

Get Involved: Pray



EMBRACE Prayer Group May 2014

Northern Ireland is becoming more and more diverse by the day. In the course of a week at the International Meeting Point we welcome roughly 500 people through the doors from more than 30 countries. These include Somalia, Iran, China, Spain and Venezuela to name a few. But what sort of welcome do they receive here as a whole?

Recently I have come across two stories which have deeply disturbed me. An Eastern European migrant and his mother were recently due to move into a bungalow in South Belfast, because his mother had severe cancer and does not have the strength to go up and down stairs any more. Over the next few weeks they were subjected to a hate campaign designed to stop them moving into the neighbourhood, including graffiti on the door and bricks through the windows. In another case, an East African refugee has been having stones thrown at his windows several times a week for months.

These are alarming stories, but they are not the norm in Belfast. Most people do not go through this, and even report that they find Northern Irish people friendly. However, something I have heard again and again is that deep friendships are very hard to make in Northern Ireland. Many migrants have told me that they have only been able to strike up genuine friendships with other migrants. While local people are friendly, they have found that local people generally have all their friends and family close by and so they are not really looking for any 'new friends.'

This is something I have heard from many migrants, and it raises a challenge for the Church in Northern Ireland. How far should we go in welcoming the stranger? Should we say hello in the street, offer them a cup of tea and consider our job done? Rather, I think we should be sacrificial in our welcoming of the stranger, opening our homes and our lives to people. Many migrants and refugees are miles away from home and family and can be very isolated in a new place, where they get little to no contact with others. A lot of these people will be coming from a country where there is no established Church, and so we may be the very first Christians they come across. With this comes a huge responsibility to show them the love of Christ through our hospitality and friendship.

Contributed by Michael Sentence

This month we give thanks for:

- People and churches who are welcoming towards others
- Friendship built between locals and newcomers
- Places such as the International Meeting Point where people can meet and start building relationships.

We pray for:

- More compassion and understanding
- People who are in difficult circumstances
- Victims of hate crime.