

Pro Diaconia Prize 2017: Project - Welcoming the Stranger

Saint Helens, Merseyside, led by Deacon Kevin Duffy, Archdiocese of Liverpool

In September 2015 Pope Francis invited every parish, religious house and monastery in Europe to respond to the growing refugee crisis by offering a place of sanctuary to families fleeing from war and persecution in their home countries. In the Archdiocese of Liverpool Fr Chris Fallon, Director of the Permanent Diaconate, recognised that permanent deacons had a key role to play in responding to this invitation. In October, working with Steve Atherton, the Justice and Peace Fieldworker for the Archdiocese, he gathered together the brotherhood to dispel some of the myths and provide deacons with key information about the situation in their local area. Rev Kevin Duffy, a deacon serving in St Helens, decided to offer opportunities to the fourteen local parishes to discuss the situation and decide what response could be made at a local level. Following these meetings a group of around twenty five people led by Kevin began to meet on a regular basis.

Around the same time the local authority agreed that the home office could secure 30 properties to house asylum seekers whilst their cases were being heard. This meant that around 100 asylum seekers would be resident in the local area. St Helens is one of the least ethnically diverse towns in the UK. In the 2011 census 95.9% of respondents said they were born in England, 98.8% spoke English (no other language was above 1%), 78.8% said they were Christian, only 0.2% Hindu and only 0.3% Muslim. Although St Helens is a welcoming community there are many challenges for asylum seekers in this environment.

By the spring of 2016 the first families and individuals began to arrive in the town. As the Home Office does not allow any individuals or organisations, including charities, to know the home addresses of asylum seekers, a drop-in point was needed to allow these vulnerable individuals and families to seek support. Kevin consulted with other organisations in the region and in conjunction with the local authority, British Red Crossⁱ, MRANGⁱⁱ, SHAPⁱⁱⁱ and local Christian and Muslim faith communities set up a drop-in known as 'Welcoming the Stranger Café'. Its purpose initially was to provide access to expert help via BRC and MRANG with an opportunity to socialise with vetted local people and other asylum seekers. We have been very successful in connecting with the majority of those placed in St Helens and over weeks and months have begun to understand their needs and concerns. It quickly became apparent that specific support was needed with regard to health issues and dealing with the NHS locally. These issues were compounded by the lack of ethnic diversity in the existing area. We made contact with a local Anglican Community Nurse who attends to give support and advice on health matters. The core group of volunteers and supporters is very diverse and has the active support of several Christian communities including the local Baptist church, United Reform Church, Salvation Army, YMCA, Christian life Centre, Anglican and Catholic communities, along with the local Muslim community and several secular groups. The café provides a space where Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and people who do not align with any faith group meet and exchange ideas. For many this is in stark contrast to the situation from which they are fleeing where their faith defined who they were and how they were treated. The opportunity for people of one faith to understand the religious beliefs of others is not restricted to those fleeing persecution as many local people have never met anyone who does not describe themselves as a Christian.

It also became clear to the local clergy that in order for Kevin to give the significant amount of time needed to support this project he would need financial support. Several parishes now contribute to provide Kevin with an income of £6000 each year which in part enables him to devote the overwhelming amount of his time to this aspect of his ministry.

The local authority also took the decision to ensure the houses were dispersed across the borough. An unintended consequence of this decision was that attending the drop-in could cost £6.00 per adult: as they only have an allowance of £35 each week this became a barrier to attending. The group led by Kevin decided to appeal to the local parishes to provide

basic food, toiletries and household items. These were then split and distributed in food parcels each week that equate to the cost of attending. These donations have now been provided for almost twelve months with two parishes served by Kevin's brother deacons Rev Ted Kane and Rev John McLoughlin being the most committed supporters of the project's work.

Working with the asylum seekers it became apparent that the biggest barrier to social integration is the lack of language skills. The government does not provide any support for English lessons for asylum seekers. Again the project reached out to the local community to meet the needs of the 80 people currently engaged with the project. We have a willing group of volunteers, the majority of them retired teachers, who are keen to run regular sessions and provide one to one support. A small amount of funding has been secured from the CUF^{iv} Near Neighbours Fund to equip this dedicated group with resources and infrastructure to take the project forward for the current clients and those who will arrive in the years to come.

