BARRINGTON UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

CHURCH AND SOCIETY

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO REFUGEES SEEKING ASYLUM

 OCTOBER 13, 2019

The recent Church & Society program presenting “A Christian Response to Refugees Seeking Asylum was introduced by Rosalyn Wesley who focused on the Biblical imperative calling us to care for those fleeing oppression and seeking refuge.  She reminded us that Jesus and his parents were called by God to be refuges shortly after Christ’s birth.  Participants then heard from Mazen Ataya, a Syrian refugee who has been granted asylum in the U.S. He told his story of growing up in Syria without the right of free expression, living in a neighborhood that was routinely bombed by the Syrian government, and realizing that people he knew had simply disappeared.  Mazan then described the long legal process leading to his grant of asylum.  He also made clear that his decision to give up his country, friends, home and personal possessions was not easy to make. Mazen also described the heartbreak of having his family dispersed among many countries. Mazan was assisted in his successful effort to obtain asylum by the Northern Illinois Justice for Our Neighbors (“NIJON”), a not for profit organization that assists individuals in navigating the asylum process.

 Rich Gray, an attorney, described the asylum process. He identified the many important legal obstacles that must be overcome to be successful, including that the burden of proving entitlement to asylum falls on the asylum seeker.   Rich also recounted his personal experience in representing Teresa [last name withheld,] an asylum seeker from Liberia who had been persecuted as a member of a Liberian ethnic minority and as a member of a political party opposing the dictatorial regime then in power. Rich pointed out that an asylum seeker has no right to appointed counsel. Rich’s firm represented Teresa pro bono (without charge in the public interest). Teresa was successful in obtaining asylum but only after a process, including court proceeding, lasting over two years. Rich informed the group that Teresa has since become a U.S. citizen. The legal efforts on Teresa’s behalf were supported by the not for profit National Immigration Justice Center (“NIJC”).

There are a number of ways in which interested members of our congregation can help those seeking asylum. NIJC’s website **immigrantjustice.org** describes what you can do as a volunteer. Go to the website and click on “How to Help” and then click on “view the ambassador tool kit.” Additional resources can be found at the **NIJON.org** website. You can also contact Church and Society members, including Rosalyn Wesley, rosalyndwesley@gmail.com and Rich Gray, RGray@jenner,com for additional assistance in finding ways to make a difference in the lives of people seeking asylum.