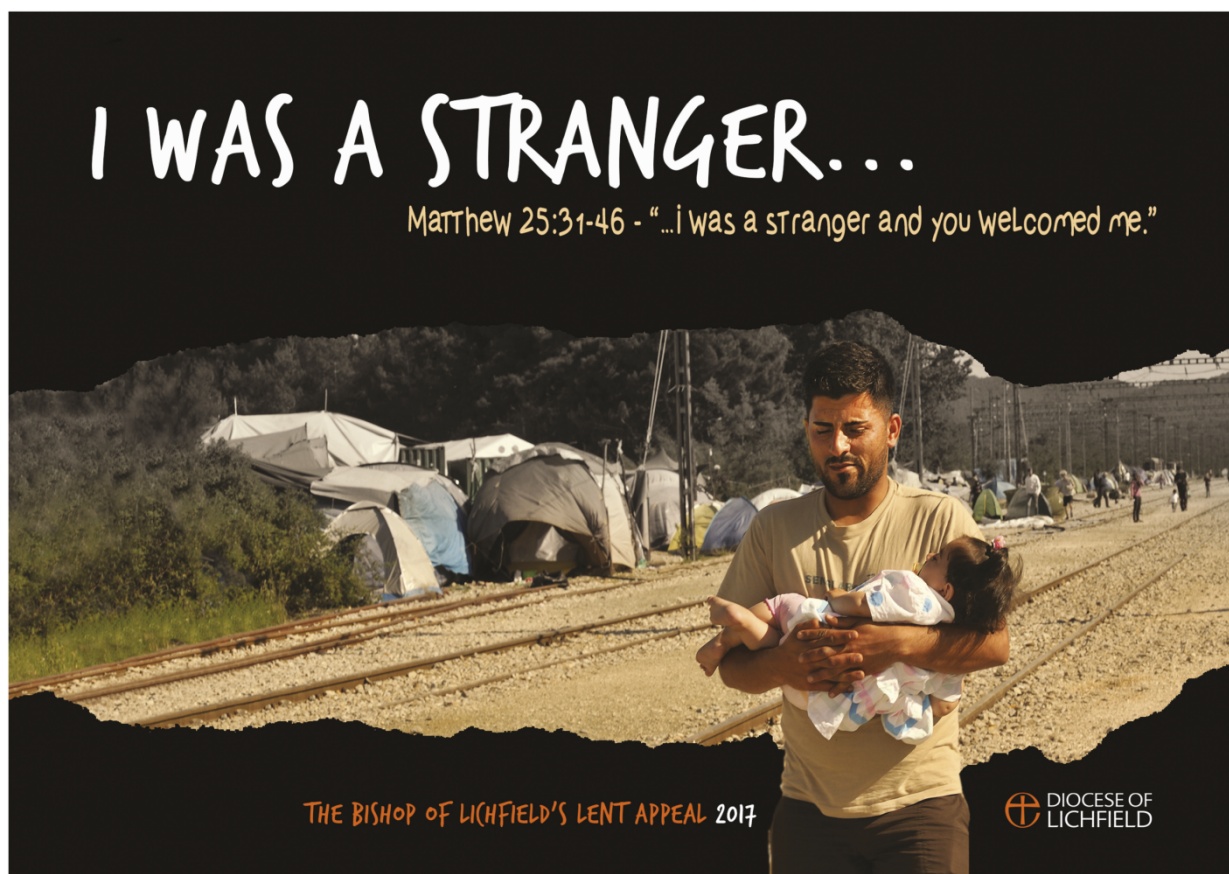


The Diocese of Lichfield welcomes Asylum Seekers and Refugees



A selection of stories illustrating some of the many ways in which members of churches across the Diocese of Lichfield support asylum seekers and refugees.

Compiled by Charlotte Swan and Daniel Njuguna
Edited by David Primrose
August 2017

The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

Leviticus 19.34



The Church of England around Staffordshire, northern Shropshire and the Black Country

Introduction

Members of churches across our diocese are supporting asylum-seekers and refugees in numerous different ways, from individual acts of kindness to regular volunteering with projects serving those who have come to live among us. As part of Bishop Michael's 2017 Lent Appeal and in conjunction with his Hat-te-bah Conference on 13th November, we asked church-members to tell us about local projects known to their church whose work supports refugees and asylum-seekers. Charlotte Swan and Daniel Njuguna have followed up this initial sample, interviewing church-members with project staff and producing this inspirational collection of stories. As you read these ordinary humble examples of practical generosity and faithful service, you will encounter themes of hope, shared blessings, and personal transformation. There is a commitment to justice for some of the world's most vulnerable citizens and an opportunity to see our Christian faith put into practice. Much of this ministry takes place ecumenically, and in the wider community. It is shared here for your encouragement.

