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Feature

JRS chief urges the UK to unleash vast potential that exists in refugees

Sarah Teather describes her transformation from politician to leading the Jesuit Refugee Service – and the inspiration she takes from the friends she meets in the role

Anita Boniface

One of the things Sarah Teather loves about her job as Director of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) UK is “unleashing a huge torrent of energy” from the refugees and asylum seekers her organisation provides with volunteering opportunities.

The former Lib Dem MP and Education Minister tells me: “You have people who have not been allowed to work, sometimes for years, and they have all these pent-up skills and the desire to contribute. So when you give people an opportunity, it’s hugely creative.”

Internationally, the Jesuit Refugee Service accompanies, serves and advocates for refugees and forcibly displaced people. JRS UK specifically works with destitute refugees and asylum seekers – those struggling to gain recognition of their refugee status – and people in immigration detention. For the former, it runs a hosting scheme and a weekly day centre where refugees can come for a hot meal and a place to relax, and supports different activities through the week. The contribution of refugee volunteers is vital to this work.

Sarah says asylum seekers often have “huge skills that they’d like to be able to contribute to others.” Often they come into the country expecting to be able to work and “pay their way” despite the great trauma they may have endured and Sarah says that “if they’re denied that opportunity it’s really hard. They can’t support their families, their sense of purpose, their sense of belonging.”

So Sarah and JRS organise volunteering roles within the organisation. For example, some refugee volunteers provide pastoral care to other refugees; others help to run the office. Part of her passion and committed belief in their resourcefulness and contribution comes from her respect for their resilience and ability to endure the hardest of circumstances.

“If you’ve managed to flee your country, organise yourself, get out of a situation, you probably were resilient before and you still require a level of resilience. You may have also acquired great trauma, and you might arrive with physically nothing and carry wounds internally, but you probably also have massive banks of reserves because if you’re the kind of person who’s managed to do that and survive you’ve got some-



thing quite important to give back.”

JRS UK appreciates that often peoples’ backgrounds include trauma, persecution, loss, grief and torture. Therefore, Sarah feels it is imperative that these ‘friends’ – JRS UK’s term for the refugees they accompany – are provided with a sense of welcome, of safety and a place they “feel at home”.

JRS UK is a place where “people make friends and form relationships” Sarah tells me. “It’s important to feel yourself at home especially when you’ve lost your (own) home.” She continues: “People can be themselves, whoever they are... there’s the practical stuff that people need and the practical help, but sometimes the most important aspects of what we do is by walking with people and getting to know them. We create spaces where they can be themselves and flourish as people.”

Part of this is JRS UK’s open and non-judgemental ethos. While JRS UK is an organisation founded by and affiliated with the Jesuits, Sarah is keen to point out that it is a welcoming place for people of all faiths and none. “We don’t proselytise to the people we serve. We will serve people whether they are Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu. We don’t

ask questions and we serve them”.

This non-judgemental, welcoming and open approach to people is itself part of a “witness” to the Gospel. Sarah says: “I think it’s really important that we witness to the... value of each individual life and the gifts people bring. That in a sense is our witness to the Gospel and we understand that and see that very clearly – that’s part and parcel of working for the Kingdom to go out and try to spread those values to others....the first thing is to make sure that we create a society for us that’s welcoming to refugees.”

Much of the work of JRS UK in witnessing to the Catholic faith is done in conjunction with the Catholic community, such as with members of religious orders and parishioners on the ground. Despite the harsh treatment by the “dominant voices” in the media, Sarah says that the public have a different approach.

Sarah suggests that those within the Church and within ordinary parishes often have “a kind of instinctive sense that they don’t really like (what the media is saying about refugees) and they are... keen to welcome asylum seekers and refugees and are not sure quite how

to go about it, not sure what to do... they come forward in their local area and say ‘this matters to me, I care about this, I care about my community’.”

Sarah explains that JRS UK is helped greatly by Catholic parishioners putting in time as volunteers, or making financial donations. “So we’re recipients of people’s generosity,” she says. Often this desire to serve others “comes out of their faith. They understand that this is the way they live out their faith and they’re looking for ways of doing that. At different stages of your life you have different opportunities and money and skills. Some people, perhaps those with young children, might help by campaigning or letter writing, and at a later stage people who are retired and have more time, might take a much more active role in volunteering.

“We’re happy to take people at different stages in their life who can give different things.”

Sarah herself is a committed Catholic whose life entered a different stage when she left politics and joined JRS. Reflecting on her political life, starting at the age of 29 when she was first elected MP for Brent East she explains: “When I was first elected I had had a period away from attending Mass and going to church. But the night I was first elected was in a sense the night at which I fully re-engaged with my faith. It was the realisation that I had been given an opportunity to do something that was not about me and my own story at that stage even though I was very much at the cen-

tre of media attention.”

She says she had “absolute clarity that this was not about me and that I had a job of service to do and I was being given the most enormous, extraordinary opportunity to do it and this enormous opportunity and the expectations of other people meant that I had to engage with my faith.”

She continues: “I suppose it was a kind of immediate sense of desire to connect with God, to pray about it, to offer it, to understand how to use it, and that required reengagement with my faith. And I never stepped away again.

“In fact, throughout my political journey there were so many challenges and tests, each one different, and the only mechanism I really had for understanding how to respond was engaging more deeply with my faith. It became progressively more important in that time.”

What helped her both working through challenging times in government and in working with JRS UK was her faith and her spiritual direction by the Jesuits. Sarah was a member of a young Christian Life Community (CLC) group, as well as being in the young adult Mass at a Jesuit church. Following the guidance of her spiritual director she decided to follow a calling to do the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises on a 30-day silent retreat “partly because (she) was curious” and because her spiritual director had “sown the seeds”.

Sarah describes the month-long retreat at Loyola Hall as “an intense experience” and says she reaped the benefits for at least two years after it had been completed. “I still gain from it. Memories, experiences, nuanced now in a sense, but built on the foundations of what happened during the 30 days.”

It is perhaps part of a natural progression then that Sarah now heads up JRS, an organisation that is essentially Ignatian. Leading a team doing practical caring work of befriending refugees and asylum seekers, she is looking to collaborate with other charities such as the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) in order to pool experience and resources so as to welcome and befriend more vulnerable people.

Before the end of the interview with Sarah she gives me a little insight into her belief and commitment towards collaborative work. Giving me a copy of the Archbishop Oscar Romero prayer entitled *A Step Along the Way* and written by Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw, she says “I am very fond of this prayer. In a sense your job is to sow seeds. You don’t necessarily get to see the grand picture. You’re not necessarily the person who has the grand plan.”

Sarah concludes: “We’re workers, we do our bit, we don’t get to see the bigger picture. We’re part and parcel of something larger.”

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