



courtesy of Aamna Willoughby

Refugee resettlement Hope, heart, hospitality

In 35 years of pastoring, it was one of the most rewarding experiences,” says Phil Reynolds. He pastors Hope Church of the Brethren in Freeport, Mich., one of several congregations and groups across the denomination that are active in refugee resettlement, or are planning to get involved.

What does it mean to resettle refugees in the United States at this time? The world has seen an unprecedented increase in the number of displaced people—with the horrific war in Syria bringing the crisis to a boil. At the same time, American politics has brought hard questions to bear on immigration policies, and the traditional welcome mat for refugees has frayed.

Here are stories to shed light on a sometimes misunderstood ministry.

Hope

“We had a great success” hosting a family from Somalia, says Reynolds. “The Hope congregation went way beyond what was expected, and the family is doing very well. It is very exciting for us to see God at work.”

The Muslim family includes father, mother, and three children. They arrived in Michigan in February, after spending years in South Africa in a refugee camp. Circumstances prevented a fourth child, a teenage girl, from joining them.

She still lives in Somalia with her grandmother.

The family spoke quite a bit of English, which helped their swift progress in becoming independent, but that does not mean it was easy—for them or for the church. The family survived violence and trauma, and even in their new and safe life they could not shake the habit of fear. “She had watched someone murdered right before her, in the civil war in Somalia,” Reynolds says of the mother. “Even though they were living in safety, they were still afraid.”

And even with cultural preparation, the church made mistakes. All the material goods they showered on the



Libby Kinsey

Hope members gather at the airport to welcome a refugee family from Somalia.



courtesy of Joanna Willoughby

Children from Common Spirit at a beach outing with children from the refugee family who is hosted by the congregation.

family became a burden when it was time to move. They gave the youngest girl a Barbie doll, which her parents considered inappropriate. One Hope member worried about lovingly putting her hand on the little boy's head. Was that okay? The father reassured her, "God's love is stronger than any mistake we might make."

The church's role was to provide a welcome and fill in gaps not covered by other agencies. Much of this work was carried out by Libby Kinsey, who coordinated the family's core support group. Hope worked with Bethany Christian Services, the Church World Service (CWS) partner in that part of Michigan. Bethany provided services such as housing, English tutoring, and employment services. Church members and friends helped furnish the home, provided transportation, taught the rules of the road, enrolled the children in school and tutored, read, and played with them.

Kinsey was "sold on the idea" after attending an initial meeting with Bethany, where she learned that even a small church can pull off refugee resettlement with as few as eight people. Although the congregation is aging, the church had been looking for a ministry that would unite its membership.

The decision to resettle refugees has a political aspect from which Reynolds does not shy away. "We accepted this idea about one and a half weeks after Governor Snyder said no refugees are coming to Michigan," he says.

Some people have been critical—mostly because the church did not try to convert the family to Christianity. The family was welcome to worship with the church, but the church also helped them find a mosque. The family's culture is conservative, with women and girls wearing the *hijab* or Muslim covering.

Reynolds says the church quickly learned that refugees have their own priorities. Plans to assimilate them

into "typical American life" turned out not to be what the family wanted. Instead, once the family spent the required six months in the home first provided for them in Grand Rapids, they moved to an area in Nebraska where there is a strong Somali community.

"We had to let them go. That was hard," Reynolds says. Witnessing how the Somalis prioritized community, however, "convicted us about where our true hope lies," he adds.

Kinsey is sure the love offered by Hope Church made the difference for the family's success. Six weeks after leaving, they called her to say hello. She learned that all three children are in school, the father is working a night job, the mother is learning to drive, and the family is renting their own home. —Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford

Heart

"There's a real heart for helping refugee families," says pastor Pam Reist of Elizabethtown (Pa.) Church of the Brethren. "This congregation has a long history of hosting people who need a home."

Working through CWS, Elizabethtown has been hosting ethnic Karen families from Myanmar, also known as Burma, who first escaped to refugee camps in Thailand before gaining entry into the US. This summer it welcomed a family from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

The church's history with refugees dates back to shortly after World War II, says Ken Chastain. With his wife, Carol, he has been helping host Karen refugees. Over the decades, Elizabethtown also helped resettle people from Vietnam and other war-torn areas. Chastain remembers that refugees lived behind the baptistry when the church was part of the sanctuary movement. He got involved after 9/11, when he was asked to help host an Iranian family.



