

Church volunteers help new Syrian neighbours

Turn on the news any night of the week and you'll see the tsunami of refugees fleeing from war-torn Syria. Recent reports estimate more than one million Syrian refugees and migrants have now entered Europe, turning it into one of the planet's largest humanitarian crises.



Photo: Red Cross

Assisting refugees with the tasks of everyday life in New Zealand is a big part of the role for Red Cross volunteers including those from our churches.

New Zealand might be a long way from Europe but the Rt Rev Andrew Norton, Presbyterian Church Moderator, has urged churches here to “provide a safe place of hospitality and welcome” for people displaced by war.

“We cannot close our eyes to the great need in countries like Syria,” says Andrew. “As a Church we are called to advocate for those in need.”

As well as calling on the New Zealand government to increase its quota of 750 refugees per year, Andrew also encouraged churches to offer practical support to help Syrian refugees to resettle in New Zealand.

Two of those who heeded Andrew's call were the Rev Sharon Ross Ensor, director of the Presbyterian Church Schools' Resource Office in Wellington, and Clive McGovern from St Margaret's Presbyterian Church in Silverstream, Wellington.

Both Sharon and Clive became refugee support volunteers with New Zealand Red Cross late last year. They underwent a training programme (five Thursday evenings plus a Saturday) that helped prepare them to support the new arrivals. The programme covered topics such as the refugee experience, an overview of the political system in Syria as well as Syrian culture, English language support, pathways to employment, supporting families with school enrolments, medical registration and for government support, as well as how to use public transport, pay bills and set up bank services.

Clive and Sharon got the chance to put their training to use in February when New Zealand's first intake of 82 Syrian refugees arrived in Wellington (from the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre where they'd spent six weeks). Each volunteer commits to work with one family for six months.

For Clive, who retired a year ago, becoming a volunteer is about helping others less fortunate than himself.

“I've got the time and the energy and I'm a do-er – I want to help wherever I can,” he says.

Clive is part of a team of three volunteers who were paired up with a family of four who had spent four years in a Lebanese refugee camp. They were allocated Housing New Zealand accommodation in Lower Hutt (which was set up by local churches and organisations) and, despite the fact that they speak little English, Clive says they manage to communicate.

“It can be quite difficult sometimes but we use Google Translate and somehow work things out.”

So far, Clive has spent several hours a week with the family, accompanying them to Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ), the bank, supermarket and local schools where their two children were enrolled. He's been surprised by things such as the family's refusal to set up automatic payments or leave cash in their bank accounts.

“They don't trust the banking system because in Syria the government emptied

their bank accounts. It's those little things we take for granted that are so different for the refugees.”

Being a volunteer is a rewarding experience and Clive says the family is very grateful. “They show their gratitude with food and we spend a lot of time eating! I'm so glad to have met people I would never have otherwise met.”

Sharon, who works for the Church three days a week, says it was a no brainer to become a volunteer.

“These refugees have an immense need. They arrived in Wellington with very little and we have so much. For me, it was about stepping up and supporting those who need it.”

Sharon's team of three was also assigned a family of four – a couple and their two preschoolers. They were settled in Wellington and Sharon says she has supported them with visits to the doctor, WINZ and the supermarket.

“We've also done things like taking them on the bus and showing them how to use a Snapper card. It sounds easy but it can take a lot of time.”

And despite the language barrier, Sharon says she's fond of the family.

“They're really lovely and are so motivated. In the first week they had already started a veggie garden in their backyard. They want to succeed in New Zealand and I'm grateful to have the opportunity to be able to help them.”

Sharon Stephenson [Spanz](#)