

SidebySide

Learning what accompaniment is all about



Jesuit Refugee Service

Cover picture: **Eastern DRC:** Sr Regina Missanga with Tate Helène in Masisi, where one of the JRS priorities is to accompany internally displaced people who are especially vulnerable. The JRS team met the elderly woman for the first time in October 2010. She was lying in bed in Bukombo camp and half paralysed. Sr Inés Oleaga, also from JRS Masisi, says: "Tate Helène is very special to us. She weighs only 27 kilos but is very strong in spirit. This explains why she is still alive even though she is always asking us to pray so that she may depart."

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The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is an international Catholic organisation established in 1980 by the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). Working in more than 50 countries worldwide, its mission is to accompany, serve and advocate for the rights of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons.

Jesuit Refugee Service

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Jesuit Refugee Service



Ethiopia: Celebrating Women's Day at the JRS community centre in Addis Ababa.

Contents

Introduction	5
How to use this booklet	8
We accompany because we believe in the JRS values	13
Accompaniment is companionship	21
Mutual sharing of lives	23
Living as Jesus lived	29
The bridge that spans the power gap between humanitarian agencies and the people they serve	35
Care between and for team members – “friends in the Lord”	43
Accompaniment is a sign of God’s presence	53
A call to people of all faiths to witness to God’s love	55
A practical sign of God’s presence	61
Sharing bread	69
An image of the church	77
Finding life in death	83
Accompaniment is solidarity	91
Hospitality in action	93
Bearing witness	103
Being present in seemingly hopeless situations	111

“The mission of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is to accompany, serve and defend the rights of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. As a Catholic organisation and a work of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), JRS is inspired by the compassion and love of Jesus for the poor and excluded.”

*Jesuit Refugee Service
Strategic Framework 2012—2015*

Introduction

Since its beginning in 1980, JRS has always encouraged its team members to be close to the forcibly displaced people they serve. This element of our work is so valuable that JRS has enshrined it as one of the three core elements of its mission: to *accompany*, serve and advocate. It would be no exaggeration to describe accompaniment as the driving force of all that we do: it makes us who we are and it is what we are best known for, not least among the refugees themselves.

Over the past three decades much has been written about accompaniment in JRS. You might wonder: why would we produce yet another book on the same topic? The simple answer is that as we grow and respond to the many new challenges and

priorities clamouring for our attention, we must work hard to make sure accompaniment remains central to us as an organisation. We cannot afford to lose sight of it.

This was the reason that the JRS Strategic Framework 2012-2015 called for the development of in-service programs to help team members “recognise and deepen” the accompaniment aspect of our work. In creating this booklet as a tool for use in such programs, we decided to build on what had already been said, but also to encourage further reflection about why accompaniment is such a highly cherished value.

We have tried to break open the concept of accompaniment, to concretise the vagueness that can sometimes surround this term. Early on in our history, JRS

pioneers clearly articulated that accompaniment starts in “being with” refugees. But it is also so much more: accompaniment does not stand alone, apart from all else that we do in JRS: we accompany as we serve and as we defend the rights of refugees.

To help us flesh out this dimension of our work, we asked people who have worked closely with JRS to share their own understanding of accompaniment. We encouraged them not to repeat key ideas that had already been expressed but to step outside the box and say something *new*, and to reflect on the *challenges* inherent in accompanying refugees.

Our contributors to this work include men and women, Jesuits and members of other religious orders, members of



Chad: JRS social worker Flavien Kamdar (left) meets 17-year-old Tidjani, a former child soldier, who was reunited with his family after two months of reorientation.

other religious traditions – all of whom know JRS well. Their fine contributions reflect a deep understanding of the mission and values of JRS. As a Catholic organisation, we look to Jesus as the model *par excellence* of a companion to the poor and marginalised, a model that can be inspirational for all of us. While our accompaniment is deeply rooted in the reality of the Church, ours is an approach built on values shared with other religions. We warmly welcome the reflections from JRS team members of different faith traditions and learn much from their understanding of the significance of accompaniment.

The essays and reflections in these pages are full of insights but they are not the last word on the subject. Far from it: their real aim is to encourage you,

as a JRS team member, to step deeper into the world of accompaniment, to reflect on your own experience and to share your insights with others. This book is only a means to this end. The measure of its success will be how far it manages to stimulate new ways of thinking about and appreciating accompaniment, and of making it more than ever an integral part of our mission.

Peter Balleis SJ
International Director



How to use this booklet

The booklet has been designed as a formation tool for JRS teams. At the beginning, we list a set of values and approaches that ground our accompaniment, with references to the essays that expand upon each one.

Three sections then follow, which consider accompaniment from specific perspectives: accompaniment is companionship, accompaniment is the presence of God and accompaniment is solidarity. Each section includes a set of essays and quotations and every essay is preceded by a short introduction that highlights the major issues raised and provides questions for further group discussion.

On our website (jrs.net), you will find a section dedicated to accompaniment, which lists links to PowerPoint presentations of six of the articles as well as short video clips of three of the JRS regional directors sharing their views on accompaniment.

While individual team members may well profit from reading the booklet privately, we recommend that it be used as material for group discussion within JRS teams, in order to encourage shared reflection about accompaniment.

Here are some ways in which this can be done:

✧ Slot regular sessions on accompaniment in your scheduled staff meetings throughout the year: these may be monthly or less frequently but it is important to give them priority as a regular significant part of the on-going formation of your teams.

✧ In induction sessions for new team members, as well as in-service training courses, include at least one lengthy session on accompaniment. Some of the essays may be better suited for people joining JRS, particularly those by Taka Gani, Anne-Elisabeth de Vuyst, Atsu Andre Agbogan, Richard Dwyer, Fr General Adolfo Nicolás and Mohammed Idris.

✧ Hold an inter-religious service during which you reflect on accompaniment from the perspective of the different



Uganda: A psychosocial program for child soldiers abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army.

faith traditions represented in your team.

✦ When organizing a meeting or a segment of a meeting on the topic of accompaniment, it is recommended that you ask a veteran staff member, who knows the booklet contents

thoroughly, to facilitate the discussion.

✦ It is strongly recommended that only one essay from one section serve as the topic for a given discussion. If possible, ask your team to read the essay beforehand, and then

discuss its content with the help of the questions provided. If the essay chosen is accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation available on the website, then you may begin the discussion by viewing the presentation together.

✧ Alternately, you may focus on one of the values and approaches listed at the start of the booklet and turn to an essay that exemplifies the one you have selected.

✧ Yet another option is to listen to and discuss one of the three interviews by regional directors available on the website.

✧ In all instances, encourage your team members to share their own experiences. It would be a good idea to begin your session on accompaniment with a simple activity that allows the team to start thinking about their own experience of accompaniment first, and about what accompaniment means to them.

For example, ask them to write – and later share – the first three words that come

to mind when they hear the word ‘accompaniment’, or ask how they would explain this element of our mission in one or two sentences to someone who never heard of it before. Another way of starting the conversation on accompaniment could be to ask people to share about the last time they felt they accompanied someone, or conversely, when someone accompanied them.

At the start of later sessions, the facilitator might ask team members to take a specific essay and to pick several words or a single sentence that they found significant. The facilitator may then gather the common threads and return to further in-depth discussion of the chosen essay.

When you come to discuss the essay you have chosen for your session, encourage the

team to share those parts of the essay that resonate with their experience, a word, a line or a feeling.

At the end of the session, it can be useful for participants to reflect on what they learned. You may ask them to write down on one sheet of paper what they have learned and want to apply immediately; on another sheet something else they have learned and hope to apply gradually; and finally on a third sheet of paper something they have decided they no longer want to do, as a result of what they have learned.

✧ Using citations from sacred scriptures may also help enrich your discussions, depending on the make-up of your group. For example, you may turn to the Old Testament that speaks of how God accompanies us – *The Lord is near to the*



Ethiopia: At the JRS community centre in Addis Ababa, refugees enjoy meeting one another and attending classes, especially in music, which they find therapeutic. One refugee, Charles, said: “For me, the centre is proof of the reality that people care for one another and that pain can be eased through accompaniment.”

broken-hearted, and saves the crushed in spirit (Psalm 34:18), or I will not forget you (Isaiah 49:15). In the New Testament there are many stories of how Jesus reached out to suffering people, such as the widow of Nain – *When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, ‘Do not weep’* (Luke 7:13). In the Muslim

Hadith Qudsi we read: *When my servant takes one step towards me, I take 10 steps towards him. When my servant comes walking towards me, I come running towards him.* You may also ask team members to present materials from their own faith traditions or other sources that have inspired them. This exercise

could be used in coordination with the inter-faith service suggested above.

✳️ Encourage staff members to write their own reflections on accompaniment and share them in staff meetings and in country and regional publications.

Afghanistan: Returnees from Pakistan found a place to live in an old army barracks outside Kabul. JRS visits them and gives the children English lessons. Some are pictured with Jestin Anthony, a Jesuit from Gujarat who worked for JRS.



We **accompany** because we believe
in the **JRS values** of

compassion

solidarity

hope

dignity

hospitality

justice

and

participation

Compassion availability, empathy, loyalty, perseverance

Compassion – Compassion that compels us to try to alleviate the suffering of others is at the root of accompaniment.

📖 Read more in the essays beginning on pages 24, 36, 56, 70, 104 and 112.

Availability – We cannot accompany refugees and each other unless we keep our doors open, making ourselves available and accessible to spend time with others.

📖 Read more in the essays beginning on pages 30 and 44.

Empathy – The skill of listening attentively and non-judgementally is key to accompaniment.

📖 Read more in the essays beginning on pages 24, 30, 36, 44 and 62.

Loyalty – True accompaniment is a kind of covenant, a partnership, implying loyalty and steadfastness, a willingness to 'stick it out' with refugees.

📖 Read more in the essays beginning on pages 24, 78, 104 and 112.




Lebanon: *Comforting a Syrian refugee in Jbeil.*

Perseverance – Often it would be impossible to accompany without the gift of perseverance, because of the long drawn-out situations and injustices and suffering faced by many refugees.


📖 Read more in the essays beginning on pages 24, 84, 104 and 112.

Solidarity commitment, community, faith, cultural sensitivity


Solidarity – Accompaniment is rooted in solidarity, the sense of inter-dependency and common belonging in one human family, in spite of our differences. This implies a responsibility: we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers.

 Read more in the essays beginning on pages 36, 104 and 112, and in the letter of Jesuit Fr General Adolfo Nicolás to JRS (p94).

Commitment – Of its very nature, accompaniment is a commitment to be with refugees and to support them especially through challenging times: it is a commitment of the individual, of JRS and of the church.

 Read more in the essays beginning on pages 78, 84, 104 and 112.

Community – To truly accompany refugees, we should come from a team that lives and works as a community, with members that share talents, hopes and burdens and support one another.


 Read more in the essays beginning on pages 30 and 44.

Faith – We draw support and lessons from our faith as we accompany refugees, and we




Kenya: *At a prayer group meeting organised by JRS in a Nairobi parish.*

appreciate the importance of faith for countless refugees in our relationship with them.

 Read more in the essays beginning on pages 56, 62, 70, 78, 84 and 98.

Cultural sensitivity – Cultural differences can be an obstacle to accompanying and serving refugees. Bridging the gap between cultures is often a part of our efforts at accompaniment.

 Read more in the essay beginning on page 112.

Hope, presence, resilience

Hope – One constant aim of our accompaniment, coupled with the services and advocacy we offer, is to keep hope alive, even when the present seems hopeless. But this hope is not something automatic; it is nothing less than a gift.

📖 Read more in the essays beginning on pages 24, 36, 84, 104 and 112.

Presence – The essence of accompaniment is to be there; sometimes, this is enough in itself to show people you care.

📖 Read more in the essays beginning on pages 30, 36, 62, 78, 84 and 104.

Resilience – Refugees amaze us time and again with their capacity for resilience, courage and hope. When we accompany them, especially through their toughest times, we help them to keep their spirit of resilience alive.

📖 Read more in the essays beginning on pages 24, 56 and 84.



Burundi: Celebrating the launch of a JRS income-generating project for returnees in Giharo. JRS accompanied the refugees from Tanzania when they returned home.

Dignity, equality, surrender

Dignity – When possible, we approach refugees not to ask what we can do for them but to ask who they are and to seek to get to know them as individuals, to help restore their wounded humanity and intrinsic dignity.

📖 Read more in the essays beginning on pages 24, 30, 36, 56 and 112.

Equality – When we accompany refugees, we seek to create a rapport between equals, a rapport that is somewhat different from the typical service-provider to beneficiary relationship.

📖 Read more in the essays beginning on pages 24, 30, 36, 56 and 84.

Surrender – When I accompany another who is in great need, especially if I can do little in practical terms to meet that need, I am called to surrender to a relationship. I don't know where it will lead, but I trust it will be a discovery of love that leads to the restoration of lost dignity.

📖 Read more in the essay beginning on page 84, and the quote of Michael Schöpf (p100).



East Timor: Isidoro Costa, JRS project director, chats with Rita at the construction site of her new home; JRS supplied the building materials while the community provided the labour.

Hospitality, friendship, mutuality

Hospitality – Accompaniment calls us to reach out in hospitality to refugees, welcoming them, making them feel at home in the community where they have sought refuge, and accepting their hospitality in return.

📖 Read more in the letter of Jesuit Fr General Adolfo Nicolás to JRS (p94) and the essays beginning on pages 30 and 98.

Friendship – There are many levels of accompaniment; one is simply to make friends with refugees. Indeed, there are situations in which all we can do, or seek to do, is to befriend refugees and be there for them.

📖 Read more in the essays beginning on pages 24, 30, 36, 56 and 104.

Mutuality – Healthy relationships are two-way, characterised by give and take; we receive and learn much when we accompany refugees.


📖 Read more in the essays beginning on pages 24, 30, 36 and 84.



Eastern DRC: JRS team members share a close moment with the people they serve.

Justice


JRS works with refugees to help protect their rights. Accompaniment – presence – can serve the very practical purpose of protecting refugees.

 Read more in the essay beginning on page 104.



Participation

In our programs, we consider it essential to have the active participation of those we serve, from the moment we plan the project, through its implementation right up to evaluation of the work done. We accompany each other to provide the best possible service.

 Read more in the essay beginning on page 36, the letter of Jesuit Fr General Adolfo Nicolás to JRS (p94) and the quote of Bernard Arputhasamy (p40).



Papua New Guinea: Refugees from West Papua in Daru-Kiunga Diocese during a meeting with JRS staff.



