



Together

NEWS FROM JRS UK WINTER 2023

accompany • serve • advocate

“I like the atmosphere at the centre. It is always nice to come in and relax... everyone is really welcoming.”

— JRS Refugee Friend —

Together in Prayer and Peace



© Mazur/bcew.org.uk

Daniela and Wael, colleagues from Centro Astalli/JRS Italy, speak at Together 2023

On the eve of the synod that has been taking place in Rome, Pope Francis gathered representatives of different churches and young people from all around the world to pray for reconciliation.

As part of this special vigil, two colleagues from Centro Astalli/JRS Italy offered their prayer and testimony. Wael spoke about the gift of peace, as well as his own experiences of being a refugee:

"Dear friends,

I want to extend a warm welcome to each one of you. My name is Wael, and I come from Aleppo, a city in Syria that has suffered greatly from war and earthquakes. Italy became my home for the last seven years. I am grateful for my incredible friends in Italy who welcomed me in their home.

In today's world, conflicts and displacement are still unfortunately common. People risk everything, in the first place, their most important treasure: their lives. They face overwhelming struggles being forced to start over from scratch, seeking peace and safety. It's like being a baby learning to walk and speak for the first time.

Despite the obstacles encountered on their personal journeys, refugees still face

prejudice and discrimination by some of the host communities who live inside their own privileged bubble, making them believe they are superior.

Too often, we build walls that separate us from each other, marking certain individuals as 'us' and others as 'them,' leading us to the trap of exclusion and a misguided sense of superiority.

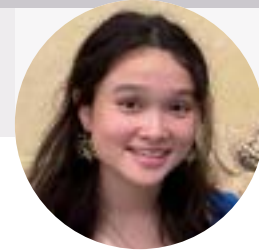
I believe that embracing a wider 'we' is the key to peace. Let's break down boundaries and celebrate the value of our shared humanity while appreciating our unique backgrounds. No matter where we come from or what we believe in, every person deserves peace and respect. We should reject prejudgment, stereotypes and bias. Instead, embrace the beauty and richness of our differences.

Together, let's become artisans of peace and create a world of love and harmony. By having conversations, seeking mutual understanding to overcome the fear that excludes others, we can build a world where each human being is valued, respected, enjoying their right to full dignity.

I invite you to become artisans of peace towards a world where everyone, regardless of their race, nationality, or language, can value the gift of the other and the gift of peace.

Thank you for being here today, united under the power of peace."

Message from the Editor



Over the last few days, reconciliation workshops have been taking place here at our centre in Wapping. People with lived experience of the asylum system, volunteers, and staff have been learning from our international colleagues about their work across the globe. Reconciliation is a major strand of work for JRS internationally, striving to “create right relationships” among the refugees we serve, between refugees and host communities, and among JRS teams.

Watching the news, the need for peace feels overwhelming, and reconciliation seems remote. Conflict in Palestine and Israel continues, as does the war in Ukraine, as well as forgotten conflicts and instability in other parts of the world – Sudan, the South Caucasus, and Myanmar, to name a few. Amidst all this, the need for safe, accessible routes to seeking refuge in the UK, and an asylum system that treats people with fairness and dignity, is needed now more than ever.

However, legislation and rhetoric continues to marginalise, scapegoat, and dehumanise people who have been forcibly displaced. Recent policy changes have also meant that moving forward, even once you are recognised as a refugee, is becoming increasingly difficult. Jasmine, our Senior Destitution Caseworker, shares reflections on the challenges refugee friends face after being granted status.

There is a better way.

Here at JRS, we find light in the interactions that take place at our centre, in our interactions with the local community, and in the continued support you all continue to give. In this newsletter, you’ll also find updates from our Accommodation Project, the support your donations provide to refugee friends, poetry by Easton, and a reflection from Abdul about volunteering with the local community in Wapping.

Our mission, to serve, accompany, and advocate for refugees is not always straightforward, but the small moments of joy that we find in our day-to-day work, and the daily reminders of our common humanity, give us the confidence to move forward.

Thank you, as always, for your support and generosity. All this makes our work possible. As we move into Advent, please be assured of our prayers and best wishes.

