



Image from the City of Sanctuary Refugee Arts Project (Making paper boats and putting them in a public space.) <http://cityofsanctuary.org/2015/09/28/refugee-crossing-arts-project/>

European Churches Respond to the Refugee and Migrant Crisis

A joint letter from the Conference of European Churches (CEC), the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME), and the World Council of Churches (WCC), on 10 September, asked European churches to increase their efforts to welcome, support and protect refugees arriving in Europe. They note the large numbers of people landing in Italy and Greece and say

We advocate for a Common European Asylum System including decent reception conditions as well as a Common European Resettlement Scheme that puts the human being and his/her dignity at the centre of the processes. We urge the European governments to take responsibility in particular for the situation of minors, the most vulnerable group, who are often deprived of basic stability, a full family life and education.

They give examples of practical actions by Christians

- Supporting the basic needs of new arrivals in the Greek islands
- Similar services and soup kitchens on the Greek mainland as well as legal support services
- A number of Churches in Hungary are active, including in the provision of medical services
- Northern churches are supporting partners in crisis areas and appeals for donations have been launched
- UK Church leaders have spoken asking for compassion in relation to the Calais situation
- An ACT alliance of Churches in Greece, Hungary and Serbia have begun to provide humanitarian aid

They have asked churches to let them know what is being done in their area. Read the full text: www.ceceurope.org/fileadmin/filer/cec/15_9_WCC-CEC-CCME_refugee_crisis_letter_FINAL.pdf

For facts about the crisis read the IOM blog: <http://weblog.iom.int/tragedy-epic-proportions-how-help-migrant-crisis-europe>

Responses from Churches in Ireland

Pope Francis has asked parishes and religious communities to open their doors to refugees and Catholic dioceses throughout Ireland have responded by setting up working groups to co-ordinate responses, including utilising the links between organisations such as St Vincent De Paul and Caritas and other partners on the continent.

Other Churches are also using existing links. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI), for example, has been linking with their partner Church, the Reformed Church in Hungary, which is working with refugees. It encourages PCI members wishing to make a practical response to support the Church's development partners, Tear Fund and Christian Aid in particular. Irish Methodists have been meeting with the European Methodist Council and urge people to give practical aid and welcome. The Church of Ireland Bishops asked for prayer, engagement with political representatives to urge greater provision of refuge and resettlement. Special collections were held in September, and a grant was made by Bishops' Appeal to agencies including Christian Aid.

People, who want a co-ordinated Christian approach, across the denominations, have set up a web site urging people to volunteer. Read more on page 3. (In the Republic of Ireland the Government has already asked the Irish Red Cross to co-ordinate voluntary responses of people who want to assist incoming Syrian refugees.)

EMBRACE reinforces the message of aid agencies that goods such as clothing should only be collected where there are active requests from partner groups on the ground. Donations for organisations such as Christian Aid, Tear Fund, Trócaire and the Red Cross, are essential to support people in refugee camps and in transit. Money spent locally avoids transport costs and reinvigorates disrupted economies. This is especially important at a time when the World Food Programme is running out of money and refugees in countries such as Jordan face starvation.

Some wandered in desert wastelands, finding no way to a city where they could settle. They were hungry and thirsty, and their lives ebbed away. Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way to a city where they could settle.

(Psalm 107: 4-7 NIV, the text used in Trócaire's Just World refugee crisis briefing, Down and Connor Diocese, 22 September 2015.)

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EMBRACE is a group of Christians from different denominations working together to promote a positive response to people who are seeking asylum, refugees, migrant workers and people from minority-ethnic backgrounds living in Northern Ireland.

REFUGEE & IMMIGRATION ISSUES

UK Plans for Syrian Refugees

The volume of refugees and migrants moving into Europe is greatly increased by the number of people displaced by the Syrian Civil War who can no longer tolerate conditions in camps and makeshift accommodation in the surrounding countries of Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey.

The UK was reluctant to respond to the UN Refugee Agency's plea that wealthier countries receive some of the most vulnerable of the refugees directly from the camps, but, during summer 2015, they agreed to receive up to 20,000 people in the next five years, as part of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation (SVPR) Scheme. The NI Deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness has announced that a small number of these people will come to N Ireland. See Col. 2.

