



# Restore

a project of Birmingham Churches Together

supporting refugees & asylum seekers

# Annual Report 2008

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## **Restore 2008 – report of the Chair of the Management Committee**

Following the financial challenges of the previous year, 2008 witnessed a generous response to appeals for support, not only from charitable trusts which have been largely responsible for covering core salary costs, but also from individuals and churches. This support has enabled us to employ Sarah Dixon as our Befriending Support Worker helping Jeremy but also focussing on women's activities, which in turn has taken some of the pressure off Shari's role as Project Coordinator.

The increase in donations from individuals and churches has been a particularly heartening expression of the wider community's confidence and trust in Restore. Donations from individuals and churches exceeded budget expectations by almost 100% and are particularly welcome because by spreading our support more widely they provide additional security which will be important with the onset of a recession.

The number of people seeking asylum in the UK may have continued to fall but Restore's work with people in real need who are ignored by the statutory services has continued to grow as have the services provided by local groups linked with Restore like Handsworth Welcome and the Solihull Churches Asylum Seekers' Support Group. Restore staff have continued to liaise with other groups at a regional and national level to promote change.

As a project of Birmingham Churches Together (BCT), Restore has continued to benefit from the support of church leaders but has also been integral in helping to plan and implement BCT's new structure and in working to improve its employment policies and procedures. We have also begun the process of reviewing the salary grades of our own staff team.

Having agreed a policy in March 2007 that committee members should sit for a maximum term of office of six successive years, with some phasing of this policy to allow for a gradual implementation, we are beginning to have to plan for change and to search for new members. We have already lost David Forbes as a result of this policy and Simon Thorburn has also resigned having moved to Oswestry.

Both Simon and David were founder members of Restore. Their contributions and support will be missed and thanks are due to them for their long service on our Management Committee, and to the many volunteers and staff who continue to support our work.

Howard J Saunders  
Chairman, May 2009



## **Restore 2008 – report of the Project Co-ordinator**

During the years of my employment with Restore I have stated innumerable times that Restore is a project of the churches of Birmingham and Solihull bringing together refugees and their supporters. 2008 was the year in which this felt unequivocally the case as people owned the work and helped us through a financial crisis. With immense gratitude I thank all those who believed in what we are about and supported the project in giving time, energy and money to sustain the work. Fundraising will be an ongoing need, especially in the current economic climate, but it says much for the generosity of supporters and trusts that within a year of church leaders launching an appeal for Restore, we were able to employ an additional member of staff!

We acknowledge the following charitable trusts which supported Restore's work in 2008: Tudor Trust, Allan and Nesta Ferguson Trust, Friends Hall Farm Street Trust, Church Urban Fund and Action in the City, Allen Lane Foundation, Bryant Trust, Cadman Trust, Deritend Chapel Endowment, New Lacey Trust, Morland's Trust and WF Southall Trust. You will note that Restore is reliant on a number of trust funds, but we have learnt that small and diverse is beautiful, rather than having all one's eggs in one basket.

Particularly remarkable and heart-warming has been the generosity of individual donors and churches across the city and beyond. This support is often an expression of faith in action, which enables Restore, in turn, to put its mission into action, such as offering social activities to lone asylum seekers or facilitating training for potential befrienders. Community fundraising highlights included our Many Voices event (multi-lingual sponsored sing and read), a garden party with live music, a media melee meal, and the Quakers and Progressive Synagogue hosting a social gathering.

Generosity was also evident among our asylum seeking community. The parable of the Widow's Mite came to mind when an Afghan man in his 50s, who had just received a small amount of money from the Hope Destitution Fund (previously Asylum Seekers' Destitution Fund) happened to overhear my bemoaning the plight of a Zimbabwean woman and her young child who were destitute. He turned to me and insisted I take £5 of his money for the mother and child. At my initial resistance he poignantly countered "I may not be able to do anything for my wife and children in a refugee camp in Pakistan, but I can give to this desperate woman!"