Libby Kinsey

A Somali refugee sits in on a quilting session with women from the Hope Church.

Politics may be involved, he says, but “we can’t let that stop us from extending our help to people who need us.”

Reist highlights benefits to the church, such as learning about the refugees’ cultures. “At a potluck, what is better than food from Myanmar?” She says the church also enjoys seeing families succeed in integrating into American culture. Over time they become independent of the church’s help—for example, one family recently bought their own home. They also grow in numbers through births and by additional family members arriving in the US. And they grow as members of society—in September one of the Karen women became a US citizen.

Gina Strouse, a lead volunteer with the Congolese family, says refugees survive difficulties and dangers. The family from the DRC—a couple with two children, the father’s teenaged brother and sister, and his sister’s young child—escaped at two different times. The father was the first to make it to a refugee camp in Zimbabwe. His brother and sister, thinking he was dead, also escaped. “It was a matter of providence” that they found each other at the same camp, Strouse says. At the camp he met and married his wife, and their children were born there.

When one of the teenagers wrote an essay describing “home,” she wrote about the DRC: “I smelled dead bodies on the street.” Strouse thought to herself, “Thank goodness she doesn’t have to smell that any more.”

Elizabethtown has chosen the “all in” level of involvement, Strouse explains, helping with everything not covered by services provided through CWS.

Over the years, the church also has partnered with other nearby congregations. Chastain says, “We’ll do things for the families they are sponsoring, and vice versa.” For example, some years ago when Conewago Church of the Brethren hosted boys from Sudan, Chastain helped out.

Asked if she has had a rewarding experience, Strouse responds, “Oh my, yes!” She remembers when the Congolese women asked why she was doing so much for them. “I had to try to explain my faith,” she says. “It comes down to this. It just feels good to know you have been able to help someone.” —**Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford**

Hospitality

If you travel through Bridgewater, Va., and turn onto Broad Street near Bridgewater College, you’ll see a few blocks of houses that look like a typical stretch of small-town America. Inside one of them, though, something special has been happening for several decades.

Bridgewater Church of the Brethren purchased its first “Hospitality House” as a home for refugee families in 1991. Seven years later, the neighboring Presbyterian church wanted to expand its parking lot, and offered another house on the next block in exchange. The house has been welcoming families from Ukraine, Iraq, Central America, Somalia,

courtesy of Pam Reist



Ethnic Karen families from Myanmar are among the refugees hosted by Elizabethtown Church of the Brethren.

Sudan, Syria, and elsewhere to its two apartments ever since.

“It has always been something that’s been important to people here,” pastor Jeff Carr says. “It comes out of a sense of gratitude for what they have and wanting to create that opportunity for other people. This congregation finds its identity in service, and this has been a way to carry out that service.”

Bridgewater’s refugee ministry dates back to at least 1957. According to a refugee resettlement history written by Bridgewater member and current Mill Creek Church of the Brethren interim pastor Jim Miller, the church in that year sponsored a Dutch family fleeing war in Indonesia. The ministry picked up more fully in the 1970s and 1980s, Miller writes, when families poured in from places including Cuba, Ethiopia, Russia, and Vietnam. Naomi West and Lowell Heisey provided early leadership.

Initially refugees would stay in the homes of church members or hastily arranged affordable housing. As the ministry continued and grew, the congregation decided to purchase and furnish the Hospitality House. It was fully remodeled a few years ago with support from Vacation Bible School, a service project by the youth group, and donations from a memorial fund.

“As far as I know, we’re the only Church of the Brethren congregation that has something like that, and the only church in Virginia that has something like that,” says Dean Neher, who joined the Refugee Resettlement Committee after he retired in 1995, and became its chair in 1998. “It’s good, because we don’t have to go out and find housing each time.”

According to Miller’s history, more than 300 refugees from at least 16 countries have been assisted either solely by Bridgewater or in partnership with other churches. Neher admits he’s lost count, but he enjoys the work.

“Working with the families is always very interesting,” Neher says. “It’s something that needed to be done, and I could do it.”

Most of the refugee families move elsewhere in the US once they have adjusted, Neher says, but he still stays in touch with some families who settled in Bridgewater and nearby areas.

Church members eagerly pitch in with supplying food, taking families to appointments, helping with paperwork, donating funds, and cleaning and equipping the house to welcome each new family. The larger community has been supportive, too, Carr says.