Jordan: "When I see Syrian families I remember when we were first refugees. I tell them, 'I was like you, scared to register with UNHCR and to share my story, scared for my family in Iraq and here for myself.'" Laith, right, is an Iraqi refugee who works for JRS in Amman. On the left is one of the many Syrian refugees he has accompanied, who says: "We had many Iraqi refugees living with us in Syria and we tried to help them, but now we are suffering from the same situation. Our hope is that one day we can return to Syria and live in peace."

Accompaniment is **companionship**

While always ready to help refugees in their material and spiritual wants, and also in designing projects leading to a fuller and more independent life, we try to place special emphasis on *being with* rather than *doing for*. We want our presence among refugees to be one of sharing with them, of accompaniment, of walking together along the same path. In so far as possible, we want to feel what they have felt, suffer as they have, share the same hopes and aspirations, see the world through their eyes.

JRS directors, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 1985

Mutual sharing of lives
23

Living as Jesus lived
29

The bridge that spans
the power gap between
humanitarian agencies
and the people they serve
35

Care between and for
team members – “friends
in the Lord”
43

“This is what I would like to stress, a more personal approach in our work with refugees and a deeper understanding of the fact that the world refugee problem is the story of millions of individual lives, of their suffering, but also their indomitable courage, resilience and determination to survive and live.”

*Dieter Scholz SJ, former JRS International
Director*

Accompaniment is...



UK: JRS day centre.

mutual sharing of lives

An encounter of endless mutual learning

In JRS, we are called to accompany displaced people by opening ourselves and sharing our lives with them. But sharing can be difficult. In addressing the profound difficulties that detained refugees and asylum seekers experience, TAKA GANI describes the challenges she experienced, as well as the wisdom she gained, from accompanying a young man in an immigration detention centre in Indonesia.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

? As you read Taka Gani's reflection, what are the challenges, 'darknesses' and inadequacies you find within yourself that prevent you from feeling light and free while accompanying the people you serve?

? When you feel down, which positive experience/s with refugees do you normally recall? How does this memory support you and help you continue to accompany, serve and defend the rights of those you serve?

? Do you really consider the people you serve as friends? Do you deal with them openly and honestly?

"Please remember us." I still recall these words that a young detainee told me in 2009, at the end of my first visit to an immigration detention centre in Indonesia.

When I first visited 23-year-old Donya, a Hazara asylum seeker from Afghanistan, he had been locked up in a cell with four or five others, 24 hours a day, for almost five months. At the time, I was blessed with permission to visit each cell and to have a brief chat with the asylum seekers, most of whom were from Afghanistan and Myanmar.

Donya's words became glued to my mind and heart. It was my first direct

experience with detained asylum seekers and I knew little about the centre. My heart spontaneously told me, however, that this was no place for and no way to treat people who had fled their home country out of fear for their lives.

That encounter was my first lesson in an endless learning process with asylum seekers in detention. I could never have imagined that it would also be the beginning of a long friendship with Donya during which we learned much together in the 'school of life'.

Many of us in JRS know something about what life is like in detention centres for



Indonesia: Taka Gani visiting detainees in Surabaya.

asylum seekers, refugees or migrants: how darkness can be inflicted not only by the physical walls that separate them from the outside world but also by their crippling feelings of uncertainty about a totally unknown future.

For asylum seekers forced to leave their homeland, every step of the way is shadowed with uncertainty, as they leave

their families behind and embark on a long journey they hope will lead them to a safe and secure future. Their questions are many:

“Why are we locked up like this in a jail?”

“When are we going to be released?”

“When will UNHCR visit us?”

“Why are we not allowed to contact our family?”

“Can you help us?”

“Am I going to arrive safely by boat to Australia?”

“Am I going to be accepted as a refugee?”

“If I become a refugee, when am I going to be resettled?”

“How soon can I be reunited with my family?”

These and other questions were always ready for me whenever I went to the

For me accompaniment is ultimately a form of surrender. You enter into a relationship with a person, you become friends and share some of his life. It could be a detainee who is there for many months, sometimes years, or a migrant who lives destitute under the bridge, with nothing to eat, and who comes to see you once a week. You try to help in a very practical way. But sometimes these situations are so bare – there is so little you can do – that all you can do is to be present. And this draws you into a relationship you have to succumb to, a two-way relationship. Maybe at the beginning you are pushed by the person's despair, but you can never surrender to despair. The only thing a human being can surrender to is love, to discover how in such a stressful situation there is still a notion of love that you yourself and the person can hold on to, which helps to restore a small piece of lost dignity. And that's a journey on which you embark with somebody together.

Michael Schöpf SJ, JRS Europe

Thank you to Jesuits, workers, volunteers, benefactors, who don't just give something or some time, but who try to enter into a relationship with asylum seekers and refugees, recognising them as people, committed to finding concrete responses to their needs. Always keep hope alive! Help to recover trust! Demonstrate that with welcome and fraternity a window to the future can be opened.

Pope Francis, visiting Centro Astalli, JRS Italy, in 2013

detention centre. At first, since I knew little about the rules and regulations of the centre or about the mechanisms of coordination among organisations working there, I couldn't bring even a glimmer of light to the darkness of uncertainty.

I felt as though I was stepping into a jungle of confusion. *What can I tell them when I don't even know what, where, how or from whom I can find answers?* Sometimes feelings of hopelessness, anger, frustration and sadness crept up as I realised how little I knew or could do for the detainees.

During this time, however, I appreciated and found great support in the togetherness and openness of my fellow team members as we shared our experiences after visiting the centre. We came to realise

we were not alone in feeling hopeless. We learned from one another about the qualities, values and strengths that could offset our frailties.

All we could do was simply to listen to anything the asylum seekers wanted to tell us, either through spoken or written words, or through photos they shared with us. All we could offer was honesty, saying what we knew or didn't know, and how we felt.

I felt happy to see the sparkle of hope in the detainees' eyes when the information shared satisfied at least some of their needs. On the other hand, my heart sank when I saw their looks of sadness and sorrow whenever I was unable to answer their questions, especially the main one: "When are we getting out of here?"

There were, and still are,

times when I feel like saving myself from the burden of their hopelessness, from replying yet again, "I don't know". I would like to offer a clear answer, a specific date, even if I have no way of knowing when they will leave the detention centre. But something that Donya wrote to me at the beginning of our friendship has been my saviour in those moments of deep uncertainty:

Dear sister, since I came here for the protection of my family, remember that my family is in danger. I have the right to save my family from fear, terror, misfortune... As you are my sister, be honest just like a sister and consider that your brother is asking you a question.

I have a family who looks to me and thinks that I can make a brighter future for them. They

think I can protect them from harsh and bad people. I am in prison. Right now I can't even help myself. Whenever I think of my present condition, I become so disappointed that I sometimes think I'll say goodbye to this world and its people.

Dear sister, reply honestly about what should I do. Don't hesitate and don't think about my heart. Just say the truth because God likes the truth and a truthful person.

Sometimes I feel as if I am running a marathon in terms of the energy levels needed to keep going... racing with questions from detained asylum seekers, with blurred answers from the authorities, with the dimmed light of hope that needs the fuel of accurate information.

Donya's letters have been a blessing for me in this race

against constant uncertainty. His story is on-going: in 2010 he was recognised as a refugee and released from the detention centre in Indonesia. But he chose not to wait for destiny and left by boat for Australia, where he was again detained for almost a year on arrival, until his release in 2011.

Throughout his time in detention in Indonesia and Australia, Donya continued writing to me about his thoughts and feelings. One letter he shared with me, *The aim of my life*, has become my favourite 'energy drink' in this JRS marathon of mine.

I have many wishes. First, I should like to get an education, no matter how old I am. I want to be a social worker or a journalist. My goal is to help the poor; to protect those who are in danger; to show the right and bright path; to

spread the light of education; to give shelter; to guide the youth... to burn the candles of love, faith and belief; to remove hatred from the earth; to clean the tears of orphans, the poor, needy and widows; to bring smiles to those who never knew how to smile; to work for humanity. My life is my family. I know I have mentioned things that are impossible. But I have faith that I can get them soon. May God bless my family; I pray to God that I will meet my family again, protect them and that soon we'll be together.

Donya's faith, courage and love for his family open another window for me as I look out onto the uncertainties of life. There is wisdom in the uncertainty. It creates a fertile land for creativity, freedom and possibility. Donya's trust in life has taught me not to seek to trade in uncertainty

for a known future, but to try to make the most of the excitement, adventure and mystery in every moment of life, and to look beyond what is visible to experience the wisdom in uncertainty.

Taka Gani

JRS Asia Pacific

Accompaniment is...



Eastern DRC: IDP camp, Mweso.

living as Jesus lived

Presence and listening count

I left the room where I had just said goodbye to a friend who had died a few days earlier. In my grief, I was not paying much attention to my surroundings. Out of the corner of my eye I saw someone detach herself from a group of friends to join me. We walked together, in silence, the short distance to the house where we were staying.

My friend's simple gesture stayed with me, although it was only years later that I was able to give it the name of 'accompaniment'. The act of walking quietly with me told me I mattered, that my grief was shared. Knowing you are not alone is a transforming experience in that you know, for certain, that you are valued in the eyes of others.

Presence is important. Being aware that others are there, knowing they care, can be our

Our work in JRS demands that we bring professional skills, knowledge and competence to our service with refugees. In addition to technical know-how and solid management skills, however, JRS needs team members who know what it means to accompany others and who put this understanding into action. As ANNE-ELISABETH DE VUYST stresses in her reflection, Presence and listening count, accompaniment is the "cornerstone" of JRS. Taking the example of Jesus as a compassionate companion of the poor and marginalised, she offers challenging suggestions on how to grow in accompaniment, such as: learning to listen, being accessible, and learning how to receive as well as to give. She concludes by reflecting on accompaniment among team members of JRS: when a community is born that is able to share the joys and sufferings of refugees, this is JRS at its best.

most urgent need at times. Jesus, in the hours before he was arrested and killed, went out to pray. *Deeply grieved, even to death* (Matthew 26:38), the only thing he asked of Peter and John was that they stay with him and keep watch.

When I joined JRS, I discovered that

accompaniment is the cornerstone of the mission. Emphasis is placed on presence, on *being with* rather than *doing for*.

Get to know one another

It is important to allow people to get to know us and to be known by us. I was privileged



Lebanon: *Zerene Haddad (right) chats with Aziza, a Syrian refugee who is in charge of the JRS kindergarten in the village of Kafar Zabad in the Bekaa Valley.*

to begin my service with JRS in a Guatemalan refugee camp in Mexico; privileged because the camp, Quetzal Edzna, allowed members of the JRS team to live among the refugees. It was there that the word 'accompaniment' became alive and real for me. Sharing daily life with the refugees, we learned where to fetch water,

wood and food and to join in daily chores. Most importantly, mutual trust and respect grew. Sharing the refugees' joys and pains, we became their companions.

Learn to listen

Isaac was an older Guatemalan man who had been in the camp already



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- ?** Think of a time when someone was a companion to you. What were the circumstances? How did it feel? Did it inspire you and, if so, how?
- ?** Think of another time when *you* were a companion to a refugee. Again, what did it feel like? What did you learn from the experience?
- ?** Our presence among refugees requires that we are accessible to them. From your experience in JRS, describe both the challenges and the joys of making yourself accessible to refugees.
- ?** Sharing our daily lives with the poor and suffering can give us a sense of disempowerment. How do we embrace this and at the same time give solace and hope?
- ?** What might "living as Jesus lived" mean to you in your JRS experience?

During the two years I spent accompanying asylum seekers, as part of the JRS Welcome network in France, I learnt about the importance of being with people, without asking anything of them, without necessarily seeking to satisfy any of their immediate needs. The asylum seekers had been welcomed for up to eight weeks in the home of a family or religious community and I used to meet them once a week. At first it was very difficult, for both of us, to precisely define my role as a 'tutor': I wasn't a social worker; I wasn't a French teacher; I wasn't a bureaucrat or a member of the security forces. So why were we meeting? In their first few months in France, asylum seekers either meet people who ask something of them or even exploit them, or else they are on the receiving end of aid, without which their life would be impossible. So this meeting with me was, for many of them, the first time they weren't being asked or receiving something. What we exchanged was a mutual recognition of each other's humanity. By being with the asylum seekers and accompanying them 'for nothing', I recognized them as individuals whose needs go well beyond the ones that can be satisfied by service providers.

Mark Cachia SJ, JRS France

When Jesus Christ identified himself with the stranger, He shed light on what the Christian way of considering and dealing with the stranger should be.

'Pastoral Guidelines', the Pontifical Councils of Cor Unum and for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, 2013

seven years when we met. Every afternoon he sat under the same tree, sometimes with one or two of his great grandchildren, but more often than not alone. One afternoon I joined him and we sat in silence in the shade. This became a daily ritual: not many words spoken, only a comfortable silence. One afternoon he told me his story. It was a story of pain and betrayal, a story buried deep inside his soul, pursuing him at night, a story he had not yet had the courage to tell. "I tell you," he said, "because you are the only person who did not ask me any questions."

Being with refugees and asylum seekers, including detainees, you learn the importance of listening, an attentive non-judgemental listening, which conveys that the person and his story matter.

Nothing brings us closer to Jesus than learning to listen and to look carefully at the faces of the suffering people we meet. We learn to walk with people as he did on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). Walking with the two disciples, Jesus listened quietly to their story, and empathised with them. There was no condemnation, no reprimand. Jesus bided his time and, when the time came, he revealed himself and inspired the disciples to become witnesses of his resurrection. They were then able to return to Jerusalem and announce the good news: *We have seen the Lord!*

Be accessible

Being a companion means being accessible. St Thomas Aquinas said the “Word became flesh in order to be

accessible to us”. As Jesus walked the roads of Palestine, he had no bodyguards or servants, only disciples. Disciples, Jesus said, had to receive *the kingdom of God as a little child* or they would never enter it (Mark 10:15). You can’t be a disciple of Christ if children are afraid to play around your door. At the camp, our doors were always open. There was a constant coming and going of people, some in need, others just to say “hello” or to ask, “how are you?” But most memorable were the many children who would put their heads around the door, stare at us and smile. Such visits led to new and lasting bonds of companionship.

Accept hospitality

Accepting hospitality is a sign of companionship too. Reading the Gospels, we discover that

Jesus enjoyed the company of friends and delivered many of his teachings in their presence. He was often seen at parties – at Mary and Martha, at Zaccheus and at Simon.

