

Faithful Witness of Women in the Church: Asylee Women- Sr. Diane Bardol, GNSH

“The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men (and women) of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.”

These are the opening lines from the Preface to the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes) one of the most well-known documents from Vatican II (1962-1965). It goes on to say:

“The church must read the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel. The church does not exist alongside or apart from the world; the church is part of the world, and its mission is to serve the whole human family in order to make the human race's history more human.”

What empowering words; a clear mandate and therefore mission of the Church and the church - all the people of God! To know and live this to the marrow of one's bones is to offer faithful witness as women in the Church. Fifty-five years later we are still energized by that mandate. Though we may not be so physically able to respond, our willingness and ability to collaborate with others is definitely alive and well.

So it came to be that in 2011 the Grey Nuns became one of the eight founding members of the **Asylee Women Enterprise, AWE**. This predated, by two years, our Chapter Directive “to offer faithful witness as women in the Church”! I believe this is a common human experience, to do something and later look back in awe and be humbled by the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives without our even realizing. It also gave witness to the spirit of collaboration, a growing understanding absolutely critical to mission today. No congregation had everything to meet the need of that moment, but each had something important and unique to give to this enterprise and without a moment's hesitation gave it.

And the story of how AWE came about is truly an awesome example of “serving the whole human family in order to make the human race's history more human”.

It's December 29, 2010, a young Afghani Muslim woman, nine months pregnant arrives in Baltimore seeking asylum. There's no room in any safe home that night, but through a series of phone calls to people who knew people, shelter was found. The Benedictine Sisters of Emmanuel Monastery opened their hearts and doors and eight days later, on January 6, the traditional feast of Epiphany, a baby boy was born to this Muslim woman. Meanwhile, the search was on for all the other things necessary for life to continue and thrive for this woman and her new born. Thus began the Asylee Women Enterprise.

Nine years later, AWE continues to accompany asylum seekers on their journey to safety and freedom so they can begin to heal from past trauma, and rebuild their lives.

From their annual report for the 2019 year end we learn some impressive facts:

“Since 2011 AWE has provided a lifeline to asylum seekers, offering emergency and long-term housing, English and job readiness, parenting classes and cultural orientation in addition to material support such as food, clothing and essential baby supplies. This year we were thankful for and celebrated positive decisions in immigration court, receipt of long awaited work permits, new jobs, new babies, and advances in English and computer skills.

Participants have attended 15,000 hours of program and 75 individuals, including more than 20 children, had a safe place to sleep and a place to call home. Intensive support was provided to mothers and children through parenting workshops and respite for single mothers. More than 3,500 hot meals and 30,000 pounds of mostly fresh produce have been distributed from the pantry to date. Behind these numbers are individual stories illustrated by examples here:

- AWE secured an 8-year-old girl's release from immigration detention to reunite with her asylum seeking mother.
- AWE secured legal services for a mother, her baby conceived in the most violent of circumstances. Baby and mother have been embraced by our community and begun to heal and rebuild their lives through regular participation in our day program.
- AWE secured medical care for and nursed malnourished toddlers and their parents back to health after a months' long journey from war-torn Congo.
- AWE secured asylum for someone who tells us in their own words, "I have been reflecting over the past few years how life has been an amazing journey ...(I'm) grateful for being a part of AWE family and all the wonderful experiences that helped me get acclimated to life in the US and continue to achieve my goals."

When we framed and accepted the 2013 Chapter Directive Statement, I think it would be fair to say that what caused us most apprehension was what "offering faithful witness as women in the Church" might ask of us. Certainly there were and are issues that could present huge risks to support, but I don't think we considered that missing an opportunity to support something new might be the biggest a risk of all. Thankfully we didn't miss that opportunity and Asylee Women Enterprise now boasts of having ten additional and diverse partner organizations beyond the original congregations of women religious, all of whom consider themselves blessed to be part of AWE.