

Fleurieu Peninsula's Walk for Refugees.

A group of church-people from the Fleurieu Peninsula hosted a successful community walk in Willunga on Saturday the 31st of October, to show solidarity with refugees and asylum seekers.



Over two hundred people participated in the event, as part of the nation-wide Walk Together for Refugees day, instigated by the charity Welcome to Australia.

Willunga was chosen for its festive atmosphere on Saturday mornings, with people flocking from all over Adelaide for the Farmers Market. The small town also has a history of supporting refugees: for almost two decades the Willunga Circle of Friends has given practical help to dozens of asylum seekers.

The event began in the parkland beside the Old Courthouse, a place of unfortunate significance to Aboriginal people, as a way to acknowledge the Indigenous Australians who have also suffered displacement. Father Tom Gleeson of Willunga Catholic Church acknowledged the traditional owners with a moving oration in both English and Kurna languages, under the shade of centuries old eucalypts.

Ranging from children to senior citizens, the walkers included members of various Catholic, Anglican and Uniting Church parishes from Morphett Vale to Victor Harbor, representatives from the Ahmadiyya Muslim Association and a large number of non-church-going people from the local community. That such a diverse group could unite around this walk was cause for celebration.

Kyam Maher, South Australian Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, and an Ambassador for Welcome to Australia, Mayor of Onkaparinga Lorraine Rosenberg, and MP Katrine Hildyard led the parade down the historic High Street to the Rose Gardens. The bustling High Street was closed briefly for the occasion and the march attracted high interest from bystanders, some spontaneously joining the walk.

At the Rose Gardens a mix of public and community figures gave speeches: Katrine Hildyard, MP for Reynell, Parliamentary Secretary to the Premier in the State Government, President of the South Australian branch of the ALP, and long-time Ambassador for Welcome to Australia eloquently shared the aspirations of Welcome

to Australia. Mayor Rosenberg spoke about the valuable contributions that former refugees are now making to the regional community. Fareed Bajwa from the Ahmadiyyas spoke about the religious persecution his people have been subjected to in Pakistan, and his organization's commitment to "Love for all, hatred for none", in keeping with the Quran. Tricia Dundon from Galilee Catholic Church described the generous, life-changing and sometimes humorous work undertaken by her Circle of Friends in welcoming and supporting refugees from a variety of backgrounds.

The warm tones of the acapella Farmers Market Choir, led by Jonathon Waetold, brought an uplifting end to the occasion with all the walkers joining them in a final song of solidarity.

The idea for the walk began when members of the Galilee Catholic Church (Tricia Dundon, Peter Laffan and Merenia Vince) saw an advert for a national Walk Together Day, by Welcome to Australia.

With the Australian Catholic Bishops' 2015 statement in mind, 'Justice for refugees and asylum seekers', they decided to organise a walk in their own region. "Our aim was to offer local Catholics a chance to answer the Bishops' call in a way that was positive and public, and to include other churches and the wider community", said Peter Laffan.

They networked with other churches and social services and formed an organising committee in a week. A highly ecumenical group, they consisted of people from St Luke's Catholic Church (Noarlunga), Galilee Catholic Church (Aldinga), St Stephen's Anglican (Willunga), and the Willunga Uniting Church, as well as one other non-church affiliated person. Naming the initiative 'Fleurieu Welcome to Australia' the group met weekly to plan the event.

In the six weeks from start to finish the committee negotiated many hurdles, notably the normal three-month period required by Onkaparinga Council to approve public events on council land, and police permission to temporarily close roads. The City of Onkaparinga and Mayor Lorraine Rosenberg showed particular enthusiasm. Eager to help, having just signed up to the Refugee Council of Australia's "Welcome Refugee Zones" in local government regions, the council sent representatives to key committee meetings, fast-tracked approval for the event and loaned a PA system for the welcome.

Financial assistance came from the Anglican Pastoral District of Southern Vales, the Willunga Uniting Church, and the Noarlunga/Seaford and Willunga Catholic parishes as well as from individuals, which enabled printing of flyers and banner-making. Onkaparinga council kindly waived the usual events permit fee of \$165 and Cardijn College loaned their PA for the welcome. The entire event cost \$275, proving that a

high profile community event can take place with just a shoestring budget...and a lot of goodwill!

Social media was a feature of the walk: facebook, twitter and Instagram were used to publicise the event and network the walkers with others across Australia and the world during the event. Facebook page [Walk Together @ Willunga](#), the Twitter and Instagram tags #SayWelcome and #WalkTogether and the Twitter handle @welcomewillunga were effective in reaching people before, during and after the Walk. The Ahmadiyya Association also interviewed speakers and participants for their own social media, and the SA Catholic newspaper Southern Cross will publish a story in their December issue.

Reflecting on the event, the main co-ordinator Peter Laffan said; "We felt very blessed in this whole process. There was much hard work put in and great enthusiasm and patience were shown by all in the team. Things kept falling into place at the right time, and we were very pleased by the numbers who responded and the spirit of "welcome to all" that the event embodied. Many walkers expressed a desire to "do it again" next year and we have heard from a number of people in the region wanting to jump in and offer hands-on support to refugee families."

Peter said there were only two downsides; "Many people told us they would have come but didn't hear about it in time. We were also sorry not to secure a Kurna representative to Welcome us to Country, but Fr. Tom's acknowledgement of the sacredness of the land we live on was a fitting alternative and made a big impression on many people."

Heartened by the community response, goodwill and positive relationships fostered on the day the committee have already met to plan the 2016 walk. Onkaparinga Council's Cultural Diversity Officer has been assisting, directing the committee to various council grants for future events.

Reflecting on the day Peter Laffan said; "My hope is that we can continue to nourish these initiatives, both the face-to-face welcoming work and the education and campaigning for change in the Australian Government's policies. We have succeeded in developing a loose network of people, some with lots of experience in this work, some with none, who can be the nucleus in their communities for future activities".

Story submitted by the Fleurieu and Kangaroo Island Catholic Network for Justice, Peace and Ecology.