

ONE MISSION MATTERS

REFUGEE RESPONSE

Autumn 2018 • No. 52

Recharging the Methodist DNA

The Church and the 'hostile environment'

Refugee-inspired music and art

Getting involved in community sponsorship



The **Methodist Church**
Living generously



Editorial

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Cover photo: Once a refugee, Maryam now volunteers at Open Doors, Hull
© Mark Kensett/TMCP

I remember sitting cross-legged on the floor of a sports centre on the outskirts of Dunkirk, playing 'Cat's Cradle' with a young boy with big, questioning eyes. My new young friend was a refugee. His family had fled Syria, travelling through all kinds of hardships that I can only imagine, all the time with hope that they would find shelter, security and a home. For a few weeks, his and a handful of other families had been given shelter in the leisure centre because the winter weather was so severe. However, we knew that in a few days' time they would have to move out, back into the 'Forest' – an area of parkland with no facilities and with the constant threat of the authorities destroying their tents and possessions to try to dissuade them from staying. Like many of the 28 million refugees in the world, they are at the mercy of traffickers and at risk of violence and abuse. They are also subject to the decisions of authorities who are increasingly giving in to right-wing pressure as they try to work out how to respond to this humanitarian crisis.

I am so very inspired by the stories of hope in action in this special edition of *One Mission Matters*. Through the love of Christian people and by God's grace, vulnerable people are being cared for and enabled to find that most precious thing: home. There are many ways we can help and despite the problem seeming so huge, if we look at the difference that we can make, when that is combined with the loving actions of other people of goodwill and with lobbying of those in power, we can make a massive difference. I had gone to Dunkirk with an interfaith group of women to visit the Women's Refugee Centre and support them in their work. It is through partnership that we can be most effective, and we can see that in the stories told in this magazine.

May God protect those who have no shelter, give hope to those who despair and prompt us to act with radical grace that we might be partners in the gospel task of transforming our world.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which reads 'Michaela A Youngson'. The signature is fluid and cursive.

The Revd Michaela A Youngson
President of the Methodist
Conference 2018/2019



Photos: © TMCP



REFUGEES: THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE

Recharging the Methodist DNA

Want to get things changed to be better for everyone? Then do it collaboratively and in true partnership, says the Revd David Butterworth, the Interfaith chaplain at the NEC Group.

Often churches point fingers and talk a lot, blaming others for not taking action. Members of the tiny St Andrew's Methodist Church in the Birmingham District sought to change the ethos surrounding them. Even though there are only 12 members in the church, it has become a powerhouse for change.

Some while ago, when cities were not yet accepting Syrian refugees, the members of St Andrew's wrote to the City Council leadership and developed meetings with local councillors and MPs. They forged relationships with the local Progressive synagogue, trade unions and the social justice group Citizens

UK Birmingham. The church heard that many warm-hearted 'Brummies' wished to offer sanctuary to Syrian refugees. So in the face of negativity from the likes of the English Defence League, St Andrew's and its partners and wider Birmingham Circuit churches challenged and encouraged the City Council to open its doors to 50 Syrian refugees (some of the first in Britain) when many cities were silent.

In front of 1,000 Brummies in the Great Hall at the University of Birmingham, they became a central part of the warm heart of Birmingham, speaking directly to its leaders. Collaboratively, they

said, "We have a dream ... that Birmingham will set a model of loving its neighbours and receive an initial tranche of 50 Syrian refugees." They recognised that they had a representative voice and could be instrumental in the saving of refugees' lives.

Members of the Methodist Church warm to the idea of 'recharging our DNA' and our roots of challenging injustices. Many younger members now see we have a great platform from which to speak and our voice resonates from centuries of experience. When young and old stand together, we can bring transforming hope to our cities and communities.

Photos: © Bashir Siraj



Open doors, open arms

For many of the people seeking refuge in Britain, a drop-in is usually their first point of contact with the local church. Here, we drop in on three different projects.

When Bashir Siraj fled to Britain from Pakistan, Open Doors at Princes Street Methodist Church in Hull helped him and his family settle into their new home town. Today, Bashir is Open Doors' Project Coordinator, overseeing the work of the project to give practical assistance to asylum seekers, refugees and migrant workers.

Open Doors began in 2000, with a few church members seeking to reach out to a group of Afghani men who were new to their neighbourhood. Today, more than 300 people from over 60 nationalities come to Open Doors' drop-in every Thursday, where Bahsir and a team of 60 volunteers are on hand to serve them.

"What inspires me is the aim and work of Open Doors," Bashir says. "We have our arms open in welcome to recognise each human being and to encourage them to grow in confidence. It's not just a

job to me; it's my passion to help because I've been through the process. We can't solve everything but we go the extra mile. We listen, and then respond with great care."

"There are other services in Hull offering help," says Jayne Mercer, a British Red Cross worker who visits the project to help asylum seekers and refugees trace family members. "But nowhere has the atmosphere Open Doors has. It really is the jewel in the crown."

A warm welcome

When asylum seekers arrive in the Borough of Blackburn With Darwen, the public service provider SERCO gives them an invitation to the ARC Project's weekly drop-in.