We know that across the diocese there will be many more examples of church members supporting asylum-seekers and refugees both individually and as part of their local church. This will involve direct engagement as well as participation in established projects. Please email tc@lichfield.anglican.org with any more stories so that we can add these to those posted on our diocesan website.

Prayer

As an aid to personal and corporate prayer, Bishop Michael has written this prayer:

*Faithful God,
Your people have lived in the midst of chaos and oppression,
And journeyed across borders to contribute to new lives built on justice and peace.
Grant that we may recognise your presence in those
who come to us seeking refuge and asylum,
And respond with open arms and generous hearts.
May the welcome we give be a foretaste of the welcome that awaits us all,
When we gather in glory before your Throne.
Amen.*

Action

Contact details for projects mentioned in this booklet, along with other useful organisations, are provided on the inside back cover. Particular questions can be directed to James Henderson, Development Worker for Transforming Communities Together, our diocesan joint venture with CUF, on james.henderson@tctogether.org.uk 079046 771495.

Email your story to
tc@lichfield.anglican.org

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Syrian Refugee Families / Churches Together in Oswestry

There is an exciting new development taking place at The Oswestry and Borders Trussell Trust Foodbank, a project run in partnership with 41 local churches. They are adding five Syrian women in to their team, providing them with training, work experience, the opportunity to improve their English and a very real way to make friends, to volunteer their time and to integrate in to the everyday life of Oswestry.

The support will not stop there. A new initiative is underway to set up a Job Club. As well as helping unemployed people who have lived in Oswestry for a long time, this will be available to the Syrian parents and their older children as they begin to look for work in the local area.

The link with these women and their families had already been well established, since they moved into the area under the government's Syrian Resettlement Programme about a year ago. The churches were quick to provide a welcome and practical help. This has included buying shoes and school uniforms for the children, a Christmas party with food hampers, translation services and English lessons. As the work of the temporary CUF-funded Refugee Action Support Worker ends, the continuing support of the churches through the foodbank will be even more vital.

Liz Jermy, the foodbank manager, has always seen social justice as an integral part of her faith and *'being God's hands and feet in the local community'*. She is deeply committed to working with local people to address local needs. Reaching out to the Syrian families was a natural extension of the work of the foodbank and she says that whilst she is alert to the possibility of prejudice in a predominantly white town, she is certain that the opportunity for friendships with those from a different culture and faith is deeply enriching for everyone. One of the women is a Christian and the other four are Muslims. She is hoping that once they are volunteering they will all feel able to join in with the weekly team prayers.

Shropshire was one of the first councils in the West Midlands to have opted into the Syrian Resettlement Programme, which the government is committed to extend with more resources for Community Sponsorship. This ministry is already providing the church with a wonderful opportunity to *'welcome the stranger'* in a very rural part of Lichfield Diocese.

Email your story to
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Sanctus / St Margaret's Betley and St Peter's Forsbrook

St Margaret's, Betley and St Peter's, Forsbrook in Staffordshire are two of many churches that support the work of Sanctus in Stoke on Trent. For both congregations, their interest and commitment was sparked by hearing speakers from Sanctus sharing about the project and the needs and challenges facing asylum seekers and refugees, just 'up the road' from them. Their compassionate response has been both financial and practical; collecting baby clothes, blankets and bicycles which they deliver to Sanctus at regular intervals.

Sanctus, based at St Mark's Church in Shelton and Central Hall in Longton, runs two weekly drop-ins where those who come can find friendship, advice, craft sessions and English classes. It is also an opportunity to receive a food parcel and baby items. After having endured many difficult and often traumatic experiences, those attending valued greatly the atmosphere of welcome and care. Naresh from Nepal says it is a place in which he has found dignity and confidence as a person, where once a week he can forget about all his problems for a while.

With the growing number of destitute asylum seekers, Sanctus also runs a housing project, which gives people a place to live and a subsistence cash payment whilst they continue to pursue their asylum claim.

Liu with her husband Chang, a middle aged couple from China arrived at the Sanctus drop-in one



morning. They were desperate, homeless and in need of urgent medical help. By the end of the drop-in that day, they had beds to sleep in and the knowledge that they would be supported and helped to access the services they needed. Overwhelmed by the generosity she encountered, Liu says '*I needed to know why they helped me, if it was coming from their faith, then I wanted to find out about God*'. She is now growing in her own Christian faith and giving back to Sanctus through her love of cooking and cleaning.