With relief and pleasure Restore was able to employ a Befriending Support Worker, Sarah Dixon, in September 2008. This appointment enables a more effective response to the needs of asylum seeking women referred to the project. It has also freed me up to focus on the advocacy and developmental work of Restore. As Chair of the regional Refugee Strategy Network I represented the voluntary sector on the board of the West Midlands Strategic Migration Partnership. Restore joined other voices in raising concerns about the poor quality of accommodation sometimes provided to asylum seekers, the plight of destitute pregnant women, and safeguarding issues in the Initial Accommodation hostel for new asylum applicants.

2008 was a year when we rejoiced in a number of families within our network receiving Leave to Remain through the Case Resolution process. Also known as 'legacy cases', some families had been waiting a decision on their case for years. A positive decision from the UK Border Agency gave security and the right to access work and benefits. However, the transition from the asylum to mainstream system was not without huge challenges and we are grateful for the support that many befrienders gave at this time.

Families again joined our Summer Holiday Programme in good numbers. Restore hosted 7 activities over four weeks, which included 157 individuals from 22 nationalities. Our day trip to Ragley Hall, near Alcester, was particularly memorable in providing both sunshine and hail on one day and a cream tea for all those assembled – thanks again to the volunteers who supported these activities so helpfully and for a financial contribution from the Study Support Development Team of the Birmingham City Council.

Partnership work continued to be of great importance, whether with local support groups (such as Handsworth Welcome, World Friends in Selly Oak and Solihull Churches Asylum Seekers' Support Group) or with agencies regionally and nationally. Regionally Restore is a referring agency to the Hope projects of the Birmingham Law Centre. As Chair of the Steering Group of Hope Housing, I have been heartened to see the development of this work and the effect it has had on the lives of those who would otherwise be destitute. In 2008 a Catholic presbytery was made available, together with houses at a peppercorn rent from three housing associations, for the support of homeless asylum seekers. Workers were employed, the Heart of Birmingham Primary Care Trust committed funding for vulnerable women, and the Children's Society launched the Hope Fund for Children.

Nationally, Restore linked up with the Churches Refugee Network (CRN) and the Independent Asylum Commission. In May 2008 Restore played a key role in hosting and organising the national CRN conference entitled 'Walking with Strangers...Towards the Healing of Nations'. At a later date Restore had a role in promoting the findings and recommendations of the Independent Asylum Commission. This independent citizens' enquiry into the UK asylum system concluded: "there is grave misunderstanding in the public mind about the term 'asylum' which if not addressed threatens to undermine support for the UK's proud tradition of providing sanctuary to those fleeing persecution; and recommends that immediate action is taken to win hearts and minds and long term public support for sanctuary."

Restore's work aims to win support for sanctuary in order to continue to offer protection to those who flee persecution. We are motivated by the friendships which develop with the 100 or so asylum seekers referred to the project each year. Our hope is that your ownership of Restore's work in 2008 will be ongoing and give reason to rejoice.

Many thanks to my colleagues, Restore committee members, Birmingham Churches Together trustees, befrienders, refugee and asylum seeker friends and all those who believe in and support the project's mission.

Shari Brown  
May 2009

## **Befriending in 2008:**

**41 new befriending matches arranged in 2008**  
**77 ongoing matches at the end of December 2008**

Beyond these statistics are many stories of volunteers offering invaluable support to refugees and asylum seekers and we thank all who made that work possible through their generous, compassionate volunteering. It would be impossible for Restore to offer such an extensive service of befriending to so many people without our team of committed volunteers.

One asylum seeker befriended by a Restore volunteer wrote:

“I have found Restore useful and helpful in the following areas: it encourages socialisation amongst its members which helps people not to suffer from depression, stress and other related diseases; mobilisation towards positive goals and achievements; help in spiritual revival and restoration of self confidence; and some education through taking people to recreation centres. I personally have benefited a lot from Restore in many ways but in particular I have two great friends who have made a great difference in my life - my befriender and staff member. These are people I will never forget in my entire life. God bless you.”

Another asylum seeker wrote along a very similar theme:

“Restore is a good organisation which helps asylum seekers and refugees like me in many ways. I am one of those who received a lot of help from Restore. My befriender helped me last year by bringing me out to restaurants and cinema and I am very thankful to this organisation which is a real blessing for me.”

