

Local ministry trying to find 14 refugees a home



By Constance Scrafield

Jennifer Miedema wants to change the world or at least the bit that she has in her sights at the moment. As Chair of the Refugee Ministry at Compass Community Church, there are funds and 44 people ready to bring to Canada 14 people caught up in a tangle that is going very sour in Israel.

Here is the background:

According to the Times of Israel, there are approximately 38,000 migrants and asylum seekers, 72% Eritreans and 20% Sudanese, who have been living in the southern edge of Tel Aviv since between 2006 to 2012. In 2014, Israel built a 242 kilometre long electronic fence across its border with Sinai, bringing illegal entry into Israel across that border to virtual halt.

Eritreans are fleeing a brutal dictatorship and compulsory military service that can last up to 40 years, while the Sudanese asylum seekers have fled genocide in Darfur and fighting between Sudan and South Sudan.

The majority of these people, living in a limbo as to what their status in Israel is, reside in Neve Shaanan, a crumbling area before their arrival, where now 35,000 live in this neighbourhood designed to house 6,000.

The Times of Israel quotes Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as saying, at the beginning of a weekly cabinet meeting on January 21: "They are economic migrants, ... not asylum seekers. We are taking action against illegal immigrants ... Israel will continue to be a shelter for true refugees and will eject illegal infiltrators."

Hence, work will begin in March to deport the thousands of Eritreans and Sudanese to unnamed African countries. Rwanda and Uganda are rumoured as those countries, suggesting that Israel pays the Rwandan government \$5,000 per person but all of this is denied by the Rwandan and Ugandan governments.

Additionally, those asylum seekers who took the offered willing deportation which comes with a one-time payment of \$3,500 and a one-way ticket to somewhere, relate that, once they arrived, they were taken, in the middle of the night, to a border without documents and told to cross illegally.

Within and without Israel, the new policy has caused serious controversy, with people close to the physical problem longing to see the end of the burden of people so crowded into one too small area versus organizations, the UN, and governments calling on Israel to take a more humane approach to the problem, to find other solutions to what may not be as hard to solve as one might think.

Also, the fact that Israel itself is a land of refugees who fled the terrors of World War II Europe and found a safe refuge in the newly formed means the country cannot now turn its back on those similarly endangered and seeking refuge. Rabbis and other Jews are offering to house and hide some of the refugees, in reflection of Anne Frank.

Ms. Miedema obviously cannot think in terms of bringing 38,000 people here but wants us to help her pressure the Canadian government to at least loosen their stringent designations on asylum seekers to allow private sponsorships to bring the 14 identified people into Canada expediently.

While in Israel, if the refugees are being stripped of their asylum seekers status, it could make it increasingly difficult to pass them through the Canadian visa process, which must look at asylum seekers who have some legitimacy, not illegal immigrants or infiltrators.

"We have to recognize that there is an urgent deadline here by the end of March," Ms. Miedema urged. "We have such a giving community, we're so rich in our caring. There are a lot of communities like this in Canada."

To help with the promotion of these 14 cases, a petition has been written and Dufferin-Caledon MP David Tilson has taken up the cause, approved the petition and promises to read it in the House of Commons.

Essentially, what the petition says is that, there are currently applications in process right now at the Canadian visa office in Israel to sponsor refugees and some of them have been held for two years without any progress or notification.

Observing that the individuals are now at risk of being deported from Israel to an unnamed African country where they will be in danger again, the petition calls on the Canadian government to react to the impending humanitarian disaster that is looming in Israel as it plans this mass deportation and to add the Canadian voice to the others calling on Israel to rethink its approach to the dilemma. The eyes of the world are on them.

There will be a free movie that describes the entire problem at the Good Friends Church in the former Uptown Theatre on Broadway on February 25. Check with the church for times.

Everybody come out and see first-hand the crisis in Israel, Ms. Miedema said. There will be copies of the petition to sign. Some of those people are people I know some of them are family to people we have already brought over.

She added, I'm just a mom. I want to do what I can to help.