Faith has also grown amongst those supporting Sanctus. Bernard, who oversees the support from St Margaret's, Betley describes how putting himself forward to serve in this way has

helped to reawaken his faith and brought him new life and he says that '*I am happier, more tolerant and more prepared to listen*'. He enjoys his visits to deliver things to Sanctus and is keen to take more people from his church and community to share the experience.

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Wolverhampton City of Sanctuary / St Nicholas', Codsall

Mike's biggest father's day card this year was to 'Papa Mike' and was given to him by Fabrice, a refugee from the Ivory Coast. Three years ago Mike and his wife had been put in touch with Fabrice through the **Wolverhampton City of Sanctuary**. She was seven and half months pregnant, recently released from detention and without any support. After helping Fabrice through the final stages of pregnancy, both she and her little girl have become family. Birthday parties and many other special times together have been celebrated and this relationship has extended further as Fabrice and little Ange now sometimes attend the church. Mike comments that *'this connection has added an extra dimension to our lives; when you are giving you are actually receiving'*.

An exciting new chapter in Fabrice's story is a placement in the catering department of Jaguar Land Rover, set up by the Anglican Chaplain there. The lack of suitable opportunities for work experience and volunteering is a growing issue for asylum seekers, keen to integrate and to create a CV, ready for job applications and establishing a new life.

There are no asylum seekers or refugees in the village of Codsall, but just down the road in Wolverhampton there are 800. Following a meeting at **St Nicholas' Church, Codsall** with James Henderson from Transforming Communities Together, a group of church members set up the Asylum Seeker Support Group. They focus on raising awareness and raising funds in Codsall and the surrounding deanery, to support the work of the City of Sanctuary and other projects helping asylum seekers within the city.

The sense of community formed by the group members with Fabrice and many other asylum seekers has been a huge and unanticipated joy arising from this venture. Friendships have been made with up to 50 asylum seekers from Albania to Zimbabwe. Appreciating the deep value of these links the Asylum Seeker Support Group has enabled a three way project between City of Sanctuary, St Nicholas Church and various churches in the rural Welsh Marshes. On the day of the Great Get Together in June, a coach full of excited families set off from Wolverhampton to spend the day in Bishop's Castle; their second such visit. Reported in the South Shropshire Journal it was titled *'The Perfect Day Away; Warm welcome for town's new friends'* and described as a day where *'the activities, laughter and deep conversations among helpers and visitors bears out what Jo Cox has said, namely that we have far more in common than that which divides us'*.

Wolverhampton City of Sanctuary runs a weekly drop in at Broad Street Church, as well as occasional Meet and Mingle get-togethers, a celebration of community through music, workshops and art. It aims to welcome new arrivals to the city, many traumatised by their experiences, all facing the UK immigration system with its ever changing politics and policies.

A particular concern for the City of Sanctuary is for those who are destitute and they have a specific fund to support them. The fund, now renamed Kenny's Fund has been established in memory of a much loved member of **St Chad and St Mark's in Wolverhampton**. Through the City of Sanctuary, Kenny housed a number of destitute asylum seekers in his flat and was out shopping for provisions for them when he collapsed and died earlier this year. His funeral ran way over time due to the number of people who wanted to pay tribute to him, many of them asylum seekers who were devastated by his death. In the words of a poem about him, read at his funeral *'You knew what it meant to follow Jesus, the often hard and tricky path'*.

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Walsall Borough of Sanctuary / St Thomas Church, Aldridge

Walsall is the first **Borough of Sanctuary** in the country, all the others being Cities of Sanctuary. In the ethos of the movement, it is low on bureaucracy and strong on networking, campaigning and creating a culture of welcome. As increasing numbers of asylum seekers are dispersed to Walsall and the Black Country, the **Walsall Borough of Sanctuary** (WBS) is doing strategic work; creating opportunities for people to meet, celebrating the nationalities and cultures of those seeking sanctuary and raising awareness of the 'sanctuary message' of welcome and inclusion across all spheres of society.

Corrie Halford has been involved in the WBS since it began. One of the things she does is visit a hostel in Walsall Wood for women and children seeking asylum. She has enlisted a small team to teach English classes there. When they realised that there was nothing for the women to sit on, it was natural to see if the church might help and she approached **St Thomas' Church, Aldridge**. They had some spare chairs and gave them willingly. These have not only been put to good use for the English groups but are used daily by the women and their children as a place to sit and eat together. Before the chairs came, everyone took their food back to their rooms to eat alone. Community has been created through shared mealtimes, by that simple act of generosity.

The WBS builds coalitions of organisations from all sectors (faith and interfaith groups, voluntary, business, education etc.) They are very glad of the support of many Walsall churches from different denominations. They often use church premises to hold their events, and advertise and promote their activities through church communication networks. Corrie helped to make the local connection between St Thomas' Church and the families in the Walsall Wood hostel.