Set out below are a few examples of befriending matches made in 2008:

a medical student, befriending for the first time, matched to a single woman who gave birth a couple of weeks after the match was made (the befriender has an interest in obstetrics so has been very willing to support in this situation);

an experienced befriender taking on a second befriender with limited English but where the referring agency was willing to fund an interpreter for the first 5 befriending meetings (Oh for more referring agencies with those resources!);

a new volunteer matched to a single mum whose original befriender had moved geographically;

a new befriender matched to a man with a disability who values the volunteer's visits to his home;

an experienced befriender, matched to a young man at the point where he was ousted from Social Services support (due to the Slough legal judgment);

a befriender with considerable teaching experience, whose previous befriender had moved geographically, has been rematched to a young man who wanted help with English but who currently has no access to ESOL college courses.

We are grateful to members of our befriending team who have written about their experiences:

"Every time I meet A, I'm struck by how patient and philosophical he is when he has so little and is in such uncertainty about the future. I enjoy being able to spend time with him, and frequently find myself explaining strange English words or phrases. Trying to tell him about November 5th and Guy Fawkes was a particular challenge!"

"H was in floods of tears in my English class in Ladywood. She had been refused asylum for years, was living on Section 4 vouchers in a cramped room with two little kids ... But now she was being told that her baby girl "doesn't exist", so no more vouchers for her. The class listened carefully, and another student in the class said "Why not go to ASIRT? – they helped me so much". This advice from a 'fellow-sufferer' made all the difference as I'd been trying to get her to ASIRT for two months, but she was afraid to go. Suddenly she was willing! So we went the following Thursday. Dave Stamp at ASIRT contacted the Home Office and by the following Tuesday she got the much desired Legacy Questionnaire through the door!

Meantime, my friend became the 'formal' Restore befriender of the family. She was free, after befriending someone else, and already knew the children through volunteering at the Ladywood ESOL crèche. The new befriender got in touch with the Health Visitor, whom she found was already active in the situation. However, it needed collaboration to get things moving. The Health Visitor got the family rehoused in another part of Birmingham. Since then, the befriender has found a nursery and an ESOL class for H in the new area. She will also help to register for a school for next year. The family still awaits the 'legacy case' answer, but life is so very much better. That's how collaboration helps!"

"I first met my befriender in August 2008. This is the 2nd asylum seeker I have befriended and already the experiences are quite different. As a Muslim I did not expect that he would be open to any activities that take place in a church. We were both able, however, to attend the meal celebrating the 150th anniversary of St. John's Church in Harborne and it was good to see his initial shyness disappear as he spoke to a number of people and asked some very pertinent questions about the church and why we do certain things. It was so good to see the open conversation that he had with our Vicar!

At the Restore Christmas Party for adults at St. John's Church, Harborne, it was pleasing to see him catch up with those in a similar difficult situation to him and get 'stuck in' with the games and activities. The genuine warmth and care of those helping out was so tangible and it made the evening so much better. Although his case is so difficult and often there seems to be so much injustice about it, I am pleased with his openness and willingness to get involved in so many events. His attitude challenges my faith. When I look at my own difficulties, however small they may appear compared to his, I should try to be just as courageous and open with others and God."

“2008 was a mixed year for the couple I have befriended for over three years who faced a variety of difficulties. I was well supported by Restore in supporting them, whether it was with a food parcel when their allowance was arbitrarily stopped, obtaining a competent solicitor or always being there for all of us. We all enjoyed the Christmas party at St. John's. I greatly appreciated the opportunity to meet in a small group facilitated by Sister Breda to consider what we were doing and its impact on all involved.”

In September 2008 Sarah Dixon joined the Restore staff team as Befriending Support Worker with a focus on work with women. We are delighted with the way Sarah has settled into the role and the positive impact she is having on our service provision.

The consistent support offered by volunteer befrienders as they stand alongside those recovering from the trauma of persecution and going through difficult times in their lives is hugely appreciated. We recognise that the support offered can be emotionally draining and incredibly frustrating when we feel that justice has not been done. Yet there is also a recognition that our interaction with our refugee friends greatly enriches our lives.