In a refugee camp, food is not plentiful, and rations are given according to the number of family members. However people who have little often know how to welcome others and celebrate. Clarisse was a Rwandan refugee in a camp in Malawi. She welcomed us warmly into her humble home, a hut with walls made of cinder blocks and the earth offering a natural floor. The roughly planed table was covered with a white tablecloth and decked with an array of colourful flowers. Clarisse shared with us all she had and, we suspected, more than she usually had. She spoke about her journey, which had been

filled with challenges beyond our imagination. In spite of the hardship remembered, her voice was filled with a sense of joy and thanksgiving. Our day with Clarisse left us with the feeling that we had received much more from her than we could possibly ever give. Here we were, with all our resources, but that day it was Clarisse who accompanied us.

Become a community

After years of living and working together as a JRS team, a bond is formed and we become a community. Pope John Paul II described this as a “spirituality of communion... an ability to think of our brothers and sisters as those who are a part of me. This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to

offer them deep and genuine friendship. A spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it as a gift from God: not only as a gift for the brother and sister who has received it directly but also as a ‘gift for me’. A spirituality of communion means, finally, to know how to ‘make room’ for our brothers and sisters, bearing ‘each other burdens’.”

Live as Jesus lived

Living as Jesus lived is coming to know him personally through experience. It’s about a journey of friendship. It’s about losing one’s life to ultimately gain it. It’s about being last and becoming first. It’s about seeking and finding. It’s about giving and receiving.

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together,

running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back (Luke 6:38).

The good news is that God calls each one of us to be a companion of Jesus. Our call is to follow where he leads us, in step with him, and with those we serve as he would have served.

Anne-Elisabeth de Vuyst SSMN

JRS Latin America,
JRS Southern Africa and
JRS Europe (1991-2013)

Accompaniment is...

the bridge that
spans the
power gap
between



humanitarian
agencies and
the people
they serve

A reciprocity that comes alive

DAVID HOLDCROFT makes a compelling case for the significant involvement of refugees in the planning and monitoring of JRS projects. Only then will our services truly respond to needs and be effective. However, his basic premise is more fundamental still: David says he felt truly connected to the refugees when he had nothing to offer and was powerless to help them. All he could do was to accompany them, “silently asking forgiveness of the person I was purporting to help”. His conversations with the refugees, however, taught him much about their needs. Drawing a crucial link between accompaniment and service, David concludes that JRS captures the true meaning of service and the heart of its mission only through authentic accompaniment.



Malawi: David Holdcroft SJ in Dzaleka camp.

We are told that accompaniment lies at the heart of JRS work. But what is it exactly? For me the word conjures up an image of walking alongside the people we work for and with. It entails trying to engender a relationship different to that of service provider-to-beneficiary, clinician-to-patient. In so doing we often venture across the barriers of religion, culture, language and economic status. It is recognised as one of the three core planks upon which the JRS identity and

praxis is built. Yet, at the same time, it seems to be a value that somehow lies outside the core of typically conceived project work.

How does this 'extra' dimension relate to the 'core' work of service provision? This question is especially pertinent in these times when expectations of professionalism and competition for funding are increasing, with their attendant emphasis on measurable outcomes.

About four years ago, I spent some months working in a refugee camp at Dzaleka, in Malawi. While my time was spent mainly in administrative work, I had the opportunity to be in the camp two days a week, time spent mainly listening to people, talking with them and trying to offer solutions to some of the issues they presented.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- ? As a JRS team member, where have you experienced the two core planks of accompaniment and service interacting with one another? When has this interaction been absent or less visible? What – if any – changes do you need to make as an individual, and what changes need to be made in your team, in order to strengthen the link between accompaniment and service?
- ? Do you ever feel a tension between the JRS notion of accompaniment and your professional training, which may encourage you to put some distance between you as the service provider and the recipients of your services? How do you tackle this tension?
- ? In what practical ways can we adapt the concept of accompaniment to the different settings in which we work? How can we ensure that our professional work is consistently based on accompaniment?
- ? How do you understand the final sentence of this reflection: "It is only through real accompaniment that JRS – and other NGOs – can learn the true meaning of service and thus capture the heart of its mission"?

Most of the conversations seemed to begin with the invisible question that was perceived to be on my lips: “How can I help you?” I was universally told about the often unspeakable horrors of refugee life in Africa including continued sufferings within the camp setting.

Many times the conversation would begin with the simple statement, “we are suffering...” and end with “only God can help us now.”

The conversation inevitably devolved into a series of requests made to me. These requests were usually unrealistic, sometimes outlandish and most – if not all – involved matters I was completely powerless to influence, even if I had wanted to. To name just a few of the more common pleas, nearly everyone asked me



Malawi: Veronique Ngizwe, who was head teacher of the JRS preschool in Dzaleka camp. She and her family have been resettled in Canada.

to secure them resettlement to a western country, to help in a health matter or to intervene in an intra-family conflict. Resettlement, in fact, was only a reality for around 80 people a year in a camp that then had a population of 14,000. UNHCR and the participating countries were responsible for the selection of refugees for resettlement. Although I had never worked for UNHCR, many saw me as having an inside ticket to influence and even expedite the process. No amount of dissuasion could alter some people's unwavering belief in my abilities.

I soon became aware of the boredom of camp life and the manipulation involved in some of the stories I heard – after all I was a new face. Perhaps, more cynically, people thought my relative inexperience and

naivety could be easily taken advantage of. I was under few illusions as to my own role and status in the camp order.

Most of the time I found myself exhausted by the seemingly endless human suffering that was regularly presented to me, and by my inability to do anything meaningful about it, to somehow either restore the past or reconstruct the present. I mostly returned from the camp utterly spent.

Slowly, however, I began to see another pattern emerging in at least some of my conversations. I was aware, firstly, of being thanked. This gratitude seemed genuine enough even if I had not done anything except try to be present to the conversation and story. I then slowly began to realise that at least some of the refugees actually knew

I would be unable to respond positively or practically to the vast majority of their requests. And it didn't seem to matter.

I was once asked for an exercise bike. This was surely the last thing I thought would be needed in a refugee camp. Nevertheless the question was serious – the man before me had problems of circulation in one leg that eventually led to its amputation. When I eventually said I could not help, the person was grateful I had tried. No rancour – I think he fully expected the answer I gave him.

Gradually I learnt that the requests for help were not the purpose of the vast majority of the conversations. This realisation came as a liberation to me. I was listening to people tell of their experiences of life in a camp and as a refugee. We, listener and speaker, seemed

The idea of 'empowerment' hides the fact that humanitarian agencies retain the power and resources. Agencies seem to come from 'outside' to do things 'for' refugees and then leave. How to engage in a participatory way where the community, from the start, takes ownership for the services provided through consensual decisions? Spending time with the community, especially listening, understanding and engaging creatively, we find practical responses to problems. This paves the way to challenge the people we serve to take over the reins of the projects. This is integral to accompaniment. A true friend will challenge the other towards what is right and good while being present in time of need. At the end we want to hear the refugees say: 'We appreciate what you have done for us. Now we can do this on our own. Thank you. We no longer need you!'

Bernard Arputhasamy SJ, JRS Asia Pacific

to be seeking connections across our collective human experience, at once so different but, as I increasingly discovered, with many common points as well.

There was a reciprocity that came alive as I saw how the refugees, whose languages and cultures I hardly knew, were inviting me into their world just as I was connecting them with the outside world from which I came. Conversation had become a kind of hospitality and, somehow, a small expression of hope for both parties.

In all this, there were few outcomes that could be measured. Yet many of the conversations remain with me as if they happened yesterday. Connections made then have stayed with me, as well as the many moments of absurdity and humour. For me such

genuine points of meeting were like tiny electric currents: there was a spark in my interactions with refugees that gave me life.

I also felt that my conversations gave me a very good idea of the needs within the camp population, which I could bring to bear on any process of planning. NGOs such as JRS all want and need to be as effective as possible in providing services to address the real needs of those they seek to help. To ensure this happens we are all told – correctly enough – that the ‘target population’ must be involved at all stages of the project cycle, that needs assessments at the beginning of a project, evaluations at the end and much of what goes in between must all be participatory. In other words, the people served must be part of the process of

designing and carrying out the project.

This is good development practice. But let's not forget that in providing services we NGO people come from a position of power relative to the people we wish to help. This will always be, as long as there is a service provider-beneficiary relationship, and it is perhaps even necessary in order to make services effective.

To be sure, having refugees' participation as a benchmark of the effectiveness of NGO interventions would seem to disrupt the possible negative aspect of the power relationship. But we are simply deluding ourselves if we think such efforts will resolve the power differential completely. Merely calling for participation in decision-making will never fully address the deeper human need to search for

and elicit meaning from one's experiences, particularly when great suffering is involved.

But suffering speaks also to something universal in human experience. It is here that the community of the church – expressed through the presence of faith-based organisations such as JRS – has a role to play. Our very presence in the lives of the refugees speaks to the existence of this universal dimension. Practically, the effort to listen and attempt to understand, flawed as it may be, speaks of human solidarity and the people of God as one community.

Neither is it one sided: while I may never experience the tragic histories related to me by refugees, in some small way, I can begin to find lights that help me to understand better aspects of my own life

experience, my own moments of suffering.

But this discovery demands that I increasingly reflect on my own acknowledged and unacknowledged motives for doing this work, and the way I rely on and sometimes draw (false) identity from NGO and other power structures.

In Dzaleka camp I was the one coming from a position of power. But it was more often my powerlessness and inability to help – much as I would have liked to – that established my real link with the refugees. I was no longer in control of the interaction. Often I was forced to sit there and silently ask forgiveness of the person I was purporting to help. It has to be said that it was and is an uncomfortable place to be in for any length of time, so accustomed am I to helping and being in a position of

power and control through my helping.

Accompaniment, in one understanding, can never be the sole focus of our work: we are there to help people answer a need in their lives and to bring resources to this end. But it has to be there, at once on the edge of service, to challenge the power structure of the ‘provider-beneficiary relationship’, and at the same time at its centre to create the spiritual and psychological space for humanity to reassert itself. It is only through real accompaniment that JRS – and other NGOs – can learn the true meaning of service and thus capture the heart of its mission.

David Holdcroft SJ

JRS Southern Africa

Accompaniment is...



Chad: Sr Maria Luisa Solaun and Haram Seid Abakar in Goz Beida.

care between and for team
members - "friends in the Lord"

‘Friends in the Lord’

ATSU ANDRE AGBOGAN reflects concretely on his own experience with JRS teams in the field and, from his perspective as a human resources officer, highlights the importance of accompaniment within JRS teams. He challenges all in JRS – team members and leaders alike – to understand accompaniment as a process of working together as a team, one complementing the other, striving to identify solutions to problems and offering mutual support in order to achieve JRS’ mission.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

? *As a team member:* How do I show concern for my colleagues? Do I work as part of a team or tend to think rather in terms of my duties and myself? What can I do better to be a true friend to my colleagues?

? *As a team leader:* Is the team I am leading working freely, productively and happily, or in fear and other negative emotions? Is the work environment conducive to its potential growth? What measures can I take to ensure the team feels truly appreciated for its work?

? *As a team:* What measures have been agreed upon as a group in the project or office to foster care and support for each other (sports and games, security guidelines, community life, spending time together, etc.)? Does everyone own these activities? What can be done to foster involvement of each staff member in such group activities?

JRS would not be where it is today without its most valuable asset: team members who work together at the heart of the organisation. We need to look after one another, to walk together as true *friends in the Lord*. Something would ring false if we earnestly accompanied the refugees but neglected to show courtesy, respect and care to our colleagues, who are often those with whom we spend most of our time, our closest ‘neighbours’.

In the field or in administrative offices,



Eastern DRC: *The team in Masisi prepares to share the Eucharist with visiting JRS staff.*

accompaniment may be seen as the process of working together as a team, one complementing the other, striving to identify solutions to problems and offering mutual support to achieve the mission of JRS. In one way, all this sounds like so much human resources jargon: *teamwork, building a team in a*

workplace... Although we may have heard all this before, there is much to be said for returning to basics. To be productive and effective, we need one another's love, care and down-to-earth support.

Mutual respect

Mutual respect is key. For a team to accomplish the JRS

mission, each member must fully understand his or her role but, at the same time, respect the position occupied by others. This involves offering encouragement and dealing with shortcomings without being judgemental and without stepping on others' toes. Leaders especially are called to know the role of each member

Accompaniment is at the heart of our work, of our mission as JRS, but we cannot accompany if we are not accompanied first. This is what makes the difference: accepting to be accompanied. I am talking about another dimension here, the dimension of faith, to be accompanied by God first of all, and then concretely by others, by companions, collaborators, friends. You need to give time to be accompanied. Otherwise you'll reach a point when you can longer accompany but become like a machine, just supplying services. This is important also for our people, those we work with... We need to be present to our people first; we need to know how to accompany teams and collaborators, to give them the opportunity to express themselves in this way of accompanying others.

Nawras Sammour SJ, JRS Middle East

of the team and develop relationships of confidence with each one.

Doing my job as well as possible

Being a true companion at work means doing my job to the best of my abilities, as conscientiously and efficiently as possible. Within the team, I need to give as well as to receive. I cannot rely on others to go out of their way to do things for me without being prepared to do the same myself.

All are called to do their job as well as they can: be they guards, cooks, social workers or directors. The consequences can be serious if we don't. I remember one evening in Nimule, South Sudan, when we were sitting outside and chatting over a drink. Suddenly we heard gunshots – not unusual at

the time but the guard on duty ordered us to our rooms because he sensed danger. The next morning, we were shocked to hear that rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) had come looking for food, for the first time in the history of Nimule. Civilians were killed that night. Thankfully, the guard did his job well and protected us.

No room for negativity

In teams, there is no room for sabotage, jockeying for the best position, rumours and inefficiency that go against the spirit of friendship. None of us is perfect, so it is important to confront such behaviours and to dialogue in order to sort them out. One example: when I was country director for JRS, one project always sent reports with inconsistent data. During a field visit, a team member

shared the difficulties he faced to finalise these monthly reports on time because of the lack of cooperation of two colleagues.

This seemingly minor staff problem had a negative impact on the entire project because the incorrect reporting led to reduced funding. The three eventually ended up working well together after we discussed the problem and luckily the improved reporting led to our receiving adequate funding for the project the following year.

Stress and trauma

JRS often works in high-risk areas and with people who have been traumatised – not easy assignments. Having mechanisms for dealing with stress in the team is a practical and meaningful way of accompanying staff.

Doing things together, like playing games, watching a good film, gardening or organising social activities help to handle stress. In Dollo Ado, a remote place in southeast Ethiopia, the JRS team joins the staff of another organisation for volleyball and dinner once a week, something that has really helped both teams.