These families have become special to St Thomas' Church. Some of them are part of the church family and chatting together over coffee after the service has enabled relationships to grow. Bags of clothing and toys are regularly passed on to the families who have left their own countries with just what they could carry. Many are traumatised by their experiences and are on a journey both of healing and of faith. Those who have found support and comfort at the church are reaching out to their neighbours in the hostel, inviting them to come and experience the love of God for themselves.



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Hope into Action / Holy Trinity Church Heath Town

Taking inspiration from the words of Isaiah 58 *'Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen: to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter'* Hope into Action Black Country wants to see the church once again at the forefront of social reform, offering a more community based response to homelessness. Christians with savings are encouraged to use this wealth for the kingdom, sharing it with the poor rather than having it 'stored in barns' (i.e. banks, stocks and shares) by investing in a house and receiving a small financial return as a result.

Matt Lambert, the founder and director of Hope into Action Black Country since 2013, has a vision for opening 50 or more properties over the next 10 years. He has a passion that *'providing homes for those in need will be as normal to churches as installing a sound system'*. With seven properties now up and running in partnership with churches, housing 23 people, the journey towards the fulfilment of this vision is now well underway.

Once a house has been purchased by one or more investors, the tenants move in and the local church is free to focus on what it does best - building friendships and supporting the people who live there. This engagement with the tenants in a meaningful way is key to the success of the project, addressing what Matt calls *'relational poverty'*, the root cause of most homelessness. The Hope into Action staff are on hand to give training and help with every step of the process, as well as carrying the ongoing responsibility for the day to day management of the houses.

A growing reason for homelessness is refusal of asylum claims by the Home Office, leaving those seeking asylum with no home and no recourse to public funds. Another is the difficulty faced by refugees who have been granted leave to remain but are turned out of their government provided accommodation at short notice without financial support and before any welfare benefits are established. Hope into Action is able to offer accommodation to some of these two groups of homeless people.

Mubarak is one of the refugee tenants. He fled his home country of Sudan following his village being destroyed by the Janjaweed. He fled through Libya, spent 13 days on a boat in the Mediterranean Sea and then across Europe into France where he spent a number of months in a refugee camp. After being granted asylum but with nowhere to go, Mubarak ended up sofa surfing with another asylum seeker. When this friend was also granted asylum, they were both homeless and are now housed in a home run by Hope into Action, Black Country. Mubarak has now been offered a place at University to study engineering.

One of the churches that support a Hope in to Action house is **Holy Trinity, Heath Town**. The vicar, Richard Merrick, says it was a natural response to the issue of homelessness in the parish and to the command to *'Love Your Neighbour'*. The whole church helped in setting up the house with practical donations of furniture and other items. A befriending team was established whose members have made good relationships with the residents, some of whom have been enabled to move on, with the spaces in the house then being occupied by newcomers.

In response to the question of whether Hope into Action needs more support, Matt says a resounding *'Yes!'*.... more houses, more finance and a spreading of the word about the work of the project and the difference it is making to people's lives.

Email your story to
tc@lichfield.anglican.org

Greenfields Africa / St Peter's Stoke on Tern

Knitters for **Greenfields Africa**, a charity based in Stoke on Tern, are located as far afield as the Republic of Ireland, France and Spain as well as many parts of the UK. They are knitting blankets, jumpers, scarves, hats, teddies and baby clothes. Working with other registered charities these items, together with shoes, food and children's toys are sent directly to refugee camps in Europe and Syria, as well as to projects supporting asylum seekers in Lichfield Diocese.

Greenfields Africa was founded, and is run by, members of **St Peter's Church, Stoke on Tern**. Church members act as trustees and are also involved in collections, van driving, packing and administration. It is a particular strength for the church that several of the young people are enthusiastic volunteers for the project.

Initially set up to build an Anglican church in Greenfields Township, in the Diocese of George, South Africa, the organisation has, over the years, expanded into other parts of Africa and now supports an impoverished community in the rainforest of Kakamega in Western Kenya where they have built and support a hospital, employing 38 staff. They also fund outreach health work and school and university education for children from families with no cash income. Some members of St Peter's have been able to spend time visiting or working at the hospital, keeping the personal links vibrant and informed.

Part of the charity's work had been concentrated on collecting and shipping goods to Kenya. When Chinese investment in Kenya impacted on this aspect of their work by the removal of tariff-free status of charitable goods, this operation became difficult to sustain. With warehouse space in Telford (given for free by a church member) and the expertise to move very large quantities of goods to overseas destinations, Greenfields Africa had become a significant force in the collection, packaging and distribution of goods for charitable purposes. Rather than close down this aspect of their work, they decided to use their facilities, expertise and contacts for the benefit of refugees in this country. The knitted items and other goods have been greatly welcomed and the need for them looks likely to continue for a long time to come.

