**Possible Asylum Seeker and Refugee brief for BU.**

At Olton Baptist Church in Solihull, we have been intentionally helping asylum seekers and refugees (AS&Rs) for five years. We are not experts and much of what we offer is quite simple. This leads us to believe that what we have been doing may be replicable in other Baptist churches. So we share our story below, together with questions for you to consider, should you wish to follow a similar route.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Our story** | **To consider** |
| **Our intentional support of AS&Rs began with two church members who had a passion for welcoming the stranger. They took on a double plot with a small shed at the local allotments and invited a few AS&Rs to join them – to work the ground, grow some veg and enjoy a place of safety and friendship. Some came to drink tea and chat, others came to dig because it reminded them of working their own land. The shared activity also allowed those who had suffered trauma to enjoy company without having to talk in any depth.** | **Tap passion.** Are there people in your church who feel strongly about with the injustice and isolation experienced by many AS&Rs? The passion is necessary to maintain initiatives through difficulty.**Create a gathering.** What will be your gathering point for those looking for friendship and belonging? It can be just a drop-in, but something with an (optional) activity is better: gardening, bread-making; sewing; bike maintenance; Champions League watching? **Give dignity.** You are unlikely to be equipped to help with legal matters, or housing, or trauma counselling. But can you simply offer a place where AS&Rs are treated as people? Contrary to many people that may encounter them, you can believe their stories, show an interest in their country of origin, or just drink tea and eat cake together. You can be warm and not cold.  |
| **As the allotment project continued, other church members started to be involved in AS&R related groups. A few began to help at a Solihull Churches Together drop-in for asylum seekers obliged to report at the UK Border Agency’s Midlands centre. Another church member landed a job at nearby AS&R support organisation. A handful of church members were trained as befrienders by Restore, the Birmingham Churches Together AS&R support charity. This last connection has been especially important as we have sought advice from Restore on numerous occasions.**  | **Seek partners**. What other organisations, faith-based or secular, are already working locally to support AS&Rs? Can you contact and visit them? The more partners there are in this mission, the better. **Build knowledge.** The process of seeking asylum is complex and the services available to AS&Rs change constantly. You may never become expert, but some knowledge is tremendously helpful. It is worth a few people investing in some training?  |
| **Gradually, we encountered an increasing number of AS&Rs. Some we knew for a brief season, while others developed strong friendships with people in the church. Apart from providing the bus fare to get to the allotment project, we have never guaranteed any form of financial or practical support. Instead, a number of people in the church give low-level support to those they have built a relationship with, such as the provision of a bus pass or a phone top-up (without the ability to be in contact or to travel, relationship-building is extremely hard), or giving lifts, or helping with access to local services, or helping fill in forms. On a couple of occasions, we have written to local MPs to ask for their assistance in progressing a claim or in challenging government processes.**  | **Agree guidelines.** Befriending AS&Rs means befriending people who may well be vulnerable. Do you have a Vulnerable Adults Safeguarding Policy? Can you draw up some befriending guidelines for those who get involved? Ours are attached below. **Don’t rescue**. Your material resources probably far outstrip those of the AS&Rs you get to know. This can create an unhealthy imbalance of power. How can you ease their burden and make their integration into your community possible without creating dependency on your support? |
| **Many AS&Rs have contact with us only through the allotment project. But some have asked to attend church, and a sizeable handful has become part of our worshipping congregation. Two have been baptised, three are now church members. They have variously joined our worship band and our children’s team and our outreach to a residential home. Six came along to our church weekend away – perhaps the first holiday they have had in years. You can read what this has meant to one asylum seeker below. Alongside this natural development, the church’s teaching has frequently focussed on the theme of welcoming the stranger. We eventually signed up at a church meeting to a charter of support for AS&Rs, formally placing welcome of the stranger on the church’s list of priorities.**  | **Relinquish agendas.** Are you happy to love and serve AS&Rs because of their common humanity, irrespective of whether they show an interest in your church or faith?**Prepare the congregation.** Does your churchshare a commitment to welcoming those from other cultures? Have you discussed different views about migration in general and sanctuary for those fleeing persecution in particular? Do you have a theology of welcome?  |
| **In one case only so far, an asylum seeker has been accommodated by a couple in the church. The asylum seeker already had a strong friendship with the couple involved and expectations were openly discussed before this began. It proved both costly and enriching to the couple who acted as hosts for six months.** | **Take small steps.** There has been much media clamour around people volunteering to take in refugees. If you are considering this, have you talked to those who already have experience? Before you take such a big step, have you made progress on the journey of small steps listed above?  |
| **Behind this story lie many setbacks and mistakes. We have sometimes been taken for granted or not told the truth. We have realised that some church volunteers are vulnerable themselves and need guarding. We have felt powerless in the face of mental health difficulties. We have had to deal with anger within ourselves at the injustice of what we have seen and heard. We have found ourselves drawn in alarmingly to the needs of others as it becomes apparent we are the only ones offering support. We have been guilty of leaving the integration of AS&Rs to a few overburdened volunteers. We have had to deal with suspicion and conflict among the different ethnic groups we are reaching. And of course, we have had to challenge our own prejudices, assumptions and sense of entitlement.** | **Work together.** How can you tap into the greatest asset the church has to offer AS&Rs – its community life? Any one asylum seeker or refugee needs more than the support of one befriender. How can you provide not just a friend, but a network of friendships? **Communicate frankly**. How will you keep tabs on who is giving what support? Can you create a forum in which concerns and questions can be raised? |

Finally, there is a phrase, the ‘vowels of grace’, that has become useful to us. Welcoming the stranger, integrating those of other cultures, and supporting the marginalised can often be hard work. We have learnt to embrace the reality that ‘grace’ is spelt not only with an A and an E, but also an I, O and a U. Those who exhibit grace become familiar with Awkwardness, Embarrassment, Inconvenience, Offence and Uncertainty. When we are tempted to complain or walk away, reminding each other of this group of words has helped us to count the cost but still persevere. It is worth it, for when all is said and done, we have discovered that *we* have been enriched as we have demonstrated grace. As the marginalised among us, the AS&Rs have caused us to sharpen our faith, learn generosity and develop an openness of spirit. Our otherwise homogeneous middle class church culture needs their participation as much as they need our welcome.

**One story, from an African asylum seeker:**

“Since being befriended, my life has completely changed. I have become a part of Olton Baptist church and found a new family – people that love me and trust me. In my personal opinion, I believe that churches have to stand together and speak into politics just to make sure people are treated fairly. What I have found helpful about OBC is the way people treated me like a human being, contrary to what I experienced in all the three detention centres I have been through since claiming asylum. I now feel confident because I have a new family who believe in me and are all helping me integrate into church life. I am saying this because many people will not realise how important little things they do can be – like saying hello, or just talking to you and treating you as a person. I would like the church to see how powerful their ministry of welcome is to those who have known only hostility since they arrived in Britain.”

**Befriending guidelines**

Please see separate pdf.