Relieving the Tension

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ (Matthew 25:25-36)

By Taylor Ewing, Arrive Ministries Volunteer

In this present hour there is a tangible tension that exists within the borders of our country. It is talked about on seemingly every news outlet and it can be observed in almost any city across the country. This tension is the result of the “us and them” phenomena: the kind which develops when one group of people fails to appreciate the human dignity of another and, consequently, perceives them merely as those who are different... maybe even, a threat.

Currently, the issues are how we as a country should respond to both the immense global refugee crisis and the entry into our country by undocumented immigrants, especially through our southern borders. It has been a time of heightened emotions with many stirred to believe that those who are “different” are indeed dangerous, and therefore, should not be welcomed. Those whose dress is different and those who speak an unfamiliar language are feared. Hate speech, increased deportations and travel bans are the realities of our day.

Yet, there are still many courageous and compassionate people extending a helping hand to the outsider and the newcomer. They may go unnoticed, in the midst of other voices, but there is a surprising number of groups and individuals committed to seeing that refugees are warmly received and sincerely welcomed into our country. Every year Arrive Ministries works with hundreds of volunteers and church teams who freely give their time and energy to welcome and befriend refugees that are settled into our country. These church volunteers are called Refugee Life Ministries teams.

Recently, such a team from The Story Church was matched to a large Somali family that arrived at the Minneapolis airport only a short while after the team (which is comprised of multiple families and their children) had formed. They were organized, trained and matched quickly, but they were not dismayed. For the team saw this as an opportunity to tangibly express God’s love; and as one of the fathers also confidently stated, “to express God’s sense of justice” as well.

The church families – who are not much different from any other – had committed themselves to serve a group of people who needed to experience the expression of both God’s love, and His justice. This Somali family came from a refugee camp in Kenya, where they had known neither peace nor prosperity, but the compounded effects of warfare and fleeing from their home country.

Against many obstacles, they were vetted, approved and admitted into the U.S. because of their protracted refugee status. And now, they find a warm welcome from a team of everyday moms and dads, sons and daughters who showed kindness and support unlike they had ever experienced. By doing so this team has lived out the Biblical mandate to be instruments of God’s justice, which extends to the sojourner and the needy of any kind. Going contrary to the grain of our time, this church team, along with many others, are powerful voices that speak on behalf of those who are not always in a position to speak for themselves.

Continuing to partner with World Relief to transform lives

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What nearly got Jesus thrown off a cliff

Matthew Soerens
U.S. Director of Church Mobilization, World Relief

Hey friends... I was reading Luke 4 last night and read a familiar passage in a new way, and I thought I might share this reflection — hopefully as an encouragement to you all.

Jesus is in his hometown of Nazareth and his teaching in the synagogue is a big hit: “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth” (v. 22).

But by verse 28-29, the atmosphere has changed dramatically: “All the people in the synagogue were furious... They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff.”

What had Jesus said to make the people of Nazareth turn on him so abruptly? Do you remember?

He’d told them that they were not the unique center of God’s concern; that God sent Elijah not to heal any of the many widows in Israel, but to a foreigner. That instead of healing any of the lepers in Israel, God sent Elisha to cleanse Naaman the Syrian. That his love was even – and especially – for those they viewed as on the margins. That God is not ethnocentric or a nationalist.

I expect many of you, like me, have been troubled by the “America first” attitude of many in our country right now – even (perhaps particularly) among many within our churches – whose response to our concern for refugees or other immigrants in the US, or to those seeking safety within the Middle East, or to those facing famine in East Africa is, “We have enough problems in our own country to deal with” or “Why should we help refugees when there are homeless veterans?” I’ve even heard Bible passages quoted wildly out of context to justify this response. “When Jesus said to take the planks out of our own eye before we remove the speck from someone else’s, that means we really just need to watch out for our own.” For the record, I’m all for helping homeless veterans and other vulnerable US citizens – just not as a justification for not caring for others.

Expressing the biblical teaching that all people (regardless of their geographic location, ethnicity, religion, or any other factor) are people made with inherent dignity in God’s image (Gen. 1:27), are our neighbors whom we’re commanded to love (Luke 10:25-37), and are people for whom Jesus died (2 Cor. 5:14) may not earn us universal public accolades and affirmation right now.

