

## Welcoming the Stranger in Christ Church, Ayia Napa

*'For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me....'* Matthew 25: 35-36a

This article describes one small church's experience in welcoming and supporting newly-arrived asylum-seekers in Ayia Napa. It outlines the need, and the response of the church community, and offers some key pointers that may be useful to other churches. It has been written in consultation with Fr. Martin, parish priest, and Heather Crookes, parish warden. I am grateful for their input.

### The need

Due to significant housing limitations in the cities, the government decided to accommodate newly arrived asylum-seekers in smaller towns. From December 2019, newcomers began arriving in Ayia Napa. Their need was great.

Over the Christmas period they received gifts of essential food and clothing from The Oasis Project in Larnaca. In January 2020, I heard of their ongoing need from Heather Lewis, President of the Oasis Board. She asked whether the Anglican Church in Ayia Napa might be able to help, particularly as many of the asylum-seekers were Christians from African countries and may be seeking a place of worship.

### The response

#### **Welcome**

Christ Church's response to the newcomers was warm and swift.

*'It is very important to us as a church community to welcome the asylum-seekers, not as strangers, but as beloved brothers and sisters, including those who are of other faiths and none.'* Fr. Martin

In the first two weeks of February, the church welcomed some 5 young men to Sunday worship and fellowship. The people there responded to individual needs for food, warm clothing, blankets and Bibles, and to the newcomers' questions about Holy Communion and Confession. They also arranged transport for them to join the midweek Bible Study, should they wish to do so. Arrangements began to be made to distribute food gifts more systematically.

#### **Challenges and joys**

The church community offered hospitality despite two factors: First, being a small and predominantly elderly congregation, it was itself struggling during February with low numbers, age-related health issues and the poor weather conditions. Second, the church building in which it worshipped was hired for use on Sunday mornings. This meant that a) food gifts for the newcomers needed to be distributed directly after the Sunday service; and b) they could not readily be stored in the church during the week.

By the third Sunday in February, numbers of asylum-seekers coming to Christ Church for gifts of food and clothing had increased significantly. A rumour had circulated that new shoes were being given. The need of the newcomers was so

great, that, on finding this was not the case, their disappointment turned to frustration. The helpers (mainly older retired ladies) felt overwhelmed and it became clear that more robust arrangements were needed.

Fr. Martin reflects: *'Although at first with so many asylum-seekers coming it seemed a bit overwhelming, we are overwhelmed by their faith and their sincere gratitude for whatever we can give. In fact I would go as far as saying that they have brought with them a faith that has blessed us.'*

During February, members of the midweek Bible Study learnt directly from one young man of the horrific persecution that he and his community had experienced in Nigeria. He described how his church had been burnt down; how Christians, including members of his own family, had been shot; and how those who gathered for the funerals of their loved ones had also been killed.

As Fr. Martin writes:

[Feeling welcome] 'has meant that the asylum-seekers have been able to freely tell their stories and share their insights and experiences of God at work in their situations, both in church and Bible study.'

Fr. Martin and I met later that day to consider the way forward. We agreed that:

- support in pastoral care and working with trauma would be offered, as appropriate
- food gifts from St. Helena's, Larnaca, would be collected and brought over to Ayia Napa during Lent and assistance given to food distribution
- leaders of the Municipality, the local Scandinavian and Orthodox Churches and the Mosque in Larnaca would be approached with the aim of a) bringing together a wider response team and b) exploring a more suitable time and place for gift distribution.

Fr. Martin was grateful to receive offers of help from the Municipality, the Orthodox Church locally, and from the Mosque in Larnaca. On hearing of the situation in Ayia Napa, Imam Shakir's response was unequivocal: no matter whether those in need were Muslim or Christian, the Muslim community wanted to help. Unfortunately, due to a combination of events culminating in the onset of COVID-19, it has not yet been possible to take up these offers. They remain deeply valued, nonetheless.

On the last Sunday of February, Fr. Martin, Heather and I together heard from those directly supporting the newcomers something of their experiences and their concerns. This discussion has contributed significantly to the formulation of our recommendations below.

During three Sundays in March, distribution of essential items continued after worship with more robust arrangements in place. Some anxiety remained, however, regarding the vulnerability of church members during the time of fellowship and so, as weather permitted, the distribution of food gifts was relocated to just outside the main entrance of the church.

