

Churches in South London respond together to the refugee crisis

Claire Crowley for Churches Together in South London

Are you moved by the refugee crisis? Would you like to know how your local network of churches can come together to compassionately respond? Are you already involved?

If 'yes' is your answer to any of the above, then you were in good company at the most recent gathering of Churches Together in South London (CTSL). CTSL brings representatives of over 50 local church networks across South London together twice a year around an issue that London's Christians are keen to address.

In May we partnered with the Diocese of Southwark's Public Policy team to focus on the response to the refugee crisis so far. It was moving to see so many people crowd into the room on a mid-week evening after busy days of study, work and other responsibilities; with many perching on window sills before it was standing room only.

Alongside church networks, local and national

organisations were present to profile their joint working for immediate care and lasting change. They explained how we can work with them in different ways to bring hope to those fleeing war and persecution. I have found the desire to work together to meet the needs of displaced people to be a key driver in ecumenical relations across London over my first year in post with CTSL.

Bishop Jonathan, who introduced the speakers (Photo far right), says:

"The ecumenical movement in Britain was formed and energised by a refugee crisis - the huge European crisis in the aftermath of World War 2.

"It was in response to that the the British Council of Churches came into being, and for the Roman Catholics, Aid to the Church in Need.

"The contemporary crisis is again revealing to the churches that we must act together - in supporting those in need in their homelands or regions, in offering help to those on their journeys towards safety, and in offering sanctuary to those in this country.

"It was a privilege to hear from groups with different church backgrounds of the work that is being done in each of those areas. It was an inspiration to the Christians of South London to keep on working together."

The first part of the evening began with Bishop Donnett Thomas of Power of the Living Word Ministries International.

She was in the Chair for the last time, having served on CTSL's Enabling Group for nearly a decade. Moving thanks were led by Bishop Paul Hendricks of the RC Archdiocese of Southwark and the Revd Pauline Sparks of the URC Southern Synod. Then the essentials of business were covered, and the short AGM was closed.

The second part of the event was kicked off brilliantly by Amanda and Danielle, two Year 10 students from St Gabriel's College, Camberwell (photo below left). They explained their choice to become the first #RefugeesWelcome school, and gave us their top five tips for how to go about welcoming refugees in our communities, not least through working in conjunction with Citizens UK who were present too.

John Newton, from Aid to the Church in Need, based in Sutton, showed images and gave personal stories of displaced people in the Middle East. He talked about their ecumenical work, and the rapid depletion of the Christian community in Syria and Iraq.

Emma Kevan from Us, and her colleague Rachel Parry who had just returned from the area, gave first-hand accounts of incredible journeys and talked about their ecumenical work in Greece.

Tommy Cloherty of Housing Justice then brought things right back to our own city and explained how the London Hosting project works, with Samantha Walker telling us



about her family's experience of hosting two refugees in their home in Clapham.

Please visit the CTSL resources page at <http://www.ctslondon.org.uk/resources.htm> for information and contacts of each speaker.

To keep up to date with CTSL's activities and ways to engage with the refugee response, climate justice and other ecumenical concerns, please "like" our new facebook page: www.facebook.com/CTSouthLondon

Photos by Ayat Moradi, a documentary maker who specialises in the refugee response. roj.rojhalati@yahoo.com



The half-forgotten crisis close to home

Martin Ashford, Trustee, London Churches Refugee Fund

Over the past year, media and political attention has been focused - and rightly so - on the desperate flight of refugees from Syria and elsewhere. Their movement to and within Europe has tended to dominate, perhaps distracting us from the needs of the "stranger in our midst", in other words those who have managed somehow to reach our shores in the hope of finding a future here.

After hovering around 20-25,000 each year for the past decade, the number of asylum applications in Britain rose to 32,000 in 2015.

In November 2015 we saw the first arrivals towards the Government's stated policy of 20,000 Syrians to be resettled direct from the camps by 2020. By April 2016 a reported 1,337 had been brought in but only 43 had been settled in London, substantiating rumours that many local authorities are failing to come forward with offers of accommodation.

Local pressure in Birmingham has now generated a commitment by that city to take 500, showing what "citizen power" can achieve. The political campaign will and must go

on, aimed at getting those in power to do much more.

But what of those *already here*: those who have arrived by one means or another, are waiting for their application to be determined or their appeal to be heard, many of whom drop through the cracks in the system and fall into destitution?

Unlike the "lucky" ones in the resettlement programme, they receive neither Housing Benefit nor Jobseekers' Allowance. Instead, they can be trapped in a dark place of poverty and failed hopes, from which it is hugely difficult

to escape without the sort of professional and caring support which is certainly lacking in the official 'system'.

In London and elsewhere, front line agencies and charities are working to alleviate the poverty and suffering of refugees and asylum seekers living here. Whether it's through drop-in centres, self-help groups, legal support, help with accommodation, bus passes, bicycles or simply food and hygiene packs, charities in many boroughs (including many local churches) are on the front line, day in and day

out. The London Churches Refugee Fund (LCRF) acts as a channel for donations from churches and individuals to support those projects.

Last year, LCRF was able to make grants totalling some £22,000 to 23 different agencies, with money for fares, food and toiletries being the most common request.

All the work of LCRF is done by the trustees themselves: the charity has no staff and virtually nothing is spent on administration.

If you would like to know more their website is www.help4refugees.co.uk

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