

## Voices of Syrian Refugees Heard in Vermont

**A** S PART OF OUR CELEBRATION OF SAINT BENEDICT'S WEEKEND THIS YEAR, on Saturday, July 7<sup>th</sup>, Cheryl and George Hooker gave an inspiring and eye-opening witness to an overflow crowd in our Visitors' Center, *Witnessing to Refugee Resettlement – The Journey of Welcoming Syrian Refugees to Rutland, Vermont.*

Cheryl and George, both born in Rutland, have been teachers for many years. George taught biology and painted houses. Cheryl taught English, was elected to the Vermont Legislature, and has recently been re-elected to the State Senate. Both are socially conscious, salt-of-the-earth Vermonters and people of faith.

Joining together with a broad spectrum of others in the local community, and calling themselves *Rutland Welcomes*, they pooled their energy and resources to accept, welcome, and assist refugee families coming from over-crowded camps in countries all over the Middle East. *Rutland Welcomes* continues to work with the three families that are settled in the city and is enriched by learning more of their story, culture, and dreams for the future.

After nearly two years of overcoming fear and opposition in the local community, *Rutland Welcomes* has assisted these three Syrian families to make a new home for themselves in the Rutland community. These families have been vetted three times over a period of two years before our government would permit their arrival. Originally a total of twenty families were designated to be part of this Rutland area resettlement project. Unfortunately, soon after the arrival of these first families, no further Syrian refugees have been permitted to enter the United States because of new and restrictive refugee policy. This despite the fact that other countries have continued welcoming other Syrian refugees and offering them compassionate hospitality and generous aid.

During this process of being offered a heartfelt welcome, and despite the many difficulties faced by these refugees, who were displaced because of war and tyranny, they are now finding a path to healing and a brighter future through the compassionate commitment of grassroots people willing to support and help them. "Whatever you do to the least of these, you do it to me." *Matthew 25:40* ■



Cheryl and George Hooker



– brother Elias