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On the Frontlines of the Migration Crisis: Faith-based Support for Asylum Seekers in Manchester, UK

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<SUMMARY>
This paper draws on ethnographic research carried out in a network of emergency night shelters for refused asylum seekers in Manchester, UK. Located in churches throughout the city, these shelters provide informal accommodation for men who have been made destitute following the refusal of asylum claim. With particular focus on volunteers working in the night shelters, this paper argues that a 'theo-ethics' based on notions of Christian love – or *agape* - often informs individual and organisational practices of care while also recognising the limitations of this work in the face of the wider and systemic injustices of the UK asylum system.

1. Introduction:

At 8.30 pm on a cold Friday evening in mid-winter, a minibus pulls up outside the Longsight Community Church [LCC] in Manchester, UK. Twelve men step out and make their way into the building. They will be spending the night inside the church. The men are primarily from the Middle East, North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa and have had their claims for asylum in the United Kingdom (UK) rejected. In the UK, refused asylum seekers do not have the right to work and are barred from accessing public funds such as welfare support and social housing. They are also expected to leave the UK, although many are unwilling or unable to do so. Without a means to support themselves and living under threat of possible arrest, detention and deportation, many refused asylum seekers become dependent on charities to meet their most basic needs including food, shelter, warmth and safety. Inside the church a group of volunteers have prepared a hearty, warm meal for the men and bedding and toiletries will be given out for the night. Some volunteers will stay for the meal and socialise with the men before leaving, while others will stay overnight, sleeping in the church alongside the destitute and refused asylum seekers taking shelter.

This scene plays out every night of the week over the winter months between November and April in different churches across Greater Manchester. The LCC is one of seven informal, emergency night shelters organised by the Boaz Trust, a local faith-based organisation [FBO] that provides housing, emergency accommodation, legal advocacy and well-being support to both female and male refused asylum seekers in the city. The night shelters are offered specifically to men who would otherwise be street homeless and although the Boaz Trust coordinates the shelter network, each venue is operated by an individual church that opens its building one night a week for up to twelve men. Each church also provides its own set of volunteers, bedding, food and supplies. Located throughout the city, from leafy middle-class suburbs to post-industrial working-class areas, the night shelters are at once sites of displacement, on the fringes of public life and society while also being focal points of community activity, responding to the injustices of the UK's asylum system and wider border regime. There is a long-standing 'culture of denial' and 'disbelief' within the UK asylum system as most applications for protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention are refused in the first instance.[1] According to the most recent statistics, 29,504 asylum applications were lodged in the UK in 2018 and of the 13,242 initial decisions made that year 7,669 – or 68 per cent – were refusals.[2] This high percentage of refusals was similar to the years 2017 and 2016 which together form the most recent examples of trend dating back nearly three decades.[3] There are no official records on the numbers of refused and destitute asylum seekers living in the UK and estimates vary widely. However, the British Red Cross and Boaz Trust suggest that between 300 – 400 people access refugee and asylum seeker support services across Greater Manchester each week.[4] In its 2006 report on destitution among refused asylum seekers, the national organisation Refugee Action remarked that,

[1] Refugee Action, *The Destitution Trap: Research into Destitution Among Refused Asylum Seekers in the UK* (London: Refugee Action, 2006), p.58; Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, *Moving On: From Destitution to Contribution* (York: Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, 2007), p.7; Independent Asylum Commission, *Fit For Purpose Yet?* (London: IAC, 2008), p.2; Anna Rowlands, *For Our Welfare and Not Our Harm: A Faith-based Report on the Experience of the Refugee and Refugee Support Community at JRS UK 2017-2019* (London: Hurtado Jesuit Centre, 2019), p.13.

[2] Refugee Council, *Asylum Statistics Annual Trends February 2019*, http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Asylum_Statistics_Annual_Trends_Mar_2019.pdf [accessed 18 December 2019].

[3] Ibid; Georgina Sturge, *Asylum Statistics*, House of Commons Library Briefing Paper no.SN01403 (London: House of Commons Library, 2019), §2.1.

[4] British Red Cross and Boaz Trust, *A Decade of Destitution: Time to Make a Change* (Manchester: British Red Cross, 2013), p.7.

there exists in Britain a new and growing excluded class of people whose asylum applications have been refused, who are afraid or unable to return to their countries of origin, who have no contact with authorities, no access to work or mainstream support services, and little prospect of their situation being resolved.[5]

The LCC, along with the seven other churches in the Boaz Trust night shelter network, is effectively on the frontline of this growing crisis among refused asylum seekers. It is a crisis created by the UK asylum system.

This paper is based on ethnographic research carried out in the Boaz Trust night shelters over multiple winter seasons between 2012 and 2018 which not only included participant observation as a shelter volunteer and manager, but also three weeks spent living in the night shelters, moving between venues and sleeping on a different church floor each night of the week alongside the other men. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and conversations with volunteers over the course of this research, as well as church newsletters and public statements, this paper explores the motivations and practices informing the work of shelter volunteers and Boaz Trust employees. Ultimately, it argues that many of the primarily Christian volunteers put into a practice a highly politicised notion of Christian love – or *agape* – that not only attempts to offer unconditional care and support to the most marginalised and vulnerable, but also offers an alternative ethics to the ingrained disbelief within the asylum system. In doing so, it also indicates how some volunteers draw on their own personal experiences of migration or family histories of migration as a motivation for volunteering. This paper begins by contextualising the situation faced by refused asylum seekers in the UK within the wider, global migration crisis and details how the UK asylum system actively produces homelessness among asylum seekers before elaborating on the work of the night shelter volunteers.

2. Rethinking the Border in the Age of Migration

In many respects, we are living in what Castles, de Haas and Miller have termed 'the age of migration'.[6] This is not to say that migration is a new phenomenon in human history or society, but

[5] Refugee Action, *The Destitution Trap: Research into Destitution Among Refused Asylum Seekers in the UK* (London: Refugee Action, 2006), p.2.
[6] Stephen Castles, Heine de Haas, Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, 5th edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

rather that it has taken on an increasingly political dimension over the past few decades. International migration is now a major factor in economic, political and social change in all regions of the world. A defining feature of the age of migration, according to Castles, de Haas and Miller, is the supposed challenge that international migration poses to the sovereignty of nation states and their perceived ability to manage the movement of people across borders.[7] This challenge can easily 'catapult governments into reactivity', as Sarah Spencer writes.[8] The age of migration is also an age of expanding border controls and from the early twentieth century onwards national borders have become an increasingly ubiquitous part of social and political life. Such controls can extend both externally and internally. They may include extra-territorial processing and policing and – in the case of Australia – even off-shore imprisonment. They may also include various internal restrictions on migrant employment rights, access to healthcare and education and regulations on residency and lengths of stay in a particular country, among many other things. Border controls, whether inside or outside the formal boundaries of a nation state, are often applied unevenly and serve to differentiate and stratify individuals and groups along the lines of race, class and nationality. In other words, in the age of migration, the promise of greater mobility through new and accessible transport and communication technologies is available to some more than others.

Another facet of the age of migration is the increasing numbers of forcibly displaced peoples across the globe as a result of persecution, conflict, violence and human rights violations.[9] The age of migration is also the 'age of the refugee', to borrow a phrase from the postcolonial scholar Edward Said.[10] According to the latest annual report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], there are currently 70.8 million forcibly displaced people worldwide.[11] This a record amount. The term 'forcibly displaced' encompasses a complex set of statuses and circumstances and includes 41.3 million internally displaced people who have fled their homes but remain within their own countries as well as 25.9 million refugees and 3.5 million asylum seekers.[12] The differences between the categories of refugee and asylum seeker are not only crucial to the remainder of this paper, but are also indicative of the ways in which border regimes stratify and shape people in uneven ways. Under the 1951 Refugee Convention a refugee is someone who is unable or unwilling to return

[7] *The Age of Migration*, p.5.
[8] Sarah Spencer, 'Introduction' in *The Politics of Migration: Managing Opportunity, Conflict and Change*, ed. by Sarah Spencer (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) pp.1-24 (p.1).
[9] UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2018* (UNHCR: 2019).
[10] Edward Said, 'Reflections on Exile' in *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta Press, 2000), pp.173-186 (p.174).
[11] UNHCR, *Global Trends*, p.2.
[12] Ibid.

