

U.K. Deports Christians Under New Immigration Rules

✖ **March 12, 2009** – A prominent Christian musician and a team of college-age missionaries were recently deported from the United Kingdom under new immigration rules that require religious workers to be sponsored by a licensed organization and obtain visas to enter the country.

In early March, Colorado-based singer Don Francisco was denied entrance into London and a Master's Commission team from Arkansas was deported from Scotland because immigration officials said they needed work visas under new regulations introduced in November.

"One of the things that has been said to me over the last few days is that Christians have to operate under the radar all over the world," said Judy Littler Manners, a Christian leader based London. "But this is the first time they may be forced to do it in this country."

Francisco was scheduled to participate in the Christian musical *Why Good Friday*, which includes 10 of his songs. But when he arrived at Heathrow Airport on March 2, he was detained, fingerprinted and escorted onto a flight back to the U.S., because immigration officials said he lacked the proper paperwork.

"I felt like they were looking for reason to keep me out," said Francisco, who has traveled throughout the U.K. for 30 years without incident.

"Anyone who goes into England from this point on for any reason other [than] to be a tourist and just spend money had better have their ducks in a row," he added.

The previous day, a Master's Commission team from Arkansas was denied entrance into Scotland when an immigration worker learned they would be volunteering in soup kitchens in partnership with Assemblies of God churches in Edinburgh.

"She told us that we'd have to have a work visa," said Craig Johnson, associate youth minister at Harvest Time Church in Fort Smith, Ark., and leader of the missions team. "So essentially you can stay [in the U.K.] as a tourist for six months, but if you want to volunteer some of your time working in a soup kitchen, you have to have a work visa."

Johnson said the chief immigration officer had the power to allow the 11-member group through, but she instead returned them to the U.S. on March 4, when the first flight became available.

"The [immigration] team kept apologizing to us profusely," Johnson said. "The [chief immigration officer] had the power to just discretionally wave us through. She was just doing her job; I understand that. But discretionally she could have waved us through."

Christian leaders inside the U.K. said few ministries are fully aware of the complex new Home Office regulations, which were quietly introduced late last year. The rules require that religious workers be sponsored by an organization that has registered with the government, and applicants must pay a fee to obtain a work visa.

Volunteer missions workers would register under Tier 5 of the Australian-style points-based system, while ministers, who would be considered skilled workers, would apply under Tier 2.

"All migrants, not just charity workers, coming to the U.K. to work or study require a Certificate of Sponsorship," said a U.K. Border Agency spokesman. "Anyone without this certificate and the right visa will be refused entry."

Daniel Webster, parliamentary officer for the London-based Evangelical Alliance, said the regulations were introduced in response to illegal immigration and the increased threat of terrorism. But the complicated rules have left many ministers confused.

"The recent cases highlight just how complex these cases are and the urgent need for churches and ministries to be kept up to date," Webster said. "The Evangelical Alliance is working on a full analysis to help churches better understand the law so that this does not happen again."

Although no one *Charisma* spoke with was willing to attribute the deportations to an anti-Christian bias, some leaders are concerned that ministries may be disproportionately affected by the new rules.

"I think what a lot of us thinks is that there definitely is a sub-agenda here," Manners said. "It's not aimed at Christians, but the ones it's going to affect are going to be Christians because they're going to be honest. If Don Francisco had said he was a singer, he probably would have gotten through, but because he said 'gospel singer,' they got him."

Manners believes the new regulations are partly a means of generating income from the visa and sponsorship fees. But she said forcing sponsor organizations to register allows the government to create a master list of ministries and could open a door for officials to make "spot checks."

The Rev. Andrew Smith, superintendent of the Assemblies of God Churches in Scotland, said he was "horrified" by the way his nation treated the Arkansas missionaries. He said he paid the \$550 fee to sponsor the Master's Commission team, but the application was not processed in time.

"I felt that the team should have been allowed to stay even though technically our application was being processed by the U.K. Border Agency," he said. "Even though technically they

weren't allowed to do charitable work, they should have been allowed to stay as tourists."

He notified Member of Parliament Michael Connarty, who Smith said he was "outraged" at the deportation. Connarty is filing a complaint with the Home Office, but Smith wants to see the Border Agency issue a formal apology and refund of cost of the Arkansas team's airfare.

"We're not taking this lying down," Smith said, "because I was ashamed that my country would [deport the missionaries]. ... We don't want to be restricted from inviting co-workers from around the world in standing with us in sharing the gospel here."

Francisco said he still hopes to participate in the *Why Good Friday?* production, but he's worried that the deportation will prevent him from ever being allowed into the U.K.

"My main concern is that this one misinterpretation and misapplication of immigration law will result in my being unable to return to the U.K. in the future," he said. "One question that is always asked at a border is, 'Have you ever been denied entry into this country?' Unless this present situation is reversed, my truthful reply would probably result in yet another denial of entry."