

Churches in Cheltenham-Refugees Update

Though there has not been as much in the news recently, the situation in Syria remains a major humanitarian disaster and the refugees crisis shows no signs of abating. The work with Syrian refugees, identified as particularly vulnerable, continues locally and this update aims to give churches recent information as well as outlining opportunities for action and support.

Local Churches Responses to Refugees:

As I explained in October, there was a Diocesan led meeting set up between Gloucestershire Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (GARAS) and a range of churches from Gloucestershire to look at the community sponsorship scheme and consider a way forward. It was agreed that the scheme is not only potentially costly but requires significant skills and expertise to deal with refugees that are identified as vulnerable by the UNHCR.

An outcome of the discussions from a Cheltenham perspective was to set up a meeting in November between churches and the Cheltenham Welcomes Refugees (CWR) group to think about a way forward and how churches could be actively involved in supporting refugee families who have already arrived and those who are expected. This meeting took place at St Matthew's Church in Cheltenham on November 23rd 2016. The aims of the meeting were:

- Update churches on the work of CWR in the town and share any work with refugees currently taking place in churches
- Discuss opportunities for churches to work with CWR either: as groups of churches, as single churches or for individual church members
- Agree future plans and ways working together to meet the changing needs of refugees coming to Cheltenham

Around 35 people attended from 15 different churches in the town and there was a good time of sharing and discussing the issues around refugees and what could be done locally with two representatives from CWR updating the meeting and answering questions.

The broad outcomes from the meeting are as follows:

Churches updates:

1. Both Christ Church and St Philip's and St James' Leckhampton have been looking into Full Community Sponsorship Scheme.
2. CWR and C3 plan to run a Community Cafe at the Pavilion on first Thursday of each month, starting in January – initially open only to refugees, but possibly to wider public in due course.
3. C3 also has a collection point for aid to refugees overseas – sleeping bags, tents, clothes, shoes. To go via People in Motion to Lebanon, Syria.

CWR requests for support:

4. Temporary storage facilities for donated furniture when a house is being made ready for occupation.
5. Help with decorating when required – volunteers need to be available for a week of work. . If you are able to give anytime to help with this please contact Roy Hickey with details of what and when you are able to offer. Roy Hickey : rh@royhickey.co.uk

6. Help with school assemblies – especially in primary schools.
7. Minute takers for the working groups – to attend the meetings and type up and circulate the minutes.
8. Helping to put together CWR newsletters – information gathering from the various working groups and passing to the lady who compiles the newsletter. Ideally on a monthly basis.
9. Fund raising – to raise money to provide e.g. internet connection, TV licences for local refugee families.
10. People willing to offer lifts to refugee families for events and outings e.g.: to Gloucester.

Other discussion points:

11. Suggestion for a “Sanctuary Sunday” in churches to change the narrative about refugees. Tudor Griffiths agreed to look at a possible date and circulate to all churches for next calendar year. CWR has resources that could be used. See below for details.
12. Encouragement to people to write to MP to suggest that Full Community Sponsorship offers should be in addition to the Government’s commitment to take families, not instead of. (Citizens’ UK website for information)
13. There was discussion about who should be lobbied about the small number of families coming to Cheltenham so far, given the council’s offer of 40 homes.
14. Mention was made of the Friendship First Course that some people had attended run by Mahabba, helping local churches to better understand and pray for Muslim people. There is a prayer meeting held on 4th Tuesday of each month for those who are interested organised by Georgina Jardim who can be contacted at georginajardim@gmail.com
15. It was suggested that the Secondary School Assembly material could be adapted to be offered to Church Youth Groups. It may also be possible for members of CWR to visit individual churches to update people on the refugee situation in general and the work in Cheltenham specifically. If churches feel either would be suitable for them they should contact Scott directly.
16. It was suggested linking male refugees into church football teams .
17. CWR could find out the talents/interests of refugee families and match them with volunteers/organisations.
18. It was noted that CWR also has a Facebook page and is hoping to produce a new website soon and does produce regular newsletters.
- 19.

Cheltenham Welcomes refugees update:

The Cheltenham Welcomes Refugees group continues to grow and be active not only supporting the Syrian refugee families in Cheltenham but also raising awareness about the plight of those refugees that come to Great Britain from Syria and elsewhere and specifically towards those that come to the Cheltenham area.

At the moment the focus of the CWR group is around:

- **Housing:** CWR met with the council last week to discuss us starting to look for private housing to supplement the council’s social housing offer, which CBC didn't manage to meet last year. If any churches have access to private housing that may be suitable for refugee families, as much of the CBC stock is of 2 bed houses which are often too small, please let us know.

