

Firstly, I begin what I have to say this morning in the knowledge that I am in the company of men and women of compassion. I take that statement a little further.

Compassion by itself has never been enough. It has always been, and it always will be, that compassion must be practical. Reaching out to others to provide what may seem the ordinary things which sustain life. Educated, since you cannot truly be with those you seek to help unless you know and are in sympathy with the crisis in their lives. And continuing to be prepared to stand with them when the crisis passes from the headlines but their need goes on. Compassion, Practical, educated and continuing. The foundation of all work with the displaced

Secondly, in preparing this paper, I read again the Summary Report of the recent European YMCA Conference on Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons and I began to wonder why I was coming here. For in that document, I find an acceptance of the present reality, justification for YMCA action, an explanation of what has already been done and signposts to where European YMCAs might go in this work in the future. It is a document which needs reading and re-reading.

Thirdly, I want to get the sometimes confusing stuff out of the way: I hear the terms, “Refugee” “Migrant” and “Asylum Seeker” used as if they were one and the same. Add to that “Internally Displaced Persons”. Well, they are not the same

The 1954 Convention on Refugee Status states:

A refugee is a person who having a well founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion is outside the borders of his or her nationality. There is more but that is the important part.

A Migrant is a person who voluntarily leaves the country of their nationality for economic advantage, family reunion or a sense of adventure. No more, no less.

An Asylum Seeker is a person who, having reached a country willing to consider an application for asylum and application for asylum having been made, is considering that application. An asylum seeker is not a person in some terrible transit camp but a refugee.

An Internally Displaced Person is just that. Someone who for some reason,(generally warfare or persecution) has fled to another part of their own nationality. And in passing, I have never known the YMCA to differentiate between a refugee and an internally displaced person.

So why am I here. Well YMCA work with refugees has been done before and it was thought that something might be gained from history. To look at yesterday, then today and tomorrow.

Many years ago, a greatly loved Secretary General of the World Alliance, Fredrik Franklin, wrote a letter to George Williams. The fact that Sir George had been dead for many years did not detract from the timelessness of the *message*. Part of the letter read.

I have it from an authoritative source that where you live there are no tears and there is no pain. But, if you are able to keep an eye on what is happening in this world, can you help but shedding tears and feeling pain. I am thinking, for example, of the intensive suffering which is the fate of those millions we choose to call refugees. There are more of them now than at any previous moment in history. But with the pain, are you not glad that the YMCA is with them, not everywhere, not with all of them but with some and in some places. The whole thing, the reason why the YMCA exists, is that this world is nothing like the world which is your present address.

Only two months ago, I had the great privilege of speaking to some seventy largely young YMCA people. They were your people and, although the connection was stretched they very quickly became my people. In moving among them, listening to them at meal times, hearing the reports of what they were doing in their work with refugees and internally displaced persons, together with their informed contribution to the final report, how could I not be both moved and impressed.

And what I have to say today concerning the past is only of historical interest unless the commitment of yesterday can in some way, which I do not pretend to be able to quantify, be recognized as still speaking to today and tomorrow. And today and tomorrow is for you and for the young people I met to build together.

This is what I said last month and I am happy to share some of it with you. And I begin with the question ‘Why the Y’. A question asked many times. And there are many answers. You will have your own and they are as valid as mine.

Mine is because we are there and ---

How does it go ?

For as much as you have done it unto the least of these, my brethren, you did it unto me.

Another of Fred Franklin’s strange concepts was to change passages of the Bible. For example, he altered that well known passage in Acts 3 to read

“ And Peter and John went to the temple to pray and there was a man there who had been lame from birth. And he asked for some money. But they were late for prayer and hurried on. When they came out the man had gone. But they were still troubled and John put his case to the Executive Committee who referred it to the Finance committee who agreed that a one off payment might be made from unallocated funds.

And again Peter went out and wept bitterly.

YMCA work with refugees is almost as old as the movement itself.

In Russia, the pogroms meant the deliberate annihilation of men, women and children. By 1904, thousands were killed because they were Jews.

