



Nourishment for the volunteer's soul and refugee's stomach

You can reach out and help



There are many foreigners living in Athens. Many come here by choice and enjoy all the advantages of this colourful country and culture, and work through the negative aspects. Some people though, are forced to leave their own countries and at this point become refugees: cut adrift from everything they have known and at the mercy of whatever life throws at them. Many end up in Athens and discover there is little, if anything for them here. They scratch for food and often end up living on the streets. Fortunately a voluntary organisation called *Helping Hands* is trying to assist these people to keep body and soul together.

"Helping hands is a Greek registered organisation that helps meet the physical and social needs of the refugees and international minorities here in Athens," says its founder Scott McCracken. "It's made up of Greeks and internationals. It's a Christian organisation, which means that we try to express the love of God by what we say and what we do; not one without the other. We do that with anybody regardless of their race, religion or nationality. And we try to do it in ways that are practical for these people, most of whom who are just passing through."

Scott is a missionary who comes from Florida, USA. He says, "I lived in Austria for three years before coming here, doing similar work. But in Austria there is a whole system set up to help receive and care for refugees as they're going through the application process to obtain asylum or immigration papers to move onto another country." When he arrived in Athens though, he was surprised to find so many homeless people and felt that he couldn't just preach to them. "There was no way we could say 'God loves you' to them and ignore their enormous needs," he says. In '93 he approached a number of churches in Athens, mostly international ones, and asked them if they could get involved in setting up a network to give aid. He got a nucleus of 30 active members. That number remains the same today but as the international community is transient, the original members have now

been replaced. In addition, there are a number of volunteers who help out in a variety of ways; new ones are always needed and welcomed.

"We are renting a very small facility downtown, on Menandrou near Omonia Square," said Scott. "We have English classes, and also Greek ones when we can get someone to teach the language. Once a week, at noon on Saturdays, we have a soup kitchen, usually

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Scott McCracken, founder

for around 250 refugees. On Wednesdays and Fridays we have what we call a Tea Bar where people can come in and get a hot drink and some biscuits and play chess, backgammon or ping-pong and relax and get out of the cold and rain. Also it's a chance for them to be in an atmosphere where they know they're going to be treated like people instead of animals. We can develop friendships with them and let them know somebody cares. They then go back onto the street to sleep. We are presently trying to raise money to buy a facility from which we can offer more services such as temporary shelter for the homeless, who in Athens number around 1,000."

There are a few refugee camps just outside Athens, for example, at Lavrion and Nea Makri, with about 300 people in each. There is another camp at Pendeli which Helping Hands serves. "On Mondays we go up to the camp with food we have bought and cook and serve up a meal. In addition we go to Pendeli 2-3 times per week and offer programmes such as language classes for the children. We have also been trying to provide the refugees there with food, mattresses and heaters for the tents. Additionally, we were also able to raise some money to upgrade their kitchen," he added.

The nationalities making up the refugee population are in a state of flux. These days refugees in Greece are

primarily Kurdish people from Iraq. "They are a people who for centuries have had their own language and customs yet they do not have their own homeland," said Scott. "Saddam is systematically trying to eliminate them. I know of a Swedish organisation that was working in Kurdistan last year helping orphans - then there were some 30,000 newly-orphaned children a month - but Saddam ordered the organisation to leave. It's a horrible situation and people don't realise it, so the Kurds are leaving to escape that. They come here because Greece is the gateway to the West. Many believe they can find jobs and build a life here but are quickly disillusioned. Most move on to Italy, Germany, Sweden and Holland: countries where the refugee policies are a lot more liberal."

The Helping Hands organisation does the little it can, with the meager resources it has, yet even that is touchingly and gratefully received by the refugees. "One of the Kurdish men said to me recently 'thankyou for what you are doing for us.' But I answered, 'We are hardly doing anything, I feel terrible when I see your situation.' The man responded 'No, no, when we come to this place we feel loved, and for us that's what gives us the encouragement, that's what gives us hope, and that's what helps us to keep moving on.' My wife and I often talk about how honoured and privileged we are to meet with these courageous and brave people from around the world. Refugees are often treated like the scum of the earth but they make incredible sacrifices for the future of their families, to save their lives, just to have basic human rights. They are hard workers, people with character and courage, and working with them is an incredibly humbling experience."

Teresa O'Driscoll

Helping Hands needs volunteers for a variety of tasks, including teaching Greek and English, and are currently looking for people with carpentry skills for a special project. Cash donations are also welcomed; as are food, clothing, furniture and appliances. Needs change regularly so please call first as they have no storage space. Contact 47 Menandrou St (5th floor). Telephone 523-6812.