**Bishop Martin writes...for the East Anglian Daily Times (March 2022)**

Signing up to register interest in the Government’s “Homes for Ukraine” programme was the easy part.  You are asked just a few questions in the on-line application form, which include whether you will take adults only, or children too, and how many rooms you have to offer.  You are asked for your name, phone number and email, and the first part of your postcode.  And how long you are able to offer a room or house for.  As I say, that is the easy part.

The form makes it clear that not everyone who registers interest will receive guests from Ukraine.  As I write this more than 150,000 people have offered accommodation, and it is hard to see how the Government’s entry process will enable 150,000 refugees to come.

But we do not know how more horrific the aggressive assault of Ukraine by Russia will become, so we cannot tell just how many people will be fleeing, and wanting to come as far as the UK.

What we do know is that the British public are being incredibly generous, and so many people simply want to help in whatever way they can.

When we talked as a family about signing up, my wife asked me more than a couple of times whether I understood what we were committing to.  This was not to stop us signing up, but to underline the extent of the commitment we were making.  This is where it gets harder, and it is important to recognise what will be involved.

We have some experience of supporting a refugee family from the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme which brought Syrian refugees to this country between 2016 and 2020.  A total of 20,000 refugees arrived here under this scheme, including a number of families coming to Suffolk.  My wife became a “befriender” of one of the families, and the relationship established through that connection continues to today.

“Befriender” after a while became “friend” and in fact the Syrian family treat my wife as a member of their family.

The initial connection was made through Suffolk Refugee Support, and it was not a small undertaking, even with the ongoing engagement of the Refugee Support charity.

Coping with the arrival, the shock for the family having left their home, having spent time in a refugee camp, with so much of what they knew and loved being destroyed, the trauma takes a long time to come to terms with.  It is an experience of grief, of anger, of fear, of anxiety.  And few of us have any experience to compare.  The same will be true for Ukrainian refugees, fleeing the brutalising forces destroying so much they hold dear.  And as well as dealing with the shock, for our Syrian family there has been the whole process of adapting to a new culture, a new language, and new systems, all the while carrying that deep sense of loss of everything familiar.  So my wife helped settling children and parents into the whole new educational environment and provides ongoing support.  She helped the family deal with health care, with local transport, with shopping.

It is not hard to see that supporting refugees is not simply about providing a room.  We will need to be attentive, on hand, available for support, for resources, to answer questions, to give a helping hand.

Organisations like Suffolk Refugee Support provide excellent help and advice.

And as we welcome Ukrainians to our homes, help can be provided by neighbourhoods, villages, churches, community groups, sharing the responsibility so it doesn’t just fall on the hosts.

Yes, this is a big responsibility, and there will be challenges, but our experience with the Syrian family is that there are wonderful rewards too, from becoming friends, and in giving, finding that you receive so much in return.  It can be hard, but it is not the hardest part in this process.  The hardest part by a very long way is borne of course by the refugees themselves, by those fleeing from the bombardments, the missiles, the destruction.  The hardest part is leaving the land of your birth, leaving family and friends who remain in danger, leaving a job, a way of life, a culture, a history, into the unknown.  The hardest part is struggling through a bureaucratic entry process, which is less rigid than it was but still presents hurdles for refugees to overcome.

It is unfortunate that the enthusiastic and generous response of the British public has not been reflected in the organisation of the entry process.

As we continue to pray for the people of Ukraine, and for an end to this terrible war, we know that the antidote to evil is to do good, and the outpouring of generosity, kindness, and hospitality is certainly doing just that.

May every single refugee from Ukraine, and all refugees fleeing from danger, from brutality, from oppression, find in our homes and our communities the solace and healing that acts of kindness and generosity can wonderfully give.