Thousands more fled across Europe and the YMCA was with them. The World Committee coordinated assistance given by National and local YMCAs on the journey and the German YMCA was at Hamburg to guide and advise them as they boarded ships.

And it would appear from reading reports at the time that local YMCAs saw a need at their own front door and quite simply, without fuss, went out to help.

So today, those young people I met two months ago are meeting a need at their own front door and are writing a new chapter in a history of service to humanity that began a very long time ago.

At the end of the Second World War, the whole of Europe was in turmoil as new demands were being made on every aid agency. There were forced workers and soldiers attempting to go home. There were released prisoners and servicemen who did not want to go home.

With the re-alignment of borders, there were hundreds of thousands of German Nationals whose homes had been in what was now Eastern Europe and were homeless. In total about 20 million human beings.

All the barriers holding masses of restless, uncertain, rootless people seemed to break at once. What had been a refugee problem of tens of thousands became a problem of millions and threatened to overwhelm whole countries.

And the day after the formal end of that war, the YMCA and the YWCA went to work. I know the names of the first three staff members. Tracy Strong from the United States and Hugo Cedergren from Sweden representing the YMCA crossed from England to France and Dr. Alice Arnold of the World YWCA left Switzerland for Germany.

YMCA staff who had been prisoners formed YMCAs in the prison camps.

Listen to Belizar Ratzins, National Secretary of the Latvian YMCA and himself a prisoner, who wrote.

We got a small room, the boys painted it, the girls made curtains from paper bags, broken chairs and tables were repaired, we formed a library, a deserted stable became our gymnasium and a garden became our sports field. When it became clear that we would not be going home, we started language classes.

And that was repeated many, many times.

Ultimately, hundreds of YMCA programmes were in place

There is no time to detail these only to say that there were some 2000 professional YMCA personnel from 28 Nations working in France, Germany, Britain, Belgium, Austria and Trieste. All this is recorded in the History of the World YMCA. In this the emergent German YMCA played a notable part and their work continued in their Homes for All, years after peace had been established.

But , a new and long lasting challenge emerged. ----The 1947 Middle East War.

And the Palestinian Accountant of the Jerusalem YMCA found himself unemployed. So he went from Jerusalem to Jericho, put up a small tent in the desert with a notice "YMCA" outside and Labib Nasir – for that was his name – went to work.

In cooperation with the World Alliance, he created an apprentice training school and produced thousands of skilled tradesmen and built one of the most imaginative and beautiful YMCA buildings in the world.

The World Alliance working with the United Nations and National YMCAs then established 16 Youth in the Community Centres in Lebanon, Gaza, Jordan and the occupied West Bank.

Ultimately, it became too much for the Executive Committee and we come to 1954 and the inevitable creation of the World Alliance Refugee Committee.

Six years later, the global refugee population stood at more than 33 million and the World Alliance was still supporting continuing work in Europe with the addition of Hungarians in Britain and Canada, Chinese migrants in Hong Kong, Biharis in Pakistan, Eastern Bengalis and Tibetans in India, two Boys Towns in Bangladesh together with continuing projects in Lebanon, Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza.

Enough to be going on with you might think.

But early in 1967 a very serious meeting took place in Geneva between British Christian Aid, The United Nations High Commission for Refugees and The Refugee Committee of the World Alliance. The proposition was made that the YMCA was uniquely positioned to take a leading role in refugee work in Africa.

So a decision was taken that a person with some experience of Africa, unfortunately not an African because of passport and other difficulties, would travel throughout Africa where there were famine victims and known large refugee outflows. A report would then be submitted to Geneva.

This becomes personal: I had already worked for two years in Africa and was asked to conduct the survey and present it to the World Alliance Executive Committee. When it was accepted, I was told that I was the African Refugee Secretary. Not asked, just told. This was not in my career plan.

Working with some wonderful people for the next four years, the World Alliance had, after six months:

Programmes of assistance to the Ethiopian YMCA in its work with 30,000 famine victims together with a home for 250 orphan children.

Agricultural programmes with 120,000 Southern Sudanese, Rwandan Watutsi and Eastern Congolese in 13 agricultural settlements in Uganda. And they became self sufficient in 1 1/2 years

Educational programmes for 30,000 Watutsi in Tanzania.

