

Church communities creating

Stories of Welcome



Refugee Week 2022



The Diocese of
Southwark

"Stories are sailcloths that we hoist to catch a breath of the divine."

- Donna Tartt

Across London and east Surrey, our church communities are welcoming asylum seekers, migrants and refugees from all over the world.

This Refugee Week 2022 we want to share and celebrate these stories of welcome, and we want to encourage others to write new stories of welcome.

People arriving in our churches seeking sanctuary have many different reasons for being there, and different stories to tell. We welcome them all and seek to show them God's love. We welcome people who are seeking sanctuary from war and conflict in particular places, and here we tell the stories of welcoming those from Afghanistan at St Paul's Marylebone, Farsi-speaking Iranians at Christ Church Gipsy Hill and the children at St Dunstan's Primary School in Cheam who are embracing new classmates from Hong Kong.

We have churches dedicated to welcoming particularly vulnerable groups: the Salesian Sisters hosting destitute women seeking asylum and St James's Piccadilly reaching out to asylum seekers from the LGBTQI+ community.

We offer material support to those who have had to part with almost all their possessions: the Croydon Refugee Day Centre provides clothing and other necessities to people in Home Office accommodation, and Hope Church Hounslow assemble Welcome Boxes for asylum seekers.

We accommodate those who find themselves in need in our own homes through hosting, as at Christ Church Sutton, or source housing and provide wraparound support like the Enfield Refugees Welcome group, who have welcomed three families from different conflict zones via the Community Sponsorship scheme.

We celebrate all of these stories.

We acknowledge that we are all children of God (1 John 3:1), no matter where we are from, and no matter how we arrive in the UK. In the seamless garment of God's creation (John 19: 23-24), we are all connected, and we love each other as God loves us (John 13: 34-35).

+ Paul Mc Aleenan

The Rt Revd Paul McAleenan

Auxiliary Bishop of Westminster

+ Joanne Woolway

The Rt Revd Dr Joanne Woolway Grenfell

Bishop of Stepney, Diocese of London

+ Christopher Chessun

The Rt Revd Christopher Chessun

Bishop of Southwark





Community Sponsorship - Enfield Refugee Welcome

Welcoming as a Community

At a public meeting in Enfield in response to the Syrian refugee crisis, members of the community felt strongly that they needed to do something. From this conversation **Enfield Refugee Welcome** was formed and came to be one of the first adopters of the Community Sponsorship scheme. Alan and Denise from St Monica's Catholic Parish, Palmers Green, have been involved in the running of the group over the years.

Since the first public meeting, this group of different people from across the borough has welcomed three refugee families from Iran, Syria and Afghanistan. This repeated welcome, as well as the broad base of the community involved is a testament to the galvanizing effect that Community Sponsorship can have.

“Helping support a refugee family or individual, in any capacity, is a truly rewarding experience. To be in the privileged position to be able to help another human being makes you truly realise the unfairness in the world but allows you to do something about it. I would recommend to it to everyone, you will not be disappointed.”

Alan Seldon, Enfield Refugee Welcome

Bringing Gifts

The Community Sponsorship scheme was launched in the UK in the July of 2016 and is a way of communities working together to facilitate the various aspects of welcoming a family and helping them to integrate. As part of the process, groups assign leads for different aspects in order to ensure that there is a holistic welcome where the various requirements of the family are met upon arrival. This can include liaising with schools, speaking to the local GP and dentists' surgery and informing the local bank branch that a family will be arriving. This allowed group members to **utilise their gifts and professional experience for the benefit of the family**. Denise, who had previously been a teacher, was able to bring her background into the safeguarding role.

The process of procuring a home had initially proven difficult, especially in London, but once the group had a house the process became much easier. Indeed, it was having a property which allowed the group to more readily say 'yes' to repeating the welcome for more families. Networks were vital, both in finding a home for the families but also for more surprising contributions to the project.

Finding Connection

Support has at times come providentially. One day the parish priest called up to say that items for a baby had been left in the presbytery and would the group have need for them? As it would transpire, the family just due to arrive would have an infant. Similarly, when the group was in the process of furnishing the house, somebody got in touch to offer a three-piece suite for the family living room.

Whilst the families who have arrived find a safe home and support from the community in Enfield, it is hard for the families who have grandparents and parents still at home. When reflecting on Community Sponsorship Denise said; **it connects us at a different level...we're all part of God's family**, despite lots of differences there are so many similarities.'



