

Update from OLK Friends of Migrants Support Group, July 2022

For several years, Our Lady of Kirkstall has shown a commitment to helping refugees and those seeking asylum in the UK. We are conscious that Jesus taught us that to welcome strangers is to welcome Jesus himself (Matt. 25:31-46). When therefore we heard that over 120 men registered as seeking asylum were being housed in a hotel in our parish, it was natural to see whether we could help them in any way.

It quickly became clear that there were two distinct needs. On the one hand, many of the men had arrived in Leeds with only the clothes they stood up in. Many too were without appropriate shoes or warm outer clothes. Food is provided by the Home Office along with their accommodation, but each person receives only £8 per week to cover all other expenses such as toiletries, bus fares, phone calls. Buying clothes is not an option for them! And those most recently arrived in the UK don't receive even that amount for several weeks - or even months - after registering. But a second and more general issue was one of boredom, isolation and difficulty in undertaking basic tasks like accessing a GP or contacting charities which can offer free legal advice on their application for asylum.

Fr. Jude encouraged a group of us to meet to see what we, as a parish, could do to help. We were quickly able to organise a collection of shoes and clothing for the men, and the parish responded very generously. Our friends in Horsforth Churches Together also helped. Most of these items have now been distributed, with some held back for the new arrivals that we meet each week.

A good number of people also expressed interest in visiting the hotel to engage the men in conversation, help them to learn English and signpost on to other services in Leeds. Not everyone can manage every week, but around 6-10 people have visited every Monday for the past 2 months. The men have got to know and trust us, and we all have a great deal of fun chatting. The housing agency Mears, who support the men at the hotel, has also got to know us and appreciates the value of what we are doing with the residents.

One memorable event was a visit to Holy Name when, over 2 days, we offered lunch to 32 of the men and helped them select the clothes they needed. Many parishioners helped provide the food while each of the churches in Horsforth brought cakes and tray-bakes for the men to share. The visit was a great success, and we are hoping we will be able to repeat it in the future. We have also been able to organise visits to events at Leeds Trinity University.

We don't know how long this hotel will continue to be used as an accommodation centre; but while it is, our plan is to:

- Continue with the regular Monday conversation group
- Continue to provide appropriate clothing for those without
- Continue to support the residents to access English classes
- Organise further outings for the men, including a day trip to the Yorkshire Dales in August
- Facilitate access to leisure centres and to bikes so the men can take exercise in a variety of ways
- Provide the residents with wiped laptops or ipads
- Arrange for Opera North to do a musical session with the residents
- Explore other opportunities for activities in which the men can participate.

If you would like to help in any way, please contact Rose McCarthy on Roseatmccarthy@yahoo.co.uk or 07932063648

And, of course, a big, big thank you to everyone who has supported this work in any way, including Horsforth Churches Together, Leeds Trinity University, Ikea, and pupils and parents of St. Mary's Menston.