Exploring sponsorship of families seeking asylum

Dr Russell Rook, a UK-based social activist, consultant, parliamentary aide, and spokesperson for the Christian community in Israel, and a Salvationist, has met with numerous politicians, clerics, NGOs and his fellow Salvos during lectures last month.

As well as delivering a key message about the possibility of community-sponsorship of families seeking asylum, Dr Rook was joined by Dr Wilma Gallet in presenting a workshop on the ‘changing role of Faith-Based Organisations in the 21st Century’ in the UK and Australia.

On a Sunday night at Geelong Corps, Dr Rook shared his experience of community sponsorship of a family seeking asylum – through his corps – with the 40 people in attendance. Stressing that community sponsorship changes and saves a refugee family’s lives, accelerates integration, manages vulnerability, assists adults into training and employment, and children into education, Dr Rook stated that it also changes the lives of the community participants themselves.

‘There are 22.5 million refugees in the world,’ he said, ‘and when communities sponsor families seeking refuge and asylum, it humanises the trauma and gives us a practical way to respond and make a “glocal” impact – a local response to a global crisis.’

‘Australia’s policies on refugees and people seeking asylum have been in place for years, he told e-connect, ‘but our hope is that this government, or the next, can adopt this policy. Refugee sponsorship is a lot easier for governments; in the UK, our program probably saved 10,000 pounds per refugee.’

Some 30 people gathered at Camberwell Corps for a workshop later that week, featuring Drs Gallet and Rook. Captain Steven Smith acknowledged the First Nations peoples of Australia and said that reconciliation ‘is what we are trying to achieve in Australian communities. We are still trying to reconcile what it is to live with our Indigenous peoples.’

Major David Eldridge introduced Dr Rook, enumerating some of the guest’s roles and experiences. Dr Rook noted that the UK government, as with the Australian government, is ‘outsourcing its responsibilities and calling it welfare reform’.

Referencing the UK’s 1943 Beveridge Report with its ‘five great evils’ – want, idleness, ignorance, disease and squalor – Dr Rook said he lived ‘in the fifth richest country in the world and no child should go hungry – that’s the government’s job’.

‘Governments and churches should work together; the governments’ job is to address deficits. The churches’ job is to create opportunities to “go beyond”; to encourage us all to flourish, to live life to the full and realise our potential as individuals and communities.

‘The churches have a responsibility to hold governments to account and to work for good.’

Dr Wilma Gallet spoke about the perils of mission drift that face churches and faith-based organisations in the climate of competitive tendering, mutual obligation, economic rationalism and the ‘marketising’ of people’s lives.

Examining the demise of the social contract, the reform agenda and the blurring of
boundaries between governments and government-contracted organisations, Dr Gallet noted ‘the increasing conditionality inherent in welfare, the increase of the working poor and the stigmatising of single mothers and the unemployed.

‘The cost of the welfare state largely comes down to the aged pension,’ she stated, ‘but we blame the costs of the unemployed and single parents…human services is the biggest growth market and presents a threat to the community sector and an opportunity to slick commercial operations.’

Noting that ‘language influences culture, and culture influences behaviour,’ Dr Gallet’s presentation systematically demonstrated the challenges facing The Salvation Army and other NGOs, faith-based organisations, NGOs and not-for-profits.

‘Mission drift is a real challenge for us,’ observed Major Eldridge, ‘and there are some tough decisions we have to make sometimes about what businesses we are in.’