A little girl in the Woomera Immigration Detention Centre asked, “Aren’t there any flowers in Australia?”
So the advocates sent masses of flowers to the detainees.
The desert bloomed.

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Murdoch University
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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Abstract

Following the Second World War, a theological re-examination of “suffering and hope” arose, led by authors such as Moltmann and Sölle; however, little has been written on the topic since the 1970s. Given this length of time, the question arose for me as to whether, in the light of a rapidly changing world, this past theology continues to provide a meaningful way of talking about suffering and hope. Would the reflections of contemporary Christians who have supported others in the depths of suffering have anything to add to how theologians explore the issue of suffering and hope?

In order to answer this, I decided to interview Australian Christians who had supported asylum seekers during a time of particularly severe immigration detention policies. Conditions experienced within Australia’s detention centres have contributed to the distress of already traumatised refugees; thus advocates who supported them have a unique experience of suffering and hope.

Drawing on phenomenology, a social research methodology that seeks to explore the meaning made out of experiences, I systematically reviewed themes arising from the reflections of some advocates and compared these themes alongside the theologies of Moltmann and Sölle.

The themes, many and varied in their scope, have been divided into three sections. The first section explores the issue of suffering, including the necessity for Christian theology to hold the darkness of life without turning too quickly towards hope, and the nature of sin and evil. In the second section, hope is explored starting with the question of whether it is permissible for theologians from a relatively privileged background to write about hope and progressing to explore Christian anthropology, compassion and forgiveness. Finally, I consider the question of what can be learnt from these reflections about the nature of God.
**Acronyms**

TPV  
Temporary protection visa

PPV  
Permanent protection visa

HREOC  
Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

CCWA  
Council of Churches of Western Australia

CARAD  
Coalition for asylum seekers, refugees and detainees

CASE  
Centre for Advocacy Support and Education for Refugees Inc.

UNHCR  
United Nations High Commission for Refugees

**Definitions**

Asylum seeker  
A person who has sought asylum but has not yet been granted refugee status.

Detainee  
A person who is detained in an immigration detention facility. Mostly detainees were also asylum seekers, but could also include people with other visa and immigration offences.

Refugee  
A person who has been formally recognised as having the right to seek asylum either under the refugee convention or the convention against torture. Whilst this may include people who have arrived in Australia on a permanent humanitarian visa, there is a focus on those who were granted a temporary protection visa on release from detention and therefore refugee generally refers to this group of people.
Acknowledgements

Given the interest in my research expressed by people I have come across in daily life, it would seem that the link between suffering and hope carries a universal resonance. I have had conversations about this theme in some of the most unlikely places, and the fact that people have been interested has given me energy to continue my work. While I do need to say thank you to the many people with whom I have had such conversations, there are of course a number of special people to mention.

Firstly, my sincere thanks to everyone who opened their lives to me by participating in the research. As I listened to your experiences during the interviews, I shared your laughter and tears and I became aware that for some people, the trauma of visiting the detention centres will continue to reverberate through your lives. It cannot have been easy to share such painful stories, particularly with someone you hardly knew and I am touched by your generosity in sharing your time and reflections with me to make this research possible.

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