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Meeting tonight (Dec. 16th): Primrose United supports Mono Refugee Sponsorship Group

The tiny United Church at Primrose has once again shown that what it lacks in size it makes up for in heart, putting unanimous support behind the newly formed Mono refugee sponsorship group ?First Line for Syria.? Formed by families on the First Line of Mono, and aptly named ?First Line for Syria,' the group is determined to raise the $30,000 and more needed to support a Syrian family for a year.

It's a daunting figure, but First Line member Wally Barr says, ?We have been buoyed by the supportive community in which we live and have great faith in people.? He says Reverend David Howes of Trinity and Primrose United, who has extensive experience in refugee work ?has been a wonderful supporter and advisor? along with Sharon Holmes, treasurer of Primrose United, who has offered to handle finances through the church.

He reports that the group has also had ?the good fortune to meet several Syrian-Canadians at a recent Lifeline Syria meeting who told us that it would be no problem to contact others in the Syrian-Canadian community in order to help the newcomers adjust.?

Much help is needed to prepare a place for the family in the area and meet the challenges of beginning again. Barr says they will need a doctor and a dentist who are willing to take a refugee family on, and there may be mental health needs to address due to trauma. He reports, translation may be a challenge and the family might need English classes; transportation is a big issue; assistance will be need to acquire SIN and health cards, enrolment in schools for the children and work for the adults; and temporary accommodation is needed when they arrive until the family is able to find a more permanent home.

The background of the First Line core members includes a wealth of experience working in refugee crisis situations. Forty years ago, Wally Barr spent time in Zambia developing an agricultural resettlement scheme for internally displaced African farm families; during the Vietnamese refugee crisis he was part of a committee to bring a family to Shelburne. Karin Klouman, married to Wally, is an immigrant from Norway who lived in Tanzania as a teenager, her parents were part of the resistance movement in WWII, and she has volunteered with Mother Theresa's order, helping out in refugee camps.

Adelle Barr Klouman, a teacher and mother, who has volunteered at schools overseas, studied International Development, and attended an Islamic University in Malaysia. She is inspired by her grandfather who was part of the Dutch Resistance movement during WWII, where he moved and hid Jewish refugee children. Jeff and Sabine Rohner-Tensee, who also live on the First Line of Mono, are also very socially conscious, running a small scale organic farm as well as a business in First Aid and CPR training.

The fourth member, LeeAnn McKenna has become a presence as a voice for Syrian refugees, speaking publicly about the crisis in order to help area residents better understand the issues. McKenna has years of experience in peace resolution as head of Partera International, working in war torn countries around the world and extensively in areas with refugees.

Barr says, ?An estimated 9 million Syrians have fled their homes since the outbreak of civil war in March 2011. According to the International Organization for Migration, up to 3,072 people died or disappeared in 2014 in the Mediterranean while trying to migrate to Europe. The group is hoping the gifts of the season will inspire the community reflect and follow the example of the Primrose congregation, opening their hearts to welcome a new family to Canada.

A meeting will be held for those interested in helping out, Dec. 16th at 7:30 pm at Trinity United Church, 200 Owen Sound Street in Shelburne. Residents can also follow the progress of the group on Facebook at 'First Line for Syria'. Donations can be made to Primrose United Church (tag to Refugee Fund) at Pace Credit Union or an email transfer can be made to firstlineforsyria@gmail.com. Cheques can be sent to Adelle Barr Klouman at 715513 First Line EHS, Mono L9V 1A9. Those who would like to help in any way at all can call Wally or Karin at 519-925-9930. Tax receipts will be issued by Primrose United church.

Marni Walsh