All the best,

Victoria

Senior Communications and Engagement Officer

P.S. Do join us for this year’s Advent Service on 15th December: more details on the last page.



Refugee Gifts



Looking for a special gift for your loved ones this Advent? Check out our Refugee Gifts! You can choose from a series of beautifully illustrated cards to send family and friends, which will directly support our work with refugees and asylum seekers.

www.jrsuk.net/refugeegifts

How JRS UK supports refugee friends as they experience hardship

The cost of living crisis is especially difficult for many refugee friends. Jemima takes a look at how JRS UK is helping in these difficult times.



Refugee friends, volunteers, and staff share a meal at our centre

© JRS/Stephanie Jones

There are very few people who haven't been affected by the cost-of-living crisis, whether it's increases in food and energy prices or cuts to welfare support.

However, the impact on refugees and asylum seekers is often especially severe. People we serve are prevented from working and receive no help from the government to meet their basic needs as they prepare fresh asylum claims. Many are forced to endure years of destitution and limbo before being recognised as a refugee with a well-founded fear of returning home.

As the crisis has deepened, the chronic needs of refugee friends have become acute, with many people facing homelessness, hunger, and health problems. Some accommodation services that refugees could previously rely on have been forced to shut due to soaring bills. Every day we encounter people confronted with the looming threat of destitution and difficulty affording essentials like nutritious food.

Our direct refugee hardship provision includes cash grants, which we have recently increased in response to the cost of living crisis. One refugee friend spoke about the challenges he now is facing day-to-day: "everything is so expensive nowadays and I am running out of money quicker than ever which means the £15 doesn't really last me the two weeks". Thanks to the generosity of supporters, we have been able to extend this vital support from £15 to £20 every two weeks.

This is essential for helping refugee friends afford basic necessities and day-to-day living costs by providing them instant access to funds.

Another important service is our £10 monthly phone top-ups, which provide refugee friends with mobile credit and internet data. This helps people to stay connected with friends and family, JRS services, and other sources of support. Sarah* explained how these top-ups have helped her manage finances during such challenging times:

**Names have been changed for anonymity*



© JRS/Megan Knowles

One of our volunteers arranging clothing at the JRS UK Shop

“In the past, I’ve had to ask my friends when I needed phone credit. It’s hard to always be asking people for things you need. I know now that I can prioritise spending what little money I have on food, medication, and other essentials.”

JRS Centre

Throughout the cost of living crisis, we have seen a huge increase in the number of refugee friends coming to spend time in the centre. Accompaniment is at the heart of our work. In practical terms, this means that our team will always greet refugee friends warmly, offer them a hot drink and take the time to sit with them and get to know them. It creates a hospitable atmosphere where staff, volunteers and refugee friends get to know one another and rely on one another to strengthen their mutual perseverance.

The centre is a lifeline to many of those we serve. As other welfare services and shelters have closed, it is a point of consistency in the lives of refugee friends, invariably providing them with a place of shelter, safety, and warmth.

One refugee friend reflected:

“I like the atmosphere at the centre. It is always nice to come in and relax after you’ve collected some food and toiletries. You get offered a cup of tea and maybe some food and its very comfortable. I like JRS the best and I’ve never had any problems. The centre is always active at JRS and everyone is really welcoming”

JRS Shop

Refugee friends can visit the JRS shop once a month, to collect food, toiletries and other essential items free of charge. We aim to provide the broadest range of items possible, recognising the dignity and differing needs of each person we serve. The Shop is also stocked with clothes for men, women and children, as well as items like nappies for those with young families.

Rising prices have significantly affected the cost of providing this service, with expenditure on restocking the shop increasing by almost £8,000 in 2021-22. Thank you for all your support to make this possible.

Support us

Donating to our Hardship Fund will help refugee friends to meet some of their basic needs during these difficult times. We are also welcoming donations of winter coats and accessories, to help people stay warm in the winter months.

Find out more: www.jrsuk.net/hardshipfund

After Leave to Remain: what comes next?

Jasmine Husseini, Senior Destitution Caseworker, takes a look at the joys and challenges when a refugee friend receives Leave to Remain.

