

## Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference

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### Christ is Alive! Really? Where do we find Him? In Cities of Sanctuary

A presentation by Sam Slatcher, Eliza Colins Hodge and Rania Al Ali

Welcome to Durham, a city founded on the idea of sanctuary! My name is Sam Slatcher and I am joined by my colleagues Eliza and Rania. Today I am going to present a little bit about City of Sanctuary and we are going to share some of the stories of sanctuary in the North East through original songs that we have written.

As well as being a folk songwriter, I am also the regional coordinator of City of Sanctuary in the North East of England. As part of my role, I oversee six local groups: Durham, Newcastle, Sunderland, Tees Valley, Gateshead and Northumberland County of Sanctuary.

City of Sanctuary is a grassroots movement that began in 2005 in the city of Sheffield by Methodist Minister Inderjit Bhogal and Craig Barnett in response to a growing need at that time to support the arrival of refugees fleeing war and conflict.

In City of Sanctuary we hold the vision that the UK will be a welcoming place of safety for all and proud to offer sanctuary to people fleeing violence and persecution.

Today, there over 100 cities, towns or regions across the UK and Ireland who have signed up to the City of Sanctuary Network, with committed local groups. The slide shows the number a few years ago. Each group is run differently, depending on the needs of the communities around.

At the heart of City of Sanctuary is the concept of 'sanctuary'. Inderjit Bhogal, the co-founder of City of Sanctuary, often talks about how we need to move away from the language of 'asylum' in describing those who are seeking safety from war. We talk about animal sanctuaries – sanctuaries for donkeys, for example – but we refer to people as 'asylum' cases, which has a negative history as a term. We need to be talking about people as seeking sanctuary, not asylum.

Sanctuary is indeed an ancient concept. In this part of the world, we can trace the idea of sanctuary to a 6<sup>th</sup> century Celtic hymn.

#### 6<sup>th</sup> century Irish Hymn

The idea of sanctuary is deeply embedded in different faith traditions, including Judaism (**read Deuteronomy quote**), Islam (**read Qur'an quote**) as well as Christianity (**Matthew 25:35, 40**).

Let me take a few minutes to ask you, what motivates you as a church to offer sanctuary to refugees?

[Ask audience – a few responses]

As I said at the beginning, you are currently residing in a very ancient city that is deeply embedded in ideas of sanctuary. Durham's most famous 'sanctuary' feature is the Sanctuary knocker which you may have seen?

In the middle ages, if you were fleeing from the verdict of the law, or perhaps you were wrongly accused, and you needed space to get yourself together, you could seek sanctuary in Durham Cathedral. If you knocked on the Sanctuary Knocker (or one of the knockers places at the perimeter of the city), the monks who were on Sanctuary Watch, would ring a bell indicating to the church that someone had arrived seeking sanctuary. You would then have 37 days to face what you had done,

make peace with God, oneself and society, before either facing the trial of your convicted crime, or you were given safe passage to the port in Hartlepool (15 miles down the road). In Hartlepool, you would board a boat and leave the island to attempt to start a new life in another country.

There are of course a few others hidden sanctuary treasure in the City of Durham. Time now for a song to illustrate a thousand years of sanctuary being sought in the city of Durham

### **Song: City of Sanctuary**

Globally, there are over 65 million people who are forcibly displaced. 25.4 million of these are refugees of whom half are under the age of 18. A refugee is someone who has been forced to leave their home because of persecution, war or violence. It is not safe to stay in their country of residence.

In recent years, we have heard about the "Refugee Crisis". In the UK there was a strong public outcry after the image of the little Syrian Kurdish boy washed up on the shore made the papers in 2015. In reality, the crisis of war in North Africa and the Middle East has been going on a lot longer.