During recent months we have managed to secure further health and wellbeing opportunities by forming partnerships with local community groups. One such group is a local allotment group who have given land and greenhouses along with technical advice to enable the asylum seekers to begin to grow their own food. Another example is seeking out partners who would support our idea of creating a Men's Shed^v and the resulting partnership with St Helens Pedal Power^{vi} who lead weekly bike rides for the asylum seekers. Together with the local authority and with funding from Cycling UK^{vii} a pilot project known as the Bike Shed, to be established at St Helens RL^{viii} ground, is based on the highly successful Bristol Bike Project^{ix}.

In the autumn of 2016 the local authority agreed with the Home Office to take families who have been given refugee status as part of the government's Syrian Vulnerable Person Programme. With the first families arriving in January, over the course of the year a further sixty individuals will be being supported by the project. This is in addition to those individuals and families who, having experienced our warm welcome, have decided to make their home in the town following a successful application. Sadly these are a minority group and many more face destitution following a failed application. We are now working with expert partners BOAZ Trust^x, leader in best practice in the wider region of the northwest of England.

Evaluation - Our project has been praised by all local agencies and we have been identified as showing good practice in this vital field. The success of our project has been a challenge as it gave little time for development of our services. We have by necessity been very agile as we have learned how best to support these vulnerable people. In order to continue to support our friends at the café we carried out a SWOT analysis late in 2016. Key points are below

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Popular opportunity for people to live out Gospel values ● Strong links with sector experts and government bodies ● Dedicated group of volunteers ● Support from across deanery 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● No dedicated base ● Café becoming too small for growing need ● Shortage of wellbeing opportunities ● Need for English lessons ● Lack of local expert capability
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Wellbeing Partnerships ● English volunteers ● Defined and smaller number of service users in comparison with Liverpool ● Generosity of local community ● BRC training for Volunteers available 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Compassion fatigue ● Adverse media coverage ● Trying to provide too many services

The Home Office has taken properties on a five year lease indicating these people will need our help for many years. We have also identified key needs that will care for our friends at the café and enable them to integrate fully into the local community. This integration enhances both their own lives and the lives of their friends and neighbours. To ensure our project is sustainable in the medium to longer term we are in the process of creating a new charity to be called “Our Warm Welcome”. Some of the setup costs of the charity have been met with a grant from St. Joseph’s Province Passionist Grants Fund^{xi} as the Passionists have a special connection with St Helens. Charitable status will enable us to move into much needed larger premises and access additional funding streams to ensure the viability of the project.

ⁱ **British Red Cross** – Provide expert legal guidance and family tracing services - <http://www.redcross.org.uk/en>

ⁱⁱ **MRANG** - Provide support for women refugees and asylum seekers including pre and post-natal women and their babies, victims of sexual violence, trafficking, domestic slavery and human rights abuses - <https://www.thelivewelldirectory.com/Services/1545/MRANG-Merseyside-R>

ⁱⁱⁱ **SHAP** - Promote social justice and to combat poverty and homelessness. - <http://www.shap.org.uk/>

^{iv} **CUF Near Neighbours Fund** - The idea is to bring people together who are near neighbours in communities that are religiously and ethnically diverse, so that they can get to know each other better, build relationships of trust, and collaborate together on initiatives that improve the local community they live in. - <https://www.cuf.org.uk/about-us-near-neighbours>

^v **Mens Shed** - Men in Sheds is one of the most recent and fastest growing innovations for older men in the UK. Shed programmes originated in Australia in the 1990s, but there are now over 80 Sheds established in the UK and Ireland. Sheds provide a space to meet, socialise, learn new skills, and engage in meaningful activity with other older men. <http://www.lilac-healthequity.org.uk/index.php/sphr-research-projects/15-men-in-sheds>

^{vi} **St Helens - Pedal Power**- a community-based, non-profit co-operative lead by volunteers who are really passionate about life on two wheels. We look to use cycling as a means of addressing issues of health, wellbeing and inclusion in a fun, safe and nurturing environment.

^{vii} **Cycling UK** - <http://www.cyclinguk.org/>

^{viii} **Saints RLFC Community** - <http://www.saintsrlfc.com/community/266>

^{ix} **Bristol Bike Project** - <http://www.thebristolbikeproject.org/>

^x **BOAZ Trust** - <http://boaztrust.org.uk/>

^{xi} **St. Joseph’s Province Passionist Grants Fund**- The fund is a resource to support financially the wider family and friends of the Passionist Congregation. The Fund favours projects that similarly demonstrate ways of challenging injustice today and support for those whose lives consequently seem fragmented and impoverished today.