“We’ve had no negative responses, and we get to introduce the community to some really nice folks,” Carr says. “And all the feedback I get from the congregation is very positive. We’ve had a lot of really good success stories.”

One recent family, for example, came from the Darfur region of Sudan. The father came first after escaping through the desert and eventually into Europe before making it to the US. He was initially resettled in Roanoke, Va., and found a job, but had a long commute to Waynesboro. Bridgewater, which is much closer to Waynesboro, was asked to host him. With the new arrangement, he was finally able to bring over his family, too, and met his son—born after he left four years earlier—for the first time.

The Virginia Council of Churches gave the congregation a citation in 2002 for the impressive extent of its work. More recently, CWS recognized Bridgewater as a 50-year partner.

Best of all, Carr says, is that the ministry really is owned by the whole congregation and carried out by a host of dedicated volunteers. “It’s vibrant,” he says. “It’s that sort of magic thing where I don’t have to do anything with it except brag on it.” —**Walt Wiltschek**

Excitement

“We’d been waiting for a family for six months or so. People were so excited,” says Joanna Willoughby of Common Spirit Church of the Brethren in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Their family arrived at the end of April—a mother from the DRC and her three children. She had lived in a refugee camp in Rwanda for 20 years, and all her children were born there. Her husband is still there because he could not accompany his family to the US—they were married after she had put together her refugee “case,” with all the required documentation. He is still completing his own application.

“That was one of her first questions, ‘How can I get my husband here?’” says Willoughby.

The church prepared “by collecting all the furnishings for a house,” says Willoughby. “But then our family showed up knowing very little English and speaking a language none of us had even heard of: *Kinyarwanda*.” It turned out to be difficult to find affordable housing for a family who has little English, no job, and no credit history.

The challenges of hosting “depend on the needs of your family,” Willoughby says. However, it has been less work than she expected. “A lot of us remember refugee resettle-



courtesy of Libby Kinsey

A Hope member introduces a refugee child to the joys of sledding.

ment from the ’70s and ’80s when the church was responsible for basically everything.” Today, Common Spirit is considered a co-sponsor working with Bethany Christian Services as the CWS partner organization. Co-sponsoring is “more about the personal connecting, getting to know the city, giving them rides,” Willoughby says.

Common Spirit has adjusted to cultural differences including a different Christian background—the family is Seventh Day Adventist. This has gone both ways, and Willoughby has had to explain why her two youngest children are African American—the Congolese woman could not figure out why black children would be adopted into a white family.

“You’re not trying to make them like you,” Willoughby asserts. “And you don’t want them to be dependent on you. The goal is to help them become self-sufficient. Really, your job is to make them feel welcome, and ready to care for themselves.”

The Congolese family is doing well, and Common Spirit already anticipates hosting another family.

—**Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford**

Fun

Hosting refugee families “is a lot of work, but it’s so fun,” says Sharon Bollinger of Middle Creek Church of the Brethren in Lititz, Pa. She and her husband, Glen, are on the committee for refugee ministry.

“I just love having a new family, getting all the stuff, and setting up the apartment,” she says. “It’s a lot of fun seeing it all come together.”

Bollinger first witnessed the church’s ministry with refugees when she was a child. “My parents did this when I was a girl, and the refugees were coming from Vietnam.” She remembers going with her parents to welcome refugees when they arrived. In later years, she and her family got to know the local Russian community very well when the church hosted refugees from Russia.

Now Middle Creek is hosting a family from Myanmar: a father and mother in their early 30s, who lived in refugee

camps for many years before coming to the US, and their three young children. They arrived in April 2015. Their youngest child was born in the US this summer. This is the fourth family from Burma that Middle Creek has sponsored since 2009.

Middle Creek works with CWS, which has an office in Lancaster. The agency expects a church to commit to host a refugee for three months. Bollinger says, “We usually support them for a year. As they get a job, and they start to pay for food and rent, we gradually decrease our support. It’s such a culture shock, there’s no way they can be self-supportive and adjusted to the culture earlier than a year.” Even after that, the committee continues to be in relationship with the family and may continue some support depending on circumstances.

One special service Bollinger provides is documentation of the journey to self-sufficiency—she takes photos of nearly every significant moment, from the arrival at the airport, to appointments with Social Security, to first days of school and birthdays. “It’s all a blur” for newly arrived families, she says. Her photo albums become treasured sources of important memories.

