

WFP Birmingham/UK, Women's Peace Meeting, May 2016

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"Love and Friendship can conquer Hatred and Fear." A Report from our most recent WFP Women's Peace Meeting in Birmingham, UK.

Following the tragic events in Paris in November 2015, during which almost 500 people, from so many nations and cultures, were either killed or injured, we decided to hold a Women's Peace Meeting in Birmingham with the title "Love and Friendship can conquer Hatred and Fear".

Our usual broad spectrum of women, around 120 of us, from so many different faiths, cultures, nationalities and social standings, gathered together to share our heart of concern, in defiance of the negative forces at work in our world to create division, fear and prejudice.

Our first speaker, Dr Surindar Dhesi, a lecturer in Occupational Health, Safety and the Environment at Birmingham University, described the efforts she had made to get a small grant which allowed a study to be made, in July 2015, of the conditions which several thousand migrants were living in, in the temporary camps near Calais. This gave a somewhat different perspective to that being portrayed in the general news media.

Surindar and her colleagues looked at 11 areas of concern, such as food, water, dust, air pollution, sanitation, etc, in an objective, scientific manner, presenting their findings to the media and the UK Parliament.

Unexpectedly, they had found very few Syrian refugees in the camps, finding people mainly from Egypt, Afghanistan, Eritrea and South Sudan, amongst others. There was very little organisation, and a genuine sense of frustration, hopelessness and despair. The French government were providing one meal a day, and various other individuals and charitable organisations were providing relief in the form of food, clothing, shelter and toiletries, etc, from time to time.

Surindar described how the migrants would save some of the food from their daily meal, in an attempt to stave off hunger during the remainder of the 24 hours but, without any refrigeration, their analysis showed examples of food-poisoning bacteria in a number of samples they took back to University with them. Open fires were a cause of poor air quality, and asbestos was also found in the camp. All of these factors correlated with their findings of stomach illnesses and chest complaints when health checks were carried out. There was limited medical care present, mainly provided by Medecins du Monde, and no mental health provision whatsoever.

There were serious limitations to the water supply, both for washing and drinking, and the presence of litter and rubbish everywhere meant that rats and mice were a common sight, increasing the chances of infection and illness. Surindar described the overall conditions as "pretty grim", and mentioned that the camps' population had increased from 3,000 to 6,000 since she had been there, increasing the likelihood of far more of the problems described.

Our next speaker, Janet King, was a member of the Liberal Democrat Council for Refugee Support. As such, she could share with us knowledge of the political landscape, about the work of the United Nations, particularly UNHCR which is very low on money and therefore in its ability to support refugees, and the different possibilities for migrants to be helped to relocate -- as refugees, asylum seekers and vulnerable people. She mentioned that the British government has already given a lot of financial support, and is the

2nd largest donor in the world in terms of financial aid. She suggested 'Calaid' as a good vehicle for sending aid to the camps in France.

Janet then spoke about 'welcome groups springing up all over the place' as a positive feature in the UK, including in Coventry, Kidderminster and the Malvern Hills district. She herself has recently set up 'Bromsgrove Welcomes Refugees', and quoted Bromsgrove as being 99% white, with very few new migrants so far. She said the group is very informal, has 90 supporters so far, and is busy raising money to help furnish homes. "There are so many ordinary things that we can do to help."

Catherine was our third speaker. She became a Muslim 30 years ago, now belonging to the Clifton Road mosque community and part of the Shia tradition. She recounted the story of Prophet Mohammed's grandson Hussain and lessons which could be drawn from it, including the fact that goodness can eventually emerge from extremely difficult situations. Her own life experience has caused her to draw the conclusions that: One should always do what one feels to be right, according to one's own conscience We should do good, and support others who have the desire to do good We should try to feel the pain and suffering of others. To respond to this with kindness is 'to be alive and human' Doing good always makes a difference, and gives hope to future generations. Catherine concluded by saying that there is much bad news every day, but in gatherings like this we can find great hope to counteract it, and empower one another to do good things.



Farhana, who works at the Al Mahdi Institute in Selly Oak then read some extracts from the 'Avaaz' website where people have been commenting on the current climate of uncertainty and fear. Among these were... "Muslims... have been the greatest victims of IS, and have the greatest power to help defeat it". "Let's answer hate with humanity, and seize this chance for transformative change. For all of us -- Muslims and non-Muslims everywhere -- to welcome each other into our human family like never before." "At the darkest times, our light as humanity can shine brightest." "Let's seize this moment with wisdom, to bring down the monster we all face." "Let's encourage Muslim and non-Muslim communities everywhere to embrace each other, and welcome refugees with compassion.."

Finally, Lucie, who had driven all the way up from the Asha Center in the Forest of Dean to be with us, concluded with an inspirational, hopeful message, spoken with passion and the power of youth. She described her own journey of transformation during her initial 9 months of volunteering, engaging with other young people from around the world in an environment of friendship and openness, which the Center uniquely provides.

She learned to love the 'ordinariness' of people, and how each person is so special. To believe in the 'whole person' in a holistic way, and our connectedness to one another. To meet one another person-to-person, rather than simply through the news and social media. To try all methods as long as they speak to the heart. And to believe in one another, especially the next generation.

Following further comments and discussion, with many valuable contributions, we finished with a quiet time of reflection, meditation and prayer.

Then, as always, refreshments, chatting and networking which has become a concluding feature of our meetings, renewing acquaintances and making new friends, allowing us to leave with hope and encouragement for the future.

Reported by Patricia Earle
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