

Action Réfugiés Montréal (ARM)
(Originally published in Glad Tidings magazine)

The work of Action Réfugiés Montréal (ARM) was chosen at the WMS Council meeting in 2010 as one of the two projects promoted across the church as “Together We Can”. Many of us have heard Glynis Williams, the Executive Director of ARM, talk at some local meetings and have learnt something of this valuable work among refugees to Canada. However, in the last week of June 2011, an opportunity was given to five WMS members to visit the offices of ARM and to visit the actual Holding Centre in Laval, Quebec and talk with a few of the detainees. It was a short visit – the equivalent of two days – but what a difference those days have made to our understanding of Canada’s refugee situation.

Glynis was available to us throughout the visit, including mealtimes, and accompanied us to the Holding Centre. We also met the Program Coordinator Jenny Jeanes, the part-time office administrator Jessica Rosales, and Ian MacDonald, their volunteer treasurer. Mary-Lou Docherty, the Sponsorship Coordinator who works one day a week was not present.

A three-hour session with Jenny introduced us to the complex refugee claim process in Canada. A refugee claimant’s first point of contact at a land border or the airport is with the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), or at an inland Citizenship & Immigration (CIC) office. Most are allowed into Canada and start the process of making their refugee claim. However, a small percentage of people are detained because they arrive without documents or with suspicious documents. They are taken to the Immigration Holding Centre in Laval – virtually a prison. Canadian law requires regular reviews of the decision to detain, which are court proceedings. The review dates are 48 hours after detention, seven days later, and every 30 days. The information considered has nothing to do with the actual merits of the refugee claim. Whether or not a person is detained, a refugee claim can take about two years to be heard. New legislation passed in June 2010 will speed up the refugee claim process and will take effect in December 2011.

In Montreal, most people are detained because their identity needs to be verified. This involves contacting their country of origin to obtain official documents. Since many of them have left their country under extreme conditions and are traumatized by their experiences being held in detention causes further trauma, leading to frustration, apprehension, and sometimes serious depression.

ARM is the only organization to visit the holding centre weekly, ensuring that detainees are being treated fairly. The main goal is to provide detainees with accurate legal information, referrals, and practical assistance. ARM staff and volunteers explain the refugee claim process and ensure detainees have access to a lawyer. They pay particular attention to vulnerable detainees, like pregnant women and children. Practical support includes supplying phone cards to call home.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Red Cross have a role monitoring detention conditions but they do not provide direct services to detainees, and only

visit the Holding Centre a few times each year. Jenny keeps both organizations informed about specific issues of concern.

Jenny's role often focuses on helping the detainees to understand the requirements for their release from detention. She is *not* their legal representative. She may attend a detention review hearing which provides emotional support for the detainee and afterward explains, in simple terms, what is happening. One detained Iranian torture survivor once called her "my guardian angel".

Prior to visiting the centre, we met Bridget, a former detainee who was seven months pregnant when she arrived in 2007. She fled her West African country, fearing for her life and arrived in Canada using a false document. She was ordered detained by the CBSA officer at the airport, who told her they were taking her to a hotel to sleep. Instead, she was shocked to arrive at the Holding Centre, where she was held for two months until her identity was established. She explained to us her terror as she was placed in the "jail". She spoke of the regimen of being wakened at about 5:30 a.m. to shower and eat breakfast, while being watched by the guards. Because she was pregnant, she had trouble with the strange food which she couldn't digest and was taken to the hospital several times. She feared for her unborn baby, and that she would be sent back to her country. She was released just 10 days before her daughter was born. After release from detention, Bridget was "twinned" by ARM with a lovely woman, Maro, whom she still considers her friend. In fall 2010, Bridget was found to be a refugee in need of Canada's protection, by the Immigration & Refugee Board (IRB) Member.

Bridget still remembers her terror. She says that even now she is frightened when she hears the sound of keys, reminding her of the locked doors of the holding centre. She was brought to tears as she explained her experience to us.

The Holding Centre is located off the island of Montreal, in Laval. Visitors normally would need two pieces of identification, would be searched with a metal detector, and have personal belongings locked up. ARM was able to make special arrangements for our visit. On arrival we were issued with ARM vests to wear and promptly ushered into the visiting room. Jenny had arranged for three African men to meet with us. We asked them how they were managing and what life in the Holding Centre was like. Their replies were similar – the difficulties of being detained, their fears of not being accepted, institutional food and routines, their embarrassment of being in "prison", fear of being transported for hearings and other events by armoured vehicle in handcuffs and sometimes leg shackles, shock at their situation when they felt they weren't criminals, desires for a new life – *and always, their thanks for Jenny's help!*

At the end of visiting hours, we left with heavy hearts as we watched one of the men walk slowly across the yard back to his dormitory watched by a guard inside the chain link fence topped by barbed razor wire – a prisoner!

Our visit concluded by meeting Denise Otis, the UNHCR Legal Officer in Montreal. Denise reminded us that however clean and humane a detention centre may be, it is a serious act to deprive a person of their liberty. She made reference to The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, stating that "Everyone has the right to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from

persecution”. She described the excellent relationship with ARM, and how Jenny is “eyes and ears” which greatly helps UNHCR’s work of monitoring. She applauded their work of advocacy, making special reference to it being an organization that brings humanity to some of the most vulnerable people in our world.

We left Montreal with our heads bulging and sometimes more questions than answers. The biggest question is “how can we help?” Your support of Together We Can will mean that Action Réfugiés Montréal can continue to support the people in the Holding Centre and lead us all to be more aware of the situation and spur us to advocacy. We hope you will help!!

Catherine Blatch, Janet Brewer, Druse Bryan, Sarah Kim and Joan Smith
(With input from the Rev. Dr. Glynis Williams and Jenny Jeanes)