



Persecution continues at the reception centre

By Kari Fure

Netherlands - All Christians had to leave when Muslims started using the common kitchen at the reception centre for prayer. The centre manager did not intervene.

The Dutch Gave Foundation encourages churches and Christians to reach out to refugees. "The Church is called to show the love of Jesus to all, including refugees," says Marnix Visscher, co-ordinator juridical support. "We also believe that refugees need Dutch friends to help them integrating in Dutch society."

In recent years the organization has been committed to the improvement of the safety and religious freedom of Christians and other minorities in the reception centres. They are aware that refugees bring the culture of their countries of origin along with them into the reception centres in Europe. Christians who suffered from persecution in their home country may still face the same threats within the reception centres where they are to live together with people from majority groups that supported persecution. The reception centre management should be aware of that, Visscher says. The extent of intimidation and harassment has increased in the wake of the influx of refugees in the past year. Meanwhile, reception centres employ many new staff who lack sufficient awareness and training. In the Netherlands, people expect the state to guarantee the freedom of religion to all, but the freedom we enjoy in the community does not apply to minorities in the reception centres, Visscher notes.

Silenced Voices

Marnix Visscher believes that the incident with Muslims praying in the common kitchen is typical. When the Muslims were praying, no other could enter and cook their meals. This was a clear breach of the house rules, but the management did not intervene. Visscher believes that there was fear for trouble with the strong Muslim groups.

The Islamic majority in the reception centres is a challenge to other groups. Christians, Yazidi and other minority groups increasingly report pressure and harassment. Converts and gays in particular are vulnerable.

A wide spread complaint is the loud sound of the azaan (the call for prayer) from mobile phones five times a day. Also, moderate Muslims are forced to act as "good Muslims"; Islamic minorities do not dare to pray because their different way of praying may attract harassment; Christian women feel compelled to wear head scarves against their own wish. The overall picture is that minorities cannot safely practice their faith but rather keep a low profile and hide what they actually believe in.

Poster ban

Evangelism and Christian meetings are not allowed within the Dutch reception centres. Visscher has no problem here, but Churches must be allowed to advertise and invite for Christian meetings that are held outside the centres. However, even this is not allowed in several reception centres. In one

case a poster ban was introduced following a complaint by some Muslims who were upset about something being said at a Christian meeting they attended. This is rather weird. In public the government insists that refugees who arrive in the country must respect our human rights. In this case, however, the reception centre manager failed to explain to the Muslims that we have freedom of religion, of worship and of opinion and that they should do well getting used to that, Visscher says.

He also knows a reception centre where Christmas presents for the kids were banned for the mere fact that they were offered by Christians. This was said to be a violation the official neutrality of the reception centre. As a consequence, the Christians at this particular reception centre do not feel that the management takes them seriously and the support they much need from Churches and fellow Christians is withheld from them.

Staff needs training

Gave notes that reception centre staff are inclined to choose the easy way out of possible trouble and fail to intervene adequately when minority groups suffer from harassment. They also note that complaints from strong Muslim groups seem to be taken more serious by the managers than complaints from other resident groups. Visscher believes that fear for unrest is one explanation, but lack of training of personnel is also an issue:

- Staff must be aware of the culture the refugees bring into the reception centres and of the consequent behaviour. Improved education and training of staff will be a good start to tackle the problems. This should help the strengthening of the minorities' freedom of belief.
- When new refugees arrive at the centres, they must be informed about our standards of freedom of religion and of speech, and the consequences it should have in practice. It must be spelled out that minorities enjoy these freedoms also.
- It is not indifferent who conveys the message. Staff must ensure that the message is not being distorted, Visscher says. He has noted that dominant Muslims often enter into an informal leadership role at the centres. If they are appointed to key positions and are asked to translate and convey important information, they may distort the message to their convenience as is not unusual in their culture, making minority groups even more vulnerable.

Bridge building

Marnix Visscher emphasizes that it is often a small group of dominant Muslims who cause trouble. They may be few, but can be very influential as they may press moderate Muslims to behave likewise. While he is keen to speak out about these issues he is also concerned that Dutch Christians should not refrain from befriending Muslim refugees. If we expect all Muslims to be hostile towards Christians, it could become a self-fulfilling prophecy, but if you reach out to Muslims and show them the love of Jesus, you will experience that most people are open to friendship and that they do not mind that you are Christian. In fact, they expect that you are. However, when people close their hearts for the refugees, the newcomers will not feel welcome and a divide between the refugees and the Dutch population is easily created. As Christians, however, we are called to bridge this gap.