

## **ACTION FOR REFUGEES IN LEWISHAM & ST MARGARET'S CHURCH**

### **A COMPASSIONATE COMMUNITY – a talk at the Parish Eucharist 22 May 2016**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Hello, my name is Renae Mann and I am here today to inspire you. I want to share with you a story of compassion and hope. In a world that feels increasingly complicated and fearful, it is these stories that remind us what it is to be human beings.

The Reverend Dr Alan Race invited me here today to speak with you about Action for Refugees in Lewisham or AFRIL, a local charity supporting refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in Lewisham – some of our most vulnerable residents having survived persecution and war. I am the chairperson of the Board of Trustees, responsible for ensuring that as a charity that we are doing our best to meet our beneficiaries needs.

Why me? Why AFRIL? For the past two years AFRIL has been very fortunate to be supported by St Margaret's – Reverend Dr Alan Race, his excellent team, and many of you. At its heart this is because we share one others' values – we both believe in:

- Engagement – we involve the community around us in our work.
- Equality – we include everyone in our work regardless of race, age, gender, marital status, sexual orientation or physical and mental capability
- Empowerment - we support people to take action on issues affecting them.
- Excellence - We aim for excellence in all we do, valuing transparency, creativity, participation and learning.

#### **CONTEXT**

AFRIL was founded by our Manager, Iolanda Chirico, in 2006. At that time there was no service for this vulnerable community in the area. At that time, increasing numbers of people were being made destitute by government policies- a situation that has worsened through subsequent government action and global crises. Before I speak about the experience of refugees living in Lewisham, I thought it might be useful to first set out what it means to be a refugee, their needs and rights in an increasingly fraught debate.

Refugees are people who have fled conflict or persecution. Their lives have been threatened due to their social identity, whose governments can't or won't protect them. You will have seen the images of Syria and the towns and cities bombed by the Syrian government, and the crisis in the Mediterranean.

People seeking recognition as refugees are seeking safety having been persecuted due to their social identity – such as their faith, ethnicity, political beliefs, sexuality etc – and who's governments cannot or will not protect from these threats. An asylum seeker is a person who awaiting the outcome of their application for recognition as a refugee. This is set out in international law -the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees and the European Human Rights Act. In addition, the European Human Rights Act, states that we all have a right to family life, housing, health care and to have our humanitarian needs protected.

Everyone, you and I, have the right to seek protection as a refugee. We are able to cross borders to do this. There is no queue. There are no good or bad refugees. There is only the responsibility to protect and support people who have suffered violence and war, who have lost everything and who bring so much, to rebuild their lives.

These rights protect us all; they compel us to respond compassionately to some of the most vulnerable people in the world. They are there to ensure that when the very worst happens that people can and should seek protection and be able to rebuild their lives in a new, safe country.

## **THE NEED**

### *The global situation*

We are in the grip of a global refugee crisis. It is not just happening in the Mediterranean, Calais. It is happening here in our community. The world is experiencing the largest humanitarian movement of people since World War Two. The UN High Commission for Refugees estimates that there are nearly 60 million forcibly displaced people in the world today, and of these, about 20 million are refugees, people who need help to rebuild their lives in new, safe countries.

These are people fleeing conflict in countries such as Syria, Colombia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea.

So called, developing countries host 86% of the world's refugees – 17.2 million people. Countries such as Jordan.

Turkey hosts the largest number of refugees – nearly 2 million.

### *The UK situation*

We have seen the images from the Mediterranean and Calais. What we are not seeing is what is happening here. There is a refugee crisis in the UK. The UK receives about 33,000 applications for asylum each year, of which less than 20% will receive refugee status or some form of protection. By comparison, Germany receives over 100,000 asylum applications each year. Currently the UK is home to about 100,000 refugees having been settled here since World War Two. You may even recognise the contributions of a few:

Albert Einstein, world famous scientist, a Jewish German refugee.

Michael Marks – co-founder of Marks & Spencer's was a Russian Jewish refugee

Lucien Freud – a painter, was a Jewish German refugee

Rita Ora – a musician, Kosovan refugee.