While we can and should be sensitive and wise in how we engage these attitudes – recognizing that those who oppose refugees are also made in God’s image and worthy of respect – we have an important call to do so with biblical truth.

To the extent that we face opposition—and I know that it can be deeply painful, especially when it comes from your own “hometown,” from family or close friends or the church tradition you’re rooted in – we’re in the best possible company. At least, to my knowledge, none of us has yet been threatened with being thrown off a cliff. The work that you all are doing right now is as urgent as ever. Keep it up.

LOVE SOMALIA - Feed My Starving Children MobilePack

Thank you for your support during this period of uncertainty for our refugee friends. With this uncertainty comes great opportunity to show love and have real conversations about the truth.

One such opportunity came with dozens of our Somali Adult Literacy Training volunteers at the Love Somalia – Feed My Starving Children MobilePack, with local Somalis to stave off famine. The Star Tribune headline was “Feeding of the Five Million.” 15,000+ volunteers packed 4.9 million meals in four days!

While working together, Abdi, a young Somali man, asked a SALT tutor, “Can you explain the number 3:16? I’ve seen that number in so many places. Is it some kind of Christian code?” Abdi listened carefully to the story of Nicodemus when Jesus told him you have to be born again to enter the Kingdom of God. After hearing the precious words, “For God so loved the world, He sent his only Son, that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life,” Abdi said, “I have so much respect for the Bible.”

The SALT tutor said he appreciated that Muslims honor Jesus as Messiah. But, “Do you know what Messiah means?” he asked. When Abdi confessed he didn’t, the tutor explained that Messiah is a title, like “President” or “Sultan” meaning “The Anointed Ruler.” Jesus is coming back to set up his government so we need to pledge our allegiance ahead of time. Abdi was sincerely thankful for this new understanding. Let’s pray he does pledge allegiance to Jesus!

There was such a joyful, open and sweet Spirit among Christians and Somalis packing together—dancing, talking, working toward a shared goal. Many doors were opened through this event, and in many ways these past months Jesus followers have engaged Muslim neighbors with love.

Thank you for supporting and praying for the SALT team at Arive Ministries and a host of brothers and sisters in Christ who volunteer with us to share God’s love with our Somali friends.
Life Transformation for Refugees and the Church
By Jessica Willis, RLM Program Director

We at Refugee Life Ministries want to see life transformation for refugees and the church.

If a non-Christian refugee family is merely assisted to have a better earthly life yet never hears about the Good News, then what is the eternal significance of our efforts?

If a Christian refugee family is never connected and integrated into a church, then what have we done to care for their deep needs?

If our teams are not impacted by walking with a family and living on mission, then have we really equipped them well?

Our staff are committed to doing all that we can, by the power of His Spirit, to lead this ministry in such a way that God uses it to bring life transformation for refugees and the church. We are begging God to move through our efforts in powerful ways!

I was so encouraged to hear recently from one church of how their members have been impacted by coming alongside a refugee family. The church is quite large with over 60 people on staff, and they had six teams welcome a refugee family this last year. At their annual church member meeting recently they had people share how God has worked this past year. Three of the 15 people who shared at the meeting, told how God had used their involvement in Refugee Life Ministries to impact them significantly!

Praise God for the work He is doing! Not only are refugees being transformed by being welcomed by the church, but the church is being changed by their involvement. May God continue to move and work to bring eternally significant change! Thank you for your partnership with us in God’s Kingdom work.

Awed and Humbled by Refugee Friends
Several months ago, Arrive Ministry paired New Neighbor volunteers Roger and Carol Lutz, with a Karen family that spent 17 years in a Thailand refugee camp. According to Roger, the family consists of a mom, a dad and four daughters ages 11, 9, 2-1/2 and 1.

“We’ve really fallen in love with them,” says Carol of the family which lives 20 minutes away in East St. Paul. They hug and kiss the Lutzes and treat them like the children’s grandparents whenever they come to visit.

“When we sit on the floor, as we usually do, I have the two toddlers on my lap practically all the time we’re there,” Roger states.

