

# Speaker meeting 15th Nov 2017

We had an excellent meeting at the London Jesus Centre (to whom many thanks) with keynote speakers Rt Revd Paul Butler and Stephen Hale, and brief presentations also from two of the agencies we regularly support, Article 1 and Notre Dame Refugee Centre.

Paul Butler is Bishop of Durham and one of the authors of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) report 'Refugees Welcome?', published earlier this year.

He spoke of what it meant to be truly "welcomed", briefly tracing attitudes on this from the Old Testament to the New. This led to the subject of integration, the focus of the APPG report. It had to be seen as a two-way process, he suggested, and at its best a **community** activity; but too often it is undermined by a lack of support and resources. The government has no answer to the question 'what does it mean to be welcomed' - and no strategy for achieving such a thing. As a nation, we have shown a willingness to welcome refugees but this is undermined by systemic failures that leave many bereft and destitute. There is plenty of evidence that integration strategies improve outcomes and a call for a national strategy lay at the heart of the APPG's work.

The Bishop spoke of the powerful evidence that the APPG received from those who have been through the asylum process - often including periods of destitution. These sometimes came when people finally received right to remain, at which point their existing housing provision and Asylum Support benefits come to an abrupt halt. But policy cannot be based on stories alone and the APPG had also taken evidence from many agencies and charities. One recurrent theme was the problem of getting a National Insurance number: officially there should be no difficulty but the reality was quite different. These barriers, he suggested, were not accidental. Nor was the difference in treatment between refugees under the VPRS scheme and those who reach this country independently - this "two tier" system breeds resentment, sectarianism and alienation.

The APPG found that acute problems occurred during the 28 day "moving-on" period after receipt of right to remain and they had recommended extending this to 50 days. Other key concerns in their report were the lack of ESOL provision and funding, and restrictions on family reunion. So far, the Group has seen **some** acceptance from government of the idea of a national strategy but a cool response on other issues and a flat refusal to extend the moving-on period. However, the Bishop paid tribute to the team of civil servants at the Home Office who have done a remarkable job within the constraints of official policy. He suggested that the Church had come quite late to some of these issues but that it had an important part to play.

Speaking next, Stephen Hale, Director of Refugee Action, gave his thoughts on the question "are we making a difference?" He began by reflecting on a very recent arson attack on a house in St Helens used by refugees. That was a terrible incident and yet it was local people in Liverpool who had demanded that their local authority help out with refugee resettlement - so the picture is not just a bleak one.

The processes for asylum and resettlement simply do not work adequately. Too many people end up in detention, in sub-standard accommodation, separated from loved ones, etc. And these are people who arrive in this country already traumatised. So **why** is it happening? Often the answer is deliberate government policy, such as the cuts to ESOL provision. It is the voluntary sector, charities and community groups, who are stepping into the breach. "We **are** making a difference".

The Syrian resettlement programme, Stephen said, is not enough but again it is making a difference. Numbers in detention have fallen, thanks to pressure from various quarters. Jeremy Corbyn has indicated that Labour would increase ESOL provision. There is cross-party support on many of these issues and the change to Amber Rudd at the Home Office has been positive.

"We want to see Britain be that welcoming country", Stephen Hale concluded. And he thanked all who were contributing in any way to that goal.

We then had speakers from Article 1 (Sonya Miley, Maddy Crowdy and a young man from the Sudan) and from Notre Dame Refugee Centre (Sarah Hughes and Sunday). They thanked LCRF and our supporters for the grants they had received, stressing that it was not just about the money but also the demonstration of compassion which that represented. It made a huge difference to an asylum seeker to be treated with a little dignity.

The young person who had been supported by Article 1 told us just how difficult he had found it to navigate the "system", and how hard it was for him to have to rely on charity. Sunday, who helps out at the Notre Dame Centre, had been in the UK for 22 years and only last year finally received right to remain. He talked of the many who are not necessarily refugees but end up in "limbo" for all sorts of reasons. Only through the persistence of Notre Dame was he finally able to get his 'papers' to stay officially in this country.

Replying to a question about the 'two-tier' system, Paul Butler said that there was some logic to having a system to give more help to the most vulnerable and it was here to stay. Sarah Hughes responded that 'vulnerable' could simply mean 'oppressed'; a two-tier system is exactly what we now have - and it is wrong.

There were questions too on Brexit, on the use of indefinite detention, on the best way for charities to help with ESOL, and on policies towards other undocumented people. Sarah Hughes called for support to maintain ECHR commitments after Brexit while from Article 1 we heard a call for people to get involved as volunteer visitors to removal centres. Then it was time for a quick reminder of LCRF's work before final thanks were expressed to our hosts and Sue Withers, from the London Jesus Centre, closed the meeting with prayer.