

Hospitality in a time of Hostility

Summary of keynote address by Sarah Teather at the LCRF speaker meeting on Weds 19th September, 2018.

Sarah Teather was for 12 years a Liberal Democrat MP and served as Children's Minister. She is now UK Director for the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS).

In her opening remarks, Sarah expressed her thanks to the London Churches Refugee Fund for our consistency and faithfulness in making small grants to JRS. She also acknowledged the diversity of the evening's audience which included some who themselves had come to this country as refugees.

How can we continue to provide spaces of hospitality in an atmosphere of such toxicity? And how do we avoid imbibing that toxicity? Sarah said she would share something of what had been helpful to her in considering these questions, and that she would welcome responses from others.

She described the background and work of JRS which is active in fifty countries worldwide including places like South Sudan, Lebanon and the DRC but also most parts of Europe. The mission of JRS is to **Accompany, Serve and Advocate** for refugees. Accompaniment is an affirmation that God is present even in terrible situations. In the UK, JRS reaches out in particular to those who are destitute and those who are in detention: the 'most excluded' from our society.

Hostility, Sarah said, is not a new problem: the system has long been dysfunctional, "broken for a long time". Asylum decisions are often incomprehensible, the system seems unable to recognise the truth of refugees' stories. But things have got worse: restrictions on legal aid, incentives to civil servants for winning appeals against asylum claims, the use of targets... All of these are part of the 'murky world of decision-making' that refugees are up against.

What is new is the *deliberate* use of hostility as part of the system. Some parts of it now require and compel us all to be hostile: for instance, it is now a criminal offence to rent property to someone without status in this country.

The Windrush exposé led to some pulling back, but the 'architecture of the system' remains the same. While Windrush migrants were unintended targets, perhaps, the targeting of asylum seekers is entirely deliberate. Hostility is being used as an instrument of policy to get people to abandon their claims, there is nothing 'accidental' about this. Upfront charging for NHS services has again tightened the screw. Any asylum seeker who, in desperation and barred from working, turns to crime is on a path via short prison sentences to immigration detention and potentially deportation. Very many of JRS' clients have been in detention and the 'violent wrenching' of people from family and community leaves deep scars. Sarah said that she feels ashamed at what is being done in our name to vulnerable people.

JRS research among their day centre visitors shows that 60% have been street homeless, usually on a sporadic basis. A frequent pattern is constant moving from 'friend' to 'friend', walking for miles, waiting for hours, in the hope that a door will be

opened. It is as if the journey of the refugee will never end. Of those with a roof over their heads, more than 40% said they were 'uncomfortable' with their host and 30% felt actively threatened. The consequence of hostility is to expose people to even more risk.

JRS' response is focused through the work of its day centre, with a variety of services and activities available. They also run a small hosting scheme, placing asylum seekers with individuals and communities (including religious orders) that they could not otherwise access. But at the heart of their work is the accompaniment of human beings in their situation, a situation that we are not necessarily able to solve. Befriending an individual blurs the boundary of benefactor/beneficiary. It is about sharing food, and sharing life stories, with real people. Sarah had been moved to learn that the thing their guests most value about JRS is that staff, volunteers and guests all eat together.

Sarah went on to speak of the story of Elijah and the widow. When Elijah is sent to her, the widow is the destitute one (with her food about to run out) and he is the migrant. She has almost nothing but shares what little she has – even though in that society widows were meant to be the beneficiaries of others' aid. And her generosity leads to replenishment: the meal and oil never run out.

An order of Sisters that was about to wind down its activities, but which decided to host asylum seekers, has similarly found itself amazingly 'replenished' by the experience, its life and purpose renewed. So often it is the refugee who brings something to us.

So where do we find the 'food' to sustain us, the 'air' amid suffocating hostility? Sarah said she cannot answer for us all but that, for JRS, it has been a return to their core mission of accompaniment, service and advocacy: and that they have found themselves refreshed by doing this.

We are most grateful to Sarah Teather for her speech on this occasion.