Ed Milliband – his father was a Belgian Jewish refugee

### *The Lewisham situation*

Lewisham is home for many migrants, including myself; according to the most recent census 30% of our residents are foreign born, a trend shared by our neighbouring boroughs in Southwark, Lambeth, Bromley and Croydon. Lewisham is the among the most deprived Boroughs in London based on

educational attainment, people receiving benefits, inequality, homelessness, and unemployment rates.

The number of recorded refugees, immigrants is difficult to calculate; Lewisham Council keeps no official records beyond the census data. Census figures for Lewisham and the Southeast tells us that the migrant population has increased since 2001, we do not know what proportion comprise refugees, people seeking asylum and vulnerable migrants. Other data from the Greater London Authority suggests that between 1000-2,000 refugees living in each borough. At AFRIL we see 120 people each week.

We estimate that the number of people seeking asylum and vulnerable migrants is also increasing based on figures gathered from local authorities and the Home Office. This reflects the increase asylum applications, work-related visas and study-related visas, family-related grants to stay permanently, asylum support appeals, and the number of families with no recourse to public funds applying for local authority support.

### *Refugees' needs*

People who have sought refuge, need compassion. They need their stories to be heard and to be supported to rebuild their lives – legal advice, housing, health care, education, friendship, to belong. Things that we all need. People who have sought refuge want to contribute. They bring skills, education, perspectives that can and have made their country and the UK great. Things that we all bring to life. They need help to:

- Navigate our complex immigration system.
- Get the support that they need to rebuild their lives.
- Contribute their skills.

### *Why these needs are not being met*

Fear and suspicion rather than compassion have driven UK immigration policy for the last 20 years. As the world has fractured our governments have responded by trying to deter people by withholding the support that people seeking refuge require. Refugees, people seeking asylum and vulnerable migrants have limited or no access to support in the UK:

- asylum support is at below poverty levels or 70% of job seekers allowance.
- they cannot access benefits or other sources of government support.
- They cannot work
- Legal aid is not available except in very restricted amounts for all but asylum applications.

The Home Office can make bad decisions on peoples' asylum claims; over 60% of appeals are successful. If you can't get access to quality legal advice you cannot appeal the decision.

The Immigration Act 2016 has just taken away the right to appeal Home Office refusals of asylum support – this will lead to more people becoming destitute. It also requires landlords to check a person's immigration status before giving them accommodation – this will lead to more homelessness.

## **AFRIL'S RESPONSE**

We are a community of optimists! We believe that compassion not fear is the solution. We do this by working with the people that we are here to serve, to build a network of support around them, to enable them to escape poverty, access justice and rebuild their lives.

Our 9 part time staff and 30+ volunteers provide a range of services that do just that. We love our work and are proud of what we have enabled people to achieve. We see 120 people each week. We see people with skills, passion and a desire to be part of the Lewisham community who are:

- Living in poverty - without money for food, clothing or transport.
- Isolated, depressed and fast losing hope.
- Eager to learn English and acquire the skills to live independently.

I'd like to briefly share the story of Tofiq. Tofiq, not his real name, is an Afghan man who arrived in the UK in 2009. He was detained, fled the country. He returned, and was diagnosed with depression and post traumatic stress disorder. In 2014 he was granted asylum – he did not receive his National Insurance card until 2016. A man of dignity, he did not seek help for over a year, living in poverty and isolation unable to travel to his psychologist in north London. In late 2015 he was referred to AFRIL and was supported with £50 each week and regular support from Iolanda. Due to his impoverished living conditions he developed secondary infections, became sick and agoraphobic. Now, with his National Insurance number he receives regular benefits and is rebuilding his life.

## **HOW AFRIL HELPS**

One of our values is to empower the people that we serve; to give them the knowledge, skills and experience that they need to rebuild their lives. Here are some of the ways that we help.