ARC is a project of the West Pennine Moors Circuit of the Methodist Church. Every Tuesday, ARC's drop-in offers a space for asylum seekers and refugees to

meet, socialise and share food together, with games and activities such as pool, table tennis and crafts. Representatives from ARC's partner organisations and various professionals involved with asylum seekers and refugees also attend.

"As the Church, we simply offer God's unconditional love to those who have been forced to leave behind everything they hold dear in their home country and find themselves in a strange land whose language and culture they do not understand," says the Revd John Howard-Norman, a superintendent minister in the circuit. "Through ARC, we offer those things that are universally understood: a warm welcome, an embrace, community and friendship; a safe space and support to guide those who are newly arrived in the UK through the maze of issues they face as they seek to rebuild their lives."

LEFT TO RIGHT: 1. Welcome to Open Doors! 2. Maryam, an Open Doors volunteer, giving out food donations. 3. Service with a smile at the Destitution Project, Bolton. 4. A visitor to the Destitution Project has a haircut.



Photos: © David O'Keeffe, Kath Webster



Free haircuts!

Every Wednesday – except for the one that falls between Christmas and New Year – refugees and asylum seekers living in Bolton congregate at the Bolton Methodist Mission building. This is where the Destitution Project has its base and hosts its weekly drop-in.

“Our service users come from over 40 countries and we see around 100 to 130 people each Wednesday,” says Kath Webster, the Destitution Project’s treasurer. “As part of the drop-in, we have a table tennis table, billiards and table football all day. One of our asylum seekers is a trained barber and he cuts hair for free. We have a small art group where people find peace expressing themselves, not only through the medium of paint but also through sound.

“Although this is not a Methodist venture as such, most of the volunteers are Christians. It has been a joy to work together to bring some help and happiness into the lives of our service users.”

You can hear more stories from the Open Doors centre in Hull in this year's Advent Offering. For more information about Advent Offering, see www.methodist.org.uk/adventoffering

Overflowing Love Advent Offering 2018

Come to our special all-age service

Support Mission in Britain to give a warm welcome to those in need

Caught in the web of the 'hostile environment'

Lucy Zwolinska, Policy and Engagement Officer for the Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT) explains.

Zaza is 37. I met him in a church drop-in centre for asylum seekers and refugees where he told me his story of fleeing Turkey after the military burned down his house in 1994. On seeking asylum in the UK, he had his claim rejected. He said the Home Office did not believe his story: "I told them to look it up on Google to see that it was true, but they didn't believe me."

Zaza's immigration status is now ambiguous; he describes himself as being 'underground'. He does not have the right to rent a house, apply for a job or open a bank account.

He is even barred from receiving free non-emergency treatment from the NHS. Recently, whilst doing some voluntary gardening in an allotment, Zaza was stabbed in the hand by a used needle that was hidden in the shrubbery. He went straight to hospital – but without the right papers, he was denied treatment. The hospital didn't deem it an emergency case, and as he couldn't afford to pay, he did not get treated.

Zaza is caught in a web of policies dubbed the 'hostile environment', which are designed to ensure that those without legal status in the UK cannot access the services they need to live

their day-to-day lives. This means that the housing market, the job market, the NHS and even bank accounts are denied to those who cannot prove their right to be in the UK. The idea is that if you are forced into poverty, you will leave the country.

But for many people, returning to their country of origin is not an option. Zaza would be in great danger if he returned to Turkey. The reality is simply that he is caught in the web of the hostile environment and the poverty that it inflicts. "They make you destitute ... nobody should live homeless ... should I live on the street?" Zaza asks. "Destitution kills; you are constantly sick."

I wish that Zaza's story were unusual. Unfortunately, the web of the hostile environment is wide, and many are caught up in it.

The hostile environment hit the headlines this year when some members of the 'Windrush generation' were targeted by its policies because they did not have the documentation to prove their British citizenship. It is an outrage that they were unintended

victims of the hostile environment. As a Christian and as a human being, I believe it is also an outrage that people like Zaza are destitute because they are the deliberate, intended targets of the hostile environment. And that's why JPIT has written *Destitution Discrimination Distrust* (see opposite).

Recently, I ran a youth group for young Methodists. We discussed the hostile environment and the realities of the people suffering at the hands of its policies. One young person summed up a Christian response to this deliberate use of destitution: "We are all human. Surely you should love your neighbour whether they have the right documents or not?"

I couldn't agree more. The Methodist Church has joined a coalition of voices calling for an end to the hostile environment.