Homes for Ukraine - Christ Church, Sutton

'Pull a thread here and you'll find it's attached to the rest of the world' - Nadeem Aslam

Like many people, Phil and Jenny were deeply moved by the news of ordinary Ukrainians whose lives were being turned upside down by the turmoil unfolding across their homeland. In response, one Monday, they prayed together, wondering before God about the possibility of **welcoming a family fleeing the conflict into their home**. By Wednesday it seemed like God was offering an answer to that prayerful question, through a local relationship; a personal thread linking them to Ukraine.

Natalya, a new member of their congregation, approached Phil telling how she and her husband were planning to bring her sister-in-law, Maria and her young son Tymofii, to the UK under the Family Scheme. However, she was worried about how they would manage to accommodate her relatives in their small 2-bedroom home.

Fast forward to Easter Sunday, Maria and Tymofii arrived to stay with Phil, Jenny and their two young children; Adam and Sophie, all facilitated by Natalya's invaluable role as a supportive 'go-between' with her language skills, and emotional and cultural understanding. The new arrivals were given their own room and privacy, whilst also warmly invited to freely share the rest of the Brooks' family home. Importantly for 4-year-old Tymofii, who has had to leave his dad, his home and belongings, this has included enjoying Adam and Sophie's company...and toys! Phil notes how the children have led the way; "they are great at defusing things; the inherent strangeness of new people coming in is something that they seem to more readily accept."

Think global, act local.

In the days before Maria and Tymofii's arrival, Natalya admits "we were all nervous," Likewise Phil describes "feelings oscillating between anxiety and excitement". However, they each also recall the relief of "turning from being upset and obsessively watching the news, to doing something". Despite not feeling particularly qualified, **hosting has involved taking small steps in God's direction** and being part of the solution, locally; "I suppose it is living out the idea "Think global, act local," explains Phil, "we offered what we could to God, it was about being willing."

Learning from and leaning on others.

Phil mentions the importance of partnership with others, commenting on the benefits of (Zoom) host training events, Diocesan advice about lodging agreements and crucially Natalya's emotional support, language skills and cultural insight. He also reflects with gratitude on the international flavour of their church and the gifts and experience of welcoming already embedded within his congregation: they are actively involved in running weekly English conversation classes and craft activities as part of their Hong Kong Welcome initiatives. As Natalya adds, "**people can make such a difference by just offering a little talk, a cup of tea, a bit of attention.**" Phil observes that their recent hosting journey has helped his family "realise more of God's kindness."





Hong Kong Welcome - St Dunstan's Primary School, Cheam

Jesus' Hospitality

In the last year St Dunstan's Primary School, Cheam, has enthusiastically welcomed at least 25 children who have arrived in the UK from Hong Kong. Melody, a Hong Kong heritage parent governor, describes the pressures and dilemmas of having to relocate, often without people wanting to do so. "Life here is very different culturally", she explains. "Parents' mental health could affect the children, so we felt it was important to give parents space to talk and get to understand some of the things about the UK."

Consequently, Melody and Louise (the Deputy Head) decided to host a 'coffee morning' as a concrete way of connecting with, and welcoming new parents. With the benefit of the language skills and cultural knowledge of more than one parent, a bilingual flyer was designed and sent out to parents. 'Coffee morning' was translated as 'Tea Gathering' because the lady translating the flyer understood the language nuances and recognised that this was the best way to convey "the invitation to come in and talk, rather than drink coffee!" (for people who don't drink coffee).

Melody: **"Doing something as simple as we did... like Jesus' hospitality; we invited them in, to come in, feel safe, feel like they were being nurtured."** The event led to an increased sense of belonging and integration and spawned further informal, social gatherings outside of school. The Deputy Head believes that intentionally building relationships with newly arrived families has enabled parents to feel more connected and confident about sending their children on residential trips with the school (Not a typical feature of their previous schooling).

'They' become 'us'

She also marvels at the children's "amazing language capabilities" (facilitated by tailored online resources) and the way "they have thrown themselves into everything, doing jobs and [taking on] responsibilities around the school". Louise: "All new arrivals are given a buddy who takes them to play or lunch and makes sure that they have got what they need ...but then after a few days, everyone just swoops in [to welcome and include]. In the playground... the children from Hong Kong are not just playing with other children from Hong Kong, and that is a really clear sign of integration."

The new children admit to having felt nervous, uncertain, and curious about starting in a strange new school. But they make a chorus of positive comments about the friendly, inclusive, and sharing environment of which they are now part. They proudly list recent achievements; "I have done well and made a lot of friends", "I am proud that I have managed to adjust so well and get better at English".