After the church completes its work with a family, the committee contacts CWS to ask for another. Middle Creek is out in the country, but it has been a good fit for refugees from Myanmar because there is a sizable Burmese community nearby. “It’s very helpful for us and the family because [members of the community] understand the language and can help explain things.”

The committee represents a core group, with many others in the congregation taking part. The committee puts requests in the church bulletin and recruits volunteers. Lists of needed household supplies are distributed to Sunday school classes. Church members go to the airport to welcome families. People show up for moving-in days.

“Everyone can get involved,” Bollinger says. “Helping refugees is a practical way to live out our faith. It is an opportunity for us to be globally minded and do mission work right here in our own neighborhood.”—Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford

Welcome

La Verne (Calif.) Church of the Brethren keeps a welcoming spirit at the forefront of congregational life. A statement on the church’s website says, “We believe that true welcome is the foundation of our community.”

It seemed only natural, then, to extend that welcome to the refugee community in southern California. “It really is a natural fit,” senior pastor Susan Boyer says. “Interfaith work is important to us.”

After the shootings in nearby San Bernardino last December, Boyer says the Muslim community in the area experienced “a lot of prejudice.” La Verne members stood in front of a Muslim school to offer a different sort of wit-

ness, connecting with school officials to provide a ministry of presence and safety.

Now, the congregation is exploring ways to be more actively involved in hospitality for refugees, particularly those coming from Syria.

Josih Hostetler, chair of La Verne’s Peace and Justice Commission, says the conversations began through participation with a group called Progressive Christians Uniting. PCU and an Episcopal group called IRIS came to La Verne and led a session about refugee work, taking participants

Gina Strouse



This family from the Democratic Republic of the Congo is hosted by the Elizabethtown Church.

Church World Service partners with churches to resettle refugees

Church World Service (CWS) is the major organization in the United States serving as a partner for Church of the Brethren congregations and other faith groups wanting to help resettle refugees.

CWS invites churches to serve in a number of capacities and levels of involvement, including as host communities for refugees, as a Welcome Team for arriving refugees, by collecting a Welcome Home Kit for a refugee family, or even by welcoming a family re-

motely. A congregation should contact the local CWS affiliate office for more information.

The Church of the Brethren, through Brethren Disaster Ministries, participates with CWS and other organizations in “Refugees Welcome” at www.refugeesarewelcome.org. The website offers stories about people welcoming and hosting refugees, and resources for refugee resettlement. CWS hopes churches will continue to host and register events using the website.

through all the steps that refugees must face and the adjustments they must make.

“Out of that, we decided we would like to participate with other churches in the area,” Hostetler says.

Small steps have occurred so far. La Verne assisted a family by raising money for rent—a particular challenge with the high-priced real estate of the greater Los Angeles area. Hillcrest, a Brethren retirement community in La Verne, partnered by donating truckloads of furniture, much of it assisting a local mosque that is resettling families.

The Peace and Justice Commission is collecting signatures from people in the congregation who are willing to assist with tutoring, teaching English, taking people to appointments, and other tasks. They are particularly seeking someone who would be the point person for the outreach effort.

While the shape is still forming, the congregation is clear that this is important, and something central to who they are as followers of Christ. “It really does come back to our whole statement of welcome,” Hostetler says. “I think people ‘get it’ in the church. It’s part of our broader message.”

—Walt Wiltschek

Mercy

At the 2015 Southern Ohio District Conference, delegates approved the formation of a committee to look into adopting a refugee family in light of the current humanitarian crisis.

At the January meeting of the district board, Linda Brandon was appointed district representative to the Southern Ohio District Refugee Resettlement Task Team. Other volunteers came forward to join the team: Paula Bowser (Trotwood Church of the Brethren); Linda Brandon (Troy); Ralph Dull (Lower Miami); Wendy Noffsinger Erbaugh (Happy Corner); chair Neal Fitze, who is a Brethren Heritage Center volunteer; and scribe Isaac Zika (Oakland). Margo Royer-Miller (Trotwood) will assist the team as time and family demands permit.

Most of us have not done this before, so we hope to partner with a social service agency. The team meets monthly, and has an initial goal of helping at least one family. Because of the wholesale devastation in Syria, our

Sharon Bollinger



A refugee family receives help with groceries from Middle Creek Church of the Brethren.

desire is to resettle a Syrian family. That said, we are open to the leading of the Spirit about whether to consider other nationalities.

