



A PLACE OF WELCOME

By partnering with others and making connections, MU members can and do make a difference. This is demonstrated by the work of MU with refugees in the Diocese of Norwich.

I can remember holding banners up outside Norwich County Hall,' says Jenny Holcombe.

Jenny has been a Mothers' Union member for about 35 years. In 2014, Norwich MU joined with other charities and faith organisations in a campaign for Norwich to be a City of Sanctuary, promoting a culture of welcome for refugees and asylum seekers. 'The organisations we were working with signed a petition for the County Council to make good their promise to the government to take 50 families from the Syrian refugee camps,' explains Jenny. 'We were actually saying, we can do better than that!'

At Norfolk County Council, the People From Abroad social work team deals with refugees under the Home Office and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) resettlement schemes. This team realised that they needed resources to make sure that the necessary things were in place before resettling families in the area.

'They said to the organisations and charities, "What can you do to help?"' explains Jenny. 'We said, "We'll make up the beds." So Norwich Mothers' Union has, for the last five years, made up beds.' It's important for refugee families to be well-cared for in a thoughtful way. Often, when members

went to make up the beds, the local mosque had already laid a prayer mat and members were instructed not to move that because it was already facing the right direction. This attention to detail and respect makes all the difference.

At the start of the Norwich resettlement project, refugees were coming straight off the plane, having a night somewhere and then coming directly to the accommodation. 'The first night we expected the babies to be in bed with mum and dad,' said Jenny. 'We expected the children to wet the mattress or be sick everywhere. Mothers' Union members are very down-to-



earth about these things!

They provided good quality waterproof mattress covers for this reason – plus fitted sheets; a new quilt and pillow; two sets of matching duvet sets; a blanket and teddies to tuck in for the children. At that time, this cost about £175 per family (now it is £250). ‘We raised all the funds ourselves,’ says Jenny. MU branches talked to their churches and the project featured in parish magazines; donations came through these as well as through publicity from features in local press and radio.

‘The social work team say they couldn’t have done it without the help of Mothers’ Union and others,’ says Jenny, herself a retired social worker. MU members are still involved, providing bedding for resettling refugee families. With Covid-measures, things had to be done differently, with deliveries and pickups, but care was still taken to ensure that the appropriate items were provided (‘You don’t want to give an 18-year-old boy glow-in-the-dark dinosaur bedding!’ – Jenny) and beds were made up for those Syrian refugees who

could still get into the UK.

In 2021, Norwich MU was asked to assist with the resettlement of Afghan refugees. These refugee families have often been in temporary accommodation for some time, with a community of others in the same circumstances, before being offered a place to resettle. The idea of moving elsewhere naturally leads to trepidation. Again, ways need to be found to make refugees feel as comfortable as possible. What is appropriate? What is helpful? ‘We need to show them love and welcome,’ says Jenny.

People in diverse circumstances will have different needs. With the present situation in Ukraine, we don’t know what will happen next.

‘Be aware, pray, read the news, ask God what he thinks we could do,’ suggests Jenny. ‘Julian of Norwich says, “God is our mother.” We are looking to support families in difficulties. When we see families in difficulties, such as the Ukrainians, our heart, prompted by God, bleeds – but it also says, “what can I do?” We look for where people are doing the work and where it fits with what we might be able to do.’

Joined-up working has a lasting impact. ‘The five families who came here first from the borders of Syria five years ago are still here,’ says Jenny. ‘It’s about connections. God puts these networks together and, with a spark of the intellect God has given us, we realise how things might work.’

Prayer for Ukraine

Oh God of mercy and love,
we pray for your Spirit’s transforming power
to be at work in the present situation of war in Ukraine.
We ask for softening of hard hearts
and shelter for frightened souls.

Give us eyes and ears to perceive how we can
offer help in the most appropriate way.

‘We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you’
(2 Chronicles 20:12).

Gracious God, we cry out to you and ask for peace
and safety for all those affected.

In Jesus’ name,

Amen