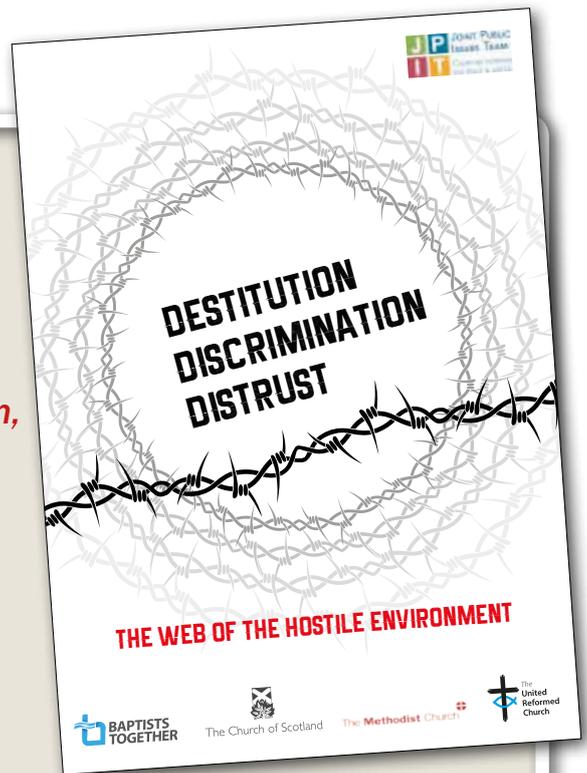
"When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them."

Leviticus 19:33 (NIV)

**Will you join us?
See above right for
what you can do.**

JPIT is made up of the Baptist Union, the Church of Scotland, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church, working together for peace and justice. Read JPIT's report on the hostile environment: *Destitution, Discrimination, Distrust* and take action by visiting www.jointpublicissues.org.uk

If you have a story of how you've been affected by the hostile environment, we'd be grateful if you are willing to share that with us. We will safeguard the confidentiality of any sensitive information. You can email us at: enquiries@jointpublicissues.org.uk



Join the conversation on social media:

#MeetYourMP



'Meet Your MP' is a new initiative to encourage positive links between church congregations and their MPs.

As Christians, we're called to transform the world. Getting to know your MP is one way of speaking up for justice.

For useful resources, including letter templates, videos, blogs, poetry, prayers, reflections and podcasts, visit the Joint Public Issues Team website.

Get involved: www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/issues/politics-and-elections/meetyourmp

Facing migration: a European challenge

Mission partner Fiona Kendall is European and Legal Affairs Advisor for Mediterranean Hope – the Italian Federation of Protestant Churches’ response to the refugee crisis.

“Human rights¹ as a limit on national sovereignty is now a concept under challenge.”

I recently heard this assertion from Prof Fernand de Varennes, UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, at a conference in Rome on xenophobia, racism and nationalist populism hosted jointly by the World Council of Churches and the Vatican. For me, this was not only a perfect summary of the populist sentiment being expressed in many parts of Europe, but also an explanation for why EU member states now appear to be incapable of agreeing how to deal with migration issues.

Lives in the Mediterranean Sea are, more than ever, at risk. The most recent statistics published by UNHCR² show that the number of migrants arriving in Italy by boat over the last 12 months is approximately 20% of the numbers recorded for the preceding year.

Worryingly, however, the number of deaths in the Mediterranean Sea recorded this year stands at 64% of last year’s figure. In short, the number of deaths proportionate to the number of crossings is significantly higher.

There could be many reasons for that. However, it does not seem to be a coincidence

that this statistical change has occurred in a period when search and rescue (SAR) operations by NGOs in the Mediterranean Sea have effectively been halted and Italian coastguard operations are being delegated to their Libyan counterparts. Why, given the statistical reality of the increased death rate, is there no rush to restore SAR – whether by NGOs or, as previously, via a concerted EU operation? Have Europeans collectively forgotten that we all have a right to life – and, by extension, a right to be rescued?

I don’t believe so. However, badly-needed reforms to the EU’s Common European Asylum System have been derailed by a failure to agree a change to the so-called ‘Dublin Regulations’, which dictate that the EU member state in which a potential asylum seeker first arrives is where an application for asylum must be made – and the state in which the asylum seeker must stay whilst that application is being determined. This has put southern states, including Italy and Greece, under financial and other pressures that they say they can no longer bear.

The European Parliament voted by a significant majority last November to share the burden more proportionately amongst EU member states. However, reform requires the European Council, comprising national heads of state and their ministers, to agree. This is where the impasse lies. When it comes down to it, not enough member states are willing to increase their share of responsibility for those who come. Therefore, whilst there are fine words from member states about solidarity, when it comes to agreeing numbers, it disappears.

Those fuelling populist rhetoric which suggests that the root of society’s current ills is a migrant ‘invasion’, will not wait for the EU to resolve its current difficulties. It is straightforward in these circumstances to justify other ways to reduce migrant numbers, hence, closing ports and borders and shutting down SAR, whatever the consequence. Whether or not one concurs with views expressed by certain politicians that SAR operations were a ‘pull-factor’ for migrants, the reality is that boats continue to come with, we now know, an increased exposure to death.

The lessons of World War 2 led to the development of conventions and institutions that safeguard human rights for all, whatever the circumstances. We should therefore pay close attention when anything threatens these – and perhaps ask ourselves whether short-term national interests really do justify their suppression.



Photo: © Getty Images

¹ For further information on what human rights are, see www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/human-rights/what-are-human-rights
² See <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/65976>



TOP: RCK's industrial kitchen, in which it prepares more than 1,500 meals a day.