This past year, Bethany Theological Seminary professor Dan Ulrich conducted a series of four hour-long scripture study sessions on “Befriending the Stranger,” highlighting the biblical mandate to care for the sojourner, refugee, stranger—anyone fleeing natural or man-made disasters, drought, famine, war, hunger, or persecution.

We strongly believe that educating our team members and our district is the most important focus for us right now in light of our current political climate, and the fearmongering that has been part of recent election campaigns. We understand that we all have strong emotions on this topic, and fears—both real and imagined. We know that there has been a constant stream of terrorist activity and subsequent deaths here and abroad. We want to ensure that all concerns are carefully considered, and that our decisions are consistent with the facts and not based on overblown or irrational fears.

We do not want to harm the fabric of our community in this process, so our goal is to foster conversation and to listen carefully to the concerns of our members. We want to stress what we all can agree on: the call of Christ to show mercy. —Paula Bowser

Who is a refugee?

A refugee is someone who fled his or her own country because of persecution, or a well-founded fear of persecution, based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

Millions of refugees around the world are forced to flee their homes due to violence and persecution. Ac-

cording to the UN Refugee Agency, as of the end of 2015 there were 21.3 million refugees, and a further 40.8 million internally displaced persons.

Once refugees cross a border to seek safety, there are three traditional durable solutions:

1. Integrate into their country of asylum.

2. Return to their home country.

3. Resettle to a third country.

Resettlement is the option of last resort for the most vulnerable refugees who can’t stay where they are or return home. Less than one percent of the world’s refugees are ever resettled.

—Refugee Council USA

A biblical basis for welcoming refugees

by Dan Ulrich

One of our essential commitments in the Church of the Brethren is to seek the mind of Christ together. We have promised to take our cues from Jesus, not from politicians of any stripe. If we want to understand the mind of Christ in regard to refugee resettlement, we do well to begin with Jesus' Bible, which is more or less what we call the Old Testament. From there we can move to a study of Jesus' life and teaching as remembered by his earliest followers. Although this article only skims the surface of some relevant scriptures, part of its purpose is to invite deeper study.

Jesus' Bible often mentions refugees, meaning people who relocate to escape danger, including the danger of starvation. Sarah and Abraham are refugees when they escape famine by going to Egypt (Genesis 12:10-20). This early example of refugee resettlement does not go well. Abraham is afraid of the Egyptians, so he persuades Sarah to lie to immigration authorities about their marital status. When the truth comes out they are deported. Fortunately, they leave Egypt unharmed and can practice better hospitality toward other travelers later.

Fast forward to a camp at the Oaks of Mamre, where Abraham sees three men approaching his tent (Genesis 18:1-15). This time he does not act out of fear. His culture allows for questioning strangers before welcoming them, but Abraham and Sarah forego that step as they hurry to provide shade, precious water, and a huge feast. After footwashing and a meal, guests are expected to share news, and these guests do not disappoint. They stun Sarah with the word that she will give birth in old age. Abraham and Sarah exemplify the hope that hospitality can bring amazing rewards for hosts as well as guests. Recalling this story, the author of Hebrews advises, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (13:2).

The blessings of hospitality are also evident in Ruth's relationship with Naomi and Boaz. Ruth marries into a family of refugees from Bethlehem while they are staying in her home country of Moab. After all the men in the family die, Ruth insists on following her mother-in-law Naomi to Bethlehem despite the widows' desperate situation (Ruth 1:1-22). The blessings begin when Boaz, a wealthy landowner, obeys Leviticus 19:9-10 by leaving some grain in the field for the poor and foreigners to glean. Boaz might have looked down on a foreign woman like Ruth, but instead he admires her hard work, courage, and loyalty to Naomi. His

prayer for her anticipates future developments: "May you have a full reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!" (Ruth 2:12).

When he tells Ruth to drink water that the young men have drawn, there is an echo of other stories about refugees who receive drinks at wells and end up getting married (Genesis 29:1-30; Exodus 2:15-22). We might expect Ruth to marry one of Boaz's workers; but, no! Soon Naomi is grand-mothering a baby, and the whole nation is blessed. Ruth and Boaz become the great-grandparents of King David and ancestors of Jesus (Ruth 4:13-17).

Whereas hospitality for foreigners can result in blessings for all concerned, the law obeyed by Boaz offers another motive worth considering. According to several passages in the Law of Moses, God's people should empathize with foreigners because of the memory of being oppressed in Egypt. Israel's treatment of foreigners must be better than Egypt's. The same chapter in Leviticus that provides for gleaning goes on to command, "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19:33-34). Other laws give a similar reason for allowing foreign workers to rest on the Sabbath: "You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:9-12; compare Deuteronomy 5:12-15).

