

How faith communities in the UK are responding to the refugee crisis

*Faith-based groups don't always get it right in their response to refugees. But, at their best, **Susanna Snyder** argues, faith communities work in partnership with other civic organisations to offer practical support to some of the most marginalised people in our communities and to shift public imagination, discourse and policy in a more generous and inclusive direction. As the refugee crisis continues to unfold such actions are crucial practices of hope.*



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In 2016, **5,079 women, men and children died or went missing** attempting to make the treacherous journey across the Mediterranean in flimsy, leaking rubber dinghies. Migrants pay unscrupulous smugglers thousands of dollars to escape the horrors of war and violence, which often coincide with food shortages, environmental and urban devastation, struggling economies, unemployment and persecution of minorities. If individuals and families are lucky enough to survive the journey, they are greeted by further challenges on arrival in Europe. Many are stuck in camps awaiting legal processing; others who travel on are met by ever-tightening border controls and hostility from established populations. Families find themselves separated. Children have to fend for themselves. Dignified and resilient human beings are treated as “bare life”, to coin a phrase of philosopher **Giorgio Agamben**—as sub- or not-fully-human because they are understood to be devoid of the political identity—citizenship—that is equated with being full persons.

Faith communities are responding to this evolving situation and offering support to those hoping for a safe space within which to live, work and contribute to society. This builds on a long tradition in this country of helping those seeking sanctuary: churches joined together to establish **Christian Aid** to assist people displaced in Europe as a result of the Second World War. Faith-based responses are motivated by religious teachings that call for care and generosity to be shown to outsiders and newcomers—teachings that grew out of religious communities’ own experiences of exile and displacement. In the Torah, commands to “love the alien as yourself” are plentiful (e.g. Leviticus 19:34); the writers of the New Testament call on Christians to show hospitality to strangers (Matthew 25:35; Hebrews 13:2); and those who help exiles are lauded in the Qur’an: “Those who believe, and adopt exile, and struggle in the path of God, and those who give them

asylum and aid—these are all in truth the believers; for them is forgiveness and a provision most generous” (Q 8:74).

Different types of faith communities—from international non-profit organizations with religious roots like Islamic Relief and Caritas to local, practising congregations—are responding in varied ways to the needs of contemporary refugees. Some are offering practical and pastoral support to those en route or newly arrived in the UK. Congregations have organised sponsored events to fundraise for charities working with migrants in Greece, Italy or the Calais camp known as the “Jungle”. In 2015, the **East London Mosque** invited worshippers to make donations and took part in the Citizens UK campaign to find 5,000 homes for Syrian refugees. The Liberal Jewish Synagogue, in St John’s Wood, runs a **drop-in** for asylum-seeking families, and St Barnabus, Walthamstow helped to form the **Walthamstow Migrants Support Centre** and are part of #refugeeswelcome Waltham Forest putting pressure on the Council to fulfil its pledge to receive ten Syrian families. The Vicar of St Barnabus, Steven Saxby, says, “The commitment to welcome and support migrants, and the various ways my church and so many others are active in response to the refugees crisis, is rooted in Christian values of respect for the dignity of every person. It connects with those words of Jesus: ‘I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.’”

Some churches are now applying to accompany a refugee family through a **new government community sponsorship scheme** initiated earlier in 2016: if successful, they commit to providing new arrivals with housing and helping them integrate and access services. Other organizations specifically focused on refugees have established wide-ranging and structured programmes. **Restore**, a project of Birmingham Churches Together, matches sanctuary seekers with befrienders and mentors, and offers an “Equipping Refugees for Work” course as well as social activities for families, women and men. The **Boaz Trust** in Manchester provides homeless refugees and asylum seekers with accommodation, and the **Jesuit Refugee Service** runs a day centre in London that offers people lunch, travel money, toiletry packs, referrals, food and coats as well as a safe space to meet friends.