BOTTOM: Volunteers preparing onions to be used in the freshly made food given to the asylum seekers, refugees and migrants in need of support in northern France.



Photos: © Bethan Laughlin

Dignity

Bethan Laughlin, a ONE Programme Intern working with the Joint Public Issues Team, recently spent time in Calais volunteering with the charity Refugee Community Kitchen (RCK).

RCK provides daily meals to the refugees, asylum seekers and migrants currently living in the forests of northern France. With more than 1,500 people in need of support, the volunteer-led team works tirelessly preparing and serving meals, seven days a week, in both Calais and Dunkirk. Since 2015, RCK has distributed over two million meals, with the help of almost 18,000 volunteers.

What struck me the most was the team's desire to put first the dignity of the people they serve. Serving a community with food was part of a broader desire to create an environment of hospitality and kindness.

This dignity becomes all the more significant when you consider that many of the people RCK serves have survived traumatic journeys and become accustomed to police brutality, state resentment and increasing media complacency. In working to mirror God's love to the world in our everyday lives, I would argue that respecting the inherent dignity of those people most marginalised is one of the most powerful things we can do.

For more information on the work of RCK, see: www.refugeecommunitykitchen.com

Stories of Sanctuary



Durham-based singer and songwriter Sam Slatcher brings Syrian refugees together to tell their stories through music, in a project called ‘Stories of Sanctuary’.

“I’ve been involved in the City of Sanctuary movement in Durham for the past three years,” Sam says, “initially because I happened to discover my neighbours across the road were Syrian refugees. The public was just becoming more aware of the issues surrounding refugees, and I wanted to do something locally to support them.

“It was very apparent that two things seem to bring different communities together: food and music. As a musician, I thought it would be great to do something that engaged people around the topic of ‘sanctuary’. Durham of course is a great place to do this sort of thing as the city has a rich history of offering sanctuary.”

The result was a mixed group of 30 (including 20 refugees), who have been involved in the writing and recording of songs together. An album, *Stories of Sanctuary*, is being released in October, when the songs will have their first public performance at Durham Cathedral.

Sam has received much encouragement and support from the Revd Dr Inderjit Bhogal, Past President of the Methodist Conference and founder of City of Sanctuary – for whom Sam works a couple of days a week as their North East Regional Coordinator.

“I grew up in a vibrant, youthful Methodist church in Hampshire,” says Sam. “I owe much of my current interest in developing art

with disadvantaged groups to a church that cultivated solidarity with the poor and oppressed. This is obviously core to Methodism, in its past and in the current priority of the Church.

“In Durham, North Road Methodist Church has offered its main building to City of Sanctuary at a reduced rate to hold language classes and drop-in sessions for refugees. The church also has offered the Stories of Sanctuary project its space at a reduced rate, and the church warden bends over backwards to help us. I feel very humbled to know the Methodist Church is living out its core values in supporting such a project.”



LEFT TO RIGHT: 1. Traditional Syrian Dabke dancing outside Durham Cathedral. 2. Sam and friends take advantage of the summer heatwave to have a group sing-along on the grounds of Durham Cathedral. 3. Sam facilitates a songwriting workshop in North Road Methodist Church.



Photos: © Simone J Rudolph

Rest on the Flight to Egypt

Once a year, for a few days only, the wild flowers of the Judean desert come into bloom.

I had the idea that as the Holy Family travelled through the desert on their flight to Egypt, Nature responded to the presence of the Christ Child. The wild flowers bloomed and the trees bore fruit. As the family moved on their lonely

journey, Nature waxed and waned with their passing.

This Holy Family were truly refugees fleeing from Herod's dark regime. We see in them every family of refugees trying to escape persecution or in the search for a better life. Similarly, in every family of refugees we see the Holy Family.

Nicholas Mynheer

Nicholas Mynheer's *Rest on the Flight to Egypt* is part of the Methodist Modern Art Collection. For more information about the Collection, see www.methodist.org.uk/artcollection



Across the Connexion...

...Methodists are offering a welcome and support to refugees. Here are some of their stories.



Walsall

Jasmine Conteh (pictured) originally came to Walsall as an asylum seeker from Sierra Leone. Today, she is in charge of running Pleck Methodist Church's 'Places of Welcome', which invite anyone from the surrounding community to enjoy a free cuppa and good conversation.

"The church has become a place of welcome in more ways than one," says the Revd Liam Dacre-Davis. "Many who came into the area as refugees and asylum seekers have come to describe Pleck Methodist Church as their home, and the congregation as their family. Sharing in their journey can be an enlightening – at times painful – experience, but it has always been a blessing, with Pleck Methodist Church truly receiving more than it could ever possibly give."



Derbyshire

"Boylestone Methodist Church has been privileged to host a number of asylum seekers and refugees for days of respite and refreshment in the beautifully peaceful and gentle countryside of the Derbyshire Dales," says the Revd Prof Stella Mills.

Refugees come on 'away-day' bus trips to Boylestone, where a team of church volunteers (pictured) welcome them with cakes they have baked specially for the occasion. Church and village folk happily contribute food and other resources to ensure that the visitors have a good time.