The following week, all churches, in line with other places of worship and public buildings were required to close to assist in controlling the pandemic. Christ

Church made efforts to see how distribution might continue despite the necessary restrictions on gatherings and movement imposed by the government. While (non COVID-related) illness within the church community hampered progress for several weeks, non-contact distribution of foodstuffs began to 5+ individuals at their addresses from early April. Each recipient was asked, if possible within the government regulations, to share the food with one other person. This arrangement has continued on a weekly basis. Church members keep in touch with as many asylum-seekers as possible via mobile phone, to offer prayer and any pastoral help that is currently possible.

## Conclusion

*'Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.'* Hebrews 13:2

This article illustrates how a church that comprises a small, and largely elderly congregation can show God's love in action through welcoming and supporting the stranger. It has continued to do so during the COVID-19 pandemic and the necessary restrictions of movement subsequently imposed.

While welcoming asylum-seekers into the church's midst has been a new and certainly at times, challenging, experience for Christ Church, it clearly values the contributions the newcomers have made to its community through the strength of their faith and their personal gifts. And for this, it gives thanks.

And what of the future? It is our hope and prayer that Christ Church's ministry of welcoming the stranger can continue and flourish.

In Heather's words:

*'Any asylum seeker is welcome to services in Christ Church or prayer or Bible studies as fellow members of the congregation, where we can all continue to share and grow together.'*

...and in Fr. Martin's:

*'The biggest issue for us, at the moment, is finding ways in which we can, with our limited manpower, continue to grow this much needed ministry.'*

## Postscript

On 5<sup>th</sup> May 2020, Fr. Martin and Heather were contacted by a number of anxious asylum-seekers. They had just been informed by the government that they must leave their accommodation in Ayia Napa to be housed in one of the reception centres. The love and prayers of Christ Church go with them.

## Recommendations

Based on our experience to date, and from those issues raised by those within the church community directly supporting the newcomers, Fr. Martin, Heather and I offer the following pointers to churches who may become involved in similar outreach. We do so, not as 'experts' but simply in the hope that our collective learning may be useful.

**1. Communication** - Good communication is vital at all levels of the church community so that there is a shared understanding of:

- a) the community's responsibility to welcome the stranger in their midst
- b) the particular needs of the asylum seekers
- c) the response offered as church and individuals' roles within it.
- d) the importance of treating all who seek help equally, irrespective of faith and/or church attendance

**2. Health and Safety** - in view of the unpredictability of the numbers seeking support, this is crucial for all concerned: for the asylum seekers, those distributing items and directly offering help, and all who are present within the church building. Whatever arrangements are made, they need to be both welcoming and effective in managing potential crowding. The dignity and space of all in the building should be fully honoured. It is recommended that:

- a) There is a clear system of food distribution in place which had been clearly communicated to all. A system whereby beneficiaries are welcomed at the door on arrival, and given a token, which they then exchange for their gift of food, has worked well at Christ Church.
- b) One person within the congregation should have clear oversight of the arrangements.
- c) There should be easily recognisable signage with arrows pointing to the distribution point, as needed.
- d) Where volunteers meet with asylum seekers outside times of worship, study, and gift distribution, they should do so in pairs.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been essential that, alongside conveying our welcome and compassion, all government regulations concerning hygiene, travelling outside of the home, sizes of gatherings and social distancing are fully observed.

**3. Support and training** – listening to the harrowing experiences these young people had in Nigeria was both important and difficult.

It would be helpful for those members of church communities who are likely to be directly welcoming and supporting asylum seekers in the future to consider refreshing their listening skills and to increase their understanding on the impact of trauma; both for those who are traumatised and those seeking to welcome them. Please speak to Rev. Anne Fitcher, Social Concern Officer, in the first instance.

**4. Knowledge of law and systems concerning asylum-seekers and refugees in the Republic of Cyprus** – it may be the first time that members of the church community have directly supported asylum-seekers and refugees and they may be unaware of the rights and duties of asylum-seekers in the Republic of Cyprus. They will particularly want to help them find work and more permanent accommodation. There are clear regulations about the work asylum-seekers can do and anyone offering employment outside these limits is acting illegally. Please see <https://help.unhcr.org/cyprus/applying-for-asylum/your-rights-and-duties-as-an-asylum-seeker/> for full details of the rights and duties of asylum-seekers.

**5. Being a powerhouse of prayer**

Being a 'powerhouse of prayer' is an important way in which all members of a church community, including those who are vulnerable themselves, can support asylum-seekers and help them to know they are cared for and remembered.

Anne Fitcher - 5.5.20.