Sanitation, nutrition and baby care projects for 40,000 Watutsi in four settlements in Burundi. Built four community centres following the Biafran war in Nigeria. Taken over the funding of a primary school for Angolan refugee children in Western Congo,

All told, the YMCA, and only the YMCA, was responsible for work with more than 200,000 refugees or victims of famine in Africa. And behind these vast numbers there were some quite extraordinary people – and the YMCA had the ability to throw up some extraordinary people.

The only other non-African, was a young Canadian, David Moore who lived and worked for three years in Burundi in Central Africa. Let him inspire you as he inspired me. This is what I wrote for a YMCA publication at the time.

He lives in the heart of a Watutsi settlement. The nearest town of any size is five hours driving away over a pot-holed dirt road. His only companions are the refugees with whom he works, no telephone, an infrequent mail service and a thin line of communication with the African Refugee Office a thousand miles distant. There are four refugee settlements with YMCA programmes. These are widely separated and one is reached by crossing a crocodile infested river by a hand pulled ferry. Every second month he is visited by the African Refugee secretary. David can still write, I am happy to be here.

A further report from Africa at this time said, and this could surely be said of today/ *‘They have come from many countries: They have poured across borders, the starved beaten and often dying victims of a continent striving for political health. They may not return to their homeland for many years, they may never return. But the fear of those who have fled is very real. The work must continue so that in as many settlements as possible there will be a YMCA person with whom they can share something – anything. To be the greatest thing of all, to be there with them.*

But a world away from Africa, the Committee was about to face another challenge. ----- Vietman.

In 1967 a group of members of the Saigon YMCA, who were also students at Saigon University studying medicine and social services, visited a refugee camp and what they saw shocked them. They organized a short term work camp which set up medical and dental clinics and organised educational and recreational facilities for the children.

Once begun, this could not be ended and a team from the Refugee Committee went to Vietnam. The Committee accepted responsibility for the work and so began the most financially challenging period in its existence.

International staff were appointed. Eventually 50 local staff were recruited and trained and YMCA work with displaced people began all over South Vietnam and continued even after 29th April 1975 when Saigon was occupied and the Vietnam War ended.

Feeling less than confident, the next day, two Japanese colleagues and I met with the North Vietnamese Military Authority and offered the services of the YMCA. We were permitted to continue our full programme until the new regime had their own system in place, then asked to stop.

We are told that pride is a sin. Well, mea culpa. Of the 51 Voluntary agencies that worked in Vietnam prior to the advance of the North Vietnamese army and the change of power, only 6 remained: And the YMCA was one.

But, of course that was not the end of the matter but the beginning of another large and important piece of service to refugees. Meet Khun Lanjul Chairatana, General Secretary of the Bangkok YMCA. Thousands of Vietnamese Boat People entered Thailand at Chantanaburi.

So Joe, as he preferred to be called brought his staff together, went to Chantanaburi and began to work. They did whatever needed to be done.

Then more thousands of Laotian refugees swam the Mekong River into Northern Thailand so Joe went to work again and called in the World Alliance. together we built two clinics in a ten thousand refugee settlement, built a hospital which served both refugees and local people and created a handcraft industry which goes on today with the refugees who settled in the area and local people.

And next, eighty thousand Cambodians fled from the dictator Pol Pot into Thailand, And tireless Joe, who had by now established a coordinating committee for all aid agencies in Thailand, accepted even more responsibility. In a letter to the Refugee Committee which I wrote on 5th December 1979, I say of those Agencies working with the eighty thousand.

“ Not least was the Bangkok YMCA which had followed its early intervention with volunteers by accepting responsibility for storing and transporting food and other supplies from Bangkok to the camp at Sakeo ninety miles distant. The United Nations has appealed to the Bangkok YMCA to continue this work, whatever happens ”.

So more than four years after the end of the Vietnam war, The Bangkok YMCA was at Sakeo with eighty thousand Cambodians The Indonesian YMCA was working with 10,000 Boat people and the two YMCAs in Hong Kong had between them 21,000 Boat people to care for. And next month, I will stand at Joe’s grave in Thailand and remember his gentle genius and sacrifice. For he died when only in his fifties but his good work, like others, lives on in thousands of lives.

