



Welcoming the stranger: Life with Restore



Shari Brown

Shari Brown is Project Coordinator of Restore, a Birmingham Churches Together project supporting refugees and asylum seekers. She was initially inspired by refugee support work when volunteering with the Caritas refugee department in Stuttgart, Germany.

'What a difficult thing it is being an asylum seeker. Watching how she copes and her spirit is an inspiration to me. Her friendship is one of my daily blessings!' (These are the words of a Restore volunteer who has befriended a lone Afghan woman.)

Welcoming the stranger

Restore is a project of Birmingham Churches Together, whose mission is to welcome, include and assist integration of refugees and those seeking sanctuary from persecution. Restore's work is relational and rooted in responding to the needs of new arrivals who have experienced loss and trauma back home and are attempting to rebuild their lives in Birmingham. Our primary service is one-to-one befriending where volunteers stand alongside refugees or asylum seekers and offer support. One refugee wrote: 'My befriender is very supportive, informative, caring and considerate. Restore has enabled me to confidently integrate myself into the community. I found Restore like a shelter for people like me who are lost in this world.'

Restore was founded in 1999 by a group of churches in Birmingham, who wished to help Kosovans fleeing conflict and other asylum seekers arriving in the city as a result of the new policy of dispersal from the south east to different regions of the country. Restore was adopted by Birmingham Churches Together in 2000 and has been a strong expression of ecumenical mission work over the last few years. Whilst retaining a befriending focus, Restore has developed other aspects of work such as social activities, training to equip refugees for work, awareness-raising on refugee issues, and advocacy –

both on behalf of clients and in seeking to influence asylum policy and practice.

Restore is a project open to all, but it remains a faith-based project, deeply committed to the call to 'welcome the stranger'. The following volunteers share what motivates their involvement in Restore's work:

'My motivation has been based upon a desire to do something to counter the blatant injustice, prejudice and hypocrisy with which the machinery of government is used to persecute some of the most vulnerable people amongst us. That's it ... as Christians we are mandated to love our neighbour and to show solidarity with the oppressed and poor. Restore is the practical means for making a positive contribution.' (Philip Rogerson)

'Almost all my life in this country (50+ years) I've lived and worked amongst people arriving from other countries and cultures and having originally myself uprooted from a very homogenous culture (Sweden), it feels as though over the years this diversity has become part of my DNA. I myself have received so much through this experience with so many diverse encounters that it seemed very natural and obvious to get involved with Restore. I guess I also know a little about what it means to leave your own country, the pain and the loss, although I did so for very different reasons compared to refugees.'

'The prevalent xenophobia in this and other countries is so against everything I believe about "welcoming the stranger". My Christian faith is obviously a strong motivation.' (Kerstin Eadie)

'My motivation for being a Restore befriender is the injunction as a Christian to reach out to the most

vulnerable and marginalised of one's society. I desire to live in a society that is inclusive and affirming, as even Christ's love is ever-inclusive and affirming. I am inspired by the knowledge that God in Christ shared the journey of being a refugee and thus in befriending refugees, we befriend those of similar journeys to Christ.

'The distinctively subjective reason for my engaging in Restore's work is that I, too, had to seek asylum and am forever grateful that I was given the opportunity of moving from unfreedom to freedom in my adopted British society. Lastly, given the nature of a British society that is in flux, and not for the better, if I don't do it, who will?!' (Brian Brown)

What then are the issues, which an asylum seeker faces in the UK? Restore uses the following monologue,

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'A day in the life ...' (written by staff member Jeremy Thompson), in our training to evoke the feelings and concerns of an asylum seeker awaiting a decision on his asylum claim.

Drama: 'A day in the life ...'

'I hadn't slept much. I lay awake thinking about my life, I thought about my wife and children ... I wonder, where they are now?

'There's no point in getting up, as there's nothing in the house for breakfast. My money has run out as I bought some food for a friend who had nothing to eat. Maybe I will be in the same situation soon.

'I wish I could work, it would give me a reason to get up. I trained as a teacher in my country. But I just have two hours at my English class this afternoon run by volunteers ... without that there would be nothing to do today. Life is so empty for me. [Pause] I cried out to my God for mercy, for justice ... for strength to live another day.

'I wanted to go back to bed. But I had to sign on with the Home Office in Solihull. It's so impersonal there. I'm just another case, another number to them. But at least they didn't detain me today.

'I experienced trauma back home and so get invited to a group counselling session. I was an opposition politician, I stood up for justice and democracy. In the group today we talked about what had happened to us in our home countries. I think it was supposed to make us feel better. But it didn't change anything for the people in my country.

'A letter! That's unusual! But it's only a message from the Home Office saying that they want to interview me next time I go to Solihull to sign.

What does that mean? Are they planning to send me back? [Pause] Should I go back to report at all?