Forum Asks NI Executive to take '5 Actions'

Organisations in the local Refugee and Asylum Forum (RAF) welcome the arrival of Syrian refugees but, in a paper endorsed by ten member groups, they asked the NI Executive to first take five actions in order 'to offer a safe and sustainable place of refuge to Syrian refugees and to better support our existing asylum seekers and refugees.' These reflect existing shortcomings:

- A properly resourced local Refugee Integration Strategy (like other parts of the UK)
- Long-term commitment to funding refugee settlement
- A mechanism to ensure that no person experiences destitution on being granted refugee status
- All refugees to have access to free, accredited English language classes
- Work with the refugee support sector in designing a Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation resettlement scheme

The groups witnessed to the need they had observed.

Our organisations work for and with a number of Syrian asylum seekers and refugees as well as refugees from other countries. We have heard first-hand the horrors of life in Syria and the dangers of clandestine travel to Europe. We have housed, fed, clothed, counselled and provided a range of support services to people who have fled conflict, rape, torture, bereavement and hardship. Some of our clients and service users have family members who remain trapped in besieged cities in Syria or who are living a precarious existence in refugee camps in neighbouring countries. Through our work we can attest to and empathise with the immense pain that many Syrians endure on a daily basis. We therefore support any efforts to encourage the UK government to resettle more Syrians and other refugees. Northern Ireland has an important role to play in this.

The Law Centre NI web site shows how to lobby political representatives on this issue. They are anxious that Syrian refugees are treated well but also that people who are applying for asylum outside the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (see opposite) do not receive less favourable treatment. <http://lawcentreni.org/news/recent-news/38-featured-slideshow/1246-five-key-actions-to-ensure-ni-responds-to-refugees-needs.html?q=actions>

Local Planning for Syrian Refugees

In September 2015, the Assembly called upon the Executive to ensure that provisions are in place to welcome Syrian refugees (<http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-22-09-2015.pdf>) and a strategic group comprised of civil servants and people from statutory bodies has been planning for their arrival. There is now also an operational group, including members of the Refugee and Asylum Forum (see opposite) and those who will have the responsibility for the practical issues involved in receiving the small numbers of vulnerable refugees who are likely to come here. The first group of 50 to 100 people should arrive before Christmas, with others to follow on a phased basis.

The Deputy First Minister said that 'Beginning with a modest number initially will assist learning and identification / resolution of difficulties.' He also said it is important that the care offered to refugees extends beyond simply 'opening the door' and that a Refugee Integration Strategy would be implemented to ensure smooth transition into society for the refugees. (UTV News, 5 October 2015, www.u.tv/News/2015/10/05/First-Syrian-refugees-will-arrive-in-December-46324)

The first group will probably come to Belfast where they will have access to specialist medical and trauma care. As they are likely to be Muslim, they would also be best able to access spiritual support in the city.

Countering Fears About Syrian Refugees

This refugee crisis has generated waves of compassion, but also raised fears and some of the statements on social media are vitriolic. This negativity is often based on misinformation. Members of the public should be prepared to explain the **Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation (SVPR) Scheme**.

- People will be selected to come here because they are vulnerable e.g. elderly people; disabled children; victims of torture or sexual violence. Some family members will be entitled to come with them.
- They will not be chosen from the numbers of people already travelling into and across Europe, so are highly unlikely to contain young people from other countries who might claim to be Syrian.
- They will be registered already as refugees from Syria by the UN Refugee Agency and the Home Office has said that appropriate security checks will be conducted before they come to the UK.
- SVP refugees will be provided with accommodation in the private rental sector on arrival, so it is unlikely that extra provision will be needed in the short term.

Find out more: read EMBRACE Information Sheet 10, **Syrian Refugees** www.embraceni.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Syrian-Refugees-Info-Sheet-Sept-2015-F.pdf

Cuts in Asylum Support

While people have been moved by the plight of refugee children, the Government has changed the financial support for people applying for asylum in the UK to a flat rate of £36.95 per person, a loss of £16 per week for individual children from 10 August, 2015. See <http://lawcentreni.org/news/recent-news/1-news/1231-uk-government-to-cut-vital-support-to-asylum-seeking-families.html>

CHURCHES NEWS

Over 100 Attend EMBRACE Syrian Refugees Event

Before the recent surge in interest, EMBRACE had already planned that its annual event at Edgehill College in August would focus on Syria because of the interest shown at the EMBRACE AGM in May. (See Newsletter No 31.)