"For many of our guests, such an excursion is a completely new experience," Stella says. "To be up-close with farm animals and rural life, and to learn about local history and traditions has proved something of a fascinating revelation."



Cardiff

The Trinity Centre is a charity of the Cardiff Methodist Circuit. Several organisations use the centre to provide a range of services to asylum seekers and refugees, as well as to other vulnerable people in the community. Amongst other things, the Centre provides food and clothing for people in need, advice, companionship and support, English conversation groups and tuition, trips and outings, recreational and sporting activities, one-off projects such as gardening, photography and art, help with childcare, ethnic music events and much more.

"My life changed with this charity," says Issa, a refugee from Syria. "All these people from Trinity helped me to be part of a community. I now have an opportunity to start a new life."

"Before, whenever the Home Office asked me if I had any family, I would say no," says Mamadou, an asylum seeker from Mali. "Now I tell them that the Trinity Centre is my family."



Strathclyde

Laurent Vernet is a probationer presbyter in the Strathclyde Circuit, and the Methodist representative at Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees.

Every year, Laurent goes to Calais to work with either Refugee Community Kitchen (see page 9) or Utopia 56, two French charities serving refugees. "As a Methodist, I believe it is an expression of faith in God's love and the kingdom here and now," he says.

Last year, Laurent spent 10 days in Calais with Utopia 56, working amongst young Eritrean refugees. "Eritrea's young people are fleeing a repressive regime and slave-like conscription," Laurent says. "These young people want to come to the UK to work and have a normal life."

Laurent wants to go again this year, hopefully with a small group of Methodists – "Not as 'charity tourists'," he says, "but as servants doing what is needed."



Leicester

"Community Cycles is a small charity doing great things," says the Revd Fran Rhys, minister of Bishop Street Methodist Church, where the charity has its base.

Through the Red Cross, Community Cycles redistributes second-hand bicycles to asylum seekers who cannot afford to use public transport. It also provides bicycle maintenance training, and courses on how to ride a bike, especially for Muslim women. Beyond that, it has organised group rides for those who have learned to ride a bike.

Bishop Street Methodist Church has been providing support to asylum seekers since 2004. "When we started, it was still possible to obtain legal aid support for asylum seekers to challenge the decisions taken by the Home Office," Fran says. "We remain ready to offer support but cases seem to be decided faster at present and fewer people are coming directly to us."



Photos: © TMCP



Learning to communicate

For anyone settling in a new country, learning how to communicate is essential. So one of the most practical things churches can do for incoming refugees is offer English tuition. Lisa Norcross, English Club Coordinator at the ARC Project in Blackburn, shares some success stories.

Our English Club has grown over the past two years from two classes to four, which run simultaneously on a Wednesday and Friday morning. We now offer beginners, intermediate and advanced English language classes alongside one tailored towards parents who bring their preschool children with them. This academic year, we are also extending to offer an absolute beginners class (ABC) for individuals starting completely from scratch. We now have a paid, part-time coordinator overseeing the English Club. A team of 20 dedicated volunteers teach the classes.

The classes are informal, and although we follow a curriculum, we don't do academic assessments. Instead, we celebrate regular attendance and achievements when students

move on to a higher-level class or go on to further study or into employment.

Another exciting development has been working in partnership with Home-Start UK, who have three years of funding to run a weekly playgroup for our families. This has been a great way for parents to find a support network and improve their English by making friends and learning nursery rhymes! We have also started a Cooking with English class, targeting the mainly single males in our group who need support with cooking simple meals and budgeting.

It has been our privilege to see students grow in confidence as their English skills improve. Recently, an unaccompanied minor who arrived in our classes without any spoken or written English, won our top attendance

award for the year. A married couple, who were at a beginning stage of learning English when they got here, have grown in confidence to the point where they now translate for other learners. Many tears were shed when they left to pursue a career in the media in London. One young student brought in baklava to celebrate passing his driving theory test on the seventh attempt! Another student in our advanced class has just successfully completed a Level Three Open Awards Interpreter Qualification.

We feel privileged to serve such a diverse community who are so motivated to learn English to restart their lives in the UK.

You can follow the ARC Project English Club's story at www.facebook.com/ARCProjectEnglishClub



LEFT TO RIGHT: 1. Members of the English Club out supporting the local team, Blackburn Rovers. 2. Lisa Norcross. 3. Learning together at English Club.

How German Methodists are responding

The Revd Dr Barry Sloan, from the Methodist Church in Ireland, is a mission partner in Chemnitz, Germany. In January, he will become Europe Regional Coordinator for the World Church Relationships Team.

In 2015, under Angela Merkel's leadership, Germany responded to the humanitarian crisis on Europe's doorstep and opened its borders to almost 1.5 million refugees (yes, 1.5 million!). The recent right-wing violence and racist protests seen in my own city, Chemnitz, show just how challenging the past three years have been here.

As is so often the case, the good news stories – and there are a lot of them – do not often make the headlines. For instance, crime rates are at an all-time low, unemployment rates are down, and over 300,000 refugees and migrants have found jobs. Almost a fifth of the German population is actively involved in volunteer work with and for refugees – and churches are right in the thick of it.