At JRS UK, it's always a joyful occasion when a friend comes in and tells us that they have received Leave to Remain. Finally, there's a sense of life being able to move on. It means refugee friends can start to access mainstream support, apply for benefits, look for somewhere to live, open a bank account, and seek employment.

At the same time, it's also a bitter-sweet moment, as friends finish their journey with us and say goodbye. But, even more than that, we're keenly aware that just because someone has received Leave to Remain it doesn't mean that their challenges stop. The process is complicated and lengthy, and many friends can have difficulty finding help to navigate the next steps.

One of the biggest hurdles for friends who have been given Leave to Remain is accessing accommodation. Previously, the Home Office followed an already inadequate 28 day move-on period for people to leave their accommodation. This started only once they had received their Biometric Residence Permit (BRP), which enables someone to rent, find work, open a bank account, or apply for benefits.

However, recent changes mean that the move-on period now starts when someone receives a letter confirming their Leave to Remain – instead of when they receive their BRP. This means that the clock starts ticking before they can start registering for housing or financial support. On top of that, when the Home Office actually tells people they need to leave their accommodation, they'll only get 7 days' notice.

To make matters worse, we're increasingly seeing long waits for BRPs, which can take weeks (even months!) to be delivered. This leaves friends in a new place of limbo, destitute and unable to move on with their lives, despite having Leave to Remain.

All of this is part of an increasingly hostile environment for refugees – even those the government has granted status to. Language barriers, mental health issues and trauma all continue regardless of status, and what should be a time of relief and joy about being able to move forward can become another period of fear and isolation. There is growing pressure on charities to fill gaps in a complex environment. This pressure also makes it harder for destitute asylum seekers, who are still resolving their case, to access help.

With your help and support, we're continuing to advocate for a fairer system. We will continue to accompany, serve, and advocate with and for refugee friends.

The previous 28-day move-on period already left people at risk of homelessness. For example, it takes 35 days to receive a Universal Credit payment, and usually 56 days to find accommodation for someone at risk of homelessness, in line with the Homelessness Reduction Act. Before the recent changes, many organisations were already advocating for a longer move-on period of 56 days. Now, most people only have 7 days to find somewhere new to live.



What am I waiting for?

By Easton

Easton is a refugee friend who was granted status earlier this year. Today, he shares a poem about waiting for status.

I am here standing in this queue,
With my feet all soaked in my shoes
My legs getting weary,
My eyes also getting sleepy,
Wondering if the tide will turn my
way today??

But all these people do,
Is to have you waiting and waiting
from dusk till dawn,
Feeling hungry with belly growling,
Like a storm setting in the far east
Yonder.

I am wondering,
“What am I waiting for??”
Is it for a yes or a no.
I can never know,
Because all they do is having me
standing in this queue.

My tired legs can't take no more.
My weary feet all soaked through in
my shoes.
The moon is at twilight,
The sun rises in the misty dawn of
the morning dew,
With rain drops falling on my head,
I am still standing, waiting and
Wondering,
“What am I waiting for??”

They are like dictators,
Telling you when to sleep and when
to rise,
So they can see you fall.
When to eat, but giving you no food
to fill the empty gaps that
growls in your guts like the far
East storm.

Still waiting and wondering,
“What am I waiting for??”
Does it fascinate them to see me
Standing in the rain??
The snow comes, falls upon my
head,
Them waiting to see me drop dead.
The sun come rises again,
But I am still standing there,
Hoping and wishing for better to
Come,
But still don't know,
“What am I waiting for ??”
Will it be a “yes” or a “no”.

With suspense fills the air and my
Thoughts,
Yet, still I don't know,
“What am I waiting for??”

Dictators on both sides,
Dictating with rage of anger,
Doesn't care or matter whether you
have eaten or hunger,
Still standing at the end the queue
All tired and weary,
All soaked right through from my
head to my shoes,
With one thought in my head,
“What am I waiting for??”.

Leave a Legacy

Leaving a gift in your will is one way to keep being a friend to refugees for generations to come. Legacies have enabled JRS UK to set up and extend vital projects, like our legal services and practical support for refugee friends.