In Kenya's Kakuma camp, another remote place, our team members meet a counsellor to debrief every 10 weeks; this has proved to be crucial to energise staff especially after difficult moments.

Many people in JRS find it helpful to develop a contemplative space in their lives where they can sit in silence or share with another their feelings of joy, hope, sadness or discouragement.

Community life

Developing a sense of community within your team is crucially important for all projects and offices of JRS, and is an integral part of our 'self-care'. Shared activities such as mealtimes, praying or reflecting, playing indoor and outdoor games, and celebrating birthdays are quality moments of accompanying one another.

This is perhaps especially so for those of us who do not live and work in our own country. Since we are far from family and close friends, fellow team members often become our 'immediate family', especially in isolated areas and when living together in the same house. Living in a community can be a real source of support and encouragement to team members in tough areas.

When I worked in the field,

having a specific time for meals helped us maintain our sanity, especially in the evenings, when we often shared our frustrations, fears and disappointment as well as the successes of the day. We would tell stories and raise a few laughs. Simple as this may sound, these moments were rich ones that we cherished deeply.

An invitation to be compassionate

To accompany is an invitation to be compassionate. At times, team members face personal crises that may affect their work, such as personal illness, sickness in their families and bereavement. As companions, these are moments when we can show our solidarity by covering our colleagues' duties as much as possible and visiting or calling them to

express our sympathy. JRS Eastern Africa, for example, has established a tradition of sending a delegation to visit bereaved team members and to attend the burial of the deceased.

Being caring leaders

Leaders in JRS need to see accompaniment of their teams as part of their professional role. Just as JRS cares and advocates for refugees, it must never forget to care for its staff. Although combining accompaniment and executive roles is never easy, leaders who care personally for their teams will discover that their colleagues are happier, more productive and more creative.

There is no doubt that a just and equitable remuneration system boosts the morale of any team. But job satisfaction is not only about salaries and



Nepal: In a camp for Bhutanese refugees in Damak, the JRS project director, PS Amalraj SJ, presents a member of the teaching staff.

benefits. It depends as well on the creation of a work environment that enables the growth and self-realisation of each individual on the team. This requires a holistic approach to leadership that appreciates the efforts of every one and takes time to ask how each is doing and how his or her work is going.

In my years in JRS, I have realised just how necessary and important listening is. Sometimes, this is all that is needed. Giving team members space to vent frustration can be as important as solving their problem. Denying them that space only exacerbates their frustration. Listening is not just passive hearing; it is about giving your full attention to the person's story and feelings, to making him or her feel valued and part and parcel of the organisation. It has to



Indonesia: *JRS team members in Aceh, friends as well as colleagues.*

do with dignity. Real listening can be easier said than done in the midst of implementing many activities and meeting countless deadlines.

I have known many caring leaders in JRS. I believe that I have been able to commit myself to service in JRS for many years because I have been nurtured and supported both professionally and personally. This is the experience of many who work with JRS and it is a strength that needs to be continually nourished.

Solid human resources policies

The process of accompanying the team members starts from the moment they join the organisation until they leave. It includes having proper policies and procedures in place and implementing them, starting with a proper orientation.

Coaching and advising staff, in a way that boosts their morale and energy, is also part of accompaniment. Performance reviews are another crucial support mechanism because, if done properly, they can help to evaluate strengths, weaknesses and areas of improvement, and offer team members the chance to give their own feedback. For those leaving JRS, it is very important both for the person and for JRS to make time for debriefing, to learn about their experience and recommendations for improvement.

Inspired by Ignatian principles

Accompanying one another is not easy because we are human beings with our own limitations. However the challenges we face as we

seek to live out our mission of companionship should not derail us. Instead, they should encourage us to find even better ways of carrying out our mission.

Ultimately, unless we accompany one another, our work with refugees will be limited. Healthy, happy teams make JRS a stronger organisation. Our mission begins with one another as team members. Only when we become *friends in the Lord*, caring and loving one another with the right attitude of spirit and of heart, can our love then extend to the refugees we serve.

Atsu Andre Agbogan

JRS Eastern Africa



USA: Celebrating the Eucharist at the Mira Loma Detention Facility in Lancaster, California.

Accompaniment is **a sign of God's presence**

To accompany refugees is to affirm that God is present in human history, even its most tragic episodes.

JRS Charter

A call to people of all faiths
to witness to God's love
55

A practical sign of God's
presence
61

Sharing bread
69

An image of the church
77

Finding life in death
83

Our accompaniment affirms that God is present in human history. We experience this presence. God does not abandon us. As pastoral workers, we focus on this vision.

*Mark Raper SJ,
former JRS International Director*

Accompaniment is...



Syria: At St Vartan, a JRS centre later destroyed in the war.

a call to people of all faiths to
witness to God's love

Contributing to the healing of the world

Compassion, hope, justice, hospitality... the key values underlying the accompaniment we offer to refugees are shared by the world's different religions. In the following reflection, SHAINA ABER draws on her Jewish tradition to describe how the accompaniment element of the JRS mission encapsulates many of her own deeply held spiritual values. Reflecting on her family background and on her time with JRS, Shaina affirms that we contribute to the healing of our world by extending compassion and friendship to people who have suffered greatly. Even as we are confronted by moments of deep despair, we are challenged to recognize the presence of the Divine in the refugees' will to survive and in their capacity to open their hearts to kindness and love.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

? How does your own religious tradition speak of the importance of accompaniment in promoting rich human relationships?

? Has your experience of accompaniment in JRS helped you to understand better your own spiritual values and yearnings?

? Where have you recognized the "presence of the Divine" in your work in JRS?

There is something both inspiring and heartrending in the struggles of refugees.

Several years ago, on an advocacy visit to the programs of JRS Ecuador, I interviewed a Colombian refugee, a beautiful young woman who had suffered unspeakable crimes at the hands of paramilitaries and human traffickers.

She spoke of how her struggles to make peace with her experiences had reinvigorated her spiritual life. "I was tortured by images of my attackers. Tortured by the

question of why I had lived, when my father, brother and son had all died. For a year I fell into drinking and crying. I did not want to live. I felt dirty. I felt used, I felt unworthy of love. It was on a visit to Jesuit Refugee Service that I met a woman who invited me to attend Mass with her. And I went to the Mass, and I felt love again: I who had not been to Mass since I was a child! I listened with new ears to the story of the holy family. And I saw with new eyes that my life may yet have a purpose."



Colombia: In Soacha, a suburb of Bogotá that is home to thousands of internally displaced people.

Listening to this young woman, I was reminded of a passage from the American author John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, a quotation that I believe captures accurately the experiences of many refugees: "People in flight from terror – strange

things happen to them, some bitterly cruel and some so beautiful that the faith is refired forever."

As an observant Jewish woman I was asked on more than a few occasions how I came to work for a Christian, Catholic organization like Jesuit

Refugee Service. In explaining what drew me to work for JRS, I usually begin by describing how the accompaniment mission of JRS spoke to me on a spiritual level. It was this aspect of JRS' work – this mandate to provide not only legal, health, educational and advocacy-related services to refugees but to also offer friendship and be a witness to our common humanity and to the eternal and unconditional nature of God's love – that was evocative of my own faith tradition and family history.

The experience of the persecuted, of refugees, of the trafficked and the dispossessed was central to my family's history and folklore. Stories of struggle and perseverance, reliance and redemption peppered my childhood. My parents, who met as activists and

In his last talk to the Jesuits in Thailand, Arrupe pleaded for Jesuits to pray constantly, to be guided by the Spirit... Refugees' voices are often unheard, unheeded, effectively silenced. Yet they are the gentle breeze, the still small voice of the presence of God of which we read in the story of Elijah. The one who accompanies refugees must know how to listen to the unheard, to the softly spoken... The unheard are everywhere.

*Mark Raper SJ, former JRS
International Director*

educators during the civil rights movement in the United States of the 1960s and 70s, came from vastly different religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. But they were bound together by a common understanding that their place in the world was beside those struggling for justice and human rights. As different as their families appeared on the surface, both my mother and my father had been taught that faith had strengthened persecuted and oppressed people for generations. From the ashes of painful histories, their parents' faiths had inspired them to persevere.

My reality was far removed from the Belarusian *shtetl*, the segregated *bayou* and the sugar plantation. Nevertheless, as a child I was taught to recognize that my faith tradition requires me not

only to subscribe to a set of intellectual beliefs, but also, and perhaps more importantly, calls me to act in accordance with the highest ideals of my faith. It is through contributing to the holiness and healing of the world that we live out our faith tradition. This Jewish concept of *tikkun-olam* suggests humanity's co-responsibility with our Creator to heal, repair and transform the world.

Likewise, as JRS team members, we are called to witness to God's presence, not through proselytizing or seeking to convert refugees (who come to us from diverse faith traditions), but by offering compassion and friendship. Frequently we are called upon to accompany individuals who have suffered the worst forms of inhuman cruelty, acts that can deprive the victims of their



Venezuela: JRS team members in a village near the Colombian border visit a family who fled Colombia after their father was killed by guerrillas and they continued to receive death threats.

sense of humanity, and can shatter their faith in God or their trust in human kindness. In listening to the most grievous stories of violence and brutality, we are challenged to see God's presence in moments of near complete despair. As we accompany refugees in their journeys, those who work for JRS seek to be the human and physical embodiment of an empathetic, loving and eternal God.

Refugee stories, stories of people forced to move, to leave behind all they have known to seek asylum in foreign places, are ubiquitous in human history. They are both biblical and contemporary. They form some of the most fundamental fabric of the story of the founding of my own nation, and they are a vivid representation of the human ability to survive and rebuild

even after experiencing the worst brutality our world has to offer.

I recall my first visit to an internally displaced community served by JRS outside of San Pablo, Colombia. After three days of hearing haunting stories from displaced Colombians and NGO colleagues – stories of guerrillas gathering community leaders together and indiscriminately shooting them; reports of paramilitaries slicing open the bellies of women far along in their pregnancy to demonstrate their brutality and to demand cooperation from a local village; accounts of Colombian army brigades kidnapping and killing civilians whose bodies would later appear dressed up as guerrilla militants – we arrived at a farming cooperative where JRS volunteers (agronomists,

biologists and sociologists) were living and working with a community of displaced people.

An older woman, a grandmother and leader of the community, greeted me with an enthusiastic hug, warm and open despite the trauma she and her family had suffered at the hands of both right-wing paramilitaries and leftist guerrillas. “Now we live here, working to rebuild,” she pronounced at a gathering of the community, surrounded by her grandchildren, children and neighbours. “Here we have begun a school for our children. We did that on our own. Here you have helped us to build our homes, raise crops and animals. It gets hard sometimes, when the planes come, when the army comes, when the groups come. But we can count on you. We are

thankful for your support.”

At times of intense human suffering, the presence of God can be difficult to recognize. Yet it is in the stories and struggles of refugees – in their ability to renew and reshape their lives after horrendous losses, in their will to survive and forge ahead, in their capacity to open their hearts once again to human kindness and love – that I have recognized the presence of the Divine.

Shaina Aber

JRS USA (2006 – 2012)

Accompaniment is...



Eastern DRC: Sr Regina Missanga with Tuliza, in a wheelchair bought by JRS.

a practical sign of God's presence

Pastoral accompaniment as a sign of God's presence

Faith plays a pivotal role in the experience of refugees. Ignoring this reality would be tantamount to ignoring the huge potential of faith to help refugees cope resiliently with the hardships they face, and to look beyond the present to a future of hope. While respecting the faith of all refugees, JRS offers pastoral services for Catholic refugees in response to need, distinctly from other services. RICHARD DWYER says that for many refugees, the presence of a priest is a symbol and a practical sign of God's presence. Another important point he makes is that accompanying refugees involves preparing them to stand alone, to give them the time, training and skills they need to be good catechists (in this story), teachers, administrators or whatever role they take on for the good of their community. Finally, Richard shows that accompaniment is often expressed in very practical actions, by going out of our way to meet urgent needs that no one else can meet at the time.



South Sudan: Richard Dwyer SJ in the chapel in Lobone.

A Jesuit priest, I arrived in Lobone, South Sudan, in 2010 eager to begin my work as a JRS pastoral minister there. The long war had ended recently; the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement made travel safer and refugees and internally displaced people had begun to return home. In this context, I discovered that in the process of accompanying refugees, listening as well as giving immediate practical responses to their needs, were both vitally important.

After a few weeks I began to form some idea of the pastoral needs of the people. I decided to call a meeting of all the catechists from the villages of Lobone, Omere, Kicenga, Palwar and Lerwa. I listened to the advice of the head catechist, Christopher, who was the only formally

trained catechist in the whole area, and held the meeting at Kicenga, which was a halfway meeting point between Lobone and Lerwa. I did a lot of listening at that meeting, and I learned that listening would be a key part of my experience of accompanying, because it helped me to understand the people of Lobone, to go where they lived and to share their lives.

There had been no priest present in many of the villages around Lobone for the past 10 to 20 years. The group of catechists unanimously agreed that I should draw up a schedule for visiting the villages in rotation so that I would celebrate Mass in each village roughly every five to six weeks. I came to understand how important the presence of a priest was as a symbol and a practical sign of



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- ? Why do you think listening to the people we serve in JRS is an important and worthwhile part of our work?
- ? It is sometimes said that good pastoral leadership consists of acting as well as listening, just as Jesus not only preached to but also healed many people. Do you think that JRS acted appropriately in the case of the five children who were bitten? Would you have done anything differently?
- ? Taking the Gospel as our inspiration and Jesus as our model, ask yourself why everyone matters in pastoral ministry? *Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?* (Luke 15:4)

God's presence, especially in providing people with access to the sacraments of the Eucharist, baptism, confession and marriage. The 'chapels' where I would celebrate these sacraments and say Mass usually turned out to be a mango tree with a makeshift table serving as a simple altar. When Mass was finished, we continued the celebration with a simple meal.

Travelling the roads of South Sudan was always difficult but the rainy season often made them almost impassable. Distance measured in kilometres meant little. The round trip to Lerwa from Lobone – about 80km – required seven or eight hours.

On Christmas Eve, 24 December 2011, Gunnar Bauer SJ, my pastoral assistant, our driver Julius and I set out for the village

of Palwar and arrived, as planned, around 5pm. Just as we reached the chapel, a terrible sound of tearing metal came from our land cruiser. We were astonished to find our rear left wheel had come out about half a metre from its normal position. Amazingly it had not fallen off. If it had come off anywhere along our journey, it could have resulted in serious injury for any or all of us. Realising that we would likely be spending the night in the village, I began preparing for the Christmas liturgy in a state of confusion.

Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (Mark 9:36-37).

