



August 9, 2004

Hon. Judy Sgro, PC, MP
Minister of Citizenship and Immigration
Ottawa, ON, K1A 1L1
Fax: (613) 947-8319

Dear Ms. Sgro:

Re: Need for Reform of the Refugee Determination System

We write in response to your recent remarks relating to the practice of sanctuary, including your assertion that churches should cease offering sanctuary to refugee claimants. While we agree that the ongoing practice of sanctuary suggests a problem, we disagree both with your analysis of this issue and your proposed solution.

We support your call for reform within the refugee determination system, but feel that your comments unjustly depict sanctuary as the root of a problem, rather than what it truly is, a valuable and often necessary “safety valve” that safeguards vulnerable individuals from flawed refugee determinations.

Further, your comments fail to acknowledge with appropriate balance and diligence that which is most fundamental to this issue: the immediate need for reforms toward an effective and transparent, just and compassionate refugee determination system in Canada.

We are also concerned and disappointed about your recent statement, “The protection of our country and of Canadians has to be the number 1 concern.” Comments such as this draw an inappropriate and unfounded link between refugees and security concerns, and reinforce popular prejudices regarding refugees. There is no evidence that refugees pose any threat to Canadian security. In fact, Canada contributes to global security by abiding by its international commitment to accept all asylum-seekers who have a well-founded fear of persecution. We trust that the Canadian government will refrain from contributing to dangerous misconceptions about refugees in the future.

Our refugee program must, in the first instance, be about saving lives and offering protection to the displaced and persecuted (Bill C-31). As such, Canada must treat genuine refugees with fairness and compassion. By forbidding the practice of sanctuary without addressing the fact that unfair refugee determinations cannot be appealed, we risk abandoning those we have sworn to protect to situations where they face persecution and even death.

At this time, we recognize and welcome your openness to meeting with church leaders regarding these issues. Constructive dialogue is an essential step towards identifying mutually acceptable solutions. However, the problems revealed by the sanctuary cases are systemic problems that require a systemic solution. Case by case interventions will not be adequate. Unfortunately, past experience has proven that contrary to their promises, ministers of immigration often do not respond to case by case appeals, which is one of the reasons why people have had to resort to seeking sanctuary in the first place. This is particularly true since there are many refugee claimants who have been rejected in error who are not in sanctuary: they also need a solution.

The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada is the Canadian association of Evangelicals. Since 1964 the EFC has gathered Christians together to foster understanding and promote collaboration for greater effectiveness in ministry and public witness. It provides a national identity for Evangelicals and a constructive voice for biblical principles in life and society. The EFC affiliates include evangelical congregations, denominations and ministry organizations, who uphold a common statement of faith. It is an active participant in the World Evangelical Alliance. Our affiliates include some 40 denominations and over 7000 churches. It is estimated that 1.5 million individuals are members of affiliated churches and organizations. Some of the EFC's affiliated denominations are Sponsorship Agreement Holders with the Canadian government; others are active in providing assistance to refugees and other newcomers to Canada in various ways.

Earlier this year, the EFC formed the Refugee Ministry Network under the leadership of Anne Woolger. Woolger is the Founder and Director of the Matthew House in Toronto, and has worked with refugees and refugee claimants for over 16 years. The Network aims to stimulate strategic initiatives among Canadian churches and to facilitate more effective assistance for refugees in Canada and around the world. The EFC's concern about the refugee system is informed by this network within Canada.

The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, in cooperation with Kairos Canada, invites a meeting with you to discuss these issues and the ways in which we can work with the Government of Canada to achieve an effective, just and transparent refugee determination system.

Thank you for considering our concerns. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Dr. Janet Epp Buckingham
Director of Law and Public Policy
The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

Anne Woolger
Chair, Refugee Ministry Network Canada
The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

CC: KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives