

Church Times

28 November 2008

www.churchtimes.co.uk

Reproduced with permission

'Champion needed' for migrant workers

by Ed Beavan

The UK is failing to protect its large numbers of migrant workers, who remain vulnerable to exploitation and poor working conditions, delegates at a debate organised by the Ecumenical Council for Corporate Responsibility (ECCR) heard last week.

The event at Friends House in central London was chaired by Lord Harries of Pentregarth, the former Bishop of Oxford, and included contributions from the GMB Union, the Gangmasters Licensing Authority, and a support group for migrant workers.

The Revd Dr David de Verny, former Chaplain to new-arrival communities in south-east Lincolnshire, described as "shameful" the comments of the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, who in September warned that current levels of immigration were causing "visceral distress", and could lead to violence in the UK.

Dr de Verny said that while women had Germaine Greer to fight their corner, and gay people had Peter Tatchell, there was no champion speaking out for migrant workers' rights.

"Come to rural parts of England and see the problems we have with isolation and gangmasters trying to sail very close to the wind," he said, "and how we as a nation fail the foreign workers who come here. Don't forget migrant workers when you're eating something that has been plucked out of the ground, washed, or packaged by them."

Dr de Verny, who is now Chaplain at the University of Hull, said that 25 per cent of all the UK's processed food came from Lincolnshire, and that the economy in the region would collapse without migrant workers. He also highlighted how right-wing parties often deliberately tried to confuse the electorate over the issues of asylum and migration for political ends, and called on churches to do more to reach out to migrant workers.

"Every church can give English lessons for free, and do more than they're doing already. We have not had any strong leadership in the Anglican Church. We don't have a migration workers' chaplain in any diocese now, and that's the main problem."

Barbara Storey, who comes from Poland but now lives in Southampton, has set up the SOS Polonia charity to support the migrant Polish community in the city. About half of them have been exploited, she says.

Ms Storey talked of the "seven deadly sins of employers" in the UK, which include the practice of failing to issue contracts or payslips for migrant workers, paying them below the minimum wage, and asking them to sign documents they do not understand.

She spoke of the "Titanic experience" of many Poles in Southampton, where the unknown concepts of P60s, P45s, and the DVLA meant that many of them felt as if they were "jumping into the ocean".

"These people have no English, but are desperate for work; they don't know the system. Just 14 of 2500 Poles we surveyed have found jobs which they are qualified for in Poland." She

said there are now 150,000 “Euro orphans” in Poland — children who have either one or both parents working in the UK while they remain in Poland.

The conference was also addressed by the chairman of the Gangmasters Licensing Authority, Paul Whitehouse, who said that moves to widen the remit to stop exploitation among migrant workers and to regulate the cleaning and construction industry would depend on the political will of those in government.