The United Methodist Church

in Bremen is just one of the many congregations with a vibrant and welcoming refugee and migrant ministry that has totally transformed the life of the congregation. They call it 'Project RESET'. Thanks to a number of volunteers, intentionally including the refugees themselves, they are able to offer a broad spectrum of courses and workshops (free of charge) including German language classes, cooking and baking, theatre group, yoga, homework club, handcrafts, guitar and piano lessons. Worship services are held in German, English, Farsi and Arabic.

There are only two Methodist churches in Chemnitz, but both are actively involved in ministry to refugees. INSPIRE, the Fresh Expression of Church that my wife Gillian and I helped start, began

in 2015 with language classes and a refugee café to support the newly arrived refugees to settle in. Through InspireKids, a children's ministry that runs on weekday afternoons, we help refugee children integrate into German life.

Other congregations have a much simpler ministry among refugees and migrants. In Halle, for instance, the Methodist church runs a monthly chess club for refugees. And in Winnenden United Methodist Church, the 'Friendly Friday' café was started by two members of the congregation who simply wanted to do something to help.

Churches all over Germany are discovering their calling to welcome the stranger in their midst. This shouldn't surprise us, really. Wherever we live, we Methodists do those sorts of things – don't we?

Community sponsorship for beginners

What is community sponsorship?

When the government announced in 2015 that it would take 20,000 refugees from Syria under the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), it was relying on local authorities to provide housing and other necessary services. Local authorities are paid to do this work and many, but by no means all, have participated to a greater or lesser extent.

However, there is another route. In Canada, more than 300,000 people have been settled over many years with the support of community groups. Community sponsorship is a way for local charities, faith groups and other organisations (but not individuals) to take on the work that local authorities otherwise do – and many would say we can do it much better than they can!

Community sponsorship is a very big commitment and not for every church. It should not be confused with, for example, 'hosting' destitute asylum seekers by providing temporary accommodation. You cannot just do it yourself; you need to apply through official channels and you will need to have a really good plan.



What is involved?

Unlike local authorities, voluntary groups are not paid by the government to do this work. So you will need to have financial resources: the minimum requirement is to set aside £9,000, to be spent over 2-3 years. But note that refugees under the VPRS (unlike asylum seekers who make their own way here) are eligible for mainstream benefits, so you will not need to fund the full cost of housing, for instance.

The key services that you then need to be able to deliver are:

- **Housing.** This is obviously critical – and is required to meet certain standards.
- **Furnishings and other equipment.**
- **English language tuition.** You are also going to need people who can act as interpreters, certainly for the first 12 months.
- **Resettlement support.** Helping people access health, education and other services. Finding work may be a really big challenge for refugees, especially those with little English. Some may have valuable skills or qualifications of their own, but the latter will not necessarily be recognised here.
- **Befriending.** Immensely important, and one area where community groups can far outperform local authorities.

In all aspects of this, your safeguarding procedures must be to the highest standard. Refugees may be traumatised by their experience and extremely vulnerable in other ways: that means you certainly cannot broadcast their address and let anyone just 'drop round', however well-intentioned your members may be.





Do our church members have to do everything themselves?

No. The key thing is to assemble a core team that brings together the range of skills you will need. This team does not have to be just from your own members; indeed it could be really valuable to partner with other organisations or faiths locally. It will depend on your local situation.

You can start to see why community sponsorship is a major commitment. It's really hard work and can take a long time to prepare. But take encouragement from the success stories that you can read in this magazine. If you feel you can tackle the challenge, and are prepared to put in the effort, then the difference you can potentially make to someone's life is immense. And there are others who can help and advise you. Is this what God may be calling your church or circuit to do?

Where can we get more information?



For more in-depth guidance on community sponsorship, give the charity **Reset** a call. Reset mobilises the skills and resources of communities, faith groups, businesses and charities who want to support refugees as they rebuild their lives in the UK.

In June this year, the Home Office gave Reset £1 million to provide training and support to any communities – including churches – that want to sponsor incoming refugee families.

See Reset's website to find out more about how they can help your church get involved in community sponsorship: www.resetuk.org

Citizens UK has been at the forefront of community sponsorship and created an offshoot called Sponsor Refugees. This offers an introductory video and a lot of information on its website: www.sponsorrefugees.org

Download and read the **Home Office's** 'mini-guide': <https://tinyurl.com/y9v2n4rb>

Other official resources (including a Welsh language version of the guide) can be found here: <https://tinyurl.com/y7vxf8xe>

If you want to know more about 'hosting' instead, the charity **Housing Justice** has information on its website: www.housingjustice.org.uk and a useful FAQ document: <https://tinyurl.com/y7vzltq7>

Meet the “Syrian Brummies”

Husband and wife, Eyad and Ghenwah, and their children, Rami and Lyan, were the first Syrian family to benefit from Methodist involvement in community sponsorship.