As part of our celebration, we were to baptize 25 babies. We finally began the celebration around 5.30pm as dusk began to fade to nightfall. I was struck by the atmosphere in the chapel. There was a wonderful sense of joy coming from the entire congregation but especially from the mothers of the children who were about to be baptized. They had been well prepared for the ceremony. I felt very pleased that Omal Patrick, the catechist in Palwar, had been able to instil such a sense of celebration in the mothers. He and another trainee catechist had been sponsored by JRS to undertake catechetical training in Gulu, northern Uganda. They were scheduled to graduate in a year's time, the first



South Sudan: Celebrating the Eucharist in the chapel of Lobone.

Sudanese to graduate from the Catechist Training Centre in over 20 years.

The entire ceremony was conducted in candlelight in the grass-roofed chapel supported by wooden poles. I thought to myself, how appropriate on this day, of all the days of the year, to be so close to what the surroundings of the stable in Bethlehem must have been 2,000 years ago. It was not difficult to speak about what we celebrate at Christmas time: that God, in Jesus, was born as a little baby just like the 25 babies there that evening. This is how God chose to come among us.

I asked all in the chapel how they saw God, what their image of God was that evening. One person suggested God was the creator. I walked over and knelt down in front of one of the

mothers and her child and I simply said, “Here is our God, Emmanuel, God-with-us, as a little baby.” Then I asked, “Is anyone afraid of any of these little babies?” Nearly all those present shook their heads, responding with a definitive “No”. I said, “My friends, my brothers and sisters, neither do we have any reason to fear approaching God, because this is our God, born as a little baby for us, this day.”

As we conducted the baptisms, the atmosphere became even more charged with joy. I deeply believe that such joy was present because somehow on that night, the Christ – the child from Bethlehem – was re-born in an unknown village in South Sudan among ululating women and singing children. It was the best Christmas gift anyone could have wished

for, beautifully simple and simply beautiful. How did such a wonderful event come about? The JRS pastoral team was there to accompany the Catholic community of Palwar and to help baptise the children of young mothers and fathers who had attended the catechetical classes for a number of weeks. In a real way our presence as pastoral ministers allowed God to be present. Jesus puts this so succinctly in St Matthew’s Gospel: *For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them* (18:20).

A different kind of accompaniment

About a month after the Christmas celebration, a dog infected with rabies bit five young children in Lobone. There is nearly no infrastructure or services in Lobone, other

than a small clinic run by four Ugandan healthcare workers for expectant mothers and the treatment of routine diseases such as malaria. The clinic had no electricity and was unable to refrigerate the live vaccines needed to treat the children.

When I went to the clinic to find out what treatment had been given to the children, the young Ugandan nurse said they had only been able to dress their wounds, as they had no other treatment. If the children did not receive the anti-rabies vaccine, she continued, some or even all would die.

I decided on the spot that JRS would have to bring the children to Uganda if they were to have any chance of surviving. Most of them lived close to staff members of JRS, so we sent out word that we would bring them to Uganda



South Sudan: *Lobone, a beautiful but remote valley.*

the next day, together with a parent or guardian.

The following day all the children, their legs heavily bandaged, and the adults accompanying them came to the JRS compound. After two hours on the road, we

reached St Joseph's Hospital in Kitgum, only to be told they had no vaccine, and decided to travel for two more hours to St Mary's Hospital in Gulu. We arrived in Gulu just as darkness fell. I was overjoyed to hear the doctor say the vaccine

was available and the children could stay in the hospital until they received the first shot. She assured me we were well within the treatment timeframe and that the children would need three separate shots altogether.

When was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you? ... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me (Matthew 25:39-40).

Over the next week the children received the complete set of treatments. All made a full recovery. I felt extremely happy to have been a part of accompanying the children and restoring them to full health, and immensely proud that JRS was able to give them the help they needed.

As I reflected on this episode, I am reminded of a scene from Steven Spielberg's film, *Schindler's List*. Oskar Schindler is given a gold ring by all the Jewish workers from his factory whom he managed to save from death during World War II. The ring was inscribed in Hebrew with a

quotation from the Talmud, a sacred Jewish text: "To save a single life, is to save the world entire." One who preserves a single human soul is regarded as the preserver of the whole world.

Richard Dwyer SJ

JRS Eastern Africa

Accompaniment is...



USA: The Mira Loma Detention Facility in California.

sharing bread

Accompanying refugees in the Eucharist

Drawn from his years of pastoral work in Uganda, South Africa and Kenya, GARY SMITH's reflection vividly describes how celebrating the Eucharist can be an act of accompaniment for Christian refugees. Celebrating Mass in refugee settings – with song and dance, drama and dialogue – the Good News of the Gospel is broken open, faith is expressed, and God's people are accompanied. Likewise, Christian members of JRS find in the Eucharist the accompaniment needed to continue being present to and supporting the refugee communities they serve.

I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty (John 6:35).

It begins here. It always begins here. At the Eucharist. Here the individual, with his or her community, touches those sacred inner regions of the heart where one is fed, in which faith is claimed and from which one is empowered to touch the world. In celebrating the Eucharist – an act of accompaniment – in the countless locations of its ministry, JRS brings forward both the opportunity for



refugees to be transformed by the intimacy of Christ and to bring a God-centred transformation to the world they live in. It has always been so. In the Eucharist we are nourished and become the yeast that will embolden the world.

**Accompanying the heart of faith:
JRS, Rhino camp, Uganda**

On Christmas Eve, as darkness came, I celebrated Mass in the refugee village of Agulupi in Rhino camp, northern Uganda. It was a hot night, and there were maybe 70 people in the little thatch-covered chapel. Dust covered everything and I could smell the sweat of the people who were crowded cheerfully into the room. A kerosene lamp hung on a wooden pillar to the right of the altar. Huge moths periodically crashed into the lamp, and once in a while, I

could hear the slap of a hand as a mosquito made its move. The village people sang the liturgy's rich music, and 20 grade-school girls danced around the altar.

Agulupi was home to many Sudanese who had fled to Uganda via Congo. After communion the singers began a Christmas song in Lingala, the language of eastern Congo, which featured an imitation of the wailing baby Jesus. The dancers sighed while folding their forearms over their foreheads in a gesture of weeping. It cut straight to my heart: a cry heard down through the centuries from God-become-human; and, too, an echo of the wailing of refugees who have endured a long road of flight and suffering. As with that birth in a barn, there is a sense – in all this stinking



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- ? In your experience working with refugees, have you witnessed the pastoral expression of God's presence or absence? If so, how?
- ? Reflecting on your own religious tradition, have you ever prayed with refugees or been invited by refugees to pray with them? Did you feel this brought you closer together?
- ? In his reflection Gary Smith states, "Christ comes to us in the Eucharist, feeds us and accompanies us." How could these words help you create a place in your daily life where you accompany refugees in their faith and in their suffering?

Accompaniment is an essential element of both our mission and of our methodology. To accompany means to be a companion. We are companions of Jesus, so we wish to be companions of those with whom he prefers to be associated, the poor and the outcast. Etymologically this word companion means one who shares bread. It is an expression of the commitment made in the Eucharist.

Mark Raper SJ, former JRS International Director

poverty – of hope being reborn and faith embraced once again. I needed to be there, to accompany the hearts of this little community in their Christmas hope. After Mass, the people, flashing smiles and tired eyes, sang traditional Christmas songs in their mother tongues.

Accompanying the expression of faith: JRS, Kakuma camp, Kenya

Like one of those huge steam-driven piston trains, wheels whirling, St Stephen's chapel roared – full speed ahead – into the final thanksgiving hymn of the Easter Sunday liturgy. Celebrating Mass, I was swept along in the wake of that last song, led by the Rwandan and Burundian singers and dancers. It was a bubbling, overflowing pot of spectacular formation – dancing children, ululating women, rhythmic hand

clapping, and an irrepressible singing congregation of several nationalities that, with each verse, increased its volume and that brand of joy which mysteriously attends the African Church. It was electrifying. Always is.

Here was expression of faith: contained in the moments described above. JRS was present, affirming it, accompanying it. But it went further. It occurred as we broke open the scripture in drama.

I learned early in my time in Africa that homilies, in translation or not, can become lost, and become the occasion of those awful moments when the celebrant knows that people are looking but not hearing. Words signifying nothing. But if one invites the congregation to create a drama to illustrate the Gospel then one is on the way to

breaking open the Gospel, like cracking an egg. And this is because the people do it, expressing in their own way their understanding of the Word. Don't just talk about the meaning of the parable of the Prodigal Son, bring forward a father or mother, have someone play their wayward son. Let them dialogue themselves right up to the clincher when the prodigal son, having blown everything in Nairobi, falls on his knees and asks for forgiveness. The long-suffering mother of the son forgives, raises up her son and tells everyone we are going to have a party, my son was dead, now look: he is alive. All applaud, lots of smiles. I ask the mom, why she forgave. She looks at me in disbelief: well, because he is my son. And to the son: why did she forgive you:

Because I am my mother's son; I shall change. I ask the congregation if they approve. There is dialogue, commentary on the dramatic expression of what has transpired. They get it. Better than I get it. At that point it is not a stretch to point out the connection between the forgiving heart of the creature and the forgiving heart of the Creator. People love to express their faith in drama. The Eucharist becomes the moment when that happens. Expression of the faith is a tough nut for the church to crack but it can be done with drama in unity with all the other Eucharistic expressions: prayer, dance, song, gestures.

**Accompanying those who
accompany: JRS, South Africa/
Zimbabwe border**

Thandi, the JRS project director, wept as she tried to

utter – at the prayers of the faithful – her grief over a young Zimbabwean woman, whom she had interviewed yesterday. The woman, a mother of one young child, her husband murdered in Zimbabwe, was robbed and raped as she came into South Africa through the treacherous bush terrain between the two countries. Somehow, broken and bruised, she made it to our JRS office. Thandi's lament: "How can we help, how can we be present to her, how can I ever forgive the monsters who prey on our people? How do we find hope? It is why we are here, now, at this daily Eucharist."

Every morning during the week, the staff of the JRS project in Makhado, South Africa (about 80 kilometres south of the Zimbabwean border), would have Mass.

There were seven of us: four South Africans and two Zimbabweans, myself. Frequently the prayers were spontaneous in Venda or Shona. The Eucharist became an instrument of accompaniment and nourishment for all of us as we prepared to launch into the intense days when often hundreds of Zimbabweans would arrive, fleeing the disintegration and persecution and nightmare of their country. It was not just a matter of interviewing and assessing, of helping them move on to a job and relatives in Johannesburg or Durban or Pretoria. It often involved intense and difficult moments with people who had lost everything, who were strangers in a strange country, who had been ambushed by a bunch of thugs on the way south. They had lost everything

except their life: shoes, money, documents and critical contact phone numbers. And, of course, their fragile sense of self-worth and dignity. Such moments demanded enormous presence and strength of vision from a staff. It was at the daily Eucharist where those who accompany were nourished; we were accompanied, if you will, by Jesus, who had called us to serve the least of the brothers and sisters on that tortured frontier where the JRS office was located.

Accompanying love and suffering: JRS, Adjumani, northern Uganda

Near the conclusion of Mass at Obilokogno, a Madi-speaking chapel in a village refugee camp, a woman was carried up to me just after communion had been distributed. She



South Africa: Gary Smith SJ celebrates the Eucharist with his team in Makhado, Limpopo, on the border with Zimbabwe.

had suffered from a seizure disorder and went down as she wobbled her way back from communion to her place in the earthen-floor, thatched-covered chapel. She was in a catatonic post-seizure state, brought to me in the loving and care-full arms of the surrounding Christians. Their

look was one of concern for her, and – deeper – the look of a people who had endured so much punishment in their flight from Sudan and seen the suffering of their brothers and sisters.

I anointed Rachel, praying for God's healing and blessed her in her mother tongue. She

relaxed and her caregiver took her outside, where she was gently laid in a blanket and, a strong young man on each corner of the blanket, carried to the nearest medical clinic a kilometre away. Here the Eucharist again accompanies, being the occasion where people can bring their sick.

And bring them with love.
The Eucharist is a moment
in time where individuals and
community can share their love
and suffering with others; for
refugees are prey to sickness
in their unstable condition.
Some of the suffering of course
is physical and some of it is the
sickness that can pounce on
the soul in the dark uncertainty
of daily life in refugee camps.

*And remember, I am with
you always, to the end of the
age* (Matthew 28:20).

Christ comes to us in the
Eucharist, feeds us and
accompanies us. We are fed
and strengthened and, just
as we are strengthened in the
power and love of Christ, we
accompany refugee hearts in
their search and affirmation of
their faith, in their expression
of faith, in the daily hope and
suffering and love that attends
their life. Finally, the Eucharist

accompanies those who serve
refugees. The Eucharist is the
centripetal force that takes
one deep inside to relationship
with the Heart of God, and
it is the centrifugal force that
sends all out, to accompany,
to serve and to advocate with
the message of that Heart,
manifested in Jesus Christ.

Gary Smith SJ

JRS Africa (2000-2012)

Accompaniment is...



Papua New Guinea: West Papuan refugees in Daru-Kiunga Diocese.

an image of the church

'If the People of God moves, the Church moves'

The church has always been close to people on the move in different ways. For the early Christian community, hospitality was a fundamental attitude and way of life. Throughout the centuries, hostels offered shelter to travellers and pilgrims, with special concern for the vulnerable. Today, ministry to refugees is a key missionary field, where the Good News of Jesus' love and compassion is proclaimed. Recalling the insightful comment of JRS founder Pedro Arrupe, "If the People of God moves, the Church moves", AGBONKHIANMEGHE OROBATOR highlights the close relationship between the church and displaced people. God does not abandon his people: even in exile, he is present, accompanying them all the way. This awareness can change our understanding of God. He, who walked with the refugees of the biblical Exodus in search of a land free from slavery, continues to walk with today's refugees. In accompanying refugees we, like God, "pitch our tent" among them and become a living sign that the church has not forgotten them.

Ugandan theologian Peter Kanyandago once asked a poignant question: "What is the church on a continent where 20 million people live in exile?" Theologically speaking, I believe that the experience of displacement sheds light on the meaning of the church. This became clear to me a few years ago when I visited refugee camps in eastern Africa. Although the primary purpose of my visit was to

collect data for my doctoral dissertation, the stories and testimonies of the refugees who were accompanied by JRS confirmed the truth of the claim that refugees embody an image of the church as the people of God. The roots of this understanding run deep in the Scripture.