Such motives only work when the collective memory of having been foreigners remains strong. Fortunately, Israelite worship constantly reinforced this memory. At Passover and other festivals, Israelite families confessed their unity with the earlier generations that God had rescued from famine, slavery, and genocide. A good example is the creed that Deuteronomy 26:3-10 prescribes for an annual harvest festival:

"A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. . . ."

The law requires worshippers to recite the story of their people's experience as refugees, using pronouns that include later generations in the story. Since this practice helps to teach empathy for refugees and other foreigners, it is no coincidence that Deuteronomy 26:11 expressly includes foreigners in the thanksgiving feast.

COURAGEOUS LOVE OF FOREIGNERS TAKES CENTER STAGE IN ONE OF JESUS' MOST FAMOUS PARABLES, FEATURING A COMPASSIONATE SAMARITAN.

Such are the laws and stories that Jesus would have recited as a youth in the synagogue or during a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. His self-identification with refugees has deep roots in that tradition. In addition, the Gospel of Matthew gives a more personal reason why Jesus identifies with refugees. His family escapes mass murder by fleeing to Egypt. Even as an adult, Jesus remains a refugee. He moves around to escape persecution, and he instructs his disciples to do the same (10:23, 12:14-15, 14:1-13).

Jesus repeatedly makes promises that reflect his identification with refugees and other vulnerable people. At the end of a long warning about persecution, he assures his disciples, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me" (Matthew 10:40). He goes on to promise a reward to "whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple" (10:42). "Little" in this context means lowly and vulnerable, which is how Jesus expects the disciples to carry out their mission. A similar promise refers to a child that Jesus has lifted up as an example of lowliness: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." Although Matthew 18:1-5 does not describe this child as a refugee, attentive listeners can catch an echo of Matthew's infancy narrative, which repeatedly refers to Jesus as "the child." Jesus understandably identifies with a child who needs welcoming.

The same theme resounds in the famous judgment scene of Matthew 25:31-46, when Jesus surprises the nations with the news that "whatever you did to the least of these who are members of my family, you did to me." Scholars debate who is included in "the least of these who are members of my family." The related promises in Matthew 10:40-42 refer to disciples as "little ones," and Matthew 12:46-50 describes disciples as Jesus' family. Matthew's earliest audiences could have heard "hungry," "thirsty," "stranger," "naked," "sick," and "imprisoned" as descriptions of their own needs, or perhaps the needs of other disciples who suffered while following Jesus' call to mission. It seems, then, that "the least of these" could be limited to disciples.

Nevertheless, as we seek to follow the mind of Christ, we would be wise to welcome non-Christians as well as Christians. We are not in a position to judge whom Jesus might claim as family, and other biblical calls to love and hospitality are more obviously open-ended. We have seen that Leviticus 19:33-34 includes foreigners in the command to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, and

Jesus expands the definition of "neighbor" to include even enemies (Matthew 5:43-48). In addition, if we would like to be welcomed as refugees, the implications of the Golden Rule are clear (7:12).

Paul makes clear in his interpretation of Jesus' love-command that genuine love requires concrete actions and includes people who are outside as well as inside the church. "Contribute to the needs of the saints," Paul writes in Romans 12:13. Then he continues with the Greek phrase, *philoxenian diōkontes*, which literally means "pursue love of strangers or foreigners." In contrast to the passive ways we sometimes practice hospitality, "pursue" means that we should actively seek opportunities to welcome others. Interestingly, the Greek word *xenos*, meaning stranger or foreigner, is at the root of both *philoxenia* (love of foreigners) and *xenophobia* (fear of foreigners). The contrast between these words calls to mind another apostle's teaching that "love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18).

Courageous love of foreigners takes center stage in one of Jesus' most famous parables, featuring a compassionate Samaritan. A review of the historical context can help this parable pack more of its original surprise. Judeans and Samaritans had been enemies as far back as the split between the northern and southern kingdoms in about 930-920 BCE. Deportations imposed later by different empires increased the cultural distance between the former kingdoms. A long-standing dispute about where to worship came to a head in 113 BCE when the Judean high priest John Hyrcanus destroyed the Samaritans' temple on Mount Gerizim. The conflict still smoldered in Jesus' time, as many Judeans considered Samaritans unclean half-breeds, while many Samaritans considered Judeans wrongheaded.