to their country of origin due to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular group or political opinion.[13] 'Asylum seeker', on the other hand, is a policy term for someone who has crossed an international border in search of protection, but whose claim for refugee status has not yet been decided.[14] While the term 'refugee' has a specific international legal genealogy, as the sociologist Imogen Tyler writes, the concept of the asylum seeker evokes a sort of non-status, where a person has not yet been recognised or may not be recognised as a refugee.[15] The asylum seeker resides in limbo, in the precarious and contingent position of a person awaiting a decision, a person who is no longer protected by his or her own state, but does not yet fit the exceptional category of a refugee who requires protection.[16] An asylum seeker may become a refugee if their application for protection is accepted or they may become a 'refused' or 'failed' asylum seeker if their application is rejected. As Tyler notes, in the UK, the category of asylum seeker only came into legal and political prominence in the 1990s as a means to distance those in need of protection from gaining refugee status, enabling the UK to manoeuvre around its obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention.[17] This 'fractioning' of the refugee label into the more degraded categories of asylum seeker and refused asylum seeker speaks to a more general need to re-think our understanding of national borders.[18] Rather than being understood simply as fixed lines demarcating formal inclusion and exclusion from a nation state, borders can be more precisely understood as a regime of institutions, practices, policies and laws that continually shape and re-shape people according to a stratified set of social and legal statuses – from the refugee to the international student and from the refused asylum seeker to the temporary worker – each with their own set of rights, restrictions and varying degrees of exposure to border enforcement, policing and regulation.[19] Borders are 'productive and generative', forming and re-forming the subjectivities of

[13] United Nations High Commission for Refugees, *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees* (1951), Article 1, A (2).
[14] Castles, De Haas & Miller, *The Age of Migration*, p.222.
[15] Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (London: Zed Books, 2013), p.83.
[16] Vicki Squire, *The Exclusionary Politics of Asylum* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p.3.
[17] Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, p.83.
[18] Robert Zetter, 'More Labels, Fewer Refugees: Remaking the Refugee Label in an Era of Globalization', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 20:2 (2007), 172-192.
[19] Étienne Balibar, 'What is a Border?' in *Politics and the Other Scene*, trans. by Christine Jones, James Swenson and Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2002), pp.75-86; Bridget Anderson, Nandita Sharma and Cynthia Wright, 'Why No Borders?', *Refuge*, 26.2 (2009), 5-18 (pp.6-7); Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, 'Between Inclusion and Exclusion: One the Topology of Global Space and Borders', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 29:4/5 (2012), 58-77; Mezzadra and Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Mark Justin Rainey, 'Colonus and Lampedusa: The Tragedy of the Border and the Dialectics of Repair', *Third Text*, 32:1 (2018), 150-160 (pp.151-153); Harsha Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2013), p.37.

people who encounter them in sometimes vicious and antagonistic ways.[20] This is particularly the case for refused asylum seekers and in this respect, I wish to argue that borders cause crises in the lives of individuals, groups and communities. In the following section I will detail how the UK asylum system actively produces destitution among asylum seekers, creating a 'growing excluded class of people' in cities such as Manchester.

3. Asylum in the UK: Enforced Destitution and Compulsory Dispersal

Under the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act, asylum seekers in the UK are subject to compulsory dispersal to towns and cities outside London and the south east of England on a no-choice basis to live in state-backed by privately operated National Asylum Support Service [NASS] accommodation while their claims are processed. Along with accommodation, asylum seekers also receive a cash allowance of £37.75 a week which is well below the standard £73.10 a week available through mainstream welfare support.[21] While the initial rationale behind dispersal was to ease the supposed strain that asylum seekers placed on public services and housing in London and the south east as well as deter the long-term settlement of refugees in these areas, the policy was also shaped by economic opportunities and the availability of cheap and vacant housing in areas of the UK including towns and cities in Scotland, Wales and the north of England. Dispersal therefore typically involves relocating a vulnerable group of people to areas of the country with existing social deprivation and poverty.[22] The UK's dispersal policy not only assumes that asylum seekers are a burden on public services and consequently should be managed and controlled through compulsory relocation, but also constructs asylum seekers as transient figures, who are unable to create lasting connections in the

[20] Anderson, Sharma and Wright, 'Why No Borders?', p.6.

[21] This was reduced from £42 in 2009. The original figure was set at the equivalent of 70 per cent of Job Seeker's Allowance. cf Heaven Crawley, Joanne Hemmings and Neil Price, *Coping with Destitution: Survival and Livelihood Strategies of Refused Asylum Seekers Living in the UK* (Oxford: Oxfam, 2011), p.8.

