

## They are such a blessing

Three former asylum seekers are now part of the leadership team at Stockton Baptist Church – and their impact on the life and witness of the church has been ‘such a blessing’, says minister Craig Downes.



**S**tockton Baptist Church in Teesside has developed a significant ministry to refugees and asylum seekers over the last decade. It set up a weekly asylum drop-in in late 2014 after it began to receive large numbers of asylum seekers on its *Alpha* course. In the ensuing years it has conducted dozens of baptisms and seen its congregation become much more multicultural: when the Baptists Together website first carried a story on Stockton in 2016, the church had responded to the needs of hundreds of refugees and asylum seekers from 34 different nations and was regularly seeing 50-70 people from an international background for its Sunday services.

Since then it has further developed its RAS (Refugee and Asylum Seeker) ministry and has an amazing team. It now employs a part time RAS administrator; has

accommodation for newly recognised refugees and destitute asylum seekers; has developed networks across the area to enable access to specialist support for, and has given space in its building to, the Red Cross, and developed its own rigorous baptismal course in Farsi - material which increasingly is being drawn on by other churches in similar situations.

A key marker in the church's development was reached last summer, when two men and one woman, all former asylum seekers, were elected to the church leadership team (two as elders; one a deacon). All three had displayed leadership qualities, but had also initially shown reluctance at assuming these positions out of humility and cultural deference. Nevertheless minister Craig Downes helped them see this was God's call on their lives and, after much prayer and discussion, they felt able to make the step.

“We knew that this was what God was calling us to,” says Craig, who joined the church around 18 months ago.

“It was obvious they were already doing the job. So over four months, I spent time talking to all three, praying with them, helping them to recognise the roles that they were already playing. Anyone in my position would have done the same.

“It was just such a joy when they finally saw that this was God's way forward for them and the church. The trio offer the church insight into the real needs of people coming from the Middle East and insight into the impact of the decisions we make. They bring cultural language identity to meetings, as well as an enormous amount of wisdom. Elders' meetings will be paused to directly ask them: ‘how is that going to impact the people coming in here?’



Their responses have directly shaped the church's RAS ministry", Craig says.

All three have been an enormous help in clarifying issues and providing support needed in difficult cases involving the Home Office. Two of them make themselves available for the drop-ins when they can. "That has been really helpful because we can cut through a lot of misunderstanding," says Craig.

Sermons are translated into Farsi and sometimes Sorani (a Kurdish language). The trio have helped the church prepare what Craig describes as 'a robust baptismal preparation', to help ensure people taking the classes do not see them as 'a ticket to asylum'. They join Craig in leading the baptism courses, as well as leading *Alpha* and *Freedom in Christ* courses.

"They've helped this church really dig into the difference between 'I'm going to do this because I want to stay in the country', as opposed to 'I'm going to do this because I truly believe that Jesus is going to change my life.' It's what we all look for, but these people have helped us make that into something we can really work with."

Craig says he is receiving enquiries each week now for these Farsi-translated baptism materials.

As well as the practical elements, there are strong spiritual gifts. They have a hunger for Jesus and understanding of the Holy Spirit.

"We forget the impact sometimes that Jesus really has, and these three can hear those stories and encourage the understanding that it's not church, it's not a priest - it's the work of the Holy Spirit. So many people are so

inoculated against Christianity in this country that we forget what it's like to be desperately hungry for Jesus."

They've also been involved in the church's growing deliverance ministry – their culture means they are acutely aware of the supernatural. "They have taken spiritual authority," says Craig.

Craig believes Stockton's experience is giving exciting pointers to the future.

"We are purposefully pushing into multi-ethnic church. People coming to our shores are bringing in energy and a passion for Jesus. A lot of that energy isn't just African, South American, the usual places - it's also coming now from the people washing up on our shores. They are ready now to take their place as leaders of our churches, not single language churches, but in mainstream Baptist churches.

"Our RAS administrator said to me the growth we've seen in this last 18 months probably wouldn't have happened if these three had not accepted their calling. My job as pastor is so much richer for the whole fellowship because I have them on speed dial and it's such a blessing. God has empowered them, so when they speak, the whole community listens. When they speak from the platform on Sunday morning, the church listens. They're held in such respect by all here.

"They are part of our elders and our deacons and we love them. Their wisdom, the baptism process, the fact they encourage hunger for Jesus: they are truly and remarkably living out the life that we believe God is calling them to as elders.

"It's just a great little snapshot of what the kingdom of God looks like."

*\*The names of the three cannot be revealed for security reasons*

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