The Founder and Director of Greenfields, Brian Hatton is full of wonder at the development of the charity's work over the last 12 years. After retiring from teaching, he didn't know whether his working life was finished or God had something more for him to do. Kneeling down in the debris of a church reordering project at St Peter's, he heard God telling him to '*build a church in Africa*'. He describes what happened next as akin to '*climbing in to a washing machine and turning it on*'. In all the ups and downs, witnessing both the immense suffering in Africa along with overwhelming generosity, his faith and confidence in God has soared. God has '*raised him up to more than he could be,*' enabling the kingdom work of Greenfields to flourish firstly in Africa and now in the refugee camps of Syria and beyond.

Email your story to
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Refugee and Migrant Centre / St Leonard's Bilston

The Good Shepherd shop, next to St Leonard's Church in Bilston, is a Christian social enterprise project. It fulfils many different purposes for the benefit of the local community and beyond. They accept second hand items including clothing, furniture, household and electrical items that are in good condition. Storage is managed with local warehouse facilities.

The link with the church is strong. Dave Wills, the vicar, is a regular visitor, often talking and praying with those who come in. Everyone working for the Good Shepherd Support Ltd is a volunteer. The shop manager is a member of St Leonard's and sees her work as a way of sharing God's love with those going through hard times.

The received goods are channelled in two directions. The project takes referrals of asylum seekers and refugees who are moving, often with very little notice, into unfurnished accommodation and need help with setting up home. These referrals come mainly from the Refugee and Migrant Centre (RMC) in Wolverhampton. With very little delay, the Good Shepherd van volunteers can transport all the needed household items to provide a welcoming and equipped home.

Bilston is an area with a large number of people living on low incomes. The shop sells goods at reasonable prices, enabling local people to afford them without getting in to debt. The income generated from sales is used to pay the overheads on the shop, van and warehouse. The benefits of the project extend to those who volunteer, giving a sense of purpose and the opportunity to participate in a special community venture.

The RMC greatly values its links with churches and the support given by the Good Shepherd shop. It is a large organisation which has been offering many services to asylum seekers, refugees and migrants for 17 years. Through open drop-ins, fixed appointments and a variety of classes the RMC gives free advice, guidance and training in the areas of citizenship, education, employment, family support, healthcare, housing, immigration, asylum support, welfare benefits and tax. Most of the services are managed and delivered by people who are refugees or migrants themselves. Their experiences help them to empathise with service users and it also means that the majority of clients are advised in a language they fully understand.

The scale of operation at the RMC can be appreciated by the following statistics: Last year 4,761 individuals and 3,985 dependents were supported through 18,294 visits to the centre. 27,807 enquiries were made by people from 126 different countries of origin. 40 languages were offered by 31 staff. These statistics underline the value of the work of the Good Shepherd volunteers who follow up on this frontline work, with practical provisions that demonstrate the love of God in action to individuals and families each with their own unique story and hopes for the future.

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The Thomas Project / St Thomas Aldridge

The name 'Thomas' is a popular one on the Leighswood Estate in Aldridge. **The Thomas Project**, linked with **St Thomas' Church** is led by Nicky Thomas. The church had been looking for a way of being and sharing good news on the estate for many years, especially once the only church there closed down. Nicky's renewal of faith in 2007 and prayer of openness to *'doing whatever God asked of her,'* planted the seed of the vision which over time grew in to the opening of the Thomas Project in 2013. It is now a flourishing accessible community hub based in a shop on a busy high street, next to the fish and chip shop.

There are so many things on offer at The Thomas Project; a foodbank, a school uniform bank, a Place of Welcome, a job club, IT sessions, counselling, budgeting advice, a prayer time, Good News for You courses and an annual Love Leighswood event. The volunteers come from several churches in the area and from the local community.



Sue Quibell, the curate at St Thomas, sees her presence there as a significant part of her ministry. She is referred to as *'our vicar'* by those who come to the project. Sue is quick to acknowledge that she has received so much from the relationships she has made; *'it has had a big impact on my growth, from having been someone shy and preferring to be washing up behind the scenes to a confidence in reaching out to people and walking alongside them'*.

When an asylum seekers' hostel for single women and their children was established in the neighbourhood, the volunteers were delighted that some of the African women began coming to the Thomas Project. The food bank and the Place of Welcome have provided them with resources of both food and friendship and they have in turn enriched the community by their presence. Some of the families now come to St Thomas' Church on Sundays and have been warmly welcomed in to the church family there.

