

Opening a Conversation about People Seeking Asylum

Since the beginning of 2015, the Sydney Alliance has been running a campaign to change the conversation about people seeking asylum inside our partner organisations. The purpose of this campaign is to address the polarization around this issue by giving members of civil society organisations an opportunity to engage with the real stories of asylum seekers and to build relationships with them by meeting them face to face in a safe space inside their organisation.

More than 4000 people have already been touched by this campaign, including more than 2500 people who have participated in table talks in faith communities including parishes and schools (and others who have heard asylum seekers' stories at mass and other meetings).

This campaign has been made possible by the financial contributions of the Vinnies NSW, the Catholic Diocese of Parramatta and Settlement Services International, among others. It is staffed by a part time Community Organiser and led by volunteers from a range of Sydney Alliance partner organisations.

What is involved?

The main activity is the “table talk” – a conversation inside a local community about and with people seeking asylum. Table talks take between 90 minutes and 2.5 hours. They emphasise respectful dialogue and mutual sharing of personal stories around values that are important to us. At each gathering asylum seekers are invited to share their story. Members also share their stories and to ask questions of an expert. The goal is to build solidarity, to find common ground in our shared values, and build the capacity of our organisations to stand with people seeking asylum.

The Sydney Alliance provides the following to participating organisations

- One or more asylum seekers / refugees who are prepared to share their story during table talks
- A suggested format for the conversation (with a focus on sharing stories and values).
- An expert to respond to participants' questions and reflections
- Someone to facilitate, or co-facilitate with a local leader if desired.

Participating organisations are asked to:

- Provide a venue and time to gather for the table talk
- Turn out members to take part in the table talk
- Meet at least twice with Sydney Alliance leaders beforehand to adapt the agenda to their community and values, and at least once afterwards for debriefing and follow up
- Identify and bring together a small group of leaders willing to run small groups at the table talk (with training and support from the Sydney Alliance).