The Committee report to the World Council in 1977 had been that work with refugees either by National Councils supported by the World Alliance or by the Committee directly over the preceding four years was:

Bangladesh, Hong Kong, India, East Timor, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam Ethiopia, Uganda, Zaire, Austria, England, Cyprus, France, Greece, Portugal, Brazil, Costa Rica, Bolivia, Chile, Guatemala, Paraguay, Gaza, Jordan West, Jordan East and Lebanon. All to be visited, projects evaluated, staff encouraged.

In 1980, I left Geneva and I was grateful to return later and study the remaining years of service given by the Committee. And a great deal of good work was done but ---By 1983, calls began for the Committee to decentralise and effectively pass all refugee work to the Regions. It took some years but in January 1995, the World Alliance Committee for Refugees and Rehabilitation ceased to exist. It had served the Movement for more than forty years.

Now, someone, somewhere, out there will be thinking, All right, but he hasn’t mentioned where the money came from.

Members of the Committee consisted of people representing the projects and people who had access to funding. That funding was only one third YMCA. The balance came from Governments, the United Nations or donor agencies. That, my friends, was it. We carried few passengers. And some years, our budget was 2,000,000 Swiss Francs.

The action of the European Alliance in establishing an office in Brussels seems to me to be very sound. There is no doubt funding is available in Europe. But if we look at other parts of the world in fund raising terms, my mind always returns to one phrase “Who today, will speak for the Middle East and Africa.” And I have no doubt that this will be much in the minds of the YMCA Executive Committee as they consider new international funding strategies.

But enough of yesterday. Today, the present refugee and internally displaced persons crisis has come to the doorstep of our world. It beams from millions of television sets night after night and is on the agenda of every government and local authority. No longer is it “over there”, it is now “over here”.

And being over here it brings challenges such as Europe has not experienced for many years. But with these challenges come opportunities not only for host Nations and communities in general but for the YMCA. The YMCA in Europe is responding but that response needs enthusiastic support and finance.

Greater minds than mine will be addressing these problems and I strongly suspect that these greater minds are sitting in front of me, now, as I speak.

The Dutch Lady, Hetekke Wapenaar, who collected us at the railway station at Den Dolder spoke of her experience as a volunteer from the Netherlands YMCA at Traiskirchen refugee Centre in Austria. For so many years cared for by the YMCA of Austria. She was a beginning. More was to follow. I learned of great and good work being done now not only in The Netherlands but in Spain, Sweden, Ukraine, Germany, England, Scotland, Denmark, Greece and Austria. And away from Europe, in the United States.

Working with children, citizenship, economic integration, employment opportunities, hostel provision for the homeless, social relationships in a new country, work going on in the source country to try and prevent exit, welcoming newcomers and handing out welcome packages, food services and camps for children, working in a war situation where there are 1,695,000 displaced human beings not recognized as refugees, helping children to learn a foreign language and volunteers going to the border areas where handing out blankets and playing with children takes the place of suspicion and anger.

Not with all of them, not everywhere but with some and in some places.

One hundred years ago, a Padre serving on the Western front during the First World War ended a poem with these words:

And like the Holy Grail the vision shines on yet ahead

and leads us on.

And we must tread where it has led however rough the road may be.

There may be rest for Thee my God but not for me.

For we must fight.

It is not right that we should cease and rest in peace,

a peace our souls has never won.

T's Thou has made us so.

T's Thou must surely know the sources of the strength we crave

to seek, to find, to save the wandering and the lost.

Bring back to shore the tempest tossed

and set these hungry bodies down `to feast.

Well, I am proud that, in the past, the YMCA set hungry bodies down to feast.

I am equally proud that in the present, the YMCA still cares for the tempest tossed. How true when we see the crowded little ships and the lost children.

And for the future, we shall all be proud when our World YMCA, as it will, sets out once more to save the wandering and the lost.

For, as Fred Franklin wrote to George Williams so many years ago:

“For with the pain, are we not glad that the YMCA is with them”.

Jim Thomson 7th May 2016