

A Ministry of Love

Rev. Lydia C. Hews

“...for I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you gave me clothing...”
Gospel of Matthew 25.35-36

Each day we read and view the plight of thousands of refugees streaming forth from war-torn Syria, seeking refuge, with varied success or lack there-of, in many European nations. And here in Maine, we too have an ever increasing number of women, men and children arriving on our “door-step”; usually not from Syria, but from numerous other countries—most recently from countries in central Africa.

Every Thursday morning, shortly after 11:00, Williston-Immanuel United Church of Portland, opens its doors to people in the community in need of assistance. By noon our chapel is filled with from 25 to 45 people—primarily, relatively recently arrived from Rwanda, Burundi, Angola, and the two Congos. Following a welcome and a prayer, two members of our congregation explain the process and have people draw numbers to establish the order in which at least 25 people will be seen and assisted.

These are people fleeing from civil war, persecution, death threats, torture, and more. They have come to the US on legal visas, and are now entering the long and time consuming process of seeking asylum in order to remain here in safety. Due to current US immigration policy, they are not eligible for a work permit for between four months and a year, or more. Most left their homes hastily, with little more than the clothes they were wearing and enough money to get themselves here. Many had to leave family members behind.

Thanks to the generosity of this church, we are able to assist those who come to us through our food pantry, our closet of disposable diapers, and money from our “Family Fund”, which is used to purchase gift cards to a local grocery store, vouchers to the Salvation Army store for warm clothing and household needs, Metro bus tickets so they can attend classes, get to medical appointments, and visit local programs offering social services and legal assistance, and partial payment of utility bills for electricity, gas, and phone service.

The people are delightful and appreciative as they wait for assistance, and we who meet with them are always blessed in the process, even as we are often horrified and saddened by their stories of all they have been through. It is a privilege to have been called and hired to lead this program here at Williston-Immanuel. I close with a portion of a poetic response by one of our members who happened to come to the church on other business last week. She writes, “At the church for a wedding consult last week, I experienced firsthand our Outreach program to refugees for the first time.”

Experiential Advent

Jani Darak-Druck

They have come here looking for safety, for home,
a place to stop wandering.

Here to this church, this country, this cold, uncaring hemisphere.

Yet now, they still must keep wandering the streets, seeking, sometimes finding,
sometimes not,

all they need to survive this hostile place.

Here they wait, carrying tender beauty and raw, despairing hope.

Filling the room with the music of their languages,

wrapping themselves in what is left of their homeland,

in a world of donated coats and shoes, food and diapers.

Even though I can't understand what they are saying, their faces tell their stories:

Careworn, white-grizzled wrinkles frame eyes that have not lost their spark.

Blooming round cheeks of expected motherhood, wondering eyes.

Tough young faces trying to get used to constant disappointment, constant
fear of failed responsibility.

If you want to experience Advent, look for it in unsuitable places.