

Stories of ministry among, and by, asylum-seekers and refugees in Cyprus

Ministry 'among' or 'by' refugees is so different from ministry 'to' or 'for' them; and that is our experience here.

Cyprus has the highest number of asylum-seekers per capita in the European Union. Many are single and young. Many arrive traumatised by religious persecution or civil war. They have escaped barely imaginable horrors and survived dangerous journeys and unscrupulous traffickers.

Life on arrival isn't easy. Reception camps are overflowing. Asylum services are overstretched. Decisions about their status are often delayed, as are benefit payments. Employment opportunities are limited.

Let me introduce you to four extraordinary young people (names have been changed).

Grace, now 23, left her parents and siblings in English-speaking Cameroon in September 2019, two years after war began. She remembers "houses and supermarkets were set alight. We had to hide in bushes to get to school. Guns were everywhere."

In Cyprus, Grace was reunited with her cousin and a friend. They share accommodation. One day, Grace offered to help a lady carrying heavy shopping. Shortly afterwards, Grace went with her to church and was immediately welcomed. Members of the congregation offer Grace, her cousin and friend, casual work but perhaps more importantly value them hugely as church members. "They give us such happiness", I was told. "They are, simply, our treasure."

During lockdowns, a team from our church telephones several people each week to keep in touch. John, a young Nigerian man seeking asylum is among those I call. Last week, John telephoned me. I asked "What can I do for you?" He replied, "I'm phoning to see how *you* are, Ma'am". It was a humbling moment. Clearly, I still have much to learn about the mutuality of this ministry.

I have felt privileged to get to know a young woman from French-speaking Cameroon. Emma, like Grace, was forced to leave home for her own safety. Her journey was hard. Reneging on his promise of safe passage to the Republic of Cyprus, a trafficker left her north of the border. Emma walked for many kilometres, alone and barefoot. Finally reaching the south, her torn, bleeding legs and feet needed immediate medical attention.

Emma was introduced to the Anglican church by a young woman she met locally. She recalls her first Sunday there. "It was nice and kind ... they welcomed me. They made me feel at home".

Emma has been in Cyprus for three years and has not yet had her first interview with Immigration. It's as if life is put on hold. And the pain of separation from

home and family remains raw. “I am the last child. I have so much love there. I would never think of leaving my people unless I had to.”

Emma relishes every opportunity for life, growth and hope. Learning English quickly and well, she works as a volunteer teaching English to fellow asylum-seekers at a local non-governmental organisation. During lockdown, unable to teach or help with their food and clothing distribution, she arranges individual appointments by phone for fellow asylum-seekers.

Emma is much loved for the energy and life she brings us in church – and for her glorious singing voice. There was widespread joy, too, when last Christmas during an online service, she read the lesson - beautifully. “My faith has grown since being in Cyprus”, Emma told me. “I’ve seen the hand of God more and more in my life.”

Lastly, meet Chris from Biafra, where he was a youth leader; “work that as a Christian I’m meant to do”, he says. But his role as a Christian leader made him a target. He fled for his life. Last January, Chris was housed in a seaside town. At the Anglican church he found practical help and, above all, a loving welcome. He explains, “I came and knew nobody. God has sent me here ... they are mother, brother, sister to me. I feel I have another family.” Chris’s contributions to worship and Bible study are greatly valued.

As the young people share their stories, news headlines come alive – of insurgencies, civil war, and the persecution of Christian communities. And as Chris’s parish priest has reflected, “We pray for the persecuted church but through them we experience what it’s like to be a persecuted Christian.”

It is a privilege to walk alongside Grace, Emma, John and Chris as fellow Christians. And we give thanks for the faith, energy, hope and joy they bring to us and share with us. Please pray for them, and for all who are forced to seek asylum and refuge. And pray for those of us who are blessed to minister with, and among them.

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https://iafn.anglicancommunion.org/media/452310/IAFN_newsletter_I-Will-Welcome-the-Stranger-0321.pdf