'I was thinking about going to the local church again but no-one takes much notice of me there. They seem too tied up in their own lives to talk to strangers. So I'll probably go back to the French-speaking church even though it is two buses ... or a long walk when you've no bus fare.

'I've nothing to do tonight so I watched TV, but I couldn't concentrate. So I went to bed.

'I still can't sleep despite the medicines. All I can think of is my problems and what will happen if they deport me? [Pause]

'The past haunts me and the future is a desolate unknown.' (Anonymous asylum seeker)

The asylum process

Feelings of loneliness, anxiety and despair are often evident in the people we meet through Restore. Many asylum seekers have left family behind and crave word from them. For some, there is no knowledge of their whereabouts and we encourage them to turn to the International family tracing service of the Red Cross, though this takes courage when there is fear that the missing person may be dead. For others in the asylum process, there is concern that contact from the loved one in this country will endanger the family's safety in the home country. For some asylum seekers communication with family is difficult because there is limited internet or mobile connection in their home country or conflict has led to a breakdown of the infrastructure of the country.

Asylum support is granted by the Home Office to those in the asylum system. Known as section 95 support, this amounts to accommodation, usually in a shared house, and approximately £37 per week. Section 4 support is granted when an asylum seeker has been refused asylum but has made a fresh claim and is awaiting the outcome of this new submission. Such support is cashless and amounts to £35 being topped up onto a plastic Azure Card, which can be used in mainstream supermarkets. No money is given for travel fares. Those who are refused asylum and unable to submit fresh representations have their Home Office support terminated and become destitute without recourse to public funds. Destitution is the plight of many an asylum seeker in our country.

Asylum seekers are prohibited from working and are not allowed to attend English language classes in the first six months of their asylum claim – the rationale being that their case will be determined in six months and if refused, they will be removed from the country. Invariably the case determination takes much longer than half a year and only a small percentage of those refused are removed or return voluntarily to their home country.

Asylum seekers are required to report to a regional Home Office centre. People often attend these reporting sessions with great trepidation as it is the place where

they are most likely to be detained and sent to a removal centre. Quality legal advice and representation is essential if an asylum seeker is to present a case with substantiating evidence, expert reports and relevant case law. Sadly, legal aid for asylum work is limited to a few hours and representatives tend to drop cases when they perceive a case is unlikely to be successful.

Trying to make a difference

'You can't always make it better but you can make a difference.' (Restore befriender) Restore is required to hold this tension. We cannot wipe away the fear and pain refugees and those seeking sanctuary experienced in their home countries and rarely can we influence Home Office decisions that will shape their futures. However, we can provide a listening ear; consistent and caring contact; opportunities to develop conversational English skills; and our desire to walk alongside refugees and asylum seekers on their journey in Birmingham.

We do not deceive ourselves that befriending and social activities can transform situations, but remarkably people affirm the healing aspect of social interaction, recreation and the sense that somebody cares! One asylum seeker described the impact of men's activities as follows:

'For most asylum seekers, hardly a day passes without you getting bad news either coming from the Home Office or from events taking place back home. "Your house has been burnt down." "Your family don't have money to pay rent." "Your wife has been taken by informers for interrogation." The list goes on and on. All this boggles your mind making your life miserable. Then a phone call comes up asking if you are available for a Restore men's event. This is good news to a lonely man who has not been out for a long time. We have been to so many places of interest in and around Birmingham, played pool, football, table tennis and gone swimming. This has helped keep us busy, reduce stress and lift self-esteem. Visiting and meeting different people makes me feel relaxed and confident about the future.'

When refugee status is granted

It is not all depressing either. Restore has its experiences of great joy when refugee status is granted, family reunion takes place, and people's lives move on for the better. A befriender writes of his witnessing a 'truly holy moment':

'My befriender phoned me very excitedly to say that finally his wife and two children have their visas to join him in the UK. He fled Darfur three years ago and hadn't seen them since – in fact, for two years they had no contact and he didn't know whether they were alive or dead. My wife and I drove him and his friend to Heathrow to meet them. The plane landed on time at 10 p.m., but we were still waiting in a rapidly emptying Arrivals area at 11 p.m. At last the aluminium doors open and there they were – she in a long black robe with red head-scarf with the children, in their best clothes, hesitant beside her. My befriender does

not move. His wife walks slowly, with great grace and dignity, to the end, and he is there facing her. It was like slow motion. They folded into a gentle embrace, almost as if they weren't quite sure if the other was solid flesh and then simply stand and hold each other. She is wiping away tears as he stoops ever so gently to clasp his son and then his daughter. It is reverent – a truly

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holy moment. The evening was a time of great joy, for us as well as the family who now begin life together in a new country where they are safe at last.' (Charles Worth)

Paulette's story

Paulette Mengnjo, a refugee, has the last word:

'It's on me!' was Paulette's greeting when I met her at a church cafe in Birmingham in early February. I was about to challenge her offer to pay for lunch but then thought otherwise. Her African tradition requires that a first salary be broken in sharing with others ... and Paulette had just received her first pay cheque!