[22] Alice Bloch and Liza Schuster, 'At the Extremes of Exclusion: Deportation, Detention, Dispersal', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28:3 (2005), 491-512; Robert Zetter, David Griffiths and Nando Sigona, 'Social Capital or Social Exclusion? The Impact of Asylum-Seeker Dispersal on UK Refugee Community Organizations', *Community Development Journal*, 40:2 (2005), 169–181 (p.171); Liza Schuster, 'A Sledgehammer to Crack a Nut: Deportation, Detention and Dispersal in Europe', *Social Policy and Administration*, 39:6 (2005), 606-621 (p.617); Jenny Phillimore and Lisa Goodson, 'Problem or Opportunity? Asylum Seekers, Refugees, Employment and Social Exclusion in Deprived Urban Areas', *Urban Studies*, 43:10 (2006),1715-1736 (pp.1715-1717); Deborah Phillips, 'Moving Towards Integration: The Housing of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Britain', *Housing Studies*, 21:4, no.4 (2006), pp.539-553 (p.542); Nicholas Gill, 'Governmental Mobility: The Power Effects of the Movement of Detained Asylum Seekers Around Britain's Detention Estate', *Political Geography*, 28 (2009), 186-196 (p.187).

communities where they have been forced to temporarily reside.[23] The structure of NASS and the dispersal system also pushes asylum seekers into destitution where an individual is rendered homeless and unable to meet their most basic needs of food, shelter, safety and warmth. Although destitution may be experienced throughout the asylum claims process, particularly if NASS support is withdrawn or delayed, the majority of reported destitution occurs at the end of the claims process, following an initial decision.[24] Those who are granted refugee status or other forms of protection in the UK must vacate their NASS accommodation within 28 days and are expected to find housing and employment or sign up to mainstream welfare support. Many are unable to do so within this short time and experience temporary homelessness as a result. Those whose claims are rejected must vacate their NASS accommodation within 21 days and are expected to leave the country. Many are unable or afraid to return to their countries of origin and without access to welfare support and without the right to work in the UK become reliant on friends and acquaintances or charities like the Boaz Trust to meet their most basic needs. Refused asylum seekers are effectively abandoned in the towns and cities where they were dispersed, including Greater Manchester.

4. Theo-ethics and the Longsight Community Church

I am an immigrant. A privileged one, to be sure. […] I live in a community of immigrants. My church consists of as many as 20 different nationalities among around 100 people. Outside the doors of the church are many more - many from Eastern Europe, and many more who have fled the conflicts of Iraq and Syria as well as Somalia and Sudan. Many of them may be called 'legal' immigrants, but many arrived by means outside the official channels seeking refuge from violence and economic ruin at home. Even in our church we have those who came legally and illegally. […] Our church is a refuge for refugees. During winter months we offer shelter, food, and hot water to homeless asylum seekers left destitute by the government because they have not persuaded the authorities that their cases are genuine. In some cases it is not difficult to discern that there is no danger for them to return

[23] Schuster, 'A Sledgehammer to Crack a Nut', p.608; Zetter, Giffiths and Sigona, 'Social Capital or Social Exclusion?', p.176; Gill, 'Governmental Mobility', p.187; Patricia Hynes, *The Dispersal and Exclusion of Asylum Seekers: Between Liminality and Belonging* (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2011); Squire, *The Exclusionary Politics of Asylum*, pp.116-141; Jonathan Darling, 'Forced Migration and the City: Irregularity, Informality and the Politics of Presence', *Progress in Human Geography*, 41:2 (2017), 178-198 (pp.182-183).

[24] Hannah Lewis, *Still Destitute: A Worsening Problem for Refused Asylum Seekers* (York: Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, 2009), §2; British Red Cross and Boaz Trust, *A Decade of Destitution*, p.5; Crawley, Hemmings and Price, *Coping with Destitution*, p.16.

home; but in the greatest majority of cases there is only danger and loss and ruin to return to. We don't differentiate in our offer of support between the two cases. God is our judge.[25]