Email your story to
tc@lichfield.anglican.org

Hope Projects / St Chad's, Pattingham

Hope Projects started out as a destitution fund in 2003 with the support of Clare Short, who was the Member of Parliament for Ladywood at the time and was finding an increasing level of destitution amongst asylum seekers in her constituency. Clare Short remains a trustee to this day and the Destitution Fund continues to be an important aspect of Hope Projects, supporting up to 70 destitute asylum seekers at any one time, with a regular subsistence allowance.

The more recent development within the project of Hope Housing provides accommodation in 9 houses to around 30 individuals and couples who have had their asylum application refused on grounds which are being challenged and who with the right support have a high probability of that decision being overturned. Those supported by either the allowance or with housing are provided with legal advice in order to identify a way forward. Generally the support continues for about six months or longer if the case is ongoing and remains hopeful.

Partnership is key to Hope Projects. They are networked with a number of agencies across Birmingham and the Black Country, who both refer people in to the project and through a representative steering group make joint decisions on whom they are able to help.

Phil Davis (Hope Projects coordinator) explains that *'if you think about Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it's very difficult to concentrate on putting together a coherent case for asylum and gathering all the evidence you need, when you have no fixed address and no way of knowing where your next meal is coming from'*.

Phil says that he particularly values the project's links with churches, as they are often places where destitute asylum seekers seek help. He appreciates that financial giving from churches usually comes without extra conditions attached. This means that when the unexpected happens, like a recent boiler breakdown in one of the houses costing £3000, he has some funds available to cover it. He is clear that seeking refuge and living in exile is at the heart of our Christian story; *'You too, must show love to foreigners, for you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt'*. So he was very pleased to be invited recently to the morning service at **St Chad's, Pattingham** to share with them about the work of Hope Projects.

St Chad's is in an affluent area north west of Wolverhampton. Through a For Richer, For Poorer partnership with St Alban's church in Wednesfield the church has already shown its commitment to making relationships well beyond their own boundaries. A member of the church, Henry Ibberson, who interviewed Phil Davis at the service, says *'Phil's visit has awakened us as a church to what's happening nearly on our doorstep, just nine miles down the road from us. His stories and his commitment convinced me that we can do more to help. The initial support will be financial but we also have plumbers and others in our congregation with practical skills, who might be able to offer their time and talents to Hope Projects'*.

Henry's personal desire to help others in desperate situations was sparked when the interfaith group in Wolverhampton screened *'A Street Cat Named Bob'* about a homeless London street musician. He knows that there are many like him in his community with a great deal of goodwill and a desire to help. He feels that the link with Hope Projects has an exciting potential to be part of mission in their own parish, a way of reaching out to people locally and sharing in common goals.

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Brushstrokes / St Paul's Church, Stafford

Viviane, a member of St Paul's Church in Stafford, makes a 50 miles journey at least twice a week to Smethwick. She has been doing this for the past few years as a volunteer at Brushstrokes Community Project. Brushstrokes is a partnership community set up in 1999 by the Parish Church of St Philip's Neri, the Sisters of the Infant Jesus, and Father Hudson's Care. It provides an outreach, befriending and advice service to asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants in Sandwell Borough, which currently accommodates a high number of asylum seekers second only to Birmingham in the West Midlands.

Brushstrokes provides valuable services to asylum-seekers and refugees through various programs:

Community Café: In a period of 12 months, the café has served 873 meals, 401 of which have been to asylum seekers and refugees. It also plays a very important role by providing a place of welcome consistent with the project's Christian principle '*welcoming the stranger*'. This opens the opportunity for the local people to meet those who are new in the community which is very helpful in building relationships and encouraging integration.

Immigration drop-in: Running every Friday morning and offering immigration advice.

Work club: offers help in writing CVs, job searches and cover letters.

ESOL (English language lessons for students of English as a foreign language). Since September 2016, 208 individuals from 28 nationalities have been part of ESOL course. Three more courses are run at 3 satellite sites in Sandwell in addition to the one at St Philip's Centre. 148 learners are currently working towards an accredited qualification. Of these 34 (30%) are men and 114 (70%) are women.

Obviously, all of these vital services to people who are in desperate need would not be possible without the generosity of many who give their time and other resources sacrificially including a significant support from various local churches. Viviane is one of the members of the wonderful team of volunteers and teaches English to asylum seekers and refugees. She had just retired from her teaching job and was waiting on God to show her what next when one of the founders of the project was invited to St Paul's Church in Stafford to give a talk about Brushstrokes. After the talk, Viviane had a strong conviction that she was being called to work with asylum-seekers and refugees and as a result took a course in teaching ESOL.

