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Reach Out and Befriend

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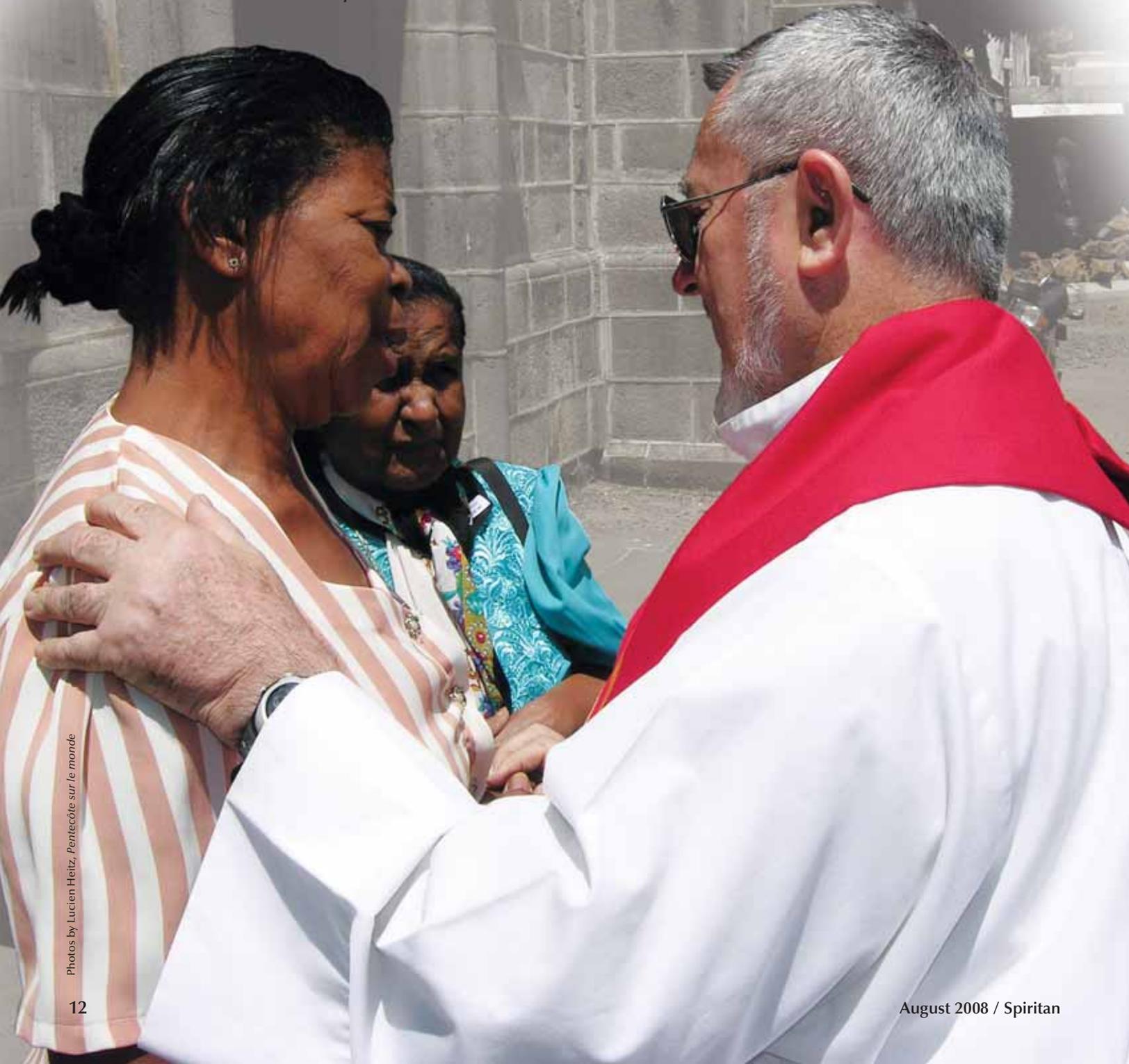
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Reach out and Befriend

*Ann-Marie and Peter Fell,
Spiritan Associates, Manchester*



riend

ENGLAND

“Who are these people? What are they doing here? Most of them are bogus asylum seekers. Why should we welcome them to our area? They’ll only cause problems. We have our own people to care for. We’ve always been a white neighbourhood. Soon they’ll be living in better conditions than us. And the government is giving them more than they give us.”

Spiritans Associates (Lay Spiritans), Ann-Marie and Peter Fell, have heard it all many times. Initially part of a small group visiting those detained under immigration rules at Manchester Airport, they discovered that there were very few facilities and very little support in the Manchester area for asylum seekers: no interpreting and translation services, few specialist asylum lawyers, a lack of understanding about these newcomers and what they were doing in England.

Ann-Marie began to encourage local churches and other faith groups to reach out and befriend these newcomers. But even when some services were slowly put in place, the asylum seekers were unable to access them because of personal trauma and language difficulties. They were isolated and had little information about how the asylum process worked. And when priests and parishioners met them at Mass they did not know how to help or advise them. How do you help them address past experiences and rebuild shattered lives?

REVIVE

Ann-Marie and Peter asked the English Spiritans to begin REVIVE, a project to offer support services in a more professional and structured way to asylum seekers and refugees, those they considered the most marginalized and disregarded people in Europe.

“Today REVIVE finds itself working more and more with destitute single persons who have exhausted all legal possibilities,” says Ann-Marie. “They are too afraid to return to their countries. But they have been expelled from their UK lodgings and have had all support removed. We provide

food parcels and bedding and work with the Red Cross to provide a weekly bus fare so they can collect some food.

“All services at REVIVE are freely available to asylum seekers and refugees regardless of race, religion or gender. We meet them at the point of need. We listen, respond and accompany them in the most honest and compassionate way we can. We pool our experience of meeting many hundreds of people. I suppose that a Listen-Reflect-Act-Reflect-Listen cyclical process would best sum up our way of welcoming those who use our service.”

Faith constantly challenged

She is caught between wanting to do a great deal and being able to do little. “We have learned to concentrate on the areas we do well and encourage others to do what we can’t. We work hard to remain optimistic and resilient where there is so much

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uncertainty and pain. It is not easy to access funding because what we do is unpopular even within the church. Our faith is constantly challenged particularly when we feel we can do so little. But we find some consolation as we realize that just being there is all we are called to do. We trust that God will sort out the rest.”

When asked where this fits into their vocation as Spiritan Associates, Ann-Marie replies, “We see ourselves being alongside groups who are marginalized and with whom few others wish to work. Our mission is to bring love in the Spirit of Christ and his gospel to all with whom we make contact. We hope this love shines through the quality of our actions and the warmth of our welcome.”

She admits to a certain sense of frustration. Asylum seekers can no longer access free English language tuition. Families live in a limbo of uncertainty. Levels of mental illness are high. Many young women are having babies in order to prolong their stay and are bringing these up alone.

“We envisage no short term improvement in the attitudes of the general population to asylum seekers, particularly as very few of them have ever met one. But REVIVE will continue to offer its services and by its presence bring some hope.” ■

