In the dark days of 1939 as the storm clouds gathered over Nazi Europe, Martha Sharp and her husband, the Rev. Waitstill Sharp, went on behalf of the American Unitarian Association on a mission to help aid tens of thousands of refugees, including many intellectuals, displaced by Germany’s 1938 invasion of Czechoslovakia.

After the group was officially founded as the Unitarian Service Committee in May 1940, its first act was to assign the Sharps to go to Southern France to try to provide what help they could to the crowds of refugees fleeing southward ahead of the Nazi army, where shortages of shelter and food, especially milk, were severe. Disease was rampant. (see Boston Globe article on Martha Sharp Cogan, Dec. 6, 1990.)

Working with a refugee network in Marseilles and Lisbon, Martha Sharp arranged for the delivery of 12 tons of milk products to hungry children. She also resolved to obtain safe passage for as many children as she could to America.

The new Service Committee’s activities in Europe gradually gained momentum through the war years. Medical units and social workers were sent to France, and USC centers were established in Paris, Marseilles, and later in Lisbon and Geneva. The Committee worked with the Red Cross and the American Friends Service Committee to distribute medical and sanitary supplies in various internment camps in Southern France. A hospital for Spanish refugees in Toulouse operated under Unitarian supervision, as did a free dental clinic for refugees in Marseilles. Orthopedic and dental work for 3000 interned children in camps led to the founding of Service Committee kindergartens and primary schools in Central France.

The Service Committee’s Flaming Chalice symbol, now common in Unitarian churches everywhere, came to represent for European refugees the Unitarian Service Committee’s openness to all races, creeds, and nationalities. In the immense devastation of Europe immediately after the war, Service Committee projects were organized in Italy, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Spain, and Portugal. In the bombed out cities of Europe, with millions of refugees searching for safe haven, warm clothing, a bit a food and medicine, the flag of the Unitarian Service Committee - a red banner with a Flaming Chalice symbol – came to be recognized by refugees as a place of safety and sanctuary in the storm.

With such a proud history behind it, little wonder why the Flaming Chalice has gradually come to be our fondest emblem for our Unitarian faith. From that day to this we have been proud to claim our liberal religious identity: We are the Unitarians. We are the people of the Chalice.

But now once again the words “Refugee” and “Asylum” and “mass migration” take on new urgency in our consciousness.

Now, once again, some 75 years after those dark days of post-WWII when millions of displaced persons wandered homeless and hungry through the war-ruined cities of Europe, the world is facing the newest incarnation of humankind’s perpetual migration crisis. Over 200 thousand people have attempted to cross the Mediterranean this year, and more than 2,000 have drowned or died in the effort, including a three-year-old Syrian boy named Aylan whose small body found on a Turkish shoreline finally seemed to break through the frozen complacency of European non-responsiveness.

To even approach addressing this horrendous state of affairs – to even attempt a reasonable and considered conversation about this crisis and what might be done about it – one must start by admitting the limits that impede our brains and freeze our hearts and numb our conscience even before the facts of this reality can be engaged.

Consider the difficulty of comprehending the sheer numbers involved. The mind boggles at the statistics. David Cameron, our Prime Minister, has pledged to take in 20,000 refugees over the next five years. More than 20,000 refugees arrived in Germany the first weekend in September. 413,000 applied for asylum in Germany in the first eight months of 2015, and 800,000 are expected to do so over the full year. To date the war in Syria has produced 4 million refugees with millions more still trapped in its active war zones.

Nor is Syria the only source of refugees, of course. Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea, and Pakistan have each sent millions fleeing for safety. The numbers really are dizzying after a while. How many are coming, from where, for what reasons, who are “asylum seekers” from war zones versus who might be categorized as “economic immigrants” from countries that are merely poor or hungry and who might dream of a better chance at life for their children. And what are the various better-off nations of the North and the West doing about it, who is doing “their fair share” and which nations are shirking their responsibilities towards the oppressed of the world? See, the statistics quickly shut down the conversation if one allow it.

Or consider the limits of language and vocabulary, for example.

The long lines of refugees now tramping toward Germany and Northern Europe have been referred to by politicians and leaders and in news reports and editorials as “swarms,” as “an invasion,” as representing an “endangerment of our national identity,” “scroungers, malingerers, people who steal our jobs.”
Such words, nouns, adjectives, and invectives quickly de-humanise the people, the human beings - men, women, boys, and girls - walking, swimming, crawling their way under unspeakable conditions towards the safety and haven of countries away from the wars, persecutions, and perils of the sorry places where life no longer has any quality worth enduring. Can we at least find descriptive words that pay respect to their personhood? Words that do not imply that refugees by definition are suspicious and less than human? The people walking in lines behind the razor wire with nothing except the clothes on their backs are fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, uncles and aunts and grandparents. They’re passing their babies and infants hand-over-hand into the windows of trains. Most of us cannot begin to imagine how desperate people must be to make such journeys. As Nicholas Kristof put it in the *NY Times* this week, if you don’t see yourself or your family members in those images of today’s refugees, you need an empathy transplant.

And there is the sheer complexity of the underlying global causes of this crisis, “the failure of leadership worldwide,” as Antonio Guterres, the head of the U.N. Refugee Agency, puts it. There are no simple answers, no quick fixes, so much blame to go around. The tendency is to feel overwhelmed and individually and collectively – even nationally – helpless and hope in the face of it all.

I’m a well-read man, and I have read virtually everything I could get my hands on to try to understand this crisis in the past two months. And while I am critical of the statesmen and the policies of our country and of all the EU nations for doing so little, so slowly, to alleviate this ongoing tragedy, I don’t see how I as a person, or how I as minister, or how we as a congregation can just remain silent or sit on our hands waiting for world politics to do the right things for people who are dying in plain sight.

People of the Chalice. My dear chapel…. We must find some significant way to respond to this current travesty. The Chapel has been here at least once before in its history, during The Great War when millions of Belgians came to England when their country was bombed to oblivion. I read to you how this Chapel sponsored dozens of refugees, opened our Hall to house them, gave English classes and work-training, helped them find work, get their children into schools, gave clothing and meals and friendship to ease them into our culture. Can we not do something similar for some refugees today?

Are there not any agencies that would welcome a church coming forward to help? Can we perchance call the other Unitarian congregations in our District to join in some collective effort specifically for refugee aid?

I am frustrated at the notion that I am about to leave my ministry here even as I am asking you to give this idea some priority in the year ahead, but that is the timing of it, I’m afraid. Still I would feel remiss if I did not call you to consider how our chapel might take some active step in behalf of ethical spiritual response to this human suffering. It isn’t charity or altruism to do so. It is ethical obligation.