**To our befriending team we say:**

**Thank you!**

**Thank you!**

**Thank you!**

## **Men's Activities 2008:**

### **32 men's social activities with over 50 men attending at least one event**

Men's social activities are a vital element of Restore's service to male refugees and asylum seekers. They offer opportunities for recreation and introduce men to new places in and around Birmingham. For clients who are unable to access ESOL classes or who experience isolation, they provide social interaction and the opportunity to build new friendships.

During 2008 there has been more development of 'educational' visits to local museums as we have discovered that clients are very interested in learning about the history of Birmingham. One client commented that although he had lived in Birmingham for a few years, no-one had ever shown him the museums. We have also been delighted that more volunteers, particularly befrienders, have been able to join these events, which then increases the possibilities for men to practise their conversational English and to feel more integrated into the wider community. A new activity in 2008 was a visit to the Monday lunchtime concerts at Birmingham Conservatoire. This experimental experience of classical music was so enjoyed that it has been repeated in 2009.

**What is the impact?** This is what group members have written:

"Restore is a great project, the team are friendly, caring, helpful and experienced, they know how to deal and coordinate the large group with different languages and cultures. They have done a lot for us, which is all appreciated. We have gone on trips to a lot of interesting places and galleries, such as the birth of Shakespeare; it was very interesting which I can't forget in my life. Be a friend with Restore, have enjoyable fun, meet new friends and gain a lot of experience."

"I am so grateful and thankful to Restore for the things they have done for me. As a person who has left his country and family and found himself in the UK where I did not speak English, I found things really hard. As I am not allowed to work or go to college this made me feel worse and at times I have felt very low. However, with Restore I am able to attend events like a trip to Birmingham Nature Centre and Cannon Hill Park, Soho House in Handsworth, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, the Lickey Hills and to Stratford-upon-Avon where I was able to see Shakespeare's House and learn more about this very important man. Going on trips like this has given me the opportunity of meeting other people, seeing different places, and chatting to other men who are in the same position as myself. It also gives me something to look forward to during the week. Being involved with Restore has made a big difference to my life and I thank you all for everything."

A befriender has written:

"Both my befriender and I have appreciated the men's events that have been organised by Restore. These have included a visit to an art gallery in Walsall in October and musical concerts. Just recently a number of asylum seekers from a variety of countries had the opportunity to listen to a free concert at the University of Birmingham given by Final Year Music students. This was followed by a visit to the Art Exhibition at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts. These relaxing events always seem to be enjoyed by all and often lead to some positive discussions and important questions."

## **Training & Awareness Raising Courses in 2008**

### **5 Training/awareness raising courses attended by 74 people**

Restore's "Truth behind the tabloids" training sessions are offered to all who are interested in becoming befrienders of asylum seekers and refugees and to anyone wishing to gather further information on asylum and refugee issues. Each course runs for 6 hours. The main trainers are Shari Brown (Project Co-ordinator) and Jeremy Thompson (Befriending Co-ordinator). We are grateful to volunteer befrienders who join us to share from their experiences of befriending: what it has involved and what they have gained or learnt themselves. We also invite an asylum seeker or refugee to share his or her own story of applying for asylum. This personal perspective is often an eye-opener for those on the course. In 2008 13 of those who attended courses later applied to become befrienders. We also had significant numbers attending from other organisations, e.g. 13 from Crossing Borders (University of Birmingham Medical Students interested in refugee issues); and 12 people from Halesowen Churches who are planning to set up a drop-in for refugees and asylum seekers in their area.

The following quotes are taken from Training Evaluation Sheets of courses in 2008:

'All the sessions have made me think more carefully about how I approach people from backgrounds different to my own.'

'I now have a better understanding of the global situations leading to people becoming refugees and how the asylum application process works.'

'I now know about the qualities of a good befriender, which will help me to establish a better relationship with the asylum seeker. I am also aware of the process and regulation involved so that I can provide information when needed.'

'I have realised more about the difficulty and hardship which asylum seekers actually go through and how much I can help by just being someone's friend.'

'I knew nothing before the training, I didn't realise how difficult it was for an asylum seeker and what life must be like for them.'

During 2008 we introduced new resources for trainees, which have also been passed on to existing volunteers: a document entitled "Where to go? What to Do? What to say?" which gives practical ideas on activities across Birmingham (we are grateful to several experienced befrienders who contributed to that resource); and in response to a request on a trainee's evaluation form, we have produced a narrative of the asylum application process to help volunteers to better understand systems of the UK Border Agency.

