

COLOGNE REFUGEE CONFERENCE

24 October 2016

By Roxana Tenea Teleman, All Saints' Chaplaincy Representative

On October 11, representatives from our Diocese in Europe and of the congregations of the Episcopal Church in Europe came together for a consultation on refugee ministry, which was jointly organised with the Anglican Alliance and USPG (United Society Partners in the Gospel) at the Kardinal Schulte Haus in Cologne, Germany. Other participants were representing the Roman Catholic Community of Sant' Egidio, the Jesuit Refugee Service, the Lutheran World Federation, the Swiss Evangelical Alliance, the UN Refugee Agency, and the Church Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME).



Bishop Robert Innes inaugurated the consultation by showing us a Lampedusa cross, a reminder of the suffering of displaced people.

We were then invited to share our birthplace and our current residence/work place. It was obvious that nearly all of us have moved at least once in their life from one country to another, and, in so doing, we fall under the broad category of migrant. Nevertheless, some participants kept insisting until the end of the consultation that they were not migrants, but guests in their residence countries (I suppose the splendid venue and the fine meals we were served have contributed to this view). Bishop David Hamid rightly said that, even if there is some dispute about the use of this term, the Anglicans in Europe are largely a migrant church and, while the consultation wants to address the needs of people “who are not voluntary migrants”, our experience as people who have successfully settled in a new country, is something to be shared “from migrant to migrant”.

Both bishops reminded us that the refugee experience is a fundamental part of the Christian story, from Abraham to the Holy Family. Europe is suffering, sadly, from “an epidemic of amnesia”, leading to worrying levels of nationalism and even right-wing ascendancy – while the experience of emigration is part of our nations' collective history.



Participants at the conference work on a planning /information table.

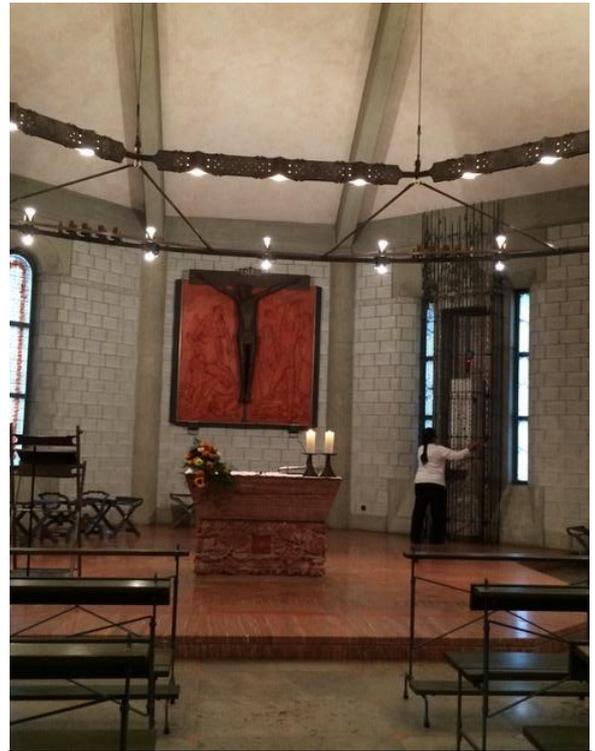
Doris Peschke, General Secretary of CCME and Jose Riera, Special Advisor to the UNHCR, explained that Europe is confronted only with a small part of the global refugee crisis – there are 65 million displaced people in the world, and only 1.3 million of them arrived in Europe, most of them making perilous journeys and having needed to resort to people smugglers, at great cost and high risk. While a few European countries (like Germany and Sweden) have offered sanctuary and consequently had their asylum systems put under huge pressure, and several others (like Italy and Greece) have seen themselves flooded with refugees wanting to reach Northern Europe, and who are now prevented from doing so, most of the European countries

either closed their borders, or agreed on taking in a minuscule number of migrants. Sadly, many people either do not feel concerned by this crisis, or consider the arrival of the refugees as a menace for their wellbeing and/or security. It is symptomatic that we were only 3 people to represent the dozens of Anglican chaplaincies in France.

The good news is that there is a wealth of experience to be shared, ranging from giving out hard-boiled eggs and bananas in the train station to organising humanitarian corridors. We were keen to hear about practical ways in which our churches could be involved in supporting refugees arriving in our areas. We all agreed that the situation is too complex for a single church to cope with, even if financial and logistic means, skills, and also good will abounded (which is not very often the case). Linking to local NGOs and government services, developing projects with ecumenical partners are of paramount importance. Drawing on this consultation, the Anglican Alliance will produce a summary of the many potential ways in which our congregations could engage with the refugee crisis.

Bishop David encouraged us to challenge “the growing toxic narrative [about refugees] around the world”. And indeed we could realize, through the personal stories of some of the participants (themselves refugees), that our communities could benefit from the presence of the refugees among us, if only allowed to offer their skills – we were graced by the presence of a young Pakistani composer and singer who sang during our services.

Bishop David left us with something to meditate upon: “Can it be that God has planted us here as Anglicans on this western fringe of the Eurasian continent to take up this particular missionary challenge?”



Chapel at the Kardinal Schulte Haus in Cologne, Germany. Worship was an important component of our conference.