- Glenn, Longsight Community Church Night Shelter Volunteer

The Longsight Community Church [LCC] belongs to the Church of the Nazarene, an international evangelical denomination in the Methodist tradition. Although the LCC traces its roots back to Victorian-era industrial Manchester, its current building and location only date back to 1985.[26] Longsight is an ethnically diverse area of inner-city Manchester and, along with the surrounding areas of Rusholme and Levenshulme, it has served as an entry point for migrants from around the world throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. As Glenn's above statement indicates, this local context not only shapes the life and character of the church with its multinational congregation made up of people with varying social, legal and immigration statuses, but it has also shaped its relationship to the surrounding community. Glenn is a North American migrant to the UK and a semi-retired academic who is also an ordained minister within the Church of the Nazarene. He has taken up different leadership positions within the LCC over the years and played an important role in establishing links with the Boaz Trust which eventually led to the church joining the night shelter network and opening its building one night a week for refused asylum seekers. Glenn and his family often prepare meals for the night shelter and during a recorded interview with a group of volunteers from the LCC he stated that the church had an obligation to serve the surrounding community and address its particular needs:

It's part of this church particularly that it exists for the sake of the community around it. […] It's our responsibility to the people who are there. I didn't go out looking for asylum seekers, they came through the door. So, then we realised what the situation was and [asked] "what do we do?"

In a similar manner, an overnight volunteer named Andy, who was in his mid-thirties and also from a migrant background, stated in a separate interview that, 'I do think that it is important that the churches do outreach, work in the community, help the poor and weakest'. 'From a church point of

[25] This statement was originally posted by 'Glenn' on a social media platform and is used with permission.
[26] For more information visit https://www.longsightnazarene.org/ [accessed 3 January, 2020] and https://nazarene.org/ [accessed 3 January, 2020].

view', he argued, 'it is whether the church should be insular or doing other things and looking out towards the community. If it's not interacting with or helping the community is there any point in it being there?'. Like many other churches on the shelter network, the LCC was much more than a place of Christian worship. It functioned as a sort of community centre within Longsight. Throughout the week the LCC would host dance classes, exercise classes, narcotics anonymous meetings, English language classes, community meals and community gardening activities, among many other things. All this was alongside the weekly night shelter over the course of each winter.

The human geographer Paul Cloke has introduced the notion of 'theo-ethics' to describe the ways in which religious faith can translate into practices of care towards others, both individually and organisationally.[27] Informed by politicised theological concepts such as love and hope and justice, the theo-ethical cuts across the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the material and serves to open up spaces and opportunities for counter-narratives and practices that challenge the current order and its hierarchical social relations. The non-judgemental, unconditional support offered to asylum seekers and refused asylum seekers by the LCC, as articulated by Glenn, is an example of such theo-ethical practice, particularly as asylum seekers and refused asylum seekers have been subject to the UK asylum system's abiding culture of disbelief and denial. The emergence of the theo-ethical as a concept has coincided with a much wider recognition that FBOs, churches and religious groups are increasingly eschewing 'salvationist' approaches to charitable work – in which charity is viewed as an opportunity to convert people – in favour of approaches based on unconditional love, acceptance and dignity.[28] Churches such as the LCC should look outwards and exist for the sake of the community as both Glenn and Andy have suggested and in the next section we will see how such theo-ethical views and practices centre around notions of Christian love or *agape*.

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[27] Paul Cloke, 'Geography and Invisible Powers: Philosophy, Social Action and Prophetic Potential', in *Emerging Geographies of Belief*, ed. by C. Brace et al (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 9-29; Paul Cloke, 'Theo-ethics and Radical Faith-based Praxis in the Postsecular City', in *Exploring the Postsecular: The Religious, the Political and the Urban*, ed. by J. Beaumont and A. Molendujk (Amsterdam: Brill, 2010), 223-241; Paul Cloke, 'Emerging Geographies of Evil? Theo-ethics and Postsecular Possibilities', *Cultural Geographies*, 18:4 (2011), 475-493.

[28] Justin Beaumont and Chris Baker (eds.) *Postsecular Cities: Space, Theory, Practice* (London: Continuum, 2011); Justin Beaumont and Paul Cloke (eds.) *Faith-Based Organisations and Exclusion in European Cities* (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2012); Paul Cloke, Jon May and Sarah Johnsen, *Swept Up Lives? Re-Envisioning the Homeless City* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); Andrew Williams, Paul Cloke and Samuel Thomas, 'Co-constituting Neoliberalism: Faith-based Organisations, Co-option and Resistance in the UK', *Environment and Planning A*, 44 (2012), 1479-1501; Paul Cloke, Justin Beaumont and Andrew Williams, *Working Faith: Faith-Based Organisations and Urban Social Justice* (Milton Keynes: Pater Noster, 2013); Andrew Williams, 'Postsecular geographies: theo-ethics, rapprochement and neoliberal governance in a faith-based drug programme', *Transactions*, 40 (2015), 192-208.

