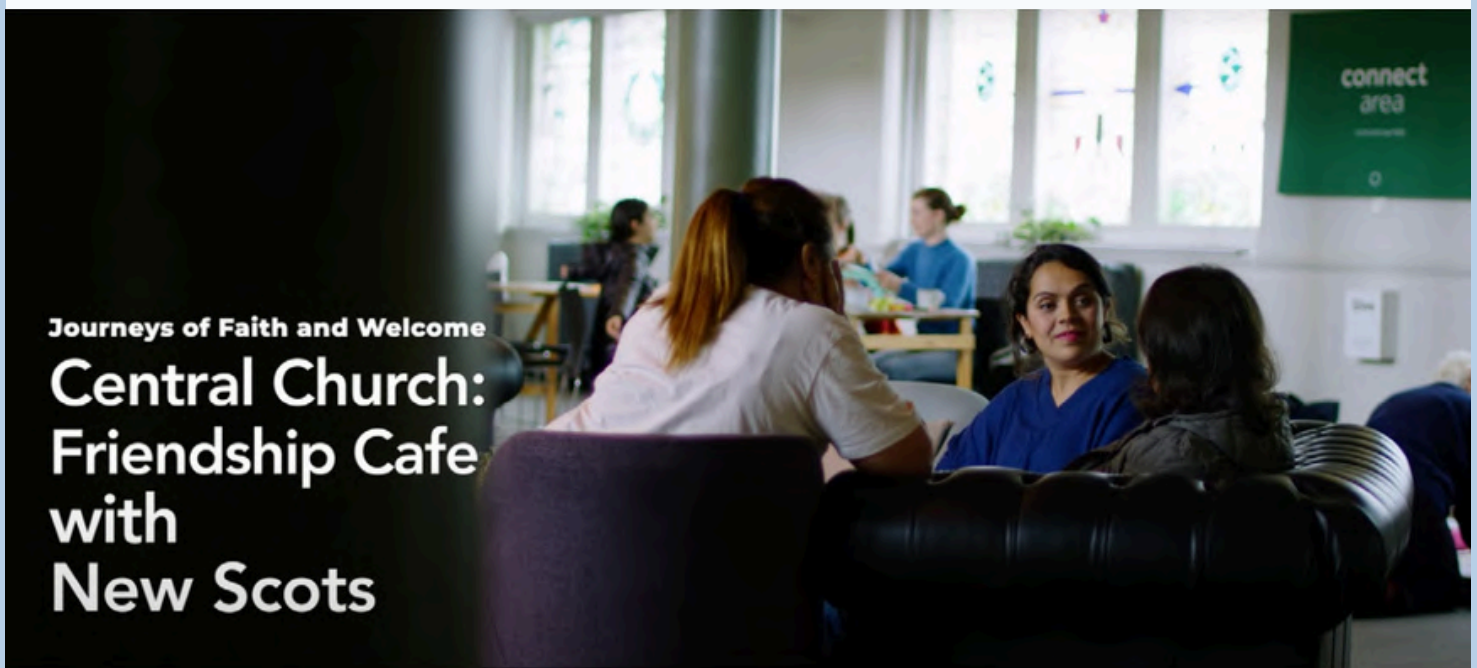
**Prayer:** Caring God, we pray for those who are currently on a difficult journey towards safety. May they encounter Good Samaritans who will offer care and protection on the way.



# VIDEO: SAWSAN'S STORY

Central Church has been welcoming New Scots (refugees and people seeking asylum) since Syrian and Kurdish families first started arriving in Edinburgh in 2015. Inspired by their Christian faith, they seek to become home and family for those rebuilding their lives in the city. Over many years they have built deep relationships and friendships with New Scots, sharing life together and helping them settle. Once a month they also host welcome meals or coffee mornings in their church to enjoy a time of fellowship with New Scots in larger groups.

**Watch here**



## **Discussion questions**

- How does Sawsan describe the difficulties they face after arriving in Scotland and the support she received?
- What difference has the church made in her life?
- What role can community and social connections play in our lives? Why are they particularly important in the lives of refugees?
- What does the Bible tell us about our role in welcoming the stranger (e.g. Matthew 25:31-40; Leviticus 19:33-34; Hebrews 13:2)?



# ANADIA'S STORY

*This story was recorded by Rev John Carswell, detainee chaplain at Dungavel Immigration Removal centre.*

*Anadia's name has been changed.*

I don't meet many women at Dungavel IRC (Immigration Removal Centre) because it is a dedicated men's facility. Women who arrive at Dungavel will be detained for only a few days before they are moved to the women's facility in Derwentside, near Durham. I was very glad to spend time talking to Anadia and I remember her story as she was so inspirational to me and my cohort.