Although Viviane's involvement is more of an individual commitment, there is undoubtedly an active link and close relationship between the project and her local church. The church is very supportive with members making regular donations to the project. The concerns and needs of the project are prayed for at her home prayer group and amazing stories of lives transformed through the services offered by the project are shared and celebrated in conversations. Viviane's testifies of how her faith has been deepened, challenged and enriched by engaging with people of different cultures and faiths. She believes that this experience has made her better in welcoming people in her own church.

Dave's (project manager) reflection on the work of their project sums its impact on his faith, '*it makes one stop and think what it means to live the faith in practice. You learn a lot from the gratefulness, gracefulness and resilience of our clients*'. Dave has a strong desire to reach out to more churches in the community so that together they can help in transforming the lives of many who are suffering from terrible experiences in our world today and are seeking sanctuary in our local communities.

Email your story to
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Hope Community Project / Holy Trinity Heath Town

When Sue Allen moved with her family from Salisbury to Heath Town, Wolverhampton in 1993 she hated it. They were staying for three years whilst her husband completed a degree at Wolverhampton University. They had two teenagers, a 21 month old and a 3 month old. She couldn't wait to return to Salisbury. They stayed and twenty four years later Sue says that she couldn't imagine living anywhere else. Living and working in Heath Town *'has put God in the centre of my life and shown me how faith can work in practice, it's been an amazing journey'*.

The turning point on Sue's journey was when the Sisters of the Infant Jesus knocked on her front door. They had moved on to the estate in 1985 to be a Christian presence there and to respond to the needs they encountered. **Hope Community Project** was established and whilst the Sisters have now moved away, the project continues to meet a wide variety of needs, from befriending to accompanying on hospital visits, running job clubs and lunch clubs to youth clubs for teenagers at risk of being groomed or drawn in to gangs. There is something happening every day and an openness to everyone whatever their situation. Sue has been the manager of the project since 1999.

Over the years the population of Heath Town has become increasingly diverse. There are now 41 nationalities represented there, including many asylum seekers and refugees, some of whom ask for help from Hope Community Project. Sue lists some of the support they have given; signposting to other agencies, English practice and sewing in the women's group, keeping a woman safe from trafficking, integrating Chinese children in to the girls' group, promoting respect and building relationships, creating a Place of Welcome and running an International Fun Day in the local park.

Holy Trinity, Heath Town sees Hope Community Project as part and parcel of its ministry in the parish. Whilst the project is an independent charity, one of the trustees and many of the volunteers are church members who live in the community. The church both fundraises and gives an annual donation from its missionary budget. When the project's premises were recently up for demolition, the council provided new facilities. At the opening, all the clergy and many church members from both Holy Trinity and the St Patrick's Catholic Church were there to join in the celebrations. Sue is clear that the partnership with the churches is fundamental to the success and sustainability of the project.

A letter from Nicolas Barré, who founded the Sisters of the Infant Jesus in the seventeenth century was quoted at the opening of the new centre. He said *'Be always at peace and trust in God. What you experience will be in proportion to your faith, your hope and your love and even more abundantly than that'*. Sue and those who work with her at Hope Community Project can testify to the truth of his words.

Walsall Refugee & Asylum Seeker Support Association / Local Churches

'I started as a volunteer with other Christians setting up the flats, cleaning, hanging the curtains and other basic housekeeping jobs ready for the arrival of asylum seekers and refugees,' says Margaret Gibbons, chair of the trustees of Walsall Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support Association (WRASSA) and a member of Methodist Church in Pleck. WRASSA is a Christian charity providing practical support for asylum seekers, refugees and other migrants in need who are staying or resident within the borough. It is supported by Christian churches across Walsall.

According to Margaret, her experience of supporting asylum seekers and refugees reignited her call to mission which for a long time had been bubbling away beneath. She resigned her full time teaching job taking up supply teaching into order to free more time to what was evidently God's calling in her. At the start, she took a training course in immigration law to maximise her effectiveness, especially in accompanying asylum-seekers and refugees to solicitors, doctors, law courts and other public services.

According to Margaret, the support of churches across Walsall is invaluable, and comes in different shapes, including fundraising and donation of items for basic daily life needs. A key project for WRASSA run by local churches is the Alms House. The house offers accommodation for destitute asylum seekers going through the legal process of seeking asylum in this country. Due to lack of enough financial resources, the running of the facilities is increasingly becoming challenging. However the trustees are hopeful and determined to do all that is possible to keep the house running. There is a special appeal to local churches to help in any way possible.

