

Migration and Ministry: re-aligning perspectives and practices.

“The story of the Judaeo-Christian religion, from beginning to end, is a story about migration”.

This was one of the first insights offered to the ninety people who gathered at Roehampton University recently, to look at ways in which Churches and Church-related organisations engage with the continuing and changing challenges of migration.

Harvey Kwiyani, a Malawian mission scholar and practitioner working in Britain, cited Abram’s migration from Haran to Palestine; the repeated stays of our forebears as refugees in Egypt; the Exile (expatriation) to Babylon; the Incarnation, as God’s migrating into our world and pitching a tent among mortals; the central place of migrants in the spread of Christianity after Pentecost; the reminder of Hebrews 11, that here we have no permanent place of abode; and the final vision in Revelation of a place where humanity dwells with God eternally: from beginning to end, a story of migration.

Kwiyani urged his hearers to use this as a lens through which to view and evaluate their approach to migration. This theological perspective, he argued, would lead us to see in a very different way the poster of a long line of refugees (used in the Brexit campaign), or the proposals of the Republican Presidential Candidate in the USA to build a wall along the US-Mexican border. Our understanding of the nature and purpose of God should shape our attitude and actions in relation to refugees: migration is a theological issue.

The Conference also made clear that migration was a humanitarian issue. Stories told by people who had been to – or through – refugee camps in Greece and Calais, as well as the personal histories of some speakers, including Inderjit Bhogal, underlined the human, and inhumane, realities behind the headlines and statistics of the newspaper reports and public debates.

Presentations by Ella Sibley, the Assistant Chaplain of Southlands College, by Debbie O’Brien, Co-ordinator of the Westminster Night Shelter venues, and by Jo Winslow Slater, Programme Manager at St Ethelburga’s Centre for Peace and Reconciliation, painted pictures of the intermingling of despair and hope in the camps, and of the interventions being made by groups that had decided they had to ‘do something’. They showed that faced with the range of human need, there was something that each person could do.

Most positively, the Conference invited participants to see migration as an opportunity. Throughout the day there were examples of the enrichment that migrants had brought to communities, and of the new possibilities that were emerging.

In the closing plenary, Lucy Berry, a URC minister and performance poet, read a selection of her poems, which connected the theme of the Conference with Scripture, and invited hearers to dance. Ric Stott, a pioneer minister based in

Sheffield, had worked with City of Sanctuary to create a triptych: three paintings of three individuals who have sought refuge in the UK. Two of them, Firas and Pride, shared their stories with us.

As a Coda to the Conference, at a dinner that evening, there was a musical performance by Roehampton University's Director of Music, Gulliver Ralston (Piano) and Ghislaine McMullin (Cello). The pieces chosen were all composed by people who had been through, or who had been affected by, experiences of displacement and persecution: Max Bruch, Zoe Martlew; Ernest Bloch; Richard Dauber.

The Conference was organised by the Susanna Wesley Foundation, with the encouragement and active support of Stephen Skuce and the Strategic Research Team of the Methodist Church. SWF intends to provide a space for the conversation to continue. Watch this space!