Anadia was from Pakistan and had come to the UK for an arranged marriage with a man she'd never met. Her two elder sisters had done the same and now had permanent right to remain. When she arrived, Anadia spoke no English. Coming from her rural village in Pakistan, she had very little education. It wasn't long into her new marriage that she discovered her husband was abusive and for a time she endured a life of domestic violence. Eventually, she decided to leave and, having made contact with one of her sisters, she left her home. This was to be a temporary arrangement because, as she explained, 'My sister has her own husband and family and didn't really have room for me in their house.' Some time later, she moved to live with her other sister in a similar, temporary arrangement.

Anadia was determined to learn to speak English and so had enrolled in an ESOL group (English for Speakers of Other Languages). It was during one of these classes that she was arrested and held for detention. She argued vehemently with the police that her case was under review with the Home Office, and she shouldn't be detained. Unfortunately, at the time of her arrest, the police were unable to make contact with her lawyer, and so she was held.

As an asylum seeker, Anadia has very few rights in the UK. She cannot take a job or hire a flat or open a bank account or apply for a driver's licence. She is entitled to a very small stipend of £45 per week for the duration of time it takes for her asylum application to wend its way through the Home Office procedures, a process that often takes months or even years to complete. Until she is granted refugee status, she is wholly dependent on the kindness of others for her day-to-day survival.

Additionally, divorce in Pakistani culture carries a heavy stigma, especially for women, so she struggles to find a place, even amongst her own countryfolk. She is a strong, intelligent and independent young woman who now speaks fluent English and is determined to remain in the UK. Going back home, she argued, would be impossible and would deny her the opportunity for further education.

‘What would you like to be?’ we asked. ‘I want to be an immigration lawyer.’ As someone who has been through the system, I can think of no better candidate.

**Reflection:** Where are you opening yourself up to stories and truths that might make you feel uncomfortable?

**Action:** Take time to research Dungavel Immigration Removal Centre and Scottish Detainee Visitors. <https://sdv.org.uk/>.

**Prayer:** God of Justice, we lament for all those people being held in immigration detention. We pray for wisdom among our policy makers, and that one day we will see an end to indefinite detention.





# JOHN'S REFLECTION

*As well as recording Anadia's story, John shared his own reflections on working as a volunteer chaplain at a Detention Centre.*

Visiting at Dungavel invariably leaves me thinking, "I don't know what I'm doing here." I feel inadequate for the task, ill-equipped and under-resourced, but then, it's not about me and my little anxieties. It is simply being present to one who is detained against their will. This is gift enough. It is a disarming feeling and one that brings me face to face with the discomfort that comes with following a crucified Saviour.

I heard it said once that, beneath the cross, there is no level ground. In other words, it's not supposed to make us feel comfortable or comforted; if we are not horrified by the cross, we are missing the point. But we go anyway, not because we want to, but because we have to, because we are called to go.

I go to Dungavel (and, in truth, to all acts of compassionate service) not because I want to, but because I need to go. It is a costly grace that has been shared with me and, while Christ still suffers, naked, hungry, imprisoned, a stranger, the call remains, "Go." I can't fix their problems but strangely, they help fix mine by being kind enough and vulnerable enough to share their often-agonising stories. In doing so, our roles are reversed; it is they who welcome me.



# VIDEO: SEWING2GETHER ALL NATIONS

Mossvale Community Church is a local church in Paisley, Renfrewshire that set up a project called “Sewing2Gether All Nations” for members of the refugee and asylum seeker community. The project primarily supports women who wish to practise English and build new friendships. Through creative workshops, New Scots learn to sew and upcycle damaged or unloved clothes. Since establishing the project, they have worked with people seeking asylum, Syrian refugees and Ukrainian families, and most recently set up the All Nations Café and drop-in for refugees and people seeking asylum, particularly responding to the opening of a hotel for Ukrainians in the vicinity.

**Watch here**



## **Discussion questions**

- In which diverse ways is Mossvale Community Church supporting refugees and people seeking asylum?
- What skills and experiences do you see in your own church that could be utilised to support people settled in your community?
- How does Psalm 24 encourage you in connecting with people from all parts of the world?
- How can we build multicultural churches that reflect the communities around us?



# RAHEEL'S STORY

*Rev Raheel Arif is a Minister in the Church of Scotland.*

“Remembering my story today, when I reflect on it again, I think when life gets tough, where do you run? In our lives, even as Christians, whenever we feel hurt, disappointed, confused – whenever life gets difficult, we often flee from God rather than running towards God. Yet the Bible tells us that God is our stronghold, our stability, our security. (Nahum 1:7)

In my personal experience as an asylum seeker and refugee, I left everything in God's hands and fled from my country to seek refuge here in Scotland. It was like sailing in the boat, not sure where the waves will take me. But I had faith and trust that God would calm the storm in my life and would provide an exodus. I kept praying hard and constantly read the scriptures. This provided me strength and a sense of assurance that God is stronger than my challenges and has the power to take me out of this situation just as Jesus was with His disciples in the boat.