Their more established classmates have evidently enjoyed the way that their new friends have expanded their horizons, teaching them new games, words and introducing them to Chinese cookies, moon cakes and movie characters. The newcomers have won their admiration; "They have been very brave about coming to a new place", "I like how they are really enthusiastic...and aren't afraid to ask questions...and tell us about their culture". One HK child offers this insight; **"we taught them [St Dunstan's] how to be kind."**





Afghan Welcome - St Paul's, Marylebone

St Paul's Marylebone embraced the opportunity to offer a welcome for Afghan refugees accommodated in a local hotel. They offered the church as a safe space outside of the hotel, and in conversation with the Afghan women, this became a place where the women could come together each week and sew clothes. Sewing machines were acquired through a grant from AllChurches Trust, fabric was donated, local churches volunteered to help, and each week between eight and fifteen women came along to be together socially, and make their own clothes.

The community at St Paul's talk about the impact the relationships with the Afghan women and their families have had on the life of the church and the wider community: **"It's a real privilege to see the way in which these relationships have shaped our community, and will continue to shape us** - both through the legacy of the women's sewing project, and with the families who have been housed here as we live alongside one another in this parish." Revd Clare Dowding.



Hosting Asylum Seekers - St Mary of the Angels, Bayswater



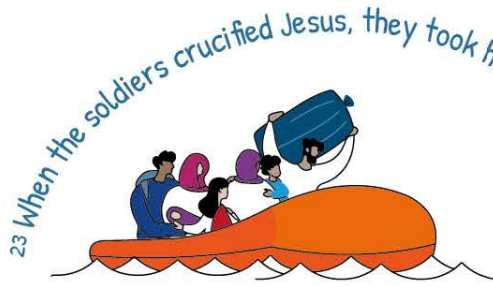
In an address to St Peter's Square in 2015, Pope Francis called on every parish, religious community and monastery in Europe to take in a refugee family and in this way to 'express the gospel in concrete terms'. This call was heard in the Catholic parish of St Mary of the Angels in Bayswater. The parish is a part of the Jesuit Refugee Service's 'At Home' Hosting scheme, where hosts are paired with refugees – most of whom are destitute as a result of being given no recourse to public funds (NRPF).

The placements provide **a space of welcome and sanctuary** for refugees who have in some cases been homeless and sleeping on the street, shelters and night-buses. A room in which to recharge and recuperate amidst the challenges of facing the asylum system is invaluable. A refugee friend who is part of the hosting scheme said "they showed me acceptance and love...unconditional love. I felt like a part of the family, I truly felt at home."

Hosting placements last for three months, with training and support provided by the Jesuit Refugee Service. Fr Keith, who is parish priest of St Mary of the Angels said of the scheme "if you think you can do it, I would say it's an extremely worthwhile thing to do; it's a tremendous opportunity."

Pathways to protection

Church communities creating stories of welcome, Refugee Week 2022



Update 2023: The Illegal Migration Bill will make it illegal to travel to the UK to claim asylum.

Asylum

- Spontaneous arrivals (e.g. small boats)
- People already here in the UK when conditions in their country of origin deteriorate (eg. a Syrian student in 2015)



Resettlement

- E.g.
- UK resettlement scheme
 - Community sponsorship
 - Mandate resettlement scheme



Other humanitarian routes

- E.g.
- Afghan resettlement scheme
 - Afghan relocations and assistance policy
 - Hong Kong BNOs (British National Overseas)
 - Ukraine family visa schemes
 - Homes for Ukraine scheme

23 When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one

Asylum

A person who is legally recognised as a refugee or someone who has been granted asylum in the UK.

Refugee

Recognised as a refugee under the 1951 Refugee Convention if they are unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin because of a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group. Nations Resettlement Scheme.

Other

People who are not recognised as refugees under the UK Government's legal route but are not in need of protection under the status under the 1951 Refugee Convention.

24 This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled that said, "Th

our humble conviction that the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God's creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet." Pope Francis quotes Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople

neighbours on a global scale

hasn't yet been used as a refugee

a way of sharing with God and our

a person who is willing to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. (1951 United Nations Refugee Convention)

"So this is what the soldiers were looking for" - recognized by the government as needing to come to the UK, referred 'refugee' under the 1951 Convention

divided my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment."

