



DIOCESE OF **Hexham & Newcastle**
DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNICATIONS

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**Churches & Faith Communities stand together against the detention of women seeking asylum
Interfaith Vigil Anniversary - Derwentside IRC - Pentecost Sunday (5 June 2022)**

For immediate release

26 May 2022

On Pentecost Sunday, taking place over the forthcoming Jubilee weekend, there will be an anniversary vigil to mark a year of prayer and practical action in opposition to Derwentside Immigration Removal Centre (IRC). All are welcome to attend on the day - 3.00pm, Sunday 5th June, at the IRC on Corbridge Road, Medomsley (DH8 6QY) itself - or show support and solidarity at home in silent prayer, or within their own congregations and churches. The interfaith vigils are organised by members of Hexham & Newcastle Roman Catholic Diocese 'Justice and Peace' network.

Derwentside Immigration Removal Centre (IRC) - nr. Consett, County Durham - began the detention of women at the end of last year. It is one of seven IRCs operated by The Home Office in the UK. Derwentside, previously known as Hassockfield and prior to that operated as Medomsley Youth Offenders Institution, is managed by Mitie, on behalf of Home Office. It replaces the more well-known and controversial Yarl's Wood Detention Centre as the main IRC for detained women in the UK and will hold around 80 women at the site. Some of the women at Derwentside IRC have been moved there from Yarl's Wood.

On learning of the plans to open the Derwentside Immigration Removal Centre members of the Justice and Peace network reached out to other members of faith communities and decided to meet monthly to pray for the women to be held in detention there as a sign of witness and solidarity.

The first vigil was on Pentecost Sunday, 2021. In keeping with Covid 19 restrictions and concerns at the time that event was broadcast from the Emmaus village, which is the base of Hexham and Newcastle's youth service. There were also groups praying in person in various churches in the area. And from August 2021 the prayer vigils have taken place on the first Sunday of each month at 3pm at the barrier at the entrance of the detention centre itself.

These events - lasting about 40 minutes - allow those in opposition to the detention of women in this undignified way, to gather and show solidarity. Other practical support is provided through the provision of toiletries and other necessities to women who have very little or no access to any financial support. As with the prayerful approach of the vigils itself, this practical activity shows solidarity with those whose lives are in very personal crisis, and possibly in physical danger following repatriation.

Those attending and participating with prayer at home, believe that there are more humane and dignified ways to treat the detained women than having them locked up in a prison-like environment - in a remote part of County Durham. More often than not, the detained women have no idea as to when they could be deported and this uncertainty only increases their sense of fragility and distress.





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Commenting on the occasion of the first anniversary, Liz Archibald (co-organiser) said:

"As Christians and others, we feel that detaining very vulnerable women in this way is not what we regard as in keeping with Christ's teachings. As I realised what was happening at Derwentside, I began to think that I

could not call myself a Christian unless I showed my opposition using the means that my faith has given me - through prayer and gathering with purpose together.

I would very much welcome others to join us either in person on the day or join us in spirit through the [prayer resources](#) and other information we can make available here: <https://diocesehn.org.uk/whats-on/event/interfaith-prayer-vigil-7/>.

I would also ask those working at parish level to use this first anniversary of our efforts, to galvanise interest and support more locally. Both I and other members of the group would be more than happy to help others become more aware and get more involved in this important act of showing our lived faith."

Mary Hughes, who also organises and attends the vigils, added:

"During the Prayer Vigil, we spend 15 minutes in silence - which is very powerful when we do it together. We might feel powerless to change this unjust situation, which goes so much against what we believe as Christians but, in that silence, we are always reminded that God's love can reach the women on the other side of the barrier and bring them our compassion. The feeling of solidarity with the women inside the IRC - while bearing silent witness - is very strong and gives us an even greater resolve to support them. I would encourage other concerned Christians and those of other faiths to join us and, in this small but powerful action, to recognise our shared humanity."

Fr. Chris Hughes who is the chaplain to the Justice and Peace Co-Ordinating Council and has attend the vigil a number of times commented:

"I fully support the regular vigils that show solidarity and support to the detained women at Derwentside IRC and congratulate the organisers and past attendees on reaching this first anniversary, on Pentecost Sunday.

The UK is one of the few countries in Europe that hold, in detention, women waiting for deportation. In seeking to respect the basic dignity of these women and aware of Christ identifying himself (in Matthew 25) with the poor and vulnerable, those seeking to live out their Christian discipleship, who have met women refugees and asylum seekers, believe that these women can and must be treated in a more humane way.

The concerned lay individuals involved - either through attendance or by silent prayer at home, supported by members of clergy - are bearing witness to what they see as an inhumane approach to dealing with those whose right to remain in his country is contested. They are using the power of prayer to show both solidarity with others and heralding God's kingdom of true peace and justice. They are also expressing the profound communion we share with all of humanity and God - a hallmark of Pentecost Sunday."





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On the occasion of the anniversary prayer vigil happening on Pentecost Sunday, Bishop Robert Byrne said:

"This is a fitting day for an anniversary vigil, as in the church calendar, Pentecost Sunday commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles and other disciples - following the crucifixion, resurrection of ascension of Jesus Christ to Heaven (Acts of the Apostles, 2). It marks the beginning of the Christian Churches mission to the world.

These regular vigils and those involved are an example of the kind of 'faith in action' which Catholic Caritas is well known for - whether in response to the war in Ukraine, or the current 'cost of living crisis'. Both are connected in their own way of course and show that issues which may seem distant from us can be closer than we think or would wish to admit.

Prayer and reflection can help us make such connections more real and more meaningful - and guide us in making the right practical, human, and Christian response. I would recommend others in the Diocese - including my fellow priests and parishioners - get involved with this interfaith group effort, and together see what we might all be able to achieve before we get to a second anniversary."

ENDS

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