5. Works of Love

I take that word 'justice', not to mean legality. I would take that to mean, in my view, that everybody is made in the image of God and everybody is loved by God and therefore just because somebody happens to be born in a part of the world that is oppressive, it doesn't mean that they should be excluded from the benefits we received.

- Boaz Trust Employee

If I'm a Christian and following Christ, his model was people and loving people. He was so big on that. Everywhere in the Bible is about helping your neighbour and loving people. Love is the biggest commandment in the Bible.

- Joy, Night Shelter Volunteer

Over the course of the interviews I conducted with over twenty shelter volunteers and Boaz Trust employees, the notion of Christian love or *agape* would often come up in conversation, particularly when the discussion turned to the role that faith played in their volunteer work or employment and their motivation for working in the night shelters or wider refugee justice sector. During one interview, an employee from the Boaz Trust emphasised how Christian love underpinned the ethical values of the organisation. 'God is love', he said simply and succinctly, 'and he loves the foreigner and those who are displaced and those who are suffering and those who are less well off than us. We're called to do that [love]'. At its most basic, the Christian 'call' to love means to love your neighbour as yourself. This love was the 'biggest commandment' in the Bible, as Joy said during her interview. Joy was a migrant to the UK and originally from Nigeria. She volunteered every Saturday afternoon during the winter months when her church prepared lunch for the men staying in the night shelters. When Joy talked about the 'biggest commandment' she was most likely referring to the words spoken by Jesus Christ in the New Testament. When asked what the most important commandment within Jewish law was, Jesus replied,

"You shall love the Lord your God will all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind". This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself".[29]

In his meditations on the commandment to love, the 19th century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard argued that there were no limits to who is one's neighbour because 'one's neighbor is all men, unconditionally every human being'.[30] Everyone is made in God's image – or carries 'eternity's mark' in Kierkegaard's words – despite being caught up in a world of stratified and hierarchical social relations.[31] To love one's neighbour is to 'become a neighbor oneself'.[32] In other words, Christian love is a process – a 'becoming' – rather than a static state of being and it requires continual work and practice. Love is an action, rather than a feeling as the anti-racist, feminist scholar bell hooks writes.[33] For hooks there can be no love without justice and there can be no justice without love.[34] The two concepts must fold into one another in practice. The realisation that love is a practice is important, particularly in the context of the night shelters. Volunteers and employees rarely declare aloud their ethics to others, except, perhaps, when asked directly by a researcher during a semi-structured interview. These ethics and theo-ethics are rather embodied in the in the ordinary practices, routines and activities necessary to keep the night shelters open such as preparing and serving meals, setting up the shelter supplies and packing them away, washing up dishes and vacuuming the building and opening the church in the evening and closing it in the morning. For some volunteers the shared evening meals were particularly important. Kevin, a retirement-age volunteer who was born and raised in Longsight explained that 'when you share food with somebody you share a fundamental experience'. 'Food has an amazing connection with people', he continued. 'It doesn't matter, even if you only talk about the food or what they like, it makes a connection'. Similarly, in his reflections in a church newsletter, Zack, who was a young American migrant living in Manchester and in his mid-twenties wrote:

As we ate with them [the men in the night shelters], we began connecting with them, sharing laughter and small pieces of our lives together. While some of them kept to themselves, many wanted to be

[29] Matthew 22:37-39 (NRSV).
[30] Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. by Howard Hong and Edna Hong (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), p.79.
[31] Ibid. p.97.
[32] Ibid, p.22.
[33] bell hooks, *All About Love* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p.13
[34] Ibid, p.19, p.30.

known and recognised as fellow people with names and stories and histories. […] It was humbling to encounter these men who would sleep on a different floor each night. Often while returning home from the night shelter thinking about my interactions with the men, I felt my own humanity and identity had somehow deepened.