After sailing in the boat, I was accepted as a refugee and welcomed by the people in Scotland, including my church family locally and nationally. I was warmly welcomed and started working as a support worker in a care home. When I responded to my call to become a minister to serve God and His people in Scotland, sanctuary (church) welcomed me and offered me all the support, resources, and training that I needed to fulfil God's plan for my life. And now I am God's servant, serving God's people in the west of Falkirk.”



**Reflection:** How might we help sanctuary seekers to explore their calling and full potential?

**Action:** Get to know someone seeking sanctuary in Scotland and find out about their interests, hobbies, skills and hopes for the future.

**Prayer:** Creator God, you have blessed each of us with gifts and talents. We pray that people seeking sanctuary are given the opportunities to live out their calling and be celebrated for their unique abilities.

# VIDEO: SAOWSAN'S STORY

Saowsan came to Scotland from Iraq with her children and lives in the South of Glasgow. As with many others, she found a warm and safe welcome in Castlemilk Community Church which really helped her and her family settle into their new life in Scotland. Castlemilk Community Church supports newcomers to Scotland by helping to tackle social isolation and making connections in the wider community. They encourage cross-cultural understanding through discussion groups and trips to places of interest. They also run employability sessions and provide a safe place to share life experiences and make friends.

**Watch here**



## **Discussion questions**

- What surprises Saowsan about the church? Why do you think she is surprised?
- What worries do you have about connecting with New Scots and people of other faiths?
- What does Saowsan appreciate about Scotland and the support she received?
- How is God calling you to respond?





# AIMEE, GLORY AND RONKE'S STORIES

*These reflections come from a Bible study with three women seeking asylum. Their insights were recorded by Sabine Chalmers.*

Whilst these three resilient women had been treated as 'less than human' by the Home Office and people around them, had spent time in detention, and faced severe poverty, they share powerfully of their own experiences of going through difficult times and God's word as 'spirit and truth' changing their perspective.

Aimee noted: "I connect with a lot of refugees and asylum seekers and to most of us, no matter the difficulty, God has been the one to give us strength to carry on. Faith is central to what we have been through. Like Asaph says in Psalm 77, I will remember God's goodness. We have been facing challenges but we are reminding ourselves that the reason we are here is because God wanted us to be here. And the same God who brought us here will see us through. God's ways are holy and higher than our ways, even in trials (v13). It wasn't easy, but faith gave us hope. Seeking asylum is a good way to know God because you see God's faithfulness."

In the midst of hardship, Aimee, Glory and Ronke are able to see God's blessing as God moulds them and strengthens their faith and trust in God.

Glory shares: “God’s word is spirit and truth. Before, I couldn’t appreciate what I have because I was taking everything for granted. Going through the asylum process had made me a better person who appreciates things and who puts God first in everything I do. I understand now that it is all grace, it is all God. We get everything from God. For me to reach this understanding I had to leave my country and come here. If I had stayed in my country, I don’t know if I would have understood how everything comes from God. You think ‘I can get this and that’, but when you lose everything, you have to start from scratch. You don’t know anyone apart from God – even to achieve small things, you are dependent on God because you have nothing. Even to meet a single good person, it takes God.”

Aimee, Glory and Ronke shared their faith with depth and authenticity. It reminded me of the quote from Corrie Ten Boom: “You may never know that Jesus is all you need, until Jesus is all you have.” All three of them are keen to share the hope they have found in clinging to God in hard situations with others. They were very aware of the fact that we need to remind each other of God’s goodness and faithfulness in the hard times.

**Reflection:** Can you remember a time when you had to entrust everything to God? In those times, what did you learn about yourself and God?

**Action:** Host a conversation and prayer time that reflects on the experiences of people seeking sanctuary (our [God With Us](#) resource contains Bible studies).

**Prayer:** God of all grace, who in Christ suffered, be known to those who have lost all they hold dear, may they encounter you in their suffering and rise with you to fullness of life.





# FURTHER RESOURCES

For more worship resources, including previous Sanctuary Sunday resources and our booklet God With Us, visit: <https://www.sfar.org.uk/worship-resources/>

For advice on where to begin supporting sanctuary seekers, please visit <https://www.sfar.org.uk/where-to-start/>

If you would like any advice and support to help your faith group to support New Scots from the team please email the co-ordinators:

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**Esther Moodie** [rmoodie@churchofscotland.org.uk](mailto:rmoodie@churchofscotland.org.uk)

And please let us know how you used this resource, we would love to hear from you.