JRS UK is part of the Free Wills Network. This provides you with a free will-writing service. We can pass your contact details to the Free Wills Network who will send you a list of solicitors close to you for a face to face appointment, at no charge to you to draw up a will that reflects your wishes.

For more information about leaving a legacy for JRS UK, email us at uk@jrs.net or call 020 7488 7310 to find out more.

Laudate Deum

Dr Sophie Cartwright, Senior Policy Officer, reflects on Pope Francis' new message and the effects of climate change on forced displacement.

At the start of October, Pope Francis released *Laudate Deum* – an apostolic exhortation reflecting on the deepening climate crisis. It is, as he notes, published eight years after his Encyclical *Laudato Si*, which called on all people of good will to take urgent action on climate change. And now, he is blunt in his assessment about the lack of progress made, and the grave danger that entails: “our responses have not been adequate, while the world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing the breaking point.”

In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis suggested that the roots of the climate crisis lay in a broken understanding of human nature – and of humanity's relationship to both creation and each other. In *Laudate Deum* – that is, “Praise God” - he focuses on what the climate crisis says about our broken relationship with and understanding of God: in failing to understand our interconnectedness with the rest of creation, we seek to “take God's place”.

This is not an alternative to the focus on human relationships or our relationship with wider creation; rather, Pope Francis sees these as aspects of the same problem. Echoing *Laudato Si*, he highlights the very real power imbalances and injustices that are bound up with failing to understand our relationship to God in this context: climate change is disproportionately caused by the richest, and suffered by the poorest.

The hugely unequal impact of climate change on the world's most vulnerable is painfully evident when we think about forced displacement. As large parts of the planet become less habitable, and people are forced to move, they face walls, borders, barriers to safety and the opportunity to rebuild their lives, kept out by those who are living in safety and security. They are not valued and they are not seen.

We must act with a fresh urgency to tackle the systemic roots of the climate catastrophe. And as we do so – indeed, in order to do so – we must see the faces of the people most badly affected by it, and we must remember our connection to them – we must recover a sense of community.



JRS refugee friends on a visit to Kew Gardens earlier this year

© JRS/Victoria Firth

Speaking to the Synod earlier this month, Dr Anna Rowlands reflected on the nature of community, and highlighted an experience she had at JRS UK: “I asked the refugees who came for assistance why they chose this particular service. I will never forget their reply: because here I am welcomed at the door by name, and the staff sit and eat with us at the same table. This dignifies me, it gives me back my humanity. At the other centres, the staff do not eat with us.”

Pope Francis is right that our abject failure to act on climate change is connected to our failure to understand ourselves properly, and to understand others properly, and to interact with others in the right way. Acting to avert climate change is an act of justice, and an act of humanity. It's an act grounded in acknowledging reality, both of the world and of the people in it.

From the Himalayas to Wapping with Love



© WaSh Wombles

Abdul and Mark, Community Projects Coordinator, joining the local community to clean up Wapping

At JRS UK, we always look for opportunities for refugee friends to connect with the wider community. This year, we've joined WaSh Wombles, a community litter picking group in Wapping, to help clean up the local area. Abdul shares his experiences with us.

I was born at the edge of the Himalayas.

Our house was encompassed by a vast forest. Until the age of 10, I used to wander through a vast forest of maize and corn fields and flowing streams.

Those distant memories keep connecting me to nature and the environment.

During the summer in the UK, I spent most of my spare time in parks. So when Mark from JRS asked me to participate in a program to preserve the local area, I accepted this offer.

The volunteers of this project greeted me with a warm welcome and we began picking litter at the local park and kept going through the waterways, streets, parking bays, ponds, and housing estates.

At the end of the event, all volunteers gathered at the Wapping Green and we had a wonderful chat about almost everything.

I truly enjoyed that experience for the conservation of nature and I'm looking forward to further participating in these venues!

I also want to say thank you very much JRS for providing me with this opportunity to connect volunteers from the local community.

See what the WaSh Wombles are up to – and get in contact – here: <https://linktr.ee/WaShWombles>

Amy-Leigh and Laurence reflect on the life-altering contributions of our host communities

Many years ago, the Sisters of the Holy Family of St Emilie and the Jesuits in Britain piloted the JRS At Home hosting scheme. Today, thanks to their ongoing commitment to our work, those who first opened their doors to refugee friends have made two new housing projects possible.