Back in Syria, Eyad ran a shop selling sweet treats in Homs. His family was famed for its delicacies, which one compatriot dubbed “the Cadbury of Syria”. Eyad’s shop, his parents’ home and his brother’s sweet factory were all bombed. The family fled the devastated city in 2013 when Rami was an infant,

escaping to the Lebanese border and making their way to Jordan, where Lyan was born.

Eyad and his family were able to settle in Birmingham thanks to a company that manages two Methodist-owned houses and normally provides students with accommodation. Challenged after

seeing the media coverage of Syrian refugees’ plight, this company’s trustees decided to make one of their flats available for a Syrian refugee family. With the help of the Revd David Butterworth, they became a pilot for the community sponsorship scheme on behalf of the Methodist Church.

Testing!

The Home Office and Birmingham City Council visited the flat to assess its suitability for the scheme, and to authorise its use. Once it was given the go-ahead, lots of preparation work needed to be done.

“We knew nothing about the refugee family we were looking to house,” said one of the company trustees, “so we sought guidance from another Syrian refugee who had come to Birmingham. We assumed the refugees wouldn’t speak or read English, and had all notices, signs and instructions for items such as fire extinguishers translated into Arabic. We learned that Syrians’ preferred method of cooking is simmering in large pots, so we swapped smaller pan sizes to larger vessels. Normally, we would supply duvets. However, in Syrian culture, blankets are preferred, so we made up the beds accordingly.



Photo: © TMCP

PICTURE: Left to right: Eyad (carrying Lyan), Ghenwah and Rami

In brief

“People donated phones, tablets and laptops for the family to use to contact any relatives who may still be in camps or moved to other countries. Supplying Wi-Fi is an essential. We have made extensive use of Google Translate!”

Essentials

Other issues the company had to take into consideration included how close the flat was to public transport, shopping facilities (particularly shops selling traditional Syrian food) and places of worship. Since some refugees may suffer from trauma or illness, they also had to ensure that the intended home was in easy reach of medical services such as GPs’ and dentists’ surgeries. Schools’ locations were another important factor to consider. Finally, the company drew up contracts – between themselves and the sponsoring body, and between the sponsors and the family.

Welcome

Eyad, Ghenwah, Rami and Lyan arrived in the UK in February. Rami is enrolled in school, while Eyad and Ghenwah are taking intensive English lessons. Eyad’s dream is to establish a Syrian sweet shop in Birmingham so that his family’s recipes can live on. A local group of refugees who call themselves “the Syrian Brummies” have befriended the family, and they meet regularly in a local church.

“They are a joy to have,” the company’s trustees said enthusiastically. “We have now set the ball rolling to receive our next family.”

And what do the family members think of their new home country? Little Rami put it best: “This place should not be called Britain. It should be called heaven!”

Maldon Methodists’ response

In 2016, Maldon Methodist Church in Essex devised a three-point response to the refugee crisis: prayer, fundraising and practical help.

“We started with a prayer week,” recalls church steward Diane O’Neill. “We welcomed anyone who wanted to pray for refugees and for peace.”

The church then set out to raise money for the charity Safe Passage, raising more than £4,000 from events including a piano concert and a quiz night.

Through numerous community links, the church found a property to house a refugee family. “Despite various ups and downs, we’ve felt God supporting us at every step,” says Diane.

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The Fund for Human Need

The Fund for Human Need is a little-known Methodist charity that gives ‘crisis payments’ to help people in dire straits.

“In the year to August 2018, we responded to 640 cases from refugees and asylum seekers who were falling between the gaps and just not coping for a myriad of reasons,” says Gill Mason, the charity’s administrator. “The crisis payments we give range between £60 and £100 per person or family. Our current giving is approximately £5,000 a month, such is the national need.”

To find out more about the Fund for Human Need, visit www.fundforhumanneed.org.uk or watch this video: <https://vimeo.com/282308832>

GIVE

Donate now to support local Methodist churches as they reach out to welcome and house refugees. www.methodist.org.uk/supportourwork

Riding the roller coaster



Photos: © Sara Hamilton

What has it meant for one church to undertake community sponsorship? *One Mission Matters* spoke to Muswell Hill Methodist Church about the experience of being a sponsor.

Tell us how this started for you, and how it developed up to the point where you became a community sponsor.

We started down the road some 18 months ago, and our Syrian families arrived in March 2018. Technically we have two families, but they are related and their seven members live together in the same house. There is a young couple, Naser and Mariam, with two small children, Mohamad and Zainab, along with Naser's mother, Wahida, and her two sons, Subhi and Mouteb. Naser is Wahida's eldest son.

We found out about community sponsorship largely by accident, when we got involved in campaigning for our local authority to house refugees. Once we started to enquire about community sponsorship, the Home Office helped us enormously, running some good workshops that helped us prepare. The Home Office team was marvellous throughout. It really does take time to form the kind of group that you need.

What key learnings can you identify from the road you have travelled?

Two things in particular. First, we needed to expand well beyond the immediate circle of church members in order to gather the necessary volunteers and spread of skills. We reached out to other faith groups including the local synagogue and mosque, but for various reasons they did not come on board with us. Instead, we have found others 'of no faith' from within the local community who were keen to get involved.