These 'connections' over shared meals as described by both Kevin and Zack, were grounded in a mutual recognition and a shared sense of common humanity. The most important thing, Kevin added during his interview, was not the food itself but 'to be seen as a human being'. In this sense the shared meals were moments of 'becoming neighbour' which took place in a non-judgemental context, entirely different to the antagonism and culture of disbelief within the UK's asylum system that had ultimately shaped the lives of the men staying in the shelters in malign ways. In her research on community responses to the United Kingdom's asylum system and wider border regime, Vicki Squire has introduced the notion of 'mobile solidarities'. These are 'enactments of solidarity in which cultural categories and legal distinctions disappear or are relatively unimportant'.[35] They involve dynamic engagements between arriving migrants - including asylum seekers and refugees - and more established residents, while also creating moments of solidarity that collapse such distinctions.[36] The connections described by Zack and Kevin – grounded in Christian love as 'becoming neighbour' - are examples of such mobile solidarities. Yet, an important aspect of this idea is the mobility or temporariness of such acts of solidarity. Mobile solidarities are inherently momentary and can dissolve just as easily as they materialise. It is a sobering reminder that 'becoming neighbour' – articulated here as practices of Christian love – is a hard and arduous work, particularly when it is up against the sustained and systemic injustice of the asylum system.

6. Experiences of Migration and the Limits of Shelter Work

I've also found, that almost unanimously, in my contact with people in the immigration system, they believe the worst of every single person. They are not helpful because they don't believe these people should be here. They've got a whole system that is inherently against anybody coming into the country, right across the board. This is what I have found.

[35] Vicki Squire, 'From Community Cohesion to Mobile Solidarities: The City of Sanctuary Network and Strangers into Citizens Campaign', *Political Studies*, 59 (2011), 290-307 (p.292).
[36] Ibid, p.296.

- Glenn, Night Shelter Volunteer

As an immigrant here, I'm on countless visas. I think I'm on my sixth visa application now and it's just a lot of money and a lot of paperwork. And I'll whinge about it. And when I'm in the middle of the experience, I'll think about it [the night shelter] a lot. It's a slap in the face. I mean, at least I have the ability to do this. I'm ridiculously lucky in the fact that I have a home to go back to if it doesn't work out here. And also the finances, the means, and every box that they need ticked. It's personally quite convicting to have conversations and hear how spoiled I am sometimes.

- Kate, Night Shelter Volunteer

Perhaps due to the multinational character of the LCC and the surrounding community and wider city, many of the night shelter volunteers that I interviewed were, like myself, either migrants to the UK or had come from migrant backgrounds. This experience had given some volunteers a personal insight into the UK immigration system which allowed for unique reflections on the conditions faced by refused asylum seekers more specifically. As Kate stated in her comment above, although she had spent lots of time and money on 'countless visas', she still somehow felt 'lucky' and 'spoiled' in comparison to the men in the night shelters. The night shelters were a space where the unevenness of the UK border regime became starkly apparent. Kate was originally from the USA and, in the words that Glenn had applied to himself, was a sort of 'privileged immigrant'. Drawing further on her experience, and that of her father, who had immigrated to the USA from India, Kate continued,

My dad was an immigrant from India to the USA. And I've seen how difficult and frustrating that is, even if you have the means, finances and paperwork and the right degree and speak the right language. If that's frustrating for me on this level, how much more frustrating is it if you have all these other barriers, or people just won't listen to you or you can't speak the language or whatever? That was a big thing for me. The personal connection.

Lisa, a night shelter volunteer with mixed Kenyan and British heritage also found a 'personal connection' through her experiences of migration. 'It's [volunteering] is a big part of my life', she said, 'with the refugees in particular. It was more familiar to me because it's more similar to home. A lot of the people are from Africa and around the world and it was something that I was able to relate to a lot more'. Andy also drew on his family background and commented, 'being a second-generation immigrant, with my Dad coming over and seeking work – obviously that's different from

asylum – but it's interesting about being accepted into this country'. For volunteers like Glenn, Kate, Lisa and Andy the night shelters not only provided a chance to reflect on their own experiences and family histories of migration, but also on the ways in which border regimes and the UK asylum system in particular, treated some people very differently than others.