Christian theological appreciation of displacement draws on events, stories and narratives from the Old

and New Testaments. The experience of migration, exile and deportation shaped the covenantal relationship between the people of Israel and their God. From Abraham's migration (Genesis 12) to Joseph and Mary's flight into Egypt in order to save the life of their newborn son, Jesus (Matthew 2:13-15), God reveals himself as a God who constantly accompanies his people. I remember a



Uganda: Celso Romanin SJ hearing confession in Adjumani back in the nineties.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

? How do I, in practical ways, demonstrate my accompaniment of refugees? Can I see myself as a sign of God's deep presence among his people of all faiths?

? The World Council of Churches said: "the faith journeys of people who suffer uprooting are a heritage of the whole church." What can the religions of today learn from the witness of uprooted people?

? If accompaniment is an image of the church, what actions might we encourage local Christian communities to take to welcome and support the refugees in their midst?

? What are some of the ways in which refugees could participate in and enrich the life of JRS and of local Christian communities?

For the church, the refugees are a constant reminder that the people of God is essentially a pilgrim people, never settled, always on the move, always searching, always reaching out further.

JRS directors, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 1985

conversation with a catechist, Juvenal Niboye, in Lukole camp in Tanzania, about the theological interpretation of being a refugee. He said:

“Our experience of exile is like that of the Israelites in Egypt. God chooses them as his people... They belong to God who will lead them home.” For him, being a refugee did not mean God had abandoned him; rather, he believed God was *present* in his experience and God will *accompany* him home. Displacement and exile do not dispossess refugees of the *presence* and *accompaniment* of God.

From a faith perspective, displacement is not merely about isolated people moving from place to place; it is the church, in its original sense as *people* of God, which has moved and has been displaced. The people on the move are

the church, the people of God, in the particular context of displacement, migration and exile. The JRS founder, Fr Pedro Arrupe SJ, captured this idea concisely when he stated: “If the People of God moves, the Church moves.” Arrupe’s statement establishes a fundamental connection between ‘church’ and ‘people’, no matter the socio-economic or political situation of the latter. To say that the church moves when the people move clearly suggests that the church does not exist apart from the people. So strong is this link that the actual condition or situation of the people reflects the locus and identity of the Christian community. This explains why, perhaps, the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People proposed the radical idea that not only

should priests and bishops visit their people in refugee camps and settlements; they should actually *follow* them into exile. The idea that bishops and priests *follow* refugees into exile clearly demonstrates the reality of accompaniment as a useful metaphor or image of the church.

When I visited Kakuma camp, Bishop Harrington, who at the time was the bishop of Lodwar, used the imagery of the nomadic lifestyle of the Turkana people to describe the identity of the church. “The church is in constant movement,” he said; “it has become a nomadic church, displaced here and there.” Clearly, to be a refugee in the harsh terrain of Turkana is a traumatic and neuralgic experience. Yet, from a faith perspective, the idea of ‘nomadism’ relates to the

essence of the church. In other words, in the context of this reflection, refugees embody the meaning of the church as a pilgrim people, as the JRS directors noted in a meeting in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in 1985: “For the church, the refugees are a constant reminder that the people of God is essentially a pilgrim people, never settled, always on the move, always searching, always reaching out further.” The World Council of Churches makes a similar point by affirming that “the faith journeys of people who suffer uprooting are a heritage of the whole church. As our understanding of God’s love has been illustrated throughout the history of the church by Old Testament stories of exile, so too must the church today receive the word of God through the witness of uprooted people.”

However, it is not enough to merely reiterate the principle that refugees remind us of the pilgrim nature of the church. To understand the phenomenon of refugees in this light generates ethical and moral responsibilities of solidarity, hospitality and accompaniment. My focus is on accompaniment.

Accompaniment demands presence; it does not make sense from a distance. An authentic and living Christian community is one in which nobody is left behind; it is a place of ‘*with-ness*’ and ‘being with’ – side by side and face to face – where we accompany one another as followers (and after the example) of Jesus Christ. In this context, accompaniment enables the Christian community in exile to deepen the awareness of its identity as a living

embodiment of the church and a community of *witness*. In his 2001 message on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, Pope John Paul II made the important point that “History shows that in those cases wherein the Catholic faithful were accompanied during their move to other countries, they did not only preserve their faith, but also found a fertile soil to deepen it, personalize it and bear witness to it through their lives.”

Over the years that I have been associated with JRS, I have come across some striking examples of accompaniment and presence. I recall a diocesan priest from Burundi, Fr Leonidas Njebarikanuye, who lived in Kanembwa camp, Tanzania; the Jesuits who lived in Rhino camp, Uganda; and the SMA (Society of African Missions)

priests who lived in Benaco camp, Tanzania. In reality, it is not physical proximity that matters; what matters is the quality of our presence to and accompaniment of displaced people as the pilgrim church of God. “The mere presence of a sister or a priest (or a lay woman or man) in a camp is a sign to the refugee of the church’s presence, walking that lonely path too; it is a sign that the church cares” (*Refugees are people*, Simon E. Smith and Joseph G. Donders).

In the final analysis, the awareness that accompaniment of refugees embodies the image and identity of the church as the pilgrim people of God transforms our understanding of God – “God, who walked with the refugees of the Exodus in search of a land free

of any slavery is still walking with today’s refugees,” in the words of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People. Here, there is something profoundly evocative of the Incarnation. The catechist, Niboye, said to me, “God has pitched his *cahute* or *blindé* (‘hut’) in the midst of his displaced people.” I believe that when we accompany refugees we pitch tent in the midst of God’s people. The veteran JRS pastoral worker, Fr Gary Smith SJ, calls this experience “a mystical theology of presence among the people”.

Agbonkhianmeghe E.

Orobator SJ

Jesuit Provincial
Province of Eastern Africa

Accompaniment is...



finding life in death

'Whites don't cry for blacks'

LUIS FERNANDO GÓMEZ GUTIÉRREZ describes his deeply moving experience of accompanying an Afro-Colombian community in Buenaventura, Colombia. Drawing on the Christian three-day celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus, he reflects on how JRS' humble accompaniment of communities in crisis can be a real sign of God's powerful love, through which we are invited to discover life even amid tragedy and death.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

? What is it exactly that moves you inwardly, to be in JRS, with the individuals and the communities that you accompany?

? To what extent is 'death' found among the reality of those you accompany?

? On the other hand, how can you recognize 'life in death' and the message of new life in the daily reality of the refugees?

? What have you learned from your accompaniment in such situations? How do you feel God is speaking to you?

First day... Community participation

29 June 2008: A wonderful Sunday afternoon. Children ran in every possible direction on the football pitch and community grounds of San Francisco district in Buenaventura, Valle del Cauca. Men and women bustled around, preparing activities to celebrate life as a community, with music, singing and laughter. It was an occasion worth celebrating: the closure of an intensive process of formation and exchange of ideas, of identifying ways to live in such an adverse environment.

Buenaventura has always been a tough place, with a harsh climate, high temperatures and stifling humidity. Throughout history, leaders have tended to forget about this region, except for its harbour, a crucial entry and exit point. Since colonial times, the harbour of Buenaventura has been the world's gateway to Colombia and the country's gateway to globalisation; a gateway built on exclusion and structural violence, on the kind of development that ignores the human element.

Today Buenaventura is a fierce battleground of guerrillas, paramilitary and governmental



Colombia: Children performing in a cultural activity in Lleras neighbourhood, Buenaventura.

forces, of strongmen and drug dealers, all fighting one another and each other's allies, but mostly manipulated by external actors. In the annals of Colombia's unofficial history, however, Buenaventura has also been a place of revival for black communities, a space earned by the sweat of men and women who sailed the long rivers and carved out a living space in semi-harmony with the jungle, wresting ground from the mangrove swamps to build entire settlements.

That afternoon, as we celebrated the life of black communities, brothers and sisters drew on their shared history to look to the future, agreeing on an action plan that would serve as the roadmap for a resurgent people. I spent the entire afternoon with my video camera, capturing the

joy of women in pink t-shirts, proud leaders in the process, and talented boys and girls dancing in traditional costume, bearing witness to the irrepressible strength of joint effort. I filmed faces, smiles, rhythmic movements, applause and speeches. At the time, I could never have imagined I was witnessing the last public words of Doña Martha Cecilia, 'Chila', a displaced black woman who had led this and many other initiatives in San Francisco district.

Just as the light of the sun that accompanied us that day disappeared, I received a call from the director of the organisation that had enabled the entire process. Deeply distressed, she told me Chila had been killed just a few minutes after the end of the day's activity. Her dead body lay on the football pitch.

People were paralysed with fear; nobody dared go to her. I wasn't far away and all I dared was to make a couple of calls to the authorities and local people who might safely be able to help. Death was back in San Francisco and other districts of Buenaventura just when it had seemed the killers were yielding to the peaceful strength of the community.

Second day... Sharing tragedy

In the late afternoon, in the chapel of the Franciscans, a few metres away from the place where anonymous assassins had killed Chila, her family and friends, known and unknown, gathered to bid her farewell and to share their pain and indignation. Among the unknown were three of us *paisas*, as they call anyone who is not black around here, vaguely acknowledged as

"the Jesuits" and friends in a joint project. The night before, we had prepared a short presentation with the pictures and videos taken that Sunday afternoon, when we thought they would serve a different purpose during a joyful celebration.

In a room behind the altar, we discussed with members of different organisations what kind of words we should use, who would speak and what to say, and whether it would be sensible to deliver a clear message about human rights in the presentation we had prepared. In that chapel, we felt the despair, indignation and pain caused by injustice and the mystery of death. However, from the perspective of faith, we also recognised the risen Christ in that lifeless body behind the altar.

The Afro-Colombian



Colombia: Chila's funeral in Buenaventura.

people of Buenaventura do not stand silently in the presence of death. Music, drums, movement and alcohol accompany death, for life and death are not separate but parts of the same reality. There is death in life itself. With the melody of the music, the penetrating drumbeat, the cadence of the poems recited for Chila, and that strange mixture of life and death, my heart burst into tears. What exactly was I doing here, why had life confronted me with this reality, what could we offer these people, what lessons could we learn? What was God telling us in our desolation?

As tears rolled down our cheeks, Don Mario, a leader and poet from Buenaventura's La Gloria district, approached us, shook our hands and said emphatically: "Whites don't

cry for blacks,” suggesting with these words that we had become brothers of the community. And so, a lasting friendship was born.

Thinking back, this moment is one of many gathered throughout my work with JRS, which I carry within me. There are other memories as well: a very young woman with her children, weeping for their murdered husband and father as they realised they must flee to survive; a peasant leader, living in a region disputed by armed groups, helpless before the power of bullets; a group of women, organised to defend their children’s right to education, health and food in the mountains of Colombia, terrified of the helicopters that skim over their village firing indiscriminately against guerrilla forces on the ground.

These images have stayed

with me simply because I was there, accompanying that young woman at her husband’s funeral, making her journey less difficult; spending the entire afternoon listening intently to the peasant leader, trying to understand his frustration; sharing the women’s fear as we heard the helicopters firing close to the school we were in.

In these moments of accompaniment, I felt the presence of God in a rare and new way, just as I had experienced it at Chila’s funeral. In sharing the stories and lives of these people, I was no longer an outsider, but an insider.

Third day... Working together – Life reborn!

Months after the funeral of Chila, thanks to the seeds of life born from that celebration

of death and to Don Mario, we found ourselves sitting under a tree at the Matía Mulumba centre in Buenaventura, to discuss possible ways to give practical form to our friendship.

Since then, our relationship with the community has evolved in many ways. The rural district of La Gloria continues to face many struggles. Situated on the outskirts of the city of Buenaventura, it is a violent place with a high concentration of displaced people. Since 2009, JRS Colombia has been accompanying the La Gloria community in its struggle to win respect for the collective rights of black communities and to prevent forced displacement and child recruitment. The action plan, in which Chila had taken part, remains a point of reference for their shared life. The danger is

still there and rises each day like a giant threatening to crush small local initiatives.

Not much has changed in reality. Nevertheless, there is *La Glorita*, a small farming project, now run by the community alone, which had begun as a symbol of collaboration between the community and several organisations, including JRS.

That afternoon, as we agonised over Chila's death, we found renewed life in the courage that arose from that very injustice. Death is not eternal, life is. After three days, Christ shows us death does not have the last word. Even in moments of despair, when everything seems lost, tenacity and faith in what we believe to be central to life is what makes people start all over again with greater strength and clarity. Even though it may be hard

to believe, solid processes of cooperation have emerged from very dark experiences.

Years after we started to accompany the community of *La Glorita*, a Canadian Jesuit visited us in Buenaventura. I told him about the difficulties the people faced: pressure from armed groups, threats, internal community rivalry, expanding mining interests that were breaking up local organisations, and other problems that made us wonder if our planned 'projects' would ever work out as expected. The Jesuit gently reminded me that the ultimate aim of our support, as well as the challenge facing the community, was summed up in the kind of love we share with them through our accompaniment and service.

It is in the light of this love that I can see how the

projects, strategies and actions, implemented by JRS around the world, respond to the call of God to serve. I find the mission of JRS to be based on a consistent understanding of humanitarian response in tough environments and with people who have suffered disproportionately and unfairly. It is a concrete way to find life in death.

**Luis Fernando Gómez
Gutiérrez**

JRS Latin America



Malta: An immigrant disembarks from an Armed Forces of Malta (AFM) patrol boat after arriving to Valletta's Marsamxett Harbour. Together with another 100 African immigrants, she was rescued by the AFM after their vessel encountered problems.

Accompaniment is **solidarity**

“Solidarity is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.”

John Paul II

Hospitality in action

93

Bearing witness

103

Being present in seemingly
hopeless situations

111

Hospitality in itself isn't enough. It's not enough to give a sandwich if it isn't accompanied by the possibility of learning to stand on one's own feet. Charity that does not change the situation of the poor isn't enough. True mercy, which God gives and teaches us, calls for justice, so that the poor can find a way out of poverty.

Pope Francis, visiting Centro Astalli, JRS Italy, in 2013

Accompaniment is...



Chad: Goz Amir refugee camp, near Koukou.

hospitality in action

Hospitality fosters reconciliation

In accompanying refugees, we are called to make them feel truly welcome through concrete gestures of solidarity, so that they may find a place where they feel at home, where they are no longer strangers. In his letter to JRS on the occasion of its 30th anniversary, the Jesuit Superior General, ADOLFO NICOLÁS SJ, preferred to look not at our “accomplishments” but at the “tapestry of many enduring friendships and partnerships in the mission” woven over the years. In particular, he focuses on hospitality, “that deeply human and Christian value that recognises the claim that someone has, not because he or she is a member of my family or my community or my race or my faith, but simply because he or she is a human being who deserves welcome and respect”. Recognising that hospitality is steadily being eroded in today’s world, Fr Nicolás urges JRS to “creatively, effectively and positively” influence the unwelcoming values of the cultures in which we work.