Faith community work does not stop with responses to immediate needs, though. It also seeks to bring about change in the political and legal contexts that give rise to—or at least intensify—refugees’ challenges by calling on the government to adopt more generous refugee policies, and by raising awareness in the public square. In September 2016, an **open letter** signed by over 200 representatives from Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist and Hindu communities to Prime Minister Theresa May called on the government to “urgently revise its policy towards refugees” by creating “safe, legal routes of travel” and “adopting fair and humane family reunion policies for refugees.” The Archbishop of Canterbury raised the challenge of unaccompanied minors in Calais in the House of Lords, and faith community members were among the 10,000 people who took part in a “Refugees Welcome” march in London on 17 September. On 19 October, faith groups gathered to welcome child refugees arriving at the Home Office visa and immigration centre, Lunar House, in Croydon. Despite decreasing mainstream church attendance in the UK, this kind of advocacy remains important, as faith communities continue to wield some moral sway with at least some people. The **City of Sanctuary Movement**, founded by a Methodist minister and now supported by a range of faith communities, seeks to build cultures of hospitality in cities across the country. It has held ‘Sanctuary in Parliament’ events, aiming to deepen MPs’ understanding by providing them with opportunities to learn directly from refugees.

Creative arts projects are one means faith-based groups are increasingly using to provoke responses to the refugee crisis. **Flight**, by Arabella Dorman, was a powerful “cry of anguish” suspended from the ceiling of St James’ Piccadilly last Christmas, and services and concerts connected with this installation brought refugees and non-refugees together to sensitise those attending to the unfolding crisis on Europe’s beaches. **Sea of Colour** by Güler Ates, an extraordinary hanging made from baby clothes hand-stitched together, was hung in the Salvation Army International Headquarters in London during Lent of 2016 so that those walking across the Millennium Bridge could see it. Through these projects, faith communities are trying to cultivate a new imagination around refugee migration—to help people see what is going on and why people are moving in a new way. Given that the so-called refugee crisis is at least in part the result of how

our tendency to see “the refugee” as a problem rather than a person, these efforts at re-envisioning are significant.

Finally, in light of the fissures in British society exposed by the Brexit vote, efforts by faith-based organisations to foster dialogue and understanding between established and newer members of local communities deserve a mention. Blame for the struggles of JAMS (the “just-about-managing”) and those in former industrial areas has been placed by some on migrants: migrants (including refugees) and non-migrants are being pitted against each other in a zero-sum game. Faith-based groups are offering spaces in which people can come together to share their stories, joys and struggles and to find common ground. Akwaaba (meaning “Welcome”) is a Sunday social club held at Green Lanes Methodist Church in Hackney that brings newcomers and established residents together for everything from food to arts and crafts and bike workshops. Founder Michael Boyle sees it as a space of “social solidarity”. [Interfaith Glasgow’s Weekend Project](#) involves local residents and new arrivals getting to know one another through day trips, workshops on ‘Glasgae’ slang and Scottish history, and ceilidh dances. The [“Love Your Neighbour” Campaign](#), started by faith and community leaders in Birmingham after the rise in hate crime and sense of division that followed the Brexit vote, encourages people to get to know their neighbours and to do simple acts of kindness.

Faith-based groups don’t always get it right. Sometimes, they can be too paternalistic—about “us” helping “them” rather than about affirming and amplifying refugees’ own agency. A few see refugees as ripe for conversion. And efforts can be piecemeal or disjointed at times. But, at their best, faith communities work in partnership with other civic organisations and as refugees and non-refugees together standing in solidarity to offer practical support to some of the most marginalised people in our communities and to shift public imagination, discourse and policy in a more generous and inclusive direction. As the refugee crisis continues to unfold—and with wars still raging and climate change increasingly driving people from their homes, it surely will—such actions are crucial practices of hope. Hope for those of us who are citizens as well as for those of us who are on the move, because our character as individuals, local communities and as a nation is formed and shaped by and through our treatment of all who live within and beyond our borders.

About the author



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