The sociologist Les Back suggests that the problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of the 'immigration line'.[37] This problem describes the ways in which thick political and social lines are drawn between people, determining 'who can move freely across the globe and who cannot'.[38] Grounded in racisms both past and present, the immigration line, for Back, demarcates those lives that are endowed with the gift of citizenship and those that can be cut short with impunity.[39] The night shelters, where refused asylum seekers take temporary refuge, are spaces cut through with the problem of the 'immigration line'. In this respect, it's no wonder that while volunteers often spoke of love, non-judgemental care and creating connections between themselves and the men staying in the shelters, they also expressed frustration and concern about the minimal support that the night shelters could ultimately provide. For instance, Kevin, Andy and Kate all questioned why the night shelters had to close each spring. 'Why does it have to end in April?, Kate asked rhetorically during her interview. 'It's Britain. You're not guaranteed warm weather. I understand that it's a volunteer-based network and might fall apart at certain times in the year . . .'. In answering her own question Kate exposed the fragile nature of a network that was so dependent on volunteers and a disparate set of churches across the city. Opening the night shelters throughout the year may put a strain on the resources – human, material, financial - of some churches even though having the shelters open year-round seemed to meet an obvious need for some volunteers. Alongside this, the shelters only appeared to offer the most basic support in the face of the broader problems faced by many refused asylum seekers. 'What we do isn't justice. It's just the bare minimum', Carlos said to me as we left a café in the more affluent south Manchester suburb of Didsbury following an interview. 'A floor mat, some sleeping bags, two meals and a roof over your head for the night isn't justice, it's just the bare minimum'. Carlos was originally from Colombia and had lived in Spain for a number of years before settling in Manchester. In his mid-thirties, he now had a leadership position at the LCC and one of his responsibilities was organising the Friday night shelter. Carlos had taken issue with me raising the notion of 'justice' in relation to the night shelters during the interview and argued that, in his view, offering the bare minimum of support could not be considered something akin to justice.

[37] Les Back, *The Art of Listening* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), p.31.
[38] Ibid, p.11, p.31.
[39] Ibid, p.31.

Our conversation continued long after the recording had finished. During the interview Carlos had emphasised that the LCC's work with asylum seekers came to down 'to our Christian beliefs of helping people, whoever they are'. 'At least here [in the shelter]', he said, 'we can care for the very least of their needs'. On one hand, these comments were simply indicative of the multiple and divergent understandings that different people brought to their work in the shelters, but it was also a thoughtful reminder that sometimes the forms of unconditional support being offered can seem inadequate. There are always present tensions on the frontlines of the migration crisis when *agape* presses up against wider systemic injustice and mobile solidarities continually form and dissolve. 'Becoming neighbour', as I have described it here, is an always incomplete and speculative action, requiring constant and persistent work.

Conclusion

This paper was initially presented to the Institute for International Collaboration, Hokkaido University on 13 July 2018. At the time the UNHCR reported that there was an unprecedented 68.5 million displaced people in the world.[40] A year later this number increased by over 2 million.[41] The annual *Global Trends* reports released by the UNHCR indicate that the current refugee crisis is mainly occurring within the developing world as the majority of the world's refugees are living in countries neighbouring conflict areas such as Turkey, Pakistan and Uganda.[42] In Lebanon one in six people is a refugee and in Jordan the number is one in fourteen people.[43] The world's largest refugee camp is in Kutupalong, Bangladesh with a population of over 600,000 people.[44] In other words, the frontlines of the migration crisis are primarily in the developing world, rather than on the shores of Europe and Australia or on the American border, however much the media may suggest otherwise. This is not to say that the crisis does not extend into developed countries. This paper has shown that it does. And a key argument is that border regimes, particularly in countries such as the UK, exacerbate the issue. Borders produce crises. The UK asylum system actively creates destitution among asylum seekers and refused asylum seekers, rendering people homeless and dependent on charitable support for prolonged periods of time. The problem of the immigration line, as Les Back describes it, with its social and legal demarcations, cuts through to the very heart of our social life together, creating stratifications and hierarchies between people in shared spaces and environments.

[40] UNHCR, *Global Trends in Forced Displacement in 2017* (UNHCR: 2018).
[41] UNHCR, *Global Trends in Forced Displacement in 2018* (UNHCR, 2019),
[42] Ibid, p.3. Along with Sudan, Germany currently hosts 1.1 million refugees. Germany is the only developed country in the top five refugee host countries.
[43] Ibid.
[44] UNHCR, *Rohingya Refugee Response – Bangladesh: Refugee Population Density*. (UNHCR, 2019).

Kutupalong is a frontline of the refugee crisis and so too is Longsight in south Manchester, albeit in very different ways and to very different degrees. This paper has also elaborated on the work being done by religious groups, FBOs and churches in support of destitute, refused asylum seekers in the UK and how practices of Christian love, understood here through the notions of 'becoming neigbour' and 'mobile solidarities', often press against the systemic injustices of the border regime, offering moments of recognition and support – in often limited ways – that counter the culture of denial and disbelief in the UK asylum system.