

Australian Jesuit to head JRS South Africa

The former Director of JRS Australia, Fr David Holdcroft SJ, has been appointed Country Director of JRS in South Africa, and will take up his new position in August. He will be in charge of the three offices comprising JRS South Africa, located in Pretoria, Johannesburg, and the northern Limpopo region which borders Zimbabwe.

While South Africa is home to refugees from across Africa, JRS is specifically tasked with helping Zimbabwean refugees to establish themselves in South Africa. Last year alone, they assisted nearly 30,000 people. 'We provide everything from accommodation for unaccompanied minors and other vulnerable groups to food vouchers, fee support to enable young people to attend school, text-books, basic toiletries and so on', says David. 'We also offer micro credit to help people begin businesses so they can be self-sustaining.'

Having spent the past year as a tertian in Boston, David is looking forward to re-engaging with asylum seekers. In preparation, he recently spent some time in a refugee camp in Malawi, an experience which clarified the extreme conditions that cause people to seek asylum elsewhere. 'My work in Malawi certainly reinforced for me the pressure, intensity and sheer desperation of people who have been stuck in camps for up to 15 years with their life on hold and totally powerless over their situation', he says. 'I don't think I had quite realised the extent of this when I was working in Australia. I can certainly better appreciate why some people try to come to Australia against seemingly insurmountable odds—they are escaping an intolerable situation not only in what initially caused them to move, but also in the camps!'

David says that refugees represent a failure of the international system upon which the rest of society relies. 'Refugees do not cause their situation, and so it is a classic opening for the Church to be working with these people to help restore their dignity.'

The shared experience of asylum seekers in Australia and South Africa will help David to draw on his previous experience in this new role. 'The issues facing asylum seekers in South Africa are broadly similar to those encountered by asylum seekers in Australia in that many of them have fled unjust political situations. Like Australia, these people face a public debate that questions whether they are really refugees', he says. 'For them such questions are superfluous as the struggle to survive from day to day is so dire.'

'Unlike Australia, South Africa has relied less on detention as a means of controlling the situation; all the asylum seekers live in the community although many struggle to find work. Also the numbers, though often exaggerated in the news media, are much, much bigger than in Australia.'

By Catherine Marshall

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