However, despite what the mainstream papers suggest, less than 1% of the 51 million uprooted people make their way in to Britain. Over 80% of the world's refugees are in neighbouring countries. At the time of writing, Pakistan, Iran, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey are the world's top five hosts of refugees according to the UN. The population of Lebanon increased by 40% in 2014 as a result of the accommodation of refugees from Syria. The UK equivalent of this would increase the population here by around 30 million.

As we may be aware, refugees often make very difficult journeys not of their choosing, risking life and costing huge amounts of money. We know of stories of people holding the undersides of planes to make their journey; many travel on crowded creaking old boats; others travel in air tight containers on trucks. Many thousands perish on the way and are lost in desert sands or the desolate sea.

Since 2011, the civil war in Syria has resulted in one of the largest displacements of people. According to the UNHCR, Syrians now comprise one of the largest groups of refugees worldwide, making up 32% of the 16.5 million refugees under the mandate of UNHCR.

In September 2015, one of those 16.5 million arrived in the UK after a difficult journey across land and sea. His story is the story of this next song.

### **Song: Shadow and I**

City of Sanctuary was set up to encourage cities in the UK to be places of sanctuary for people like Kareem fleeing war. The core aims include being a grassroots movement that cuts across different sectors of society. It is all about being a bridge between local people and refugees. City of Sanctuary works alongside many other organisations that seek to improve the lives of refugees living in this country, offer proper legal representation and campaign for a humane and dignified policy towards those seeking asylum.

There are very many challenges that face people arriving here in the UK to seek sanctuary. The UK government sub-contracts its responsibility to house people seeking sanctuary to private companies like G4S, who in turn allocate cheap housing stock to people seeking sanctuary. There are many cases of people who have come to the UK highly qualified as doctors, surgeons and academics, who are forced to live in over-crowded housing. And in some cases, even being forced to share the same room. People who come here seeking asylum are also on the lowest level of welfare support (just £37.50 a week, almost half the amount if you are on Job Seekers allowance). However, one of the

biggest challenges for people waiting for their refugee status to be granted is the fact that there are not permitted to work. They are forced in limbo, without any guarantee their asylum case may be granted. Even when people do receive their status – which can take years in some cases – they face further vulnerability having just a month to find work and alternative accommodation.

In the face of these challenges, City of Sanctuary is all about helping create a culture of hospitality and welcome.

One of the most important ways we work is by linking up different sectors of society, including schools, sports clubs, hospitals, charities, services, as well as faith groups. It is all about embedding the concept of sanctuary in society, to ensure we uphold the value of welcoming the stranger in our midst.

In 2006, Durham City of Sanctuary was set up to support the arrival of refugees from Syria. In December 2015, the British government committed to resettling 20,000 people from Syria in the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. Unlike those who arrive and claim 'asylum', those settled here via the SVPRS scheme are allocated housing and 'Humanitarian Protection'. Gateshead, Newcastle and Durham council all committed to resettling a handful of Syria families. Durham City of Sanctuary supports the resettlement of refugees through conversation classes, group visits (including a trip to Newcastle, York and Flamingo Land!) as well as food sharing events.

Stories of Sanctuary is one such project, which we launched in June this year. The group consists of 30 people – two thirds are refugees – and the others are either local residents or students. We have now completed six workshops in which the group have been writing songs about their experiences of seeking sanctuary in the North East of England. Six brand new songs emerged including Shadow and I that were heard a few minutes ago. The songs will feature in an album that will be released in the autumn at the performance piece that will appear at Durham Cathedral on the 19<sup>th</sup> October.

The song we about to share is one of these songs. Like a Butterfly was written by participants (see image to the left) including Eliza and Rania.

### **Song: Like a Butterfly**

You can support the project by following it on social media, sharing and twitting (if you are the tweeting types).

You can also support the project by buying one of my EPs – it includes the City of Sanctuary song. All proceeds will go towards the costs of the project.

So, finally, we will hand over to you. To summarise, there are three key principles: To Learn, To Embed and To share. And perhaps you are part of that story...