I am very happy to greet the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of its foundation by Fr Pedro Arrupe. In the years since 1980, JRS has received many blessings, for which I join all those who have been part of the JRS family in thanking the Lord. Together, we thank God for the growth of JRS, which, from its modest beginnings, now finds itself engaged in more than 50 countries. We also are grateful

for the fruitfulness of its work: JRS has touched thousands of lives, and has been the Lord's instrument in bringing the fuller life of the Gospel to those who have lost their homes and hope.

Moreover, I am sure that the many collaborators and Jesuits who have spent time with JRS will join me in thanking the Lord for the transformation that our service has produced in us. We wanted to help, but in the end, we realise that those

whom we served and with whom we served taught us so much more and changed us deeply. Finally, together we thank the Lord because the history of the past 30 years is not simply a record of accomplishments, but perhaps even more deeply, a tapestry of many enduring friendships and partnerships in the mission.

I am also glad to know that this 30th anniversary celebration has not just been a time to look back, but also to look forward. It is not my role to discern for you, but allow me to share some reflections for the journey of JRS in the next 30 years.

As you are aware, the world of displaced persons that JRS desires to serve is rapidly changing. Since the Vietnamese boat people first inspired Fr Arrupe's response of compassion on behalf of



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- ? Have you developed “strong friendships and partnerships in mission” through your accompaniment? How have you managed to do so?
- ? What are some practical ways in which JRS/your team can “build something more lasting, something that strengthens the humanity of those for whom we work”?
- ? What are the challenges standing in the way of offering hospitality to refugees, for you personally, for the JRS team you work in, for the communities where you work?
- ? How can we create more welcoming communities in the places where we live and work?
- ? How can we make hospitality more of a mutual process, not only extending a welcome to refugees, but giving them the opportunity to reach out too?
- ? How can JRS/your team “advocate and promote more actively the Gospel value of hospitality in today’s world of closed borders and increased hostility to strangers”?
- ? In his reflection (p98) James Keenan states: “We are called especially to those who find no dwelling place in this world.” How does this statement ring true with what you have seen of hospitality in JRS?

the Society, many new forms of displacement, many new experiences of vulnerability and suffering have emerged. You know these better than I: the victims of natural and environmental disasters; those who lose their lands and homes because of the world's hunger for minerals and resources; the increasing number of urban refugees, just to name a few. How can JRS promote both the spirit and the structures of Ignatian freedom to respond with agility to these new calls upon our compassion?

In our service to refugees, I ask how JRS can better build participatory communities. The long tradition of depending on the help of others might hinder those we serve from taking responsibility for their own needs. To help people do the right thing, without

depending on someone from outside, who can do it better and faster, will need much detachment and patience; but, in the long run, it will be more effective. We want to respond to needs, certainly. But how can we build something more lasting, something that strengthens the humanity of those for whom we work? How can we help them experience and move towards reconciliation, the healing of deep wounds often connected with violent displacement, so that communities of peace can emerge?

I also wonder how JRS can advocate and promote more actively the Gospel value of hospitality in today's world of closed borders and increased hostility to strangers. Hospitality is that deeply human and Christian value that recognises the claim that

someone has, not because he or she is a member of my family or my community or my race or my faith, but simply because he or she is a human being who deserves welcome and respect. It is the virtue of the Good Samaritan, who saw in the man by the roadside, not a member of another race, but a brother in need. It is a value that you in JRS know is being eroded in today's world, in culture and in policies, because so many are fearful of 'the other'. Many are closing their borders and their hearts, in fear or resentment, to those who are different. JRS, in serving refugees, is Gospel hospitality in action; but, perhaps, we can ask how we may, creatively, effectively and positively, influence the closed and unwelcoming values of the cultures in which we work.

As JRS looks back in



Malawi: Refugees enrolled in a construction course at Dzaleka camp.

gratitude, as it reflects on the lessons learned over the last three decades, and tries to listen to the new appeals of the Spirit of God speaking in our time, I offer my thanks, encouragement and prayers.

I pray that you may continue the good work; that you may respond with freedom and creativity to new challenges; that you build communities of hospitality that foster reconciliation among all those

you serve as a sign of the Kingdom in our world.

**Message of Fr General
Adolfo Nicolás SJ to JRS on
its 30th anniversary**

Jesuit hospitality?

JAMES KEENAN offers a theological reflection on hospitality. Uniquely, perhaps, the Jesuit concept of hospitality is shaped not so much by where we live, but rather by what we do. JRS, like the Society of Jesus, lives and works where there are people in need. Our journeying far and wide in JRS to meet those in need is in itself an act of hospitality. We are called to offer a home to those “who find no dwelling place in this world”.

Hospitality is not one of, say, the first dozen descriptions that come to mind to define the Jesuits. Although Jesuits are polite and welcoming, our propensity for service leads us often to be away from our own homes and communities. Often enough, you can arrive at a Jesuit community only to find no one at home. If you want religious hospitality, go to a Benedictine monastery. The Benedictines will be at home and they'll treat you like God!

Jesuit hospitality – attributed here to all, religious and laymen and women, who share in the Jesuit mission – is VERY different. In order

to understand it, we need to first understand Jesuit identity and spirituality. Our identity is caught up in our mission. Jesuit identity is not shaped by *where we live* but rather by *what we do*.

We are missioned throughout the world. This includes being missioned to go where those most in need are, to accompany the most vulnerable. In light of this mission, we can begin to understand the type of hospitality to which the contemporary Jesuit is called. As one theologian writes, “The central image of the Jesuit St Ignatius seems to have had in his own mind, right up to his

death, was that of a kind of apostolic vagabond.” How can an “apostolic vagabond” be hospitable? What hospitality can a homeless vagabond provide?

One of the founders of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), Jerome Nadal, wrote that Jesuit ministry does not expand from the Jesuit community; rather, community occurs where Jesuit ministry is: “Wherever there is need or greater utility for our ministries, there is our house.” We live wherever those in need live. Nadal continues, “The principal and most characteristic dwelling for Jesuits is not in ... houses, but in journeyings...”

Thus we form our communities in the heart of our mission; we live where those whom we serve live.

In a manner of speaking, Nadal sees our ministry as being like the first apostles: to meet those most in need as apostles of the church. Where they are, we dwell. In as much as we are a people “sent on mission” (Jesuit General Congregation 35, Decree 1: *With Renewed Vigour and Zeal*), we make our pilgrim lodging where others already are and, from there, we support those in need.

That journeying forth to meet those in need is, then, an act of hospitality. As one “in the church” and “in the world”, the Jesuit goes to those on the margins of society to welcome them into the church, by preaching, catechizing and confessing, or into the wider



Jordan: A community day for Iraqi refugees at the Jesuit Centre in Amman, where the refugees came together to pray and share a traditional Iraqi meal.

Hospitality is a challenge. It is not about going where refugees are, to be with them and to help them there. It is first and foremost about letting them come where we are, 'to a place that we have made a home for us, where we are safe, can rest, where we can be ourselves. It is about welcoming a stranger to the place that we have made for the people we love'.

Michael Schöpf SJ, JRS Europe

society through education or social ministry. If the world is our home, as Nadal proclaimed, and if our mission is to those who are refugees, then our call is to bring them to sanctuary.

Our model for Jesuit hospitality is not found, then, in the gracious Benedictine monastery, though indeed there is much we could learn from that place. Rather the model for Jesuit hospitality is the refugee centre. In his letter to JRS on the 30th anniversary of its founding, the Jesuit Father General, Adolfo Nicolás SJ, says, "JRS, in serving refugees, is Gospel hospitality in action."

In as much as we go out to the whole world, we are called especially to those who find no dwelling place in this world. Wherever those refugees are without country or support, we go to meet them and invite

them into a place of welcome where God works. Where anybody in need is, there is our Jesuit mission and our Jesuit brand of hospitality. Our hospitality is not a domestic one, but a mobile one, mobile not because our communities are mobile, but because those whom we serve are found throughout the whole earth in transit.

In as much as the Jesuit charism is so strikingly defined by our mission to go to those in need, the accent on hospitality warns Jesuits and JRS as well against seeing the world as solely the place where we live; rather it calls us to be more attentive to where and how others live. We are invited to be hospitable as the itinerant Good Samaritan was, the model of hospitality that Fr Nicolás invokes in his letter to JRS, when he describes



Chad: Frank Zo'o Mbida (left), JRS project director in KouKou, talks to the headmaster and a teacher in Lobotigue village.

hospitality as “the virtue of the Good Samaritan, who saw in the man by the roadside, not a member of another race, but a brother in need”. The model of the Good Samaritan is then the model of a hospitable itinerant figure. Of course the ultimate model is Jesus who teaches us by example that the practice of mercy is the definitive expression of neighbourly love.

It might do us good, then, to reflect on this parable from Luke (10:29-37). We must start by remembering why Jesus tells this parable. He has just given the commandment to love one another. In response, one of the scribes asks Jesus: *who is my neighbour?* Jesus responds by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan.

A close reading of the story reveals that Jesus is offering a

very surprising answer to the question. At the beginning, we are thinking the answer to the question *who is my neighbour?* is the man lying wounded on the road. But by the end of the story we are no longer looking at the neighbour who is wounded but rather at the neighbour who has taken action. The scribe therefore answers Jesus' clever question at the end of the parable (*who then is the neighbour?*) by saying that the neighbour is the one who shows mercy. In the beginning we think the parable is about whom we should help. But the end is really about who we are called to be. We are called to be like the Good Samaritan, that is, to be a neighbour.

But why is Jesus so interested in teaching us to be like the Good Samaritan?

Like the surprising ending,

many of us forget that this parable was never primarily a moral one. Many great preachers and theologians see in it the story of our redemption by Christ. In this light, then, the parable is first and foremost not a story about how we should treat others, but rather the story of what Christ has done for us. Like the lessons we learn from the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, we come to understand that before we discern what we will do for Christ, we need to remember first of all what he has already done for us. We are instructed to "go and do likewise", only after we have understood the mercy we have received. We are called to follow the actions of the Good Samaritan because it is a live retelling of the entire Gospel of salvation as it has already played out in our lives.

In Decree 3 of the Jesuit General Congregation 35, *Challenges to our Mission Today*, we are called to establish right relations with our neighbour. The parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us further that we seek right relations with others because Christ has first made right relations with us. Welcomed into his kingdom, all of us in JRS are in turn sent out, 'homeless vagabonds' that we are, to accompany others whom we find along the way. Our hospitality is not found in the quality of our dwelling place but in the fact that we accompany the other travellers until it is time for them, with us, to meet the Christ who will one day return to accompany us home.

James Keenan SJ

Boston College

Accompaniment is...



Myanmar: An IDP camp in Kachin state.

bearing witness

Out of sight, out of mind

In this poignant essay, INÉS OLEAGA shows how accompanying forcibly displaced people can be a very practical way of protecting them and of showing them that they have not been forgotten by all, despite evidence to the contrary. The presence of JRS team members can prevent atrocities while JRS communication networks bring to light abuses that do take place and that would otherwise remain hidden from international sight. In its own small way, JRS' accompaniment makes a great difference by bridging the gulf that separates the displaced people from the outside world. The presence of JRS brings hope to isolated communities who believe they are truly "out of sight, out of mind".



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- ? What examples of practical protection through the mission of accompaniment have you seen in your work with JRS?
- ? Who do you consider to be one of 'your own', for whom it is worth going through the trouble to do anything for? Family members, friends from your own culture or generation? Or perhaps people who are just human beings like you? Has your experience in JRS helped you to understand better what Inés Oleaga calls "the shared land of humanity"? Have refugees become more than strangers for you?
- ? Can you understand your mission of accompaniment as building bridges and creating ties of love between realities apparently separated by an abyss? Make a list of those realities that make your home different from your place of mission (ethnicity, architecture, ways of communicating with and greeting one another...). Then try to create an image of how you see yourself as building bridges through your accompaniment of refugees.

April 2006: I had been living in Timor Leste for one and a half years when armed violence that seemed to herald civil war led to the displacement of thousands of people within a few days. The capital, Dili, became a battlefield: neighbourhoods erected barricades and attacked each other with fire, stones and all manner of homemade weapons.

When our embassies extended an offer of evacuation, I and several other sisters refused to leave,



Eastern DRC: *A makeshift camp for internally displaced people in Masisi.*

although we didn't know clearly what we could do if we stayed.

Our Timorese neighbours, friends and acquaintances soon showed us what we could do to help. Put simply, we were foreigners; we had a car; and we could get around more easily than the

local people. This meant we could become witnesses and 'human shields' for those who wanted to escape to the outskirts of the city where a camp had been set up for people displaced by the violence. What's more, the Timorese people told us, "We don't want to be

abandoned to our fate as we were in 1999 [in the violence perpetrated by Indonesian troops and paramilitaries following the country's vote for independence] – such atrocities won't happen again if there are foreign eyes watching."

For weeks, we devoted

To accompany is a practical and effective action. Not infrequently it is precisely the way in which protection is given. It is a way to 'internationalise' a situation. The presence of an international team can sometimes prevent an attack on refugees. Moreover, presence can be a sign. That a free person chooses willingly and faithfully to accompany those who are not free, who had no choice about being there, is itself a sign and a way of eliciting hope.

Mark Raper SJ, former JRS International Director

ourselves to ferrying our neighbours to Metinaro, the camp set up some 30kms from the capital. International military aid gradually arrived in a bid to prevent the fledgling country from descending into full-scale war. There was no repeat of 1999. The world did not abandon the Timorese people to their fate, perhaps due to lingering 'guilt feelings' for not intervening to stop the devastation in 1999.

For three years after the violence, without consciously planning to do so, I felt compelled to visit the people displaced in Metinaro camp. What did I do once I got there? I tried to accompany them, to preserve a link with their old reality. Above all, I tried to continue bearing witness to their plight in a country that was moving towards stability but where thousands were

still barely able to survive from one day to the next. I was perfectly aware that they found my status as a foreigner helpful, that they felt somehow protected. At the same time, as Timor Leste emerged from the crisis and tried to show that “everything is fine”, I could raise my hand, point towards Metinaro camp and say: “The displaced families, whose houses were burned down, are still there and other people have grabbed their land.” It was only after nearly three years that the displaced people were able to return home.

September 2012, North Kivu, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo: The rest of the world knew something was wrong here. The President of Congo, Laurent Kabila, was in New York, attending a special summit on the so-called

‘Great Lakes crisis’. In Masisi, North Kivu, they call it war, not crisis. The presence of the president at the UN ensured that international attention was focused, at least temporarily, on the conflict.

