

Chester and Wrexham Amnesty International Group meeting
Held on Monday February 20th, peace and Justice Centre, Wrexham

Present: Wendy, Abi, Alex, Carol, Helen, Mike, Alan, Michelle

Apologies: Karen-Marie, Peter, Michael

Minutes and Matters Arising

- Abbey looked into the free business cards. Wallet sized cards were not suitable as they do not provide enough space to hold all Amnesty information. Abbey will look into designing cards that can be printed at home. Sameena will be contacted to provide guidance for card info/details.
- Mike will be attending the Amnesty International UK AGM held in Nottingham 8th-9th April. It was agreed that Mike would use his judgement to vote on behalf of group members.

Events and Diary Dates

- 'Feeding the Darkness' – Group members agreed that the performance was very powerful and informative. There was a great audience in attendance and a fine discussion following the play. The group would like to thank Lynn, Dave, Mike and Michael in particular for their collaboration which resulted in an inclusive atmosphere being achieved for the performance and the audience discussion. All members agreed that we would like to host another performance by the Journeyman Theatre. Alan agreed to check the Journeyman's diary in hope of securing a date for a performance of 'The Bundle'.
- Next Event – March 25th, Bagpack at Morrisons Chester 11 am – 2 pm.
Mill Lane, Liverpool Road, Upton, Chester, CH2 1BT.
- 8th-9th April. Amnesty International UK AGM, Nottingham.
<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/national-conference-and-agm-2017>

People on the Move Campaign

Alan attended a refugee workshop at Chester Cathedral organised by Claire Henderson-Davies. A question and answer session was held where volunteers spoke on behalf of refugees. In the Chester West locality, a 'Pre-family arrival meeting' in regards to the pending intake of refugee families from Syria has been organised by Mathew Smith. It is to be held at Ellesmere Port Council Offices, March 1st – 10am. Carol agreed to attend on the groups behalf.

Feedback from Woodbrook Refugee Course

Many thanks to Alan and Karren-Marie who attended on behalf of the group. There were approx. 120 attendees. Alan commented that it was a wonderful experience being in the company of so many like-minded people. The course iterated that we should concentrate on the forced migration of refugees and how they are not exercising free choice. Crisis, poverty, war, and persecution creates refugees and these are the fundamental topics that need to be addressed. Alan has created a synopsis of the weekend, please see attached at end of minutes.

The group discussed how we could take action for the People on the Move campaign. It was agreed that we would campaign to make Chester/Wrexham a City of Sanctuary.

- The group agreed to research the City of sanctuary process.
- The group agreed to take a grassroots approach – organisations suggested for collaborative action include: Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network, Chester Development Forum, TCC (working towards making Wales a nation of sanctuary), local schools (St. David, Wrexham – currently a school of sanctuary), and local churches. Mike agreed to contact the Share Shop in Mold/Chester.

Ali Aarass

Ali's health is worsening due to his continued solitary confinement following his prison transfer on October, 10th, 2016. An urgent action has been issued. The group sent solidarity messages direct to Ali written on maps of Chester and Wrexham. Wendy will also send a map to the Ambassador of Morocco. The group wrote letter to various Moroccan officials requesting an immediate end to Ali's solitary confinement and imprisonment.

Website and Social Media

Michelle has agreed to monitor the website, Facebook, and Twitter account. Mike has agreed to contact Colin Taylor (Amnesty North West Media rep.) to request information and/or a session on the technical features of admin accounts. Administrative access and passwords have now been activated.

Finances

The Chester and Wrexham 'Write for Rights' events raised £14.56.
The group currently has £192.58.

£329.50 was collected during the Feeding the Darkness performance.

£50 to be deducted for hall hire.

£30 to be deducted for Journeyman theatre's travel expenses.

The remaining funds will be donated to the 'freedom from torture' charity by request of Lynn and Dave.

A.O.B.

A talk on the seminal book, 'The Spirit Level' is being held at Glyndwr University on Wed 15th March - the Nick Whitehead Theatre. Admission free.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on 20th March at the Watergate Pub in Chester – 7.15 pm for a 7.30 pm start. The group will be welcoming a speaker on Palestinian affairs.

Forced Migration; How can Quakers Respond?

-Significance of title; points to importance of considering root causes of the problem and avoids unhelpful and over-simplified categorisation of migrants.

Andrew Lane – Quaker Council for European Affairs

-May's 'hostile environment' for migrants buttressed by political swings in Europe & US. Militarisation on the increase; armed soldiers on the streets, naval operations in the Med, diversion of aid budgets into armed forces overseas. Attempts to externalise the problem e.g. deal with Turkey.

Gina Clayton – lawyer, South Yorkshire Law and Justice Group

-Legal framework for Immigration and Refugees/Asylum Seekers is separate but currently both are dealt with by the same department within the Home Office.

-20,000 Syrian Refugees to be settled by May 2020. (4,414 in 175 LAs by September 2016-Scotland leading the way, 49% under the age of 18). LAs receive £8000 per head in first year from Overseas Devt Budget. Aspiration should be to treat others similarly. Important to bear in mind these are vulnerable people plucked from camps in the Middle East with UNHCR vetting.

-There is no legal route to travel to and enter in the UK as an Asylum Seeker. But once arrived it is legal to claim asylum which can only be done at Lunar House in South Croydon no matter how far that is from the relevant dispersal centre. This is where the crucial interview will take place. Refusal means destitution – offence to work, no right to benefits and limited access to health care. Assist Sheffield currently supporting 93 people in destitution.

-Brexit will not affect UK involvement with Council of Europe or European Court of Human Rights, [48/49 states in Europe (Kosovo?) with popn of 800m] and these institutions can bring some limited influence to bear on the issues.

-In France and Denmark there have been prosecutions of people for assisting refugees. In the Netherlands such a policy was thwarted by mass community action.

2016 Immigration Act

-At least 6 Immigration Acts since 2000. Landlords and Employers now face criminal prosecution if they have tenants or employees with out legal status. 2016 Act required schools to record immigration status of pupils.

-2016 44,323 applications for asylum. 2011-2015 this figure increased by 65% - during this period 60% of applications refused but 35% of those appealing were successful.
(nb net long term migration to the UK in 2016 was 327,000)

City of Sanctuary

-A national movement designed to create a culture of welcome and hospitality, for refugees and asylum seekers in particular, but for newcomers more generally. Very informative and impressive website – cityofsanctuary.org.