### **The Rainbow Club**

For ten years we have provided a supplementary school for refugees and migrant children to develop their academic and personal development. It is difficult being the new child at school, I know from personal experience, but it is so much harder when you have fled war, have lost everything, do not speak the language, live in poverty, and have no friends or family to support you. There is very limited support in our schools for refugee children to get the support that they need to overcome these issues.

Our 60+ students are aged 4-11 years. They study English, maths, art and music. Every year we see significant progression. Several of our children have been accepted on to local music programmes, and all have gone on to attain GCSEs and A levels. While their children learn, parents meet to discuss issues concerning them and get specialist support such as support to engage with mainstream services or referral to specialist advisers. For example:

- Parents often can't provide support with school work due to language.
- Chance to meet other pupils.
- Many mothers need time to complete important tasks without children.
- Opportunities for service users to volunteer (currently 5).
- Community organisations coming together to support children– Fairbeats!, Cakes for Kids.

## **ESOL – English for Speakers of Other Languages**

It is essential that refugees and migrants are able to speak English if they are to rebuild their lives in the UK. Education and employment relies on it. Sadly, provision is very limited, due to government policy and funding cuts.

We offer ESOL classes Monday, Wed & Thurs – 48 Students, average 10 per class. We are delighted to have been able to recently increase our English classes with St Margaret's where we are offering classes each Thursday until June.

### **Advice Service**

This is the key service to help people to begin to rebuild their lives. People who are seeking refuge or who are new to the UK need quality advice. Understanding how to apply for asylum or respond to Home Office letters or challenge a decision. Understanding how to apply for housing, speak to a child's teacher or access specialist health care.

Our multilingual advice service operates three half days a week and helps 10 people each week. We also have an immigration solicitor once a week who provides immigration advice. Our advice service is essential. It helps people to:

- Navigate our immigration system which creates confusion and inefficiency
- Access their legal right to protection which is often denied due to incorrect decisions and complex procedures.
- Manage the psychological impact by providing a trained professional to help them through this difficult process.

### **Destitution Service**

Our destitution service is a lifeline for those people who are unable to access the help that they need. Sometimes the helping systems in the UK do not work and people have no money. AFRIL provides food, clothing and money. We are currently supporting 10 families by providing food, clothing and money. We are very grateful to St Margaret's help in supporting this vital work.

The Christmas appeal brought in so much that we had to stop. Many people donate this way but actually isn't the most needed thing. Food is more important than clothes, and money allows people to access legal advice and travel to appointments.

### **OUR RESOURCES**

AFRIL receives no government funding. Our services are delivered by a team of 9 part time staff, and 30+ volunteers. Without the generous support of our funders and supporters we could not offer our services. The Rainbow Club, Advice Service, and Iolanda are funded by trusts and foundations. Our destitution service is funded by donations from our supporters. We work hard to raise funds for our vital work. Our clients need your support.

AFRIL can only do what it does with the fantastic staff and volunteers who deliver the work, and the support of our community. Our people are highly skilled, committed able to deliver complex services

with limited resources. We are grateful to our supporters like St Margaret's for providing us with premises, material goods, and fundraising to meet our clients' needs.

**THERE IS A REFUGEE CRISIS – We need your help.**

UK Government policies are increasing their poverty, denying them justice, and the ability to rebuild their lives. This is not compassionate. UK citizens across the country do not support this approach. We are compassionate, welcoming people as I have shown through AFRIL's work.

You can make a difference.

Refugees, asylum seekers and migrants need our compassion not our fear. They need our welcome, our understanding. They need to be seen as the resilient, skilful, diverse people that they are and the immense value that this offers our society. With our support they can have their cases heard, escape poverty and rebuild their lives.

You can make a difference

You can write to your MP and Councillors asking them what they are doing to make Lewisham a welcoming place for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. You can volunteer with AFRIL. You can support AFRIL's work by raising money to support our work.

*Elie Weisel, Jewish refugee: Today as yesterday a nation is judged by its attitude to refugees. Be the voice of those who don't have one, and join us today.*

You will have received an AFRIL pamphlet with our contact details. We look forward to welcoming you soon.

Thank you.