We know that safe and stable accommodation is, *now more than ever*, one of the most pressing challenges in a complexly hostile environment.

This is why JRS UK has been working alongside our supporters to develop and expand our Accommodation Project; growing our hosting community, and more recently, opening houses for people to live independently.

Hosting

Back in 2012, the first hosts to take part in our At Home scheme opened their doors to refugee friends. Since then, there have been countless more 'firsts'. First placements, first departures. First misunderstandings, and rarely the last... First times trying new foods. And of course first times realising your idea of 'spicy' is very different from your guests!

The opportunity to accompany refugee friends and volunteers on their journeys through hosting is always unique, with each placement offering the chance to learn something new.

The relationship between the refugee guest and their hosts is at the heart of everything. Our hosts often say that, despite some initial apprehension about welcoming a stranger into their space, they find hosting to be an enormously enriching experience. We have seen how both hosts and refugee guests change in the process.

Being welcomed with hospitality as opposed to facing hostility recalls and affirms people's humanity. But we also know that living with others is rarely straightforward. So, what inspires people to continue hosting?

"You realise a lot about yourself. A bit of disruption to the norm is always good, you break habits and gain perspective..."



One of our volunteer hosts welcomes a refugee friend to his home

"Hosting a guest is witnessing to our belief that we are all sisters and brothers in one big human family. It's enriching as we learn about each other's cultures."

"Like with all new people, you have to learn how to get along, and that is always an added challenge when you live together. But we have also learnt how to make each other laugh, to share about ourselves and to be present when needed."

"We have the space, how couldn't we host! The joys greatly outweigh any challenges, and it feels like the right thing to do, to share our good fortune with those who have very little."



© JRS/Aidan Cantwell

JRS staff visited Amani House ahead of its opening this winter

Housing

In many cases refugee friends require a longer-term and more stable accommodation option than hosting – particularly if they have health needs, are receiving trauma counselling, or need to engage intensively with their asylum application.

Thanks to the kindness of the Sisters of the Holy Family of St Emilie, in 2021 we were delighted to open our first house. This transformative new provision has offered our refugee friends a unique opportunity to regain independence and vital life-skills. Emilie House gives people the chance to belong to a growing community of residents, staff, and volunteers.

“I used to be homeless and I needed medication. When I was sick and homeless, I faced a lot of problems. I was refused and needed somewhere to live. It’s nice to be somewhere like Emilie House. The people are really friendly and we share the responsibilities. It’s like a family.”

When Emilie House was officially opened, one of the first residents shared that she: **“hopes that JRS can get other houses to help more people in the future”.**

The good news is that this has become a reality! **Emilie House will now be a model for Amani House, our new home for male refugee friends.** The Jesuits in Britain have made this property available to us and supporters are now contributing towards the running costs.

Amani (*Am – ah – nee*) translates to hope/wishes in Arabic, and peace in Swahili. It’s a fitting name for this exciting next chapter in our Accommodation Project. **Preparations are currently underway to open Amani House this winter and we’re looking forward to keeping you posted as together with refugee friends we make this house a home.**



© JRS/Victoria Firth

An ice-breaker activity at the Emilie House Summer Garden Party this year

Join JRS UK for our annual Advent Service!

Friday 15th December, 7pm
Farm St or join online
by livestream



Join JRS UK for a night of carols, readings and performances, followed by a reception of mulled wine and mince pies.

Church of the Immaculate Conception, Farm Street, 114 Mount St, London, W1K 3AH
See more details: www.jrsuk.net/news/advent-service-2023

The Jesuit Refugee Service works in more than 50 countries around the world.

JRS UK is made up of staff and many volunteers who work to accompany, serve and advocate for destitute and detained refugees in the UK, of all faiths and none.

If you can, please consider donating to JRS UK. With your support JRS UK can continue to accompany destitute and detained refugees in a spirit of hospitality, welcome and love.

Donate today

Visit www.jrsuk.net/donate
Email uk@jrs.net

Mail your cheque/postal order made payable to Jesuit Refugee Service to the address on the right.



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