NRPF

No recourse to public funds, "failed asylum seeker"

Return/removal

Expected by the Home Office to leave the UK

Not a refugee



Waiting for a decision on their asylum claim

E.g. those in hotels or interim accommodation - cannot claim benefits and are not usually allowed to work



Refugee

Recognised by the Government as a refugee and issued with refugee status documentation



Integration support

- E.g.
- English
 - Mentoring
 - Befriending
 - Employment support

"Pull a thread here and you'll find it's attached to the rest of the world." Nadeem Aslan



Supporting those in hotels - Croydon Refugee Day Centre

The day centre, staffed mainly by volunteers from churches across Croydon, seeks to support asylum seekers who are, for the most part, living in nearby hotels. Asylum seekers are confined to one room, with extremely limited financial means and very few opportunities to integrate socially or experience normal daily life. The centre aims to extend a compassionate welcome and provide those attending with information and practical items such as essential clothes, shoes, toiletries, some household goods, and food items. They also link sanctuary-seeking families to their Family Education Project support (hotel visits, outdoor children's games, face-to-face English classes and help with form-filling). Most people who come to the centre have nowhere else to turn.

But volunteers are not simply meeting needs; they encounter God in one another. Linda Anglican Priest at CRDC says: **“This is where I meet God, in the lives of those I meet...and where I make a difference - what a privilege.”**



Supporting the LGBTQI+ community - St James's, Piccadilly

The story of St James's Church Piccadilly is about being family. Family to asylum seekers from the LGBTQI+ community from countries such as Uganda, Nigeria or Ghana, with the majority claiming asylum not due to conflict, but due to persecution. Monica Bashabe, one of those supported tells us: **“The community means a lot, because it's like a family now. When I need help, they are there for me.”**

St James's Church Piccadilly support practically and emotionally those going through the asylum system, as well as those who have recently made their way through the system. The support can be anything from weekly food vouchers, helping people find legal support, housing, communicating with the Home Office, as well as holding some of the emotions and trauma that those they are supporting are forced to relive. It might be helping people access therapy, or it might be providing a space where they can talk about things, or know they are being prayed for, and are cared for.

The story of the community is also about celebration. With four people granted their 'leave to remain' during the pandemic, they take the opportunity for a joy-filled party. A celebration of the wins, but also of the strength and resilience of those still going through the system. Monica tells us: “Whenever you are down, they motivate or uplift you. St James's is really part of my life.”





Welcome Boxes - Hope Church, Hounslow

Their Welcome Boxes project began as a response to the urgent needs Hope Church Hounslow were seeing right on their doorstep. As a church they had supported refugees for many years through their foodbanks. With the pandemic, the overall use of their foodbanks increased, as well as the number of asylum seekers attending. With charity shops closed, the foodbank volunteers started to notice an overwhelming need for clothes. So Hope Church, led by Rev Claire Clarke, set up a clothes bank: **“Sometimes we would meet refugees with no shoes on their feet and no jackets on their back in the middle of winter”** says Victoria, the Welcome Boxes project lead.

Boxes of care

As the scope of their refugee ministry work increased, Hope Church decided to become a Welcome Boxes church. Hope Church Hounslow now has a team of volunteers who put together welcome boxes to deliver to newly arrived asylum seekers, as a way of letting them know that “the church cares about them” and is “here to support”. The boxes are personalised for each person. They can include practical items like t-shirts, pyjamas, nice toiletries, plus toys and books for children, as well as things like chocolates, candles and a handwritten note, which “can hopefully bring a little bit of comfort”. **“It’s a very practical way of showing the love of Jesus”** explains Cas, another of the Welcome Boxes volunteers.

We are all God’s children

The volunteers at Hope Church talk about the opportunity to meet those they have supported through Welcome Boxes, individuals from all walks of life and all with different struggles and stories, as “a privilege” and “a blessing”. Hannah, one of the team, shares how she has grown both as a person, and in her faith through volunteering. She felt that God wanted her to be: “a vessel, to show that no matter what the religion, or background the family were from, **we are all God’s children, and that as a church we care.**”

A greeting and a smile

Since 2021 Hope Church have delivered Welcome Boxes to 41 adults and some have ended up becoming part of their church community. Those receiving the boxes have talked about the gladness and surprise the welcome brought: “I am very glad to see you kind angels today. Thank you very much for the gift you gave me.” Even when comprehension can be limited, Jonty, another of the volunteers talks about the ability connect through a greeting and a smile: **“I hope it’s one small step along the road from feeling less a stranger and more a brother or sister”**.





Hosting Asylum Seekers - Salesian Sisters

Hosting changes lives

Hosting for the Salesian Sisters began when they were looking to respond to the terrible immigration crisis they were witnessing back in 2016. It was by chance that they stumbled across the Housing Justice hosting scheme, and came to understand the plight of the many displaced homeless asylum seekers already in our country. They are in their fifth year now of hosting women through Housing Justice, and the Salesian Sisters tell us that “the project is going from strength to strength.”

Hosting is simply where someone offers a private room and access to shared facilities in their own home to a person or persons in need, free of charge. As well as providing a safe, temporary home, hosting can give people in the asylum and immigration system vital stability that enables them to access the support they need to move forward with their life.