## Open Meetings in 2008

Restore's Open Meetings are part of the package of support that Restore offers to its volunteers. Open Meetings provide an opportunity for volunteers and supporters to receive further input on asylum related issues and also to network informally with other volunteers and supporters. A few refugees sometimes attend the meetings. In 2008 we held 5 Open Meetings.

February 2008: The key focus was on the family legacy case resolution process and the evening included input from Ann Hopkins who shared about the impact of this process on the family she was then befriending. The second part of the evening looked at the issue: What do I really need to know? A role play full of intrusive questions stimulated discussion on what volunteers need or don't need to know or ask about their befriended.

April 2008: Adrian Randall from the Wardlow Road Refugee Resource Centre (a Birmingham City Council service) spoke about his work, the implications of the family case resolution process and steps they were taking to make the transition easier for families given refugee status, particularly the policy of deferred evictions while suitable new accommodation was sought. Phil Rogerson shared from his experience of supporting the young single man he befriends, who had received Indefinite Leave to Remain.

June 2008: The Annual Meeting and 9<sup>th</sup> Birthday Party with guest speaker Revd Canon Nicholas Sagovsky from Westminster Abbey, London, and a member of the Independent Asylum Commission.

July 2008: Jonathan Cox, Co-ordinator for the Independent Asylum Commission (IAC), addressed an extraordinary Open Meeting, which was opened up to the whole of the refugee support network in the West Midlands, to motivate us to take up the recommendations of the IAC and to take action and lobby for change.

September 2008: Annie Hughes, Chaplain at the Karis Medical Centre spoke on "Reflections on the patient love of God". Much of Annie's work is with refugees and asylum seekers. She mentioned an asylum seeker who had said of God 'I am in a far off place, but you have not abandoned me.' Annie encouraged us to understand the importance of lament: allowing people to pour out their grief for as long as it takes. We have to accept that some things can't be fixed. Real lament eventually gives rise to hope, but that cannot be hurried.

December 2008: The final meeting of the year is generally more informal. Jeremy and Sarah had been looking for some new interactive training resources to be incorporated into Restore's training sessions for new volunteers. These activities were given a trial run at the December Open Meeting and we were grateful for the feedback.

During 2008 we also offered extra support to volunteers through a sharing group organised by a trained group facilitator. Those who attended the 5 sessions found it helpful. We would like to repeat this, but need to find a facilitator to take it on.

## Many Voices & Community Fundraising

As part of our response to the funding challenges of 2007, we embarked on some community fundraising activities. We decided to organise a central focus event and wanted something that could easily include many of our refugee and asylum seeker friends. An event with international food? Or with traditional costume? In the end we struck on the innovative idea of Many Voices - a multilingual sponsored sing and read.

As the idea developed we soon realised that this would be more than a fundraising event. Friends from many countries very readily agreed to participate through singing, reading from Luke chapter 4 or reciting a poem from their culture, and we looked forward to celebrating our diversity and our unity.

It was not a passive experience for the 'audience' of over 80 people who gathered at St Philip's Anglican Cathedral on Saturday, 26th April 2008. The 'International Voices' and 'Kiss the Ceiling' choirs taught us all a song from Ghana and we joined in some Taize songs in Latin, Italian and Russian.

All in all, we heard 43 languages from Africa, Europe and Asia including: Amharic, Bangante, Euskardi, Farsi, Gangulu, Hebrew, Irish Gaelic, Kurdish, Lingala, Mandarin, Runyankore, Sinhalese, Tigrinian, Uzbek, Welsh, Xhosa and Zulu.

Here are some comments from those who attended:

**"What a great event, it was so varied and affirming! What a creative idea!"**

**"... it was really lovely and very moving to hear so many voices and feel the oneness that that created."**

***"I found it very moving, reflective, celebratory, thank you all!"***

Many Voices involved celebration, worship and awareness raising so was much more than a fundraising event, but it also raised nearly £4,000 - way beyond our hopes and expectations.

We are also very grateful to supporters who raised funds for Restore by organising other events including: garden parties, fun nights, tombola, quiz night and a media melee meal.