Paulette Mengnjo is in her early 40s and comes from southern Cameroon, West Africa. She was a successful business woman back home and engaged in politics through joining the opposition party calling for greater autonomy for the minority English-speaking south. She had a son and supportive parents. Following arrests during political demonstrations she grew particularly fearful when security police called at her home. Warned that they had targeted her, she fled into the rural area and then left the country on false papers.

Arriving in the UK in September 2006 she made her way to Croydon to apply for asylum. She still speaks of her apprehension about approaching any one in uniform and the loneliness of being in a strange country. Yet there was relief and confidence that she would be granted asylum soon. She was dispersed to a hostel in Birmingham and went forth to find a solicitor – the first on a list she had been given (as they must be the best!)

Today she talks with frustration about the lack of quality legal representation she received in her first case. She was refused asylum by the Home Office case worker following her substantive interview and the case then went to court. Her solicitor arranged for a French interpreter, who was finally instructed to step back by the Judge who recognised that Paulette was an English speaker. There was no evidence to substantiate she had been tortured as her solicitor had argued a medical report was unnecessary as the Home Office believed she had been in prison. Paulette's asylum application was rejected. The Judge determined she was not a high profile political activist and could relocate to a safe place in the Cameroon.

With no more entitlement to legal aid she paid the solicitor privately to appeal. No action was taken,

however, to translate a French medical report her parents had sent from the Cameroon and she became particularly vulnerable to removal from the country as she had no 'live' case. Paulette was detained when reporting at the regional Midlands Enforcement Unit in 2007 and sent to Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre. An injunction led to her release some days later and she returned to Birmingham. Homeless and without benefits (as Asylum Support had long since been terminated), she turned to the Hope Projects, a Birmingham project offering accommodation to destitute asylum seekers. She reminded me that she was accommodated by Hope Housing for 20 months!

Further submissions were made by another solicitor in 2009 and Paulette was able to apply for section 4 cashless Asylum Support. In 2010 her fresh claim was refused and she became destitute again.

Finally in 2011 a much respected legal firm took on her case and insisted a medical report was needed. She was referred to Freedom from Torture. Friends and church people accommodated her. In April 2013 she was detained again ... and then released after 11 days (she is currently seeking compensation for unlawful detention). Paulette was eventually granted Refugee Status on the 25 January 2014!

'Seven years and four months later!' says Paulette, with a wry smile, she won her case for asylum. I ask her what kept her going through these tough years and she answers: 'Hope kept me going!' She then refers to:

- the daily communication she has with her son, who is doing academically well in his studies back home;
- the support of agencies like Restore and Hope Projects;
- the commitment of her latest solicitor;
- the wonderful support of her church community at Olton Baptist;
- certain individuals who generously provided accommodation, financial support and counselling;
- her political activism in exile (with the Southern Cameroon National Council) and involvement in the organisation Right to Remain (she is currently the Chair).

Now able to access mainstream benefits, housing and having entitlement to work, Paulette rejoices in the opportunities open to her. She has a small Council flat and through the Learning Hub at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital received training late last year. Her first salary cheque comes from the hospital where she began work as an auxiliary nurse in January this year. She calls me 'next of kin' and I threaten that she is never to get ill and cause me further concern, but I am grateful for the inspirational, courageous woman she has been in my life over the past seven years!

Christianity and the world of ideas

How should Christians engage in the world of ideas? What do scripture and theological reflection have to say about life today? The think tank Theos has been asking these questions for over eight years now, engaging in the battle of ideas in print and on the media.



Their recent publication *The Case for Christian Humanism* aims to recapture 'humanism' from atheism, arguing not only that Christians should be better aware and more proud of their humanist heritage, but also that genuine and secure humanism *needs* Christianity in order to sustain it.



The extended essay, *Just Money*, takes a look at the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary capitalism and shows how the detailed and impressive body of thought known as Catholic Social Teaching can help address the weaknesses while preserving the strengths.



"Speaking Up" - Defending and Delivering Access to Justice Today argues that although Christians have long seen justice as a key mission, they have been slow to recognise the importance of *advocacy*, of speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves. It contends that in the context of recent cuts to legal aid, this is going to become an ever more important issue and that Christians need to place greater emphasis on both *defending* and *delivering* access to justice today.



A Very Modern Ministry: Chaplaincy in the UK is the report based on an extensive, detailed year-long study into chaplaincy in Britain, looking at where chaplains are, where they come from, what they do, and what different they make, and arguing that chaplaincy is particularly well-suited to the kind of society Britain is becoming.

All these publications and more are available from the Theos website, where you can also find information about joining as a Friend or Associate: www.theosthinktank.co.uk