- **English lessons:** are ongoing and CWR is looking for experienced English Language teachers. Our current teachers are doing a fantastic and really important job, but we do need more, as more families arrive here. If you could help please contact Gabriella: gabriellateachersco1ordinator@gmail.com
- There is a project starting which the University is funding - called "Building Sustainable Communities" that CWR is in discussions about.
- The **Community Cafe** that is led by C3 Church is ongoing; the third café has just happened ; by all accounts was really good last month, the Syrians apparently had asked to use the time for some more English conversation with volunteers (rather than just a chance to get together and socialise with each other), so there might be some activities to give English practice this time too. This is a closed event and a chance for families to get together and also for members of the welcome group to come and everyone to meet each other. Helpers are needed and anyone interested can contact Georgina Gray ieren6402@gmail.com
- The **Media Team** are desperate for more people, but specifically with good IT and social media skills. Please contact Nat Genes if you would be happy to be involved with this: nathalie.genes@btinternet.com
- The University STAR group are organising an open mic night fundraiser for the 1st April.
- **CWR Strategic Review** : At the moment CWR is in the process of reorganising. A consultant has talked to a wide range of the key members of CWR as well as people from GARAS. She has put together a strategy for how we can move forward and this involves rethinking some of our ways of doing things, we need to fill some key spaces in a Core Team.
- There are ongoing needs for fostering unaccompanied children through Gloucestershire County Council in its plans for fostering unaccompanied children coming to the area. <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/fostering-young-asylum-seekers-tickets-27523975953?utm-medium=discovery&utm-campaign=social&utm-content=attendeeshare&utm-source=strongmail&utm-term=listing>
- The **Education Team** continue to take assemblies in both primary and secondary schools locally and have recently completed a series in Cleeve School, where a group of students are setting up their own Refugee Group. More recently the group has piloted more extended workshop sessions which have been more interactive and delivered to all Year 10 and 11 students at Pates Grammar School. Anyone interested in helping with this work please contact Chris Vidler chris.vidler@btconnect.com

Sanctuary Sunday:

Sanctuary Sunday - one day when we can consider in our churches across the town the theme of Sanctuary - offered to those in need, most particularly refugees. We are completely free to take this on board - or not. But it could inform our preaching, our praying, our giving that day. We might want to involve GARAS or Cheltenham Welcomes Refugees. We might set up some displays... we can all take on what we feel appropriate. The injunction to welcome the stranger is such a strong Biblical theme and so relevant to the world of 2016-17. As Christian leaders we can sway our culture to be welcoming.

There is great value if a number of churches across the town do something to recognise Sanctuary Sunday. This is not an original idea - it has been tried successfully in Leeds. The meeting asked me to pick a date and circulate the church leaders. So - Sanctuary Sunday is March 19th (Lent III for those who follow the common lectionary). Tudor Griffiths tudorg@stmstm.org.uk

There are a variety of possible resources shown below.

Sanctuary Sunday resource which was made for churches in Leeds when it ran there in 2012:
http://cityofsanctuary-archive.dove.flet.org/files/sanctuary_sunday_resource_pack_0.pdf

A wonderful resource created by the Anglican diocese & Churches Together in Merseyside. This has stories, scriptures, facts and information.

<http://www.liverpool.anglican.org/userfiles/files/News/2015/2016/aguide-welcomethestranger.pdf>

Citizens UK website- this has very up to date information, particularly about Syrian refugees being resettled here, and how people can help.

http://www.citizensuk.org/save_lives_by_helping_resettle_refugees

Some prayers, reflections and scriptures relating to welcoming and giving to refugees, from Christian Aid who are really being a wonderful and proactive voice re: refugees

<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/emergencies/refugee-crisis-church-resources>

A much more in depth resource, by a group of church bodies/ Christian organisations about a Christian response to the refugee crisis

<http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Made-for-goodness-A-faithful-response-to-the-refugee-crisis.pdf>

One of a few very good videos by Home For Good, about fostering Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children. Fostering UASC in Gloucestershire is a significant local need

<http://www.homeforgood.org.uk/get-involved/responding-refugee-crisis>

Resources for children and young people, if the children's workers/Sunday school teams want to extend this into the children's sessions on that Sunday:-

<http://lassn.org.uk/resources-for-young-people/>

Finally

There are many points above that give opportunities for churches and individuals to get involved with the work with refugees from: giving lifts and helping to take and type up meeting minutes to offering property for rent or fostering refugee children. If you feel able to help with any of these areas or want further information please do contact me, details below.

Churches could continue pray for the wide variety of work that continues in the area and for smooth transitions for refugees who are coming to Cheltenham. The ability of CWR with GARAS to plan and prepare accommodation and time it successfully with the arrivals of refugees is challenging, please pray that the housing that has been allocated can be used and that the processes would enable those in great need to come to the area as soon as is possible.

I have contact details for a variety of churches across Cheltenham, but if you have any questions about this update please do contact me.

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