Second, we had not anticipated quite how emotionally demanding it would be – sometimes in surprising ways. It has been a real roller coaster of emotions – for the families obviously, but also for our volunteers. We hold a monthly meeting with an outside facilitator so that volunteers can share their feelings and support each other.



LEFT TO RIGHT: 1. The family shortly after arrival: (L to R) Mohamad, Wahida, Mouteb and Subhi. 2. Mariam and Naser at the Community Sponsorship Awards ceremony, October 2018. 3. Mariam, Naser and Mohamad at the Community Sponsorship Awards ceremony, October 2018; in the background is Bob Goldsmith, one of the founders of Muswell Hill Methodist Church Welcomes Syrian Families.



Would you say that the Syrian families are successfully 'integrating' into the community?

It's still early days and this is going to be a long process. We can see already that the one-year-old will grow up speaking fluent English, and her brother has just started school, so he too is integrating quickly. It has been harder for the secondary-age children: their lack of English was an initial barrier but, with extra tuition, they are really starting to settle in now. Their father has been very positive about building a new future, but it is going to be really difficult for him to get into employment until he can learn more of the language. And it's been hardest of all for the grandma of the family, who feels isolated and is not adapting at all well. We understand why she is desperate to cling to her own culture, but it makes integration almost impossible.

What has been hardest for the volunteers?

Gender issues have been challenging. Some volunteers were concerned that the young mother of the family was having to do all the housework and childcare while the young men did nothing, and they wanted to intervene on her behalf. This wasn't a clash of 'British' and 'Arab' values; one of the volunteers was Arab, and in other Syrian families we know, gender roles are more balanced. We had to take a firm view that we could not tell other people how to live, but we did explain to the family the different norms they would find in the society around them.

Also hard to take was the contrast between the support we were providing and the dreadful standard of housing provided by the local authority to one of 'their' refugee families. A volunteer challenged the council over this. In the end, that family was rehoused in a Methodist property!

So – the bottom line: Would you encourage others to take this on?

Definitely! It's something any group can do, if you are willing to work hard and put the time in. We haven't been promoting our experience actively but would be happy to share more with any church that is considering becoming a sponsor.

Community sponsorship needs to grow and be scaled up across the country. But there's also still a job to win 'hearts and minds' in our communities. We have seen some evidence of an anti-immigration backlash; the church has received some hate mail. A single negative story: things going wrong for a Syrian family being sponsored elsewhere, for example, could do a lot of damage. That's why we have to stay totally focused on the welfare of those for whose care we are responsible.



Housing refugees under VPRS

Undertaking community sponsorship may be too big a challenge for some, but there may be other options. Here we look at a church response that provides housing and 'buddying' for a resettled family without the full responsibility of sponsorship. The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS) was launched in 2015. Kate Cambridge, a minister in the Winchester, Eastleigh and Romsey Circuit, reports on how the circuit used VPRS to 'adopt' a Syrian family.

Late one evening in March 2017, members of Hampshire County Council and a British Red Cross support worker collected a Syrian family of five from Heathrow Airport. The family had come into the country through the VPRS. They were taken to a vacant manse belonging to the Winchester, Eastleigh and Romsey Circuit, where they were to begin their new life in the UK.

A member of the local church welcomed the family on arrival. Once they had settled in, they were introduced to two other church members who had been

trained as buddies. Their job was to help the family settle into the area and provide them with support, under the oversight of the Red Cross.

Members of the Winchester, Eastleigh and Romsey Circuit had worked towards this day for a long time. Following the tragic death of the three-year-old Syrian boy Alan Kurdi in September 2015, we felt compelled to respond. After much discussion and prayer, we explored the possibility of offering the manse in this way. Once our offer was approved by the relevant

authorities, we began to furnish the manse. Contributions of money and goods came from around the circuit. The local Muslim community offered help and advice. Everyone pulled together, cleaning, gardening, delivering furniture and providing toys. It was not easy. The Red Cross emphasised the importance of confidentiality, but in the small community the family were to join it became a bit of an open secret. Not everyone was comfortable with the idea of Syrian refugees moving into their neighbourhood,

Photos courtesy of the Southern Daily Echo



On 3 February 2018, Chandlers Ford Methodist Church held a coffee morning in support of the Southampton-based refugee charity CLEAR.

but the family has settled in and been made to feel welcome.

There are a number of other Syrian families relocated within our circuit, whom we support under the umbrella of Churches Together. This means that 'our'

family are able to be part of a wider Syrian community. We hold coffee mornings three times a year to promote different refugee charities and fundraise for them, eating cake for a good cause! At the last event, the Syrian family provided Syrian

food, which was very well received.

The refugee crisis has not gone away and we are looking at how we can continue to respond.

VPRS: help for churches from TMCP

For churches and circuits considering offering refugees a home under VPRS, the Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes (TMCP) have produced the Residential Tenancy (Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme (VPR) Focus Note. This gives valuable guidance on best practice and explains how the process works. The Focus Note is now available on TMCP's website under letting property and third party use, and at this shortcut web address www.bit.ly/TMCPVPR



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