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'Tremendous interest' in sponsoring refugees, Victoria pastor says

Michael D. Reid / Times Colonist

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Syrian refugees walk on a railway track toward a makeshift camp for asylum seekers in southern Hungary. Photograph By Muhammed Muheisen, The Associated Press

About 300 people showed up at St. Matthias Anglican Church for an information session on private sponsorship of refugees — an inspiring example of Victoria's potential for humanitarianism, its pastor says.

"I'm used to having 50 people in church on Sunday morning," Rev. Bruce Bryant-Scott said of the Wednesday night event.

"It was on a hot evening, and we don't have air conditioning."

Bryant-Scott said because such "tremendous interest" was shown, more sessions will be held. And he plans to travel to Gabriola Island, Port Alberni and other communities.

At the church, there were parishioners, university students, tech sector and government workers, retirees and members of the Syrian community, he said.

Sabine Lehr, from the Inter-Cultural Association of Victoria, and Bryant-Scott explained sponsorship procedures and fielded questions about the Syrian refugee crisis.

Canadians may sponsor refugees as part of a group of five or more people, through community sponsorship, or through sponsorship-agreement holders such as faith groups or humanitarian organizations. The federal government's Blended Visa Office-Referred Program matches refugees identified for resettlement by the United Nations Refugee Agency with private sponsors in Canada.

"One of the challenges we face is that even though there are four million Syrian refugees, the waiting list for people the

Canadian government can refer to us has been snapped up [by other groups]," Bryant-Scott said.

The church is trying to bring three Syrian refugee families to Victoria. Contacts are made through the federal government's program, families and the Internet, he said, but the process is costly — about \$30,000 to support a family of four for a year. Activists say more federal support could ease the financial burden for sponsors.

"A lot depends on what goes on with Immigration Canada over the next six weeks. We'll see," said Bryant-Scott, who said he has reached out to the Roman Catholic Diocese of Victoria's bishop, the Rev. Gary Gordon, for potential collaboration.

Canada has promised to take in 11,300 refugees by the end of 2018. Of that, 2,374 have arrived so far.

Bishop Logan McMenamie of the Anglican Diocese of B.C. is calling on Canadians to raise the migrant crisis with candidates ahead of the federal election. "We are a nation of immigrants and we should never forget the welcome we received in this country," he wrote in a letter released Thursday, adding he hoped the federal government will revise its refugee program to accept more families.

Bryant-Scott said those who want to help can go to the website for the Canadian Council for Refugees at ccrweb.ca, or donate to organizations such as the United Nations Refugee Agency or Doctors Without Borders.

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