

Interfaith community lays groundwork for Syrian refugees



By Brock Weir

Aurora's Trinity Anglican Church was the site of series of interfaith gatherings on Sunday as Trinity and Aurora United Church welcomed members of the Newmarket Islamic Centre, and members of the community at large, to tackle the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis.

In discussions led by Ian McBride, Executive Director of AURA ? the Anglican United Refugee Alliance ? a non-profit agency which helps communities sponsor refugees, interested parties listened intently to the ins and outs of refugee sponsorship before meeting afterwards in The Rectory to hammer out the fine details.

The result is Interfaith Resettlement Restitution, which has set immediate fundraising targets to sponsor one refugee family to settle in the Aurora and Newmarket area and, it is hoped, potentially sponsor more families in need.

?We work as a unit,? says Mae Khamissa, representing the Newmarket Islamic Centre. ?Everyone will be doing their own individual fundraising but, at the end, together we will work on bringing in one family, and who knows how many thereafter. Having Ian on board guiding us has brought things to light. The paperwork is all going to be taken care of on his side, which makes life a lot easier, knowing 100 per cent of what we bring to this group is going towards the family. That is so reassuring to know there isn't any money going towards lawyers, paperwork or what have you. Every penny will be put towards bringing a family into Canada.?

Ms. Khamissa, who co-owns Omar's Shoes with her husband, Raz, heeded the call of Trinity's Reverend Dawn Davis, who put out feelers to see if the local Muslim community was interested in getting involved in the joint sponsorship process being undertaken by her church, as well as Aurora United Church.

Adds Mr. Khamissa: ?It is not a religious thing. It is not a political thing. It is just trying to make people welcome. It is great that everyone is coming together for this cause.?

The Newmarket Islamic Centre itself has its roots in Aurora, first finding its foundation over 30 years ago in the basement of Omar's Shoes. An initiative of Mr. Khamissa's father, Omar, the founder of the business, members of the Muslim community were reaching out to him at a time for a place to gather for Friday prayers. They found a home there.

As their numbers grew, a separate space was needed, and the Mosque as established in a former residential home on Newmarket's Mulock Drive, just east of Bayview Avenue.

?We had no place local to have a congregation to do our prayers, and [my father said], let's open this up to whomever can come,? says Raz. ?We started with a group of five or six and built up to a group of 70 or 80, housed in the basement of the store. My dad's hope was that someday there could be a mosque in this area. Obviously, Aurora would have been his first choice, but they found a place almost on the border which serves the whole area.?

In the intervening years, their numbers have swelled to the extent Friday prayers need to be taken in shifts just to accommodate the congregants.

According to long-time resident Jamal Massadeh, a member of the Islamic Centre's Board of Directors who is also involved in the refugee process, up to 300 families call the Mosque their religious centre and they are welcoming the initiative with open arms.

?We have a lot of things to do, but hopefully we can bring over one family, and hopefully more than one,? he says. ?This is a great initiative and we're willing to stand up. I think financial help is very important and every member of the community will be able to support this cause.?

Adds Mae: ?I am most looking forward to seeing this family come down at Pearson. I am looking forward to seeing the joy of their new home, welcoming them. It is very hard to see a lot of these families running and escaping. It is not just a fact of them running and escaping, it is seeing them separated. Young people are fleeing. I would like to see us help these families find peace and being able to start a happy, good life. What better place than Canada? It is such a great place for us to be contacted by churches to want to get involved, to want to help. We are, by far, the greatest country ever.?

To find out how to become involved, contact Aurora United Church at 905-727-1935, Trinity Anglican Church at 905-727-6101, or Mae Khamissa at 905-727-9391.