

UNICEF in Syria

John and Fiona Earle

After hearing a broadcast by Lyse Doucet, John realised that conditions in Syria were a great deal worse than he had thought. We decided we wanted to help, and learnt that UNICEF is helping children in Syria and the neighbouring countries – Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Egypt.

John outlined the position in All Saints Church early in January. People were obviously interested and members of the congregation contributed to a collection. A member of UNICEF staff came to talk to us in the Morning Service on January 12th. Our Vicar, Jo, has been giving this her full support.

Based on the talk and letters from UNICEF staff, we realised there are three main areas where UNICEF is giving constant help: health, education and psychosocial support. The latter is designed to help children who have suffered emotional trauma, as they would if their parents, siblings or friends were killed or maimed. Also in winter it is cold, with temperatures dropping as low as -6C, and families are living in tents. In Syria UNICEF has distributed over one million warm blankets and in the region they have distributed 350,000 sets of winter clothing to help keep children warm at night, and prevent acute respiratory infections or pneumonia.

Many children are suffering from malnutrition. To give some idea of costs (2013 prices), £7 provides fortified milk for a baby for a week. Peanut paste, enriched with proteins and vitamins, can be eaten straight out of the packet. One month's supply for one infant costs £22.50. Whenever possible UNICEF shops locally to keep prices down, and it recruits help from local people to avoid any language difficulty and to ensure local knowledge is available.

Measles is a dangerous illness in young children. In Syria and in the surrounding region, UNICEF staff have vaccinated

about 2.5 million children against measles in 2013.

By the end of 2013 polio had been diagnosed in 17 children. This doesn't sound many, but it is likely that around one person in every thousand who are infected will become paralysed. Polio is spread by contaminated water – the faecal-oral route. In 2013 UNICEF provided over 10.3 million people with safe drinking water and by the end of 2013 had immunised 24 million children in the area against polio. It costs about £120 to immunise 1,000 children.

Roughly one school in five in Syria has been destroyed or damaged. UNICEF devised the "School in a Box" to enable children who have lost their schools to still get an education. The boxes contain pencils, notebooks, a slate board and a wind-up radio that needs no electricity. This might provide music and news in Arabic – the local language. The subjects taught include First Aid, personal hygiene and "reproductive health", which presumably includes HIV Aids. "Life skills" are taught, which is likely to mean reading, writing, numbers and possibly computing. There may well be time for art and vocational skills such as sewing. Younger children benefit from "Nursery in a Box" containing soft toys, coloured crayons and paper.

In Syria, children who have been emotionally shattered are helped by doing something they enjoy in a safe place, having some fun and getting their childhood back, maybe playing football, doing something they can look forward to from one day to the next. This and school attendance provides a structure to their lives as well as a safe place. UNICEF provides footballs and other sporting equipment.

About 1 million Syrian children are refugees. Many have lost their parents, their friends, their homes and their schools. It is difficult to envisage a million children. If you had a

magic carpet and they were all five feet tall, you could lay them along the Great North Road, head to foot, they would go from London to Edinburgh and back. Now, stand them up. They all need feeding, safe water and access to a loo. You can imagine how lonely they are and how vulnerable, probably owning just the clothes they stand up in.

During the past five weeks the members of the congregation of All Saints and members of the audience at the weekly Soundbites concerts have been most generous and contributed over £1,500. Members of a "Churches Together" congregation have also made a contribution. If you wish to make a contribution to UNICEF please phone 0844 801 2414 and speak with a member of their staff.