

'Forced Migration: How Can Quakers Respond?' Woodbrook Study Centre. Feb 3-5th 2017.

This conference, organised by Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network (QARN) and others, was attended by over a hundred delegates from all over the UK and beyond. It was an informative and inspiring weekend and a wonderful experience to spend time with so many people manifesting their faith in action via 'conversation' or 'international' cafes, visiting detainees in deportation centres, delivering supplies to camps across Europe, inviting asylum seekers to stay in a spare room...

From the wide variety of workshops we were able to cover four.

'Climate and Migration' revealed that people suffering from a climate catastrophe usually only move within their country, intending to return home, but reach a point where their poverty curtails their options so seriously that they are stuck where they are. Surely money currently spent on militarization, walls and fences would be better spent on grants, enabling these people to set up home and earn a living in the place to which they have moved?

In 'Building a Movement' participants were invited to write their names in the centre of a blank sheet of paper, then write in names of all the groups and networks we belong to, in order to see how we can reach those with the power to make decisions.

'Women's Experience and Forced Migration' was led by Bridget Obi, driven from Nigeria with her small daughter in 2005 still without legal status and existing on the fringes of society - to which, were she allowed to work, she could obviously make a valuable contribution.

In 'Safe Passage for All' Renke Meuwese from Help Refugees, who has worked for months in the Calais 'Jungle' gave a distressing account on the inhumanity of the camp's clearance, where at least two hundred children, moved from the now-destroyed camp but not given an alternative place to live, have returned to live in the bushes and continue their dangerous attempts to reach the UK. *(The next week we were told of a further damning of their hopes when the government announced the end of the Dubs scheme to bring over child migrants.)*

We also had an opportunity to watch *The Bundle*, a new play by Journeyman Theatre on the experiences of an asylum seeker from Chechnya, which was both shocking and moving.

It was a weekend to feel proud of Quaker work, inadequate in the face of so much commitment, appalled at the 'hostile environment' created by our government to deter refugees and asylum seekers and aided by much of the media and at the terrible treatment of those who live in destitution but are not allowed to work, who are locked in detention centres without having committed any offence, who are 'dispersed' around the country with no control or understanding of where they are going and at constant risk of deportation to the countries from which they have escaped.

So How Can Quakers Respond?

One answer is to continue with the sort of work outlined above but also we should be forming links with other organisations working on these issues and doing all we can to, as the current Amnesty campaign puts it, 'Change the Narrative', challenging the view of migrants as scroungers by broadcasting the facts about their reasons for leaving home, their treatment in UK and the benefits they can bring to our country. We can write to MPs, MEPs, councillors and anyone in a position of influence. We can also look for opportunities to welcome refugees to our area and to donate to those suffering in camps abroad.

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