



Welcoming Syrian refugees to the northwest

By Steve Atherton, Justice and Peace fieldworker

During 2015 over one million people sought refuge in Europe in the biggest movement of displaced people since the Second World War. We were told that the influx would stop with the onset of winter but it continues. Seeing the horrific pictures of Syrian refugees trying to escape into Europe, it is natural to want to help. The compassionate response is to ask when these people are going to arrive in the United Kingdom and how will we help when some of them reach the northwest. The shocking fact is that they are arriving but they are not being welcomed.

The reason for this is that the UK government's '20,000 over five years' Syrian Resettlement Scheme (SRP) is only available to people in the refugee camps on the borders of Syria. Any of those who have fled the conflict and reached Europe are not eligible for consideration.

The government has refused to discuss taking responsibility for any part of a quota system that would share the humanitarian response across the countries of Europe. According to our government, anyone who has fled the war in Syria and got as far as Europe is not a refugee but an asylum seeker. It seems inhumane to penalise people for being in the wrong place and showing too much initiative. Are we really saying that they should have stayed in the camps in Jordan and Lebanon along with four million others? Are we really saying we have no moral responsibility to help suffering humanity? Are we already saying we are not part of Europe?

There is no safe way to enter the UK: just think of the Jungle at Calais and the armed guards at the Channel tunnel. Desperate people try to bribe drivers. They try to hide on and under trucks. They walk into the tunnel. They even cling to the top of trains. And the



government does everything in its power to stop them. If people are able to get into the UK, they have to take their chances in the hostile asylum application process. Fifty per cent of applications are refused, many because of inconsistencies in the stories told at interview – often the result of panic and the desire to make a good impression.

On a positive note, 20,000 on the SRP scheme is better than none and the first thousand arrived before Christmas. It is likely that a few families will arrive in the northwest by the summer. The government has negotiated with 18 out of the 19 local authorities here to become dispersal areas for asylum seekers. (There were previously only three involved.) So the already large number of asylum seekers in our region will increase and towns with no prior experience of asylum seekers will welcome fresh faces.

So what are we doing?

We have to recognise the place of the Church in the national response to the refugee situation. The line of communication is: national government, local government, voluntary sector. The Church is included in the voluntary sector and no particular denomination is

given preference. The government's working assumption is that the churches are one entity.

With this in mind, we are looking to help set up a network of ecumenical groups based around local authority boundaries and with a strong presence in RC parishes.

The proposed activities will include:

- Welcoming people on arrival and offering help with integration (eg with doctors, schools)
- Organising local projects.
- Raising money
- Helping with learning English, for example by setting up conversation groups
- Explaining UK culture and arranging days out (to parks, the seaside, etc)

Initial contact with asylum seekers may be best arranged via a welcome event.

To get involved, email s.atherton@rcaol.co.uk or ring 0151 522 1080.