AN INTERFAITH COALITION TO SPONOR SYRIAN REFUGEES

April 2017

Back in September 2015, members of the Lakeshore Unitarian Universalist Congregation began discussing the possibility of sponsoring a Syrian refugee family to come to Montreal. Over the next several weeks, we were joined by people from other West Island churches who also wanted to do that. We agreed that while it would be a challenge for one congregation to do this, we could do it together. By combining our energy and resources, we could to raise the necessary funds, find accommodation, material goods and other forms of support that would be needed to sponsor and support a refugee family.

Taking action!

A few months later, Lakeshore Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Beaurepaire United, Union Church and Summerlea United Boards formally approved a Memorandum of Understanding to form the Summerlea Refugee Support Coalition. Each congregation named 3 members to form the Coalition’s working committee, to be chaired by Sheila Laursen of Lakeshore. Summerlea United’s Board agreed to be responsible for the financial and legal aspects of the sponsorship.

Over the next 3 months each congregation held fundraisers and gathered pledges of financial support to reach the $34,000 needed to guarantee support for a family of 6 for one full year. We have a co-sponsor in this endeavour. Salman Karnazi is the brother of the man of the family we are jointly sponsoring to come to Montreal. Bilal and his wife and 4 children have been living in Saudi Arabia on visitor visas after fleeing Syria. Salman has visited and spoken at our churches and he and his wife have supported our special fundraising events.

We have been on a steep learning curve; and have benefitted from training sessions at Action Réfugiés Montréal, and from the experiences of others, including the President of the Dorval mosque, about their experiences of refugee sponsorship. And we have supported the collection of clothing and household items for refugees arriving in Montreal.

We are not alone!

Along the way, we organized meetings of a larger group as well, a West Island Refugee Network (WIRN). Those meetings have brought our coalition together with representatives of another United Church and two Catholic parishes that had
also applied to sponsor a Syrian refugee family. And we have kept in close contact with the Unitarian Church of Montreal, which has sponsored two Syrian families. Our goal is to share information, resources and learnings as well as offer mutual support.

**Supporting our Syrian Refugee Family**

In early 2017, our co-sponsor, Salman, shared sad news recently about one of Bilal's children (the Syrian family we are sponsoring to come to Canada). Abdallah, 10 years old, had gone out for a walk on December 13 with his 78 year old grandfather who had come to see Bilal and family in Saudi Arabia. While they were walking, they were hit by a car, driven by a reckless driver. Both Abdallah and his grandfather were thrown quite a distance, and each suffered from a broken leg with open wounds which required surgery. While the insurance company for the driver who caused the accident paid for their surgery, it will not cover any further surgery or follow up care such medications, physiotherapy, etc.

**Horrific Tragedy and A Healing Response**

On Sunday, January 29, the late night TV News led with the shocking and horrifying details of an attack on a Quebec City mosque - with 6 people killed as they were praying, and several others injured when a gunman deliberately shot everyone he could.

The next morning, we initiated the idea of a vigil at the Dorval mosque for 6 p.m. that same evening through emails to our Summerlea Refugee Support Coalition and West Island Refugee Network members, inviting them to inform our larger West Island community.

Instead of shivering outside, we were welcomed into the mosque’s prayer space ....until over 200 people were there, finding a seat or a spot on the plush oriental rug. There we were - people of all ages and colours - packed together, sharing greetings, condolences, and support with each other. Most had never been in a mosque before.

I still find it hard to describe the overwhelming spirit of togetherness that followed, so I will quote the words Rev. Vicki Cowan of Union Church used to share her experience at her following Sunday service:
“John and I experienced a profound sense of connection with this Moslem faith community and those like us who were there to support and protect them. And there was more. As people shared from the heart, faces began to glow. People became radiant. The room lit up. There we were, fulfilling our gospel lesson that calls us to be light-bearers. Light-bearers bringing out the God colours of the world.”

The “light-bearers” who spoke that evening included a 4 year old girl who told us that “we are different, and that is nice - and good” and a 14 year old boy who stated that he believes not in God, but in justice for all. Two Protestant ministers, a couple of Muslim women, and at least a dozen other people shared their sorrow, their support and their determination to build together, strong and safe communities for us to live and play in peace and harmony. As we left the mosque an hour and a half later, we were greeted with two snowbanks of flickering lights from the many candles that had been planted in the snow. Only later did I learn that about 20 people never made it inside, and braved the cold, keeping vigil and singing “Amazing Grace”.

Amazing Grace it was indeed. For all of us there, it was a spiritual experience; one that we will hold close in our hearts for a long time to come.

Raising Funds

Our Summerlea Refugee Support Coalition is now organizing fundraising activities to help cover the family’s living expenses and medical care while they are still in Saudi Arabia. In addition to generous donors, these funds are being raised through the proceeds of several concerts organized by members of our four congregations. One of those features the musicians and a joint choir from Summerlea United, Lakeshore Unitarian Universalist and Merging Waters (Union Church and Beaurepaire United.).

We have just received news that our family’s interview with officials at the Canadian Embassy in Riyadh will take place on May 10. We are looking forward to celebrating their arrival in Montreal later this year, and we know the our Coalition has not only helped one Syrian family, but has also lasting relationships for our 4 congregations, and our West Island community!

Sheila Laursen