The room was packed, mostly with people from churches all over Northern Ireland. They were given expert information about the situation. Liz Griffith, Law Centre NI, explained how our system of asylum protection under the Refugee Convention emerged from the horrors of the Second World War and the failure to protect people from persecution and genocide. Neil McKittrick of the Red Cross spoke about the magnitude of the Syrian refugee crisis and how only 6% of refugees had sought protection in Europe. He also stressed the importance of improving conditions for people who are already here, in the asylum system (see page 2). In a powerful presentation, Dr Linda Agnew described the psychological problems faced by refugees, and how, even when protected, they continued to 'live a life of loss'. She stressed the importance of faith and freedom to practice it.

Dilsher Shekhey who is seeking asylum here, spoke about his fellow Syrians, fleeing from warring groups and suffering in other countries. On a warm summer evening in Belfast, he reflected on the intense cold of winter nights in Lebanon.



Linda Agnew (L) and Liz Griffith (R)
listen to **Dilsher Shekhey**

Kadijeh Okdeh Farouki, a Syrian architect, who has lived here for 25 years, spoke with pride about how her country was a sophisticated modern state before the civil war, only lacking democracy in order for it to develop fully. She expressed her gratitude that conversations about Syria were at last beginning to take place here.



Kadijeh Okdeh Farouki

Christian Website Urges 'Help Refugees Now'

Church Army's Jasper Rutherford and others have set up a web site to help co-ordinate Christian preparation for the arrival of future refugees. www.helprefugeesnow.com/

The site urges people to register, especially linguists who can speak Arabic; people who can help with teaching and educational needs; and professional counsellors and other specialised personnel. (When Syrians arrive here under the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (see page 2), they will have full entitlement to statutory provision of support in these areas. It remains to be seen whether the services of volunteers will be required, and in what numbers.)

EMBRACE September Prayer Letter for Syria

September's prayer is for Syrian people. www.embraceni.org/category/about-us/embrace-prayer-letters/ Since 2011, the Syrian civil war has seen every form of violence and abuse of human rights, including the near destruction of entire neighbourhoods by shelling, the use of cluster bombs, poison gas, kidnap, torture and summary execution. Lack of food, water and electricity has added to the need to flee. Millions of refugees in nearby countries such as Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan, in refugee camps and in communities, are now suffering increasingly intolerable conditions, with little access to employment, their money running out and food and water sometimes in short supply. Many have been forced to risk their lives once more, either returning to Syria to try to raise money to avoid starvation, or in perilous journeys towards Europe.

Book on Exiles and Refugees in Northern Ireland

EMBRACE Information Officer, Margaret McNulty is writing a book on refugees in order to help local people understand what it is like to have to flee from your home, convince officials in another country to believe your story, and cope with bewildering cultural, social and financial challenges. In order to complete the picture she is also outlining the history of exiles and refugees in previous centuries, from Huguenots in the sixteenth century to the Jewish victims of pogroms who fled here at the end of the nineteenth century and Jewish children protected in a farm in Millisle in the 1930s.

In the twentieth century N Ireland was also home to diverse exiles: one of Stalin's future commissars; some anti-fascist refugees in the 1930s; Gibraltarian evacuees and members of the defeated European armed forces during the Second World War. In the 1950s we were a staging post for Hungarian refugees on their way to Canada and, in 1979, some of the Vietnamese 'boat people' came here.

From then on, people have arrived from many countries, escaping conflicts and human rights violations.

The gaps in the information are interesting. Were there really almost no Belgian refugees north of Co. Monaghan during the First World War? How many of the European nationals who remained here after the Second World War were people displaced by the conflict and communist occupation of Eastern Europe? Do you have stories about individuals who came here as exiles or refugees in the twentieth century? Contact EMBRACE if you have a story to tell.

The book should be published in 2016 and perhaps some of the lessons learned from the past will help in the successful integration of our present and future refugees.

EMBRACE NEWS

The EMBRACE office has been receiving many offers of help for Syrian refugees and also an increased number of requests for information and assistance with understanding the current situation. Unfortunately this comes at a point where the group's resources are at their most stretched.

Since the failure to gain renewal of core funding from the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) in the spring, staff hours have had to be cut, with Development Worker, Aneta Dabek working one day per week and Administrative Assistant, Jill Marrs, running the office from 10 am to 3 pm, Tuesday – Thursday.