What we don’t know is what “international attention” really meant. There are many long kilometres between New York and Masisi, kilometres that hide the length and depth and senselessness of what has been happening in North Kivu. As the saying goes, “out of sight, out of mind”.

In Masisi, we see camps where thousands of displaced people live; they fled their villages because armed groups wouldn’t leave them in peace. It’s a tough choice: if you don’t run away, you risk your life; but if you do run, you lose everything and live hoping against all hope. The camps

are small, with a few thousand people in each, scattered across the mountains and difficult to reach.

JRS accompanies, serves and advocates for the most vulnerable and the poorest of people. Those who could afford to go elsewhere left long ago, opting to live in the town or in more stable and safer areas of the province. The camps are multilingual, multi-tribal and very complex. The people have been uprooted several times over and are very sceptical about seeing a positive outcome to their plight.

Foreign volunteers are hailed with great joy in the camps because they renew hope. Somehow or other we are like a bridge over the abyss that separates the displaced people from the world that decides, at least in part, what will happen

to them. They don't ask what Chinese, Spanish, Chilean or Italian volunteers are doing here, simply because their geographical perspective does not stretch beyond 100 kilometres of Masisi.

But in JRS Masisi we ask ourselves constantly what we are doing here. If we didn't do so, the hostility, incomprehension, frustration, loneliness and, especially, the sense of the ineffectiveness of many of our efforts would get the better of us and we'd give up. We can hardly speak the language spoken by the majority of the displaced people. In fact, some of them don't understand it either. We travel around in a land cruiser and the roads are in such a bad state that at times we never make it to our destination.

Sometimes we have difficulty

getting along with the few other humanitarian workers in the area, because we sense they don't understand that our mission of accompaniment stems from a profound experience of human brotherhood. Put another way, our sense of accompaniment enables us to understand that, although refugees may be "out of sight" for the rest of the world, they are in our minds and hearts because we believe in a loving Father who cares especially for those who are most forgotten and vulnerable. With St Paul, we trust that *we, who are many, are one body in Christ* (Romans 12:5). It is this certain knowledge that abolishes all frontiers and tribalism and places us in the shared land of humanity.

The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman says, "Strangers are not a modern invention

– but strangers who remain strangers for a long time to come, even in perpetuity, are." Perhaps it is this belief in human 'inter-belonging', beyond interdependence, that makes sense of a presence that may not always be efficient but is reaffirmed every time a camp is attacked and JRS volunteers happen to be nearby. When we witness what happens, when we use all the communication networks at our disposal to tell the world what we have seen, then others may be touched by what they can see through our eyes.

It gives us hope and encouragement to feel that we are points of reference, 'strangers' around whom a welcoming and even family-like atmosphere springs up. When vulnerable displaced people are forced to flee again,



Eastern DRC: *Sr Inés at one of the camps for internally displaced people in Masisi.*

they know they have a place to come back to – whenever it's possible for them to do so. They can be certain we will be waiting for them, to support their efforts to start all over again, even though we were helpless to prevent the circumstances that led to their flight in the first place. Since we cannot guarantee full security, given the conflicts that surround us, accompanying displaced people turns into an opportunity – and also an obligation – to instil a sense of confidence.

As foreigners, creating bonds of trust and not of 'foreign' power allows us to share the most human of experiences: faith that reaches beyond fears and insecurity. Raimon Panikkar, a Catalan priest and philosopher, said: "Security is to be found in strength (political, physical,

economic, military...), *certainty* in an epistemological necessity, but *trust* in human nature. The search for the first is driven by our fears, the second by our doubts and the third by our faith.”

There is only one way to explain this, although it is admittedly very difficult to do so. All foreign JRS volunteers arrive in North Kivu with their own roots, nationality, identity and cultural background. The displaced people become a part of us, as we are a part of them; ignoring them or looking the other way is not an option. There is no turning back.

As I walk alongside displaced people, they start to make their mark on my identity: in my hometown of Bilbao, many friends and family members have now integrated the displaced people of North Kivu into their lives in a variety

of modest ways. In Timor, where I lived for six years before coming here, and where the worst is over, they worry about the displaced people in North Kivu, too. And, of course, the entire network of JRS colleagues, who try to persuade the international community to do whatever it can to support the people of North Kivu, are far from indifferent and make good use of our eyes.

In this way, we bridge many thousands of kilometres in our mission to accompany. Although our mission may seem at times to be weak and inefficient, it reaches a truth dear to St Ignatius: “The more universal the good is, the more it is divine.”

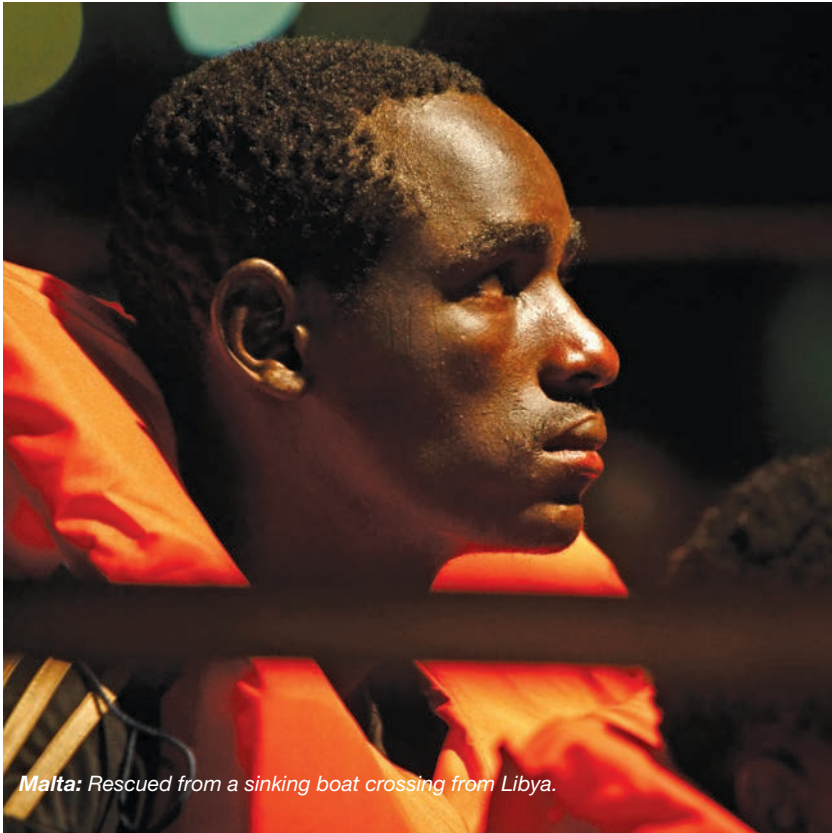
God chose to be accompanied, first of all, by shepherds and wise men from a different world, then, in his

daily life, by his humble but brave mother. In his mission he found companionship with rough, clumsy men and wonderful women; and, when he died, the same women and incredulous Romans surrounded him. No doubt, the mission of JRS to accompany refugees has dimensions that cannot be explained by the criteria of today’s society, but that can be understood only from the perspective of the Gospel. This is the Good News that saves the poor first, with the simplest of means.

Inés Oleaga ACI

JRS Asia Pacific,
JRS Great Lakes

Accompaniment is...



Malta: Rescued from a sinking boat crossing from Libya.

being present in seemingly
hopeless situations

‘I have a value, they are doing this for me’

MOHAMMED IDRIS' contribution is a very personal one. He writes as a refugee who was motivated to join JRS because of the way JRS accompanied him when he was in detention. For Mohammed, his work as a cultural mediator with JRS Malta offered countless practical opportunities to accompany refugees, who often feel lost in a country with a language and culture so foreign to their own. The refugees who need most help are those who are vulnerable, who need to be accompanied with patience and cultural sensitivity.



For me, the help I received from JRS was a sign that I should dedicate myself to others, to volunteer to do my part. I was energized; when you get something, you have to give something back.

It's hard to find the words to explain how I felt when JRS staff visited me in detention, such a very difficult place; the fact that someone comes to you, to see you, to speak to you, to ask about your health, your case, your conditions, to give you information... makes you happy. You think to yourself, "I have a value, they are doing this for me." Even when I was released, JRS

stood by me and continued to help me.

Joining JRS gave me the chance to pass on to others in need of help the hospitality I had received. JRS has taught me so much. For me, a Muslim who grew up in an environment where Christians and Muslims lived together peacefully, it has been a good opportunity to discover more about how to live with people of different faiths, to cooperate in a friendly way and to learn from one another.

I believe that a chief aim of JRS accompaniment is to be committed to refugees, especially those who are vulnerable. Many refugees in Malta grapple with mental health issues – a good deal of which develop in detention – while others have serious or chronic diseases. JRS does a lot to accompany refugees



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- ? How do you integrate the element of accompaniment when working in practical projects, such as the distribution of aid or ensuring access to social services and healthcare?
- ? When accompanying refugees, what challenges have you faced in being culturally sensitive? What helps to bridge the gap between cultures that can sometimes come in the way of effective accompaniment?
- ? Mohammed Idris writes: "When people are afraid, upset or worried, I've learned I may need to give them time to talk, even if they do so angrily, to rest from their feelings." Accompanying people who are desperate, wounded and angry can be difficult. How do you, as an individual and as a team, manage such situations?
- ? Mohammed Idris' own experience as an asylum seeker in detention shows how deeply he appreciated the accompaniment of JRS team members. What feedback do refugees give about this aspect of your work?
- ? Accompanying people in very difficult situations can be emotionally draining. In what ways do you, as an individual and with your team, cope with the strain?

I believe that the human capacity to enter into the world of another and, in so doing, to allow one's own life to be transformed, is the richest quality of the volunteers of JRS. Such people, who are open to accepting others in difficulty and accompanying them, are the most real part of society. They are ready to take the risk of being empathetic, compassionate and close to others, to open the doors of their home, their heart and their talents to walk with others.

Jesuit Superior General Adolfo Nicolás SJ

facing such hardships. Otherwise many would end up alone: when you run into big problems, no one wants to take responsibility and even 'friends' forget about you. I remember one young man who arrived in Malta with me in 2008, a sad but hardworking person. When all his friends resettled to the US, he started to develop mental health problems, and ended up homeless in the streets until we took care of him and persuaded him to go for treatment.

People who fall seriously ill in a foreign country, where the ways of viewing and treating illnesses of the body and mind are radically different from what they have known, are immensely vulnerable. They need help to understand what they are told and to communicate their own heavy



Malta: *An immigrant sits on a window ledge while talking on the telephone at the detention centre in Safi.*

concerns. A cultural abyss often separates them from healthcare professionals and this, coupled with isolation and a huge fear of the unknown, can paralyse them, preventing them from seeking the treatment they need and from taking the right decisions.

As a cultural mediator,

together with the JRS nurse, I translate, I persuade vulnerable refugees to seek the treatment they need, explaining what they should do, allaying their fears and accompanying them through the whole process. We go to visit the asylum seekers' unit at the mental health hospital, a truly shocking

place. The physical conditions are very harsh and many refugees find it impossible to communicate with the staff. Independent reports about the hospital have underlined the lack of adequate translation services, which means that the medical team often has a limited understanding of

the refugees' history and symptoms, while the refugees have little or no understanding of the treatment doled out, even if it has possible severe side effects. When we visit the unit, we tell the refugees they must cooperate to get well, not to worry or harm themselves, and we try to give them hope for the future: *today is like this but tomorrow...* When our people are discharged, we follow them closely, prepare their medicine and make sure they take it.

In my work, then, I am a bridge between the refugees and the professionals, helping them to understand one another. I accompany refugees for hospital appointments, speak to the doctors with them and try to persuade them to do what seems to be the best thing, given their circumstances. Sometimes

we get people who are difficult to deal with, who don't understand, and we must make a big effort to help them grasp the implications of what the doctor is saying. It's our job to save people from the problems they may encounter later as a result of the decisions they make today – in a way, to save them from themselves. When they finally realise what is at stake, they usually cooperate.

I remember well a pregnant woman who tested HIV-positive. She insisted that she wanted to go abroad, which would have meant missing out on the treatment to prevent the transmission of HIV to her baby. We tried hard to stop her and finally, only reluctantly, she accepted to stay. She went for her hospital appointments and we accompanied her from beginning to end. Her baby

was born HIV-negative, and she later acknowledged that if we hadn't stopped her when we did, she wouldn't have given birth to a healthy child.

Another woman refused to take urgently needed medication because she was fasting. "After I finish Ramadan I will take medicine," she said. It was really hard for me to make her understand that she needed to begin taking her medicine regularly but, after I shared verses from the Koran with her and her husband, she accepted that she is exempt from fasting because she is sick.

Sometimes we must accompany refugees through traumatic moments of diagnosis of serious illness. When someone is diagnosed, at first it is really shocking to take in; there is so much to deal with, to absorb. When we

have to break it to someone that he is infected with HIV, it is really very hard. Together with the JRS nurse, I explain everything the doctor says, reassure the patient that he has a good chance of surviving just like anyone else if he takes his medicine properly and convince him to put himself in the right frame of mind to move on.

Gradually, work experience has allowed me to share suggestions with people just learning their diagnosis. Their biggest fear is always that their own community may reject them. Sadly, many refugees can become outcasts if it is known that they have HIV. People begin to spread rumours and suddenly no one comes to visit you: this really frightens those affected. When we give them their medication, some will even

say: “No, because people will suspect I am sick”. They throw away the boxes or burn them.

When people are afraid, upset or worried, I’ve learned I may need to give them time to talk, even if they do so angrily, to rest from their feelings, then when they calm down, I can talk to them and they can understand better.

It is with time that I gained experience in how to deal with things. At first I was taking people’s stories home, they were burned in my memory, so it was very tough. When I heard some things, I thought, why is this happening? After crossing the desert, the Mediterranean Sea, you’d expect to be able to rest your mind but instead you find more suffering and instability. However after reading, getting experience, speaking with colleagues and learning from

them, things got better. In the team, we help one another with such things.

Ours is not an easy job. It is only thanks to years of experience, of being with refugees throughout their stay in Malta, that we have won their trust and learned how to help them effectively. Generating solutions comes from knowing the refugees and their problems in detail, from being really present with them, from beginning to end.

The effort is worthwhile, because as soon as you see that the refugees, whom you have helped, are improving; when they come and say: *You did a lot for me, thanks*, then you realise what accompaniment in JRS is all about.

Mohammed Idris

JRS Europe (2009 – 2013)

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Published in October 2013