“Hosting not only changes the lives of the guests, but it changes your own life too, for the better!” says one of the Salesian Sisters.

One of the Sisters talks about the privilege of living alongside these wonderful women: “[it] is very humbling. They are incredible. I see their struggle, feel their pain, but what speaks most to me is their faith and trust in God in this very difficult situation in which they find themselves. **They bring “new life” into the heart of this little community, and they are at the centre; they are part of our family.**”

Her experience is that living with the ladies on a day-to-day basis, is just like living alongside any other person: “We all have our joys and sorrows, our ups and downs but they have opened themselves up, shared their stories and allowed me to journey with them at this time in their lives and it is such a blessing.” She talks about how they love to laugh together.

Challenged by their stories

The Salesian Sisters feel challenged by the stories of the women they host, and encouraged “at their ability to wait and wait and wait for their right to remain!”. “I am not sure I would manage it as well as they do if I was walking in their shoes!” one of the Sisters admits.

The ladies’ presence reminds the Salesian Sisters daily of the thousands of poor, homeless, asylum seekers and refugees destitute in our country. It challenges them to be a voice for them and to “be proactive in sharing the ‘Good News’ they bring in our society and seek to **break down barriers of prejudice, and discrimination, which isolates and rejects them.**”





Finding Freedom

The guests talk about the impact of the support provided through hosting on their lives. For one of the women it has meant, “A new life, a new beginning”. For another, it has provided independence to manage her finances, to “learn how to budget, work with others more freely.” A third tells us, **“I found freedom being with the sisters. It helped me to feel safe and at peace”**.

Hopes for the future

When asked how friends or family would describe them, those hosted use the words “understanding”, “generous”, “caring”, “confident” and “gentle”. Waiting for their right to remain is highlighted as one of the biggest challenges the women currently face. But one of the women talks about the hope which another of the women receiving her right to remain has provided. They share their hopes for the future, which for one of the women is “to put back into the community what was given to me” and for another is to have her “own place and begin my new life”.

One of the women ends with what she has learnt about God during her time in the UK, and her wisdom is this; **“Trusting God more. Without God you cannot do a lot anywhere.”**



Photo credits: Photos taken by Housing Justice Guest



Farsi outreach - Christ Church, Gipsy Hill

It started with a simple greeting

The ministry to Farsi-speaking asylum seekers at Christ Church, Gipsy Hill began with a God-arranged opportunity which was embraced by the congregation. A small group of Iranian asylum seekers, housed in a local hotel, arrived at the church one Sunday morning, and were warmly welcomed by Antoinette, a church member married to Hamid, an Iranian.

Hamid's language skills and the unexpected opportunity for the visitors to converse in Farsi were a sign of God's kind provision. It was also the first step toward some "faith-stirring" friendships and **the blessing of supporting divinely loved strangers**.

Transformation together

The 40 Iranians who have recently joined the congregation have extraordinary stories to tell, some of which are tragic and are hard to contemplate, but which also bear testimony to their courage and God's miraculous intervention.

Emma and Luke (curates) describe the privilege of getting to know their new sisters and brothers, and of hearing first-hand about their risk-filled, life-threatening journeys and miraculous dreams, as; "challenging and faith-building". Luke describes the fresh poignancy and depth of "the symbol of life-giving water... after doing Baptism preparation with people who share real-life examples of passing through the Channel and costly dangers to come to new life."



Making Space

Christ Church provides a safe, welcoming space, "a place where people can be themselves". The church shares practical kindness and worship which is responsive to new members' needs, rather than expecting them to simply fit into existing (predominantly English) worship. Christ Church has provided Farsi bibles, accessed Farsi liturgies and translations, and enjoyed the blessings of including Farsi singing during Communion, alternative language readings, and included Iranian members in symbolic acts (e.g. carrying candles).

Open Door

One particular opportunity for hospitality and fellowship is the weekly community lunch, aptly named 'Open Door'. Guests have a rare opportunity to gather communally, get advice, share a meal, pray or cry together. "Home is where family is," says Hamid, "**we have created family here**". Different guests describe how coming each week makes them feel they have somewhere to go; to feel connected to a community rather than alone.

The uncertainty of living in temporary accommodation "waiting and waiting" [for an asylum claim outcome] with nowhere to turn takes its toll; "If I hadn't had this place, I don't know what would have happened to my mental health... this kindness and support we have found...I wouldn't have been able to keep going without it."

For more information on how you can get involved,
click on the following links:

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or scan the QR codes below!



Caritas
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Diocese of
London



Diocese of
Southwark



Refugee Week 2022

What's **your** story?