The group hopes that they will be able to respond to requests by running information events where numbers of people can be brought together, thus reducing the pressure on committee members and staff.

Involvement in the Refugee and Asylum Forum

Denise Wright, Chair of EMBRACE, facilitates the Refugee and Asylum Forum (RAF), a network of statutory and voluntary bodies, that emerged from an EMBRACE initiative to bring people together to talk about refugee issues. EMBRACE Information Officer, Margaret McNulty also attends RAF. Both Denise and Margaret were invited to attend meetings called by the Lord Mayor of Belfast to discuss what the city could do to help.

Members of RAF, including Denise, are part of the operational group at Stormont (see page 2), in charge of the practical organisation of welcome and integration of Syrian refugees.

Both Denise and Margaret are also members of the Belfast City of Sanctuary Steering Group (which is a sub group of RAF). Along with the Belfast Compassionate City initiative, this group organised a public meeting on 2 October where panellists and those who attended engaged with the question, 'What would Belfast look like if it was safe, compassionate, welcoming city?'

Staff and Committee Activities

Irene Jovaras and EMBRACE Information Officer, Margaret McNulty, have both been included in the group assisting the Catholic Diocese of Down and Connor with their response to the current refugee and migrant crisis.

Margaret McNulty led a workshop on understanding local immigration and asylum issues at the 2015 Stronger Together Conference in Ballymena on 29 September; presented information on the crisis points in the asylum system to St Vincent De Paul volunteers in the South and East Belfast Conferences on 12 October; attended the East Belfast Race Relations Forum on 13 October; led a panel discussion on refugees in wartime at the Literature of the Irish in Exile autumn conference at the Centre for Migration Studies in Omagh on 17 October; and spoke about the refugee and migrant crisis to a group of Church of Ireland clergy in the Rathcoole area of north Belfast, on 20 October.

Development Worker, Aneta Dabek, continues to compile the list of English language classes which is available at www.embraceni.org/category/migrant-support/english-classes/. In August she led a workshop on 'Welcoming the Others' at the Methodist Church in Ireland's Holiday Week in Castlewellan. She is also running sessions on culture, diversity and migration with 16–18 yr olds in Newry.

Denise Wright and Irene Jovaras spoke at Newtownbreda Presbyterian Church at the end of October and Richard Kerr will address the Contemporary Christianity Group, with Glen Jordan of the Law Centre, in November.

Richard has just returned from a trip to Hungary where he met with Dora Kanizsai-Nagy, director of the Hungarian Reformed Church's ministry to refugees. The dedication of staff and their commitment to ensuring refugees and asylum seekers are welcomed and integrated was impressive. In addition to their on-going programmes, they have been overwhelmed by the influx of refugees coming through Hungary in the past few months. Recently, new government policies have led to the border with Serbia being effectively sealed and many who had been seeking asylum in Hungary have instead moved on to Austria and Germany. The Government in turn has closed some of the reception centres and replaced them with temporary tented accommodation.

NICRAS First Online Newsletter

The NI Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS) has recently published the first issue of NICRAS Community News. Chairperson, Justin Kouame says, 'NICRAS is the only refugee and asylum seeker-led organisation in Northern Ireland. Our work spans education, policy, health, housing and much more.' The magazine gives further information on the work of NICRAS. The group has 425 members currently, from over 30 countries.

Among those thanked for their contribution to NICRAS are numerous organisations and individuals, including Sister Anne who runs English classes, 'all the different churches that have supported us' and EMBRACE. <http://beacon.by/nicras-community-news/nicras-community-news#/0>

EMBRACE Emergency Fund

During the summer months there was an increasing demand for grants from the fund, especially for people who had come here from other countries, hoping to find work, but unable to find any and becoming destitute, with no alternative but to return home. The fund paid for eleven individuals to return to Romania, Czech Republic, Lithuania and Slovakia. Six destitute asylum seekers were provided with food and accommodation and funding paid for essential legal documentation and towards funeral costs. A total of £2060 has been paid out in the past six months.

It is hoped that the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) will revive their crisis fund for destitute migrants and that this will take the pressure off other charities.

Thinking of Joining Us or Making a Donation?

If you are not already a member of EMBRACE, please consider joining us. Subscriptions are £10.00 annually per person and £20.00 for groups. Please write to us at the address below. If you would like to make a donation towards our work please send a cheque, payable to EMBRACE.

Your support is greatly appreciated.

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