

FPCT Justice and Peace Group special evening meeting, 28th September 2016, St. Mary's Church

A Forgotten People : Migrants and Refugees Challenge us to respond with Christian Mercy.

Della Shenton, from [Parishes for Peace](#): a UK charity working to support the local church in Jordan and the NGOs to support and facilitate communication and friendship between Christian families in the UK and the refugee families.

This interesting and challenging talk, attended by 25 people mostly from St. Mary's but with a few from other FPCT churches, began with an outline of the historical background to the flight of Iraqi Christians from their ancient homeland in Mosul, Iraq, where 10 years ago there were 35,000 Christians, but by 2013 only 3,000, to the sanctuary they were offered in Jordan. In August 2014 the Christians were marked out by ISIL and given the choice to convert, leave or be killed. Even children suffered atrocities. They were able to walk to Kurdistan, where they had the choice to stay, go to Europe or accept the offer of sanctuary from the King of Jordan. The Christian priests in Iraq knew those in Jordan and told Christians where to go, because the refugee camps were not safe. Most international aid was going to the Syrians so they came to the church for help.

In 2014 Della Shenton went on a pilgrimage to Jordan and met Iraqi families in portacabins, taking medicines, clothes, money, etc. In 2015 Pope Francis said that all Catholic groups should be prepared to support one family and a study tour 2 months later with priests reconnoitred the situation and as a result *Parishes for Peace* was started to link UK parishes with Iraqi families. It was registered as a charity a few months ago. Some of the refugees had tried to flee to Europe and been drowned in the process. She showed the map of the Middle East and in particular of Jordan, showing the areas where these refugees have been accommodated, 8,000 of them by August 2014, initially in church halls and portacabins. The adults are mostly professionals – engineers, teachers, doctors, dentists, lawyers, etc. – and the children have now been placed in Christian schools for which charities pay the fees. Higher education is not available for the older teenagers. Provision for rent and utilities is random, but food is paid for by the Bible Society. *PfP* is trying to plug the gaps in provision. CAFOD feeds into Caritas, which also provides support. The refugees are not allowed to work because they are registered as refugee asylum seekers, but they can work for the churches: for the men in particular this is very difficult, as they are used to professional working lives, while the women have the children and household to look after. They think that the British don't want them, an impression the charity has been able to correct, at least with regard to Christians in Britain. They see Australia and Canada as Christian countries to welcome them, especially Catholic parishes and Bishops in Canada who are looking after families and can get them visas. The Caritas Centre for Christians saw that Christians needed different treatment from Muslim refugees, on account of their trauma resulting from religious persecution, and helped traumatised children by using puppets to enable them to express their feelings.

Showing slides of some of the families they had been able to help in several parishes, including 11 refugee families they had met in 2014 housed in cabins on the parish car park, Della recounted how the Vatican had put pressure for people to be housed in more suitable accommodation and now they are all out in houses or flats. She showed Marj al Hamam, where 100 families are on the database, and Zarqa, the Church of Our Lady, Queen of Peace, helping 250 families including about 1,000 individuals, where the refugees come together with the Jordanian Christians after Sunday Mass (although the refugees are Orthodox). We saw the large box full of the papers of families

waiting for help. The Australian government has given houses, but is creaming off the top professionals, who must speak English before they look for work, which can take 150 hours for them to learn. We then saw the Madaba Camp, where they started a pilot 12 day “English for life” school in July 2016, which Della, as a trained TEFL teacher, started in order to give the refugees confidence, with interactive language teaching providing the language and information they needed for everyday life, which was a great success. They learned to say grace in English and the final lunch was brought by the students, when they received certificates. They had all been there for over 2 years.

She showed a family of 10 through 3 generations, living in 2 rooms, with no money, who are being supported on a regular basis by parishes in Liskeard and Worthing, by fundraising through such events as concerts. One son had tried to get to Germany to find work, but went into a camp and stayed there for 7 months, with no-one wanting to see his papers, so he got the Germans to deport him back to Iraq and he was allowed to join the family again in Jordan. The cost per month to support this family for rent, food, nappies, milk, utilities, is £600, which these 2 parishes are providing. Although the professionals cannot work officially, there is a dentist quietly helping the 75% of the Iraqi children who have gum disease, and 2 dentists here had the idea of sending the free samples they get of toothbrushes and toothpaste, plus a probe in each pack, linked through 10 parishes here. From next month the children’s teeth will be checked and toothpaste and toothbrushes will be given out. This is the sort of project which only a small charity such as *Parishes for Peace* can do: it is aiming to make life a little more bearable for these refugees. In various other small ways they are showing a caring Christian community, such as taking out medicines like paracetamol and other items on her regular trips out there and handing them over directly to the people in need; or the “Beautiful women vouchers”, with which Catholic women here are helping to provide the money for sanitary protection for the female refugees. This shows the Christian church working at its best. Similarly, primary schools here have been linked with children’s groups to provide penfriends using social media, and Christmas cards.

This was a thoroughly informative and stimulating talk and we were all challenged to donate to *Parishes for Peace*, resulting in a collection of £200, gift-aided to provide £250.

Sue Mills
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