Rose Westwood is a trustee of WRASSA, now worshipping at St Anne's, Chasetown. Her involvement however goes back to 2001 as a member of St Paul's Church, The Crossing, Walsall. As a *'befriender'* she was involved with putting together gift boxes for asylum-seekers as they got off the bus. As a trained speech therapist, her skills and knowledge were helpful to asylum seekers for many of whom speaking English was a real challenge and potentially a barrier in building relationship with local communities. In summing the impact this has had in her faith, Rose remarks; *'I feel drawn to those who are different from me, I believe we meet Christ in others, especially those on the edges'*.

The impact of the work of WRASSA is tangible in the Methodist congregation in Pleck. The congregation has more than eight nationalities (some who are converts from other faiths) with high numbers of young families. The diversity in membership has enriched the congregation through intentional encouragement of the participation of all members especially in the main worship service. According to Margaret, the work of WRASSA is a powerful witness of *'Christians in action'*.

Email your story to
tc@lichfield.anglican.org

Migrant Empowerment Group / Near Neighbours

The **Migrant Empowerment Group** (MEG) was founded by Alvine Dongmo-Noumey. Her vision and passion to empower others through this self-help group is motivated by her own experiences of a challenging journey from the Cameroon to make her home in the UK, first in Cardiff and now in Wolverhampton. Her inspiration as a role model to other women and to the black minority community has taken her all the way to Downing Street where in March 2016 she was part of a group of community leaders who met with David Cameron to discuss social issues within British society.

Through weekly get-togethers the MEG provides a range of activities and opportunities. These include learning new skills such as sewing and knitting, English classes, dance and movement therapy, computer classes, health and well-being activities and careers advice. The group welcomes all Asylum seekers, Refugees and Migrants regardless of their status who want to meet and learn from one another and share their experiences in a safe setting. It is described as a place where *'our aim is to help one another to help ourselves'*, an organisation which enables the members *'to gain ownership of their own destiny'*, builds self-esteem and enhances active citizenship.

Alongside the weekly meetings, the group is committed to campaigning on issues which affect their lives. They empower and support asylum seekers, refugees and migrants from Wolverhampton to voice their needs and represent themselves at strategic and policy making levels.

Funding of the work is an ongoing challenge, Alvine says, and they are currently looking for a new place to meet in the centre of Wolverhampton after their current premises was closed down. She is appreciative of grants from the Near Neighbours programme in the Black Country, which is run by Transforming Communities Together, the diocese's joint venture with the Church Urban Fund. Ruth Burgess, the Near Neighbours coordinator, says, *'Alvine is an inspiration, full of resilience and always seeking ways to encourage others. She values the support she receives from the church and others.'*

Contact Details

[Churches Together in Oswestry](http://together.ourchurchweb.org.uk/oswestry)..... together.ourchurchweb.org.uk/oswestry

[Greenfields Africa](http://www.gfafrica.com) www.gfafrica.com

[Hope Community Project](http://hopecommunityproject.org.uk) hopecommunityproject.org.uk

[Hope into Action: Black Country](http://hopeintoaction.org.uk/locations/wolverhampton) hopeintoaction.org.uk/locations/wolverhampton

[Hope Projects](http://www.hope-projects.org.uk) www.hope-projects.org.uk

[Migrant Empowerment Group](http://migrantempowermentgroup.co.uk) migrantempowermentgroup.co.uk

[Near Neighbours](http://www.cuf.org.uk/near-neighbours)..... www.cuf.org.uk/near-neighbours

[Places of Welcome](http://www.placesofwelcome.org)..... www.placesofwelcome.org

[Refugee and Migrant Centre](http://www.rmcentre.org.uk) www.rmcentre.org.uk

[Sanctus](http://www.sanctusmarks.co.uk) www.sanctusmarks.co.uk

[The Thomas Project](http://www.thethomasproject.co.uk) www.thethomasproject.co.uk

[Transforming Communities Together](http://www.tctogether.org.uk)..... www.tctogether.org.uk

[Walsall Borough of Sanctuary](http://walsallborough.cityofsanctuary.org) walsallborough.cityofsanctuary.org

[Walsall Refugee & Asylum Seeker Support Association](http://www2.cuf.org.uk/organisation/wrassa)..... www2.cuf.org.uk/organisation/wrassa

[Wolverhampton City of Sanctuary](http://wolverhampton.cityofsanctuary.org) wolverhampton.cityofsanctuary.org

Church of England

[National Refugee Welcome Coordinator](http://www.churchofengland.org/our-views/home-and-community-affairs/asylum-and-immigration)

Nadine Daniel

www.churchofengland.org/our-views/home-and-community-affairs/asylum-and-immigration

Facts about refugees

[Refugee Action](http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/about/facts-about-refugees)

www.refugee-action.org.uk/about/facts-about-refugees

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