

## Little Amal's Visit to Brighton, March 2023



On a day of Spring showers, it stayed dry and bright for Little Amal's walk on Brighton & Hove seafront this March. Several of our Church Circuit, together with hundreds of other people, walked in solidarity with the 3.5 metre puppet of a 10 year old Syrian Refugee girl. Starting in Turkey, Little Amal has travelled over 9,000 kilometres, through 13 countries leading festivals of hope and art to support refugees and people seeking sanctuary.

Little Amal interacted with the diverse crowd as she walked along the promenade. The puppeteer inside was visible, continually acting Little Amal's range of emotions. Two other puppeteers walked alongside as support. Little Amal enjoyed exploring the Ice Cream van by the I 360. She giggled playing seafront basketball, as the large crowd cheered and gasped. Little Amal enthusiastically greeted some young people with a 'Refugees Welcome' banner. When she saw our Methodist Circuit of Sanctuary banner, she shook hands with Elin to show her appreciation. This led an Evening Argus reporter to interview Elin afterwards!

When Little Amal crossed the pebbles to listen to a string quartet, the West Pier and the sea provided an apt backdrop. Suddenly, people who had made orange paper boats in an Art Workshop appeared up from the shoreline, circling around her, moving the boats up, down and around, as if buffeted by waves. This was very effective and brought a tear to the eye of several in our company. Lots of people in the crowd wore orange (the colour of life jackets) and the orange heart symbol to show support for people seeking sanctuary.

Little Amal's journey started on the Syrian border in Turkey, so I wanted to be on my hometown beach to welcome her. My husband and I both have dual Turkish/British citizenship. We regularly visit our family in Turkey. At our Circuit Community Breakfast in Spring 2022, Andy's myth busting quiz about people seeking sanctuary highlighted that most refugees seek sanctuary in a country neighbouring their homeland. Turkey has the largest number of refugees in the world, currently hosting 3.6 million registered Syrian Refugees (UNHCR.org, November 2023). There are a range of complex reasons why some seek sanctuary further afield, but it seems clear that fair systems need to be put in place across the world so there is a wider welcome.

Welcoming Little Amal to Brighton and Hove after such a long journey felt good and important. Several times, Little Amal paused to look wistfully out to sea. This was very moving and my thoughts and prayers turn to all those making such difficult journeys across land and sea.

***Ruth Samur, Co-Lead, Brighton & Hove Methodist Circuit Refugee Project***