

Eastern Synod March 2016

This week, we remembered it is 5 years since the start of the war in Syria. In that time, over 460,000 people have lost their lives. If we were to take a minute to remember each of them, I would be standing here for 327 days...

Along with other conflicts this has contributed to the biggest refugee crisis since the Second World War. And in response to this, I am working on the assumption that we to take seriously the parable told by Jesus (Matthew 25):

“when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

And so, what are we doing in the UK? At the beginning of March, the UK had taken in 1,200 people, which includes 5 families in Colchester and a

smattering of others in the region – notably here in Cambridge where a certain St. Columba’s was able to host a welcome dinner.

And I have heard how grateful the Colchester folk are at receiving the thoughtfully prepared towel and toiletry bundles from Lion Walk URC.

Thinking of that 1,200 figure, even those of us who struggle with maths will work out that this is nowhere near the target of 20,000 in five years. However disappointing this may be for some, and not wanting to be an apologist for the failures of the system, there are reasons with this.

Firstly, the Home Office announced the figure without having developed a detailed strategy, and few local authorities (Scotland excepting) were keen on signing up if they didn’t know the funding available.

Secondly, there is a real problem with housing, in the current climate it would not be easy to convince the public that it is acceptable for people on this scheme to push people down long social housing waiting lists.

Also, when details came through from the Home Office, it was clear that the requirements are complex and multiagency coordination is required. Some areas have more experience in this than others. Then of course there is political will and the current climate is not conducive. The list goes on.

So let me tell you how, in Southend, we have moved forward on this.

Early on in my time in Southend, I was introduced by a church member to a local grassroots group called CAST – Communities and Sanctuary Seekers Together. On a small scale it offers hosting to people who have had applications fail or on appeal who have no recourse to public funding. It also offers plenty of opportunities for asylum seekers and those with refugee status to integrate in fun, community building activities, such as arts workshops, family days, concerts and a film festival.

When then Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme was announced in the autumn of last year, there was a huge sense that as a group CAST needed to do something, but we were also very aware that lots of other individuals were signing up to foster

unaccompanied children, that people were organising to send random stuff to Calais, that people wanted to help, but had no idea how to.

CAST called a small group of community and faith leaders together to suggest that we needed to coordinate what was going on and answer some questions. Independently, the Council had agreed that it would be willing to take 10 individuals, which was 10 too many for some in the community... but a risible figure in the minds of many community groups and churches.

And so a public meeting was called, for just a fortnight later and on the 8th October at Crowstone St. George's about 140 gathered, representing many Christian denominations, Jewish and Muslim communities, several local councillors, Christian Aid, British red Cross, Citizens Advice, Hope not Hate, Calaid, the local Council for Voluntary Services among others.

Each speaker was given just 5 minutes to talk about their area of interest and at the end we were all far better informed. There was an incredible will to

coordinate our activities and we agreed to ask the Council to up its offer from 10 to 100 individuals.

As a first step, we coordinated a letter from the key individuals to the local press with our challenge of 100 and, much to our astonishment, the next thing we knew was the Council inviting all the signatories to a meeting at the Council.

The Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council were there, as well as key department heads and several portfolio holders and it was agreed that we would set up a working group to work as Council and community together on the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme.

Through CAST, the community continues to campaign for the Council to increase its offer from 10. The Council are reluctant to put a figure on it, but the Council Cabinet have stated (which becomes Council policy), that it is 10-12 individuals.... Initially.

Meantime, CAST helped with the communication flow between different groups so that people trying to help in Calais were not duplicating efforts. As an

aside, it led to a wonderful moment when I said to the Baptist minister, who is taking a local lead on the Calais situation, that I was feeling useless compared to all she was achieving.

At which point, she said how bad she was feeling that all her efforts were Calais focused and she was not able to do more on the Relocation Scheme. God, it would appear, seemed to have put the right people in the right place, to focus on the right tasks.

Back to the relocation scheme... After just one meeting of the working party, it was clear that the limiting factor was going to be housing. The wonderful news is that we have just this week secured our first two bedroomed flat and so after a final approval from the Council Executive, we will be applying for our first family of three, who may be able to arrive in a couple of months' time.

Compared to the five families already in Colchester, this may seem slow and small. Yet, for Southend, this is remarkable and, if we get this right, then there is a four bedroomed house – which could house a family of 8... Our initial target will have been met.

Although it will be tough, the group – which includes senior members of the Council staff - will have the experience and evidence to take the scheme further.

It is the case that, however frustrated we may feel that the numbers are small and the process slow, and however fortunate we were that we were actually pushing at a slightly open door with the Council, even in the most unlikely of places, there are ways to progress. There are many different networks that can help. Areas who have more experience seem very happy to share their learning and good practise. Locally there is hope.

But this issue is wider than the UK. Partly because I was known to be working on this issue locally, I was invited to take part in a World Council of Churches event in Geneva last November. I am still a little unsure whether I was a regional rep from the UK or was the URC rep – but in practice I was both.

The focus of the Multicultural Ministry and Mission Seminar was perhaps a little too wide, covering everything from gender equality, youth culture,

indigenous affairs and, at the eleventh hour, my being asked to present on 'Responses to the sexuality debate'.

Having said that, the underlying theme which emerged was how we, as churches, respond to migrant communities, whether they be Christian or of other faiths. Regardless of the Syrian crisis, I think many of us, whether we were from Canada, Australia, Denmark, Switzerland, Nigeria, Germany, Finland, the US, or the UK were pulled up short on how we integrate with existing migrant communities in our churches.

I know that the picture will be very different for different churches, but how often do we treat the black or Korean church meeting on a Sunday afternoon as a hall hire rather than as a partner in Christian witness? Especially when there may be considerable differences in terms or worship style, theology, age and language.

In welcoming migrant communities, even if they've been here a while, do we accept that what binds us together is greater than that which separates us?

What also became clear, if we didn't know it already, is that any Christian community can have problems welcoming the stranger.

Most Danish churches fully accept equal marriage, but there have been huge suspicions of Muslim refugees, with some very difficult bridge building taking place. A black minister from Finland recounted the far right rhetoric of 'Christians' in his country. Canada, the country now famous for the way in which it has publically welcomed Syrians, has French speaking churches unwilling to work with English speaking minorities.

For some it may be disappointing that there doesn't appear to be an answer to these issues, which we could adapt to our local circumstances, but we were all blessed with a strong sense that we are battling similar issues - and that this is a battle in which we are stronger if we share stories, best practise, ideas and, most of all, prayer.