

EMBRACE NEWS

Summer 2009

EMBRACE

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EMBRACE Office

Please note that during the months of July and August there will be limited administrative support from the EMBRACE office; however, please continue to send money for the Emergency Fund. The need will continue through the summer. As you will see below, needs arise unexpectedly.

'I was a stranger and you invited me into your home.' Matthew 25: 35

After the summer newsletter had gone to press the whole world was made aware of the fact that many Roma people from Romania had been intimidated in the Lisburn Road area of Belfast. Following threats and the breaking of windows the families were moved to the sanctuary of City Church and then to a secret location, until the Housing Executive was able to make emergency payments for flights so that families could return to Romania. Money donated to EMBRACE allowed single people to travel. It is hoped that some will come back, but they needed to reassure family back in Romania.

What disturbed many people was the fact that the victims of violence were the ones who had to flee, rather than the perpetrators being stopped. The police admitted afterwards that they had not known enough about the Roma community to understand their fears. Assistant Chief Constable Finlay said:

'We didn't have the ability to, perhaps, reach in and understand what was going on in their lives and what their fears and apprehensions were, and perhaps we came to that slightly late.'

That was not the only misunderstanding. There was a lot of sympathy but also a great deal of misunderstanding. The airwaves were full of people stereotyping the whole Roma community in a derogatory way, or talking about people 'taking our jobs' and 'only here for the benefits'. Here are some corrective facts.

- The Roma live in poverty on the margins of society wherever they are, subject to suspicion, discrimination and largely excluded from mainstream employment.
- They suffered slavery prior to the 19th century and were among the groups who died in the gas chambers in the Nazi period in Europe.
- When they joined the EU, people from Bulgaria and Romania (A2 countries in EC parlance) were not given the same rights to employment here as people from other new EU countries such as Poland.
- As EU citizens they are entitled to move freely throughout Europe.
- A2 nationals can work here legally if they get Work Permits as highly skilled workers or work as self-employed people; that can include some ad hoc employment such as selling papers.
- People without full employment rights are more vulnerable to exploitation.
- They are not entitled to welfare benefits or social housing.
- Discussions took place within NI Executive departments before it was agreed that the Housing Executive could release money for emergency airfares.

For a news account see: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/defiance-meet-the-romanian-families-refusing-to-be-forced-out-1722458.html>

The Good News

The reputation of Belfast as the 'race-hate capital of Europe' was counterbalanced in the eyes of the world when the Roma families were welcomed into City Church to shelter and other Christian people helped with food and bedding. They probably saw this as a spontaneous gesture but here are some other facts.

- City Church already had relationships with Roma people who had been given space to worship there and families had attended community events organised there.
- Other local congregations have Roma children in their youth groups, and at least one has a Roma group worshipping in their church.
- Churches elsewhere in the city have Roma members.
- EMBRACE has tried to develop links, although this is not easy.
- The EMBRACE Emergency Fund has been used where people have no right to public help (e.g. bus fares so that Roma children can get to school).
- EMBRACE was seen as the obvious group to be responsible for the donations which people gave to help the Roma people.
- Throughout the crisis all the food came from Storehouse (a project of Belfast City Vineyard Church) and donations from churches, individuals and supermarkets.

The media said that people were welcomed into a church hall but in City Church the hall and the church are one. People were welcomed right into the heart of where God is worshipped.

A Big Thank you!

All the people who helped in any way through gifts, volunteering and with their prayers deserve thanks.

Are you Ready if it Happens in Your Area?

Some time ago EMBRACE supported the All-Ireland Churches' Consultative Meeting on Racism in suggesting that people plan for the unhappy prospect of a racist attack in their area. The economic recession has increased the likelihood of racist attacks. Here are just some suggestions for what you can do now.

- Organise training on diversity and migration awareness.
- Build links with people from other backgrounds who have moved into your area.
- Bring churches together to plan how you would respond in the event of a racist incident.
- Make sure you know how to contact the right people in the agencies who can help.
- These might include PSNI, Housing Executive, Community Safety, district council Good Relations or Anti-Racism officers, etc.
- Visit people who have been attacked to reassure them and see if there is anything you can do.
- Go in pairs and if there are women alone, ensure that there is a woman among the visitors.
- Never give publicity to an incident unless the victims want it to be known.
- Ensure that there is one person who can make a statement on behalf of everyone.
- Pray for and write letters of support to politicians and others who are trying to move us away from intolerance and towards sharing.

EMBRACE

Building a welcoming community

