

## Baptising Refugees In North West Waters



Steve Hough is the minister at Stockport Baptist Church, who recently had the privilege of baptising a man who had only recently arrived in the area, and in the country. Steve explains, ‘There was a knock at the front door of the church as I sat in my office preparing this Sunday’s message. I answered the door to find a young, middle eastern looking man stood there. “Can I help you?” I said. He pointed a finger at me and said carefully and deliberately “You baptise me!” From the expression on my face, he thought that I had not understood him, so he took out his mobile phone and typed something into google translate and showed me the English translation : “You baptise me”!’

I invited him inside where I learnt that his name was ‘Ali’ and that he came from Iran. He was living in temporary accommodation at a hotel on the other side of Stockport which is being used as a transit post for refugees and asylum seekers before they get moved on to their final destination. I was intrigued to know how Ali had managed to find his way to my church from the hotel so I asked how he had got here and he pointed to his phone and said “google maps”.

“But why did you want to come to this church, there are plenty of other churches much nearer to your hotel, why did you not go to one of them?”. With a look of exasperation, he pointed to our sign and said “Stockport **BAPTIST** church – you baptise me”



That was my introduction to a remarkable young man who in the space of a few short days has had an amazing impact on our church and everyone else who have met him. He explained to me that he was brought up in Iran as a Muslim, but became addicted to drugs and lost the will to live. He lived in darkness for several years and thought about ending his life on numerous occasions. Eventually, one of his friends who was a reformed drug addict, suggested that Ali should attend rehab and therapy.

He agreed to what his friend suggested and he attended these rehab and therapy sessions with his friend for approximately one month. He was then given a book and was told this would help him through these difficult times and this book was the Bible. He read the Bible and became very interested in learning more about Christianity. He was introduced to a Christian community and after three months decided that he wanted to become a Christian although he knew that would be very dangerous for him. He decided to escape from Iran and come to the UK where he was transferred from London to Stockport.

After listening to his story, I realised that there was no good reason why I shouldn’t baptise him but the question was when? I explained to Ali that, unlike in the Bible, there was no obvious natural watering hole around Stockport that I could use so we would have to use the under floor baptismal pool which requires considerable effort to get it filled, heated and ready.

I proposed to Ali that we could arrange the baptismal service for a week on Sunday giving us nine days to get everything organised. He agreed and seemed very excited that he was finally going to be baptised.

The following day I spoke to the lady from the Home Office who was responsible for looking after the refugees at the hotel and she explained to me that Ali could be moved to another location at any time – that they were given no advance notice and could be moved to anywhere in the North (including Scotland).

I decided that we could not wait another week to baptise him, as in all likelihood Ali would not be around that long. So I contacted a few of the church leadership team and we agreed that the earliest we could do it was Sunday evening. This is mainly because it takes five hours to fill the pool and another 12 hours to heat it!

I asked Ali if he would write his testimony down so that it could be read out at the service and he said he would but it would need to be translated from Farsi. I recalled that a lady called Monica who had recently volunteered to cook a meal at our 'Loaves & Fishes' homeless project was Iranian and could speak Farsi so I contacted her and she very kindly agreed to translate Ali's testimony.

Late on Saturday evening, I received a text from Monica telling me that she had translated Ali's testimony and that it made her cry and could she come to the service as she had never seen a baptism. I thanked her and told her that she would be very welcome to come along.

Sunday duly arrived and the pool was filled with water. We decided to hold the service at 5.30pm which coincides with the time of the 'Loaves & Fishes' meal that we have every Sunday evening with the intention of inviting the homeless to join us upstairs in the sanctuary before the meal.

Just before the service I received a text from a friend of Ali's who I had met at the hotel the previous week but who had since been moved to another location. He had heard of Ali's baptismal service and he wanted to know if I could help him as he wanted to be baptised. The service was very simple but extremely moving. As Monica read out Ali's testimony there was not a dry eye in the place. Ali thanked Jesus for 'saving his life'. He told me before the service that he had no family – here or in Iran – whether that is because they have all died or because he has been ostracised by his family wasn't clear. But I explained to him that he now had a new family and we were all his Christian brothers and sisters.

We have no idea where Ali might eventually end up but we do know that he is in safe hands and that God will be with him wherever he goes. One of my Deacons asked me whether we should empty the pool and I said that we should hang fire as who knows what this week might bring!

## For your thoughts and prayers:

- How will you and your church respond to those of different ethnicity in your community?

- How could your church share the good news of the Kingdom of God with asylum seekers? What does 'loving your neighbor' look like in this?

