

City of Sanctuary

Over 50 people young and older, of many faiths met together to vibrant drumming by the African Group 'Yarambamba' on Saturday June 23rd. We were welcomed to the City College in Paget Road by Paul Benton to launch the initiative for Wolverhampton to become a City of Sanctuary.

The Rev John Howard chair of the steering group, spoke about the experience of a group of young Methodists being warmly welcomed as strangers in Rwanda. He said the City of Sanctuary movement was about making strangers, particularly those who were refugees, welcome in Wolverhampton.

Arten Llazari of the Wolverhampton Refugee Centre spoke about the difficulties faced by refugees and asylum seekers. We were told about the lives of a refugee from South Sudan, an Iranian young woman and an Algerian all fleeing possible persecution and even death, seeking refuge here.

The mayor of Wolverhampton Mrs Christine Mills in an inspiring speech said "Good Community cohesion can only be achieved when both statutory and voluntary bodies work together in partnership for the greater good of their community".

"Here today this partnership—working is graphically illustrated for us in that we have three community groups working together to promote the City of Sanctuary initiative – The City Interfaith & Regeneration Network, The City Refugee Centre & The City College."

"And this does not include all the many other groups and individuals who have signed a pledge supporting the City of Sanctuary initiative".

She went on to say " People come to our country because they believe that here they will be free from the tyranny of oppressive governments and dictators. Many have suffered appalling violations of their basic human rights because of their faith, ethnic origin or political convictions".

"We must be clear that tonight we are not referring to economic refugees or to general immigration but about the plight of Asylum Seekers – men, women and children who have first hand knowledge of the horrors inflicted by ruthless people".

"Our faith traditions compel us to offer the hand of friendship and support to those in need and as Mayor of Wolverhampton I am proud to offer my personal support to the City of Wolverhampton becoming a City of Sanctuary."

We enjoyed conversation and a meal together before Inderjit Bhogal our keynote speaker and co founder of the CoS movement urged us to continue doing what Wolverhampton has been good at for over 45 years, promoting understanding and respect between our many differing communities. We now

need to take further steps to become inclusive and overcome feelings of isolation felt by many refugees and asylum seekers. He urged us to continue to make sure that all refugees and asylum seekers feel welcome in Wolverhampton as in many other cities which have become Cities of Sanctuary.

More than 50 groups have already pledged their support including Wolverhampton Inter-Faith and Regeneration Network, Wolverhampton Refugee and Migrant Centre, The City College, Wolverhampton Council, Wolverhampton University, The Brothers of the Good Shepherd, the Terence Higgins Trust, the World Poverty Group, the Wolverhampton Fair Trade Group, Wolverhampton Pioneer Ministry, Wolverhampton Methodist Circuit and many Christian churches.

Individuals from different Faith Communities have pledged their support and we urge all communities of worship, as well as groups and clubs such as community centres, cricket and football clubs, Trade Unions, play groups and bridge clubs, to give their support.

Wendy Spratling