Without being told otherwise, Jesus' listeners would probably assume that the man left for dead in the parable is a Judean. If so, he could expect help from a priest or Levite going down from Jerusalem, but not from a Samaritan. He might not even want help from a Samaritan. Surprisingly, however, the Samaritan is the one who acts as a neighbor, showing mercy courageously and sacrificially. He pursues *philoxenia* even with someone stereotyped as his enemy.

Now we are in a better position to discern the mind of Christ regarding refugees. Jesus understands that people can become channels of God's blessing by practicing hospitality toward strangers and foreigners. Jesus empathizes deeply with refugees, both because of his personal experience and because of Israel's collective memory of

escape from slavery and genocide. Since the Church of the Brethren also has a collective memory of flight from persecution, we may hear Jesus calling us to “pay forward” the welcome and religious freedom that Brethren received on first coming to America.

Jesus’ command that we love our neighbors explicitly includes people that others might stereotype as enemies.



Jesus understands that active, inclusive hospitality involves significant costs and risks, but he calls us to accept those as part of the cost of discipleship. He does not want us to act out of fear, but out of the love that drives out fear.

He invites us to trust that the blessings gained by welcoming refugees will far outweigh the costs. One of the blessings Jesus promises is that we will experience his presence more deeply when we welcome children and other vulnerable people in his name. Someday we may even find ourselves among the nations who hear Jesus say, “Come, blessed ones, inherit the kingdom that has been prepared for you from the foundation of the world. . . . Whatever you did for the least of these who are members of my family, you did for me.” 

Dan Ulrich is Weiland Professor of New Testament Studies at Bethany Theological Seminary in Richmond, Ind. This is from a presentation he prepared for Southern Ohio District, which has begun working on a refugee resettlement project.

Libby Kinsey of Hope Church with refugee children from Somalia.

Five things we may not know about refugees

Much has been said about immigrants, and particularly about refugees. While there certainly is room for differences of opinion on how our country deals with refugees from war-torn areas like Syria and Iraq, and room for differences of opinion as to what our responsibility as Christians or Brethren is to them, these differences should at least be based on real information. So here are five facts that many people do not know about refugees, and particularly about those coming from the Middle East.

1. Many people are unsure as to what refugees are, and confuse them with asylees or other types of immigrants. In the United States, refugees are those who apply for refugee status in the US through the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and go through an extensive vetting process before being admitted. Asylees, on the other hand, are people who enter the US by some other method, apply for political asylum through the US legal system, and are not subject to the same vetting process.

2. Talk has focused on the need to do a better job of vetting refugees, particularly those from Muslim

countries. Refugees are already subject to an intense, multi-stage vetting process, far more rigorous than that faced by any other category of immigrant, which usually takes longer than a year. It includes iris scans and fingerprinting, as well as name checks against databases held by the intelligence community, the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security, and the State Department, at several different stages of the process.

3. Of the more than 3 million people admitted to the US as refugees since 1975, only 12, or .0004 percent, have been arrested or removed from the country for security concerns. None have committed a terrorist attack in the US. Asylees and other classes of immigrants have been responsible for several.

4. Some say most refugees from Syria are young men, and are more likely to be involved in crime or terror. However, of the Syrian refugees admitted this year, less than a quarter are men between the ages of 18 and 50. Nearly half are children under the age of 14.

5. One thing that has remained constant throughout US history is

opposition to incoming refugees and other immigrant populations: 71 percent of Americans opposed allowing more Cubans to settle in the US in 1980; 62 percent opposed allowing more Vietnamese and Cambodians in 1979; 55 percent opposed allowing more Hungarians in 1958. Before the advent of modern polling data, history records widespread opposition to the immigration of Poles, Slavs, Italians, Irish, Hispanics, Chinese, Japanese, and many other groups, even when they were fleeing violence and persecution. Even our German Brethren ancestors were met with prejudice and jealousy in 18th and 19th century Pennsylvania by residents who feared they brought “foreign ways” and were buying up too much land. What a different and lesser country we would be if those who opposed earlier waves of refugees and immigrants had gotten their way.

We hope readers will find these facts useful as they consider how best to carry out God’s instructions for how we are to treat the foreigner in our midst: “*The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself*” (*Leviticus 19:34a*).