The Lutzes have driven the family to school conferences and helped to celebrate the older girls’ birthdays. “We gave them dolls with beautiful hair they can brush and comb,” she states, adding that she wonders if the girls ever seen a doll having lived their whole lives in a refugee camp.

It has been difficult for the parents to learn English. Still, the father earned a learners permit to drive after persistently taking the test 10 times, and he recently met with a job counselor.

“Trying to find employment is obviously important to him,” observes Roger.

Carol adds, “We’re awed and humbled to think of what this family has been through and how motivated they are, not only to survive but to thrive and have a meaningful life free of oppression and poverty.”

Prayer and a Broken Heart Lead Couple to Welcome Refugees
Rick and Stephanie Nelson, (part of a Refugee Life Ministries team from Mission Point Church) have recently been paired by Arrive Ministries with their first refugee family, displaced ethnic Anuak from Western Ethiopia.

Rick had been praying about what God wanted them to do and Stephanie had an opportunity to earlier spend time with refugees in camps in Ethiopia. Providentially, Arrive Ministries was able to connect the Nelsons and the Mission Point team with an Ethiopian refugee family who desired support, friendship and community.

“It felt very natural that this is what we are called to,” says Stephanie of their involvement in welcoming displaced people to Minnesota.

Stephanie adds, “We see God’s heart for refugees in Arrive Ministries and have been blessed by the staff members we’ve met so far who have come alongside us and answered our questions so freely.”

Meanwhile, Stephanie plans to return to Ethiopia this month. “It’s one of those things that breaks my heart to do, but I have to go just to see how God weaves us all together,” she states.

Arrive Ministries is an affiliate of Transform Minnesota, an evangelical network of churches from across the state. For information about Arrive Ministries and the important work we do in Minnesota, visit arriveministries.org or contact us: info@arriveministries.org, 612.798.4332.
What God Had Prepared for this RLM Church Team

Editor's Note: Chris and Jennifer Haskett's Refugee Life Ministries Church Team from New Hope Church waited five months to be paired with a refugee family; then they struggled with an on-again-off-again relationship ending in the family returning to their native Iraq without telling the team. At a de-briefing, some team members decided they'd had enough, some members were willing to engage with a new family but wanted time off, and some members wanted to engage with a new family right away. Let's pick up the story there.

The de-briefing was held on Saturday, Sunday, team leader Chris Haskett received a call from another New Hope Church team asking for help. This church team, mostly empty nesters, was having a hard time connecting with a single mother and her five kids aged 7-12 from Iraq. Most amazing is that the woman is the sister of the man whose family had just returned to Iraq.

Chris immediately brought the opportunity to his church team, and four families decided to pitch right in and help this Iraqi family which included a boy (13), a girl (12), a girl (10) and twins (7).

“We’ve been blessed to be with their family,” reports Jennifer, who admits it has also been challenging since the mom doesn’t speak any English. She wants companionship and conversation, but it’s hard. The kids try to translate, but sometimes dates and times get mixed up. “When we do get face-to-face, it’s surprising how much we’re able to communicate without a common language,” adds Jennifer.

Chris said their church team has been gifted with a diversity of talents, interests and ways to show love. “One person likes taking care of physical needs. Another has an educator’s heart and teaches the family English one afternoon a week.” A few guys in the group, like Chris, are big kids at heart. “We come play with these children who don’t really have a dad,” he explains. Chris says this does a lot for the mom, who is concerned about her children adjusting. “When she sees us playing hide and seek with her kids,” he notes, “it makes her joyful.”

The joy and benefit flow both ways, according to Jennifer. “The Lord brought us a family of Muslims from Iraq,” she states. “It’s been a rich experience to get to know someone from a completely different background.”

Cori Haskett (16), has had the opportunity to learn a different way of giving. “I don’t have money to give and I can’t drive myself places, but I’m learning so much about being emotionally and physically there for someone else,” she says. Cori has formed a close bond with the 12-year-old who sees Cori as a big sister. (See Photo of Bracelets)

Chris says he’s learned about embracing the awkward. “We went into this refugee ministry knowing it would be uncomfortable and that language and customs would be different,” he states. “We embraced that, and after spending some time in that awkwardness, it gave way to comfort and familiarity.”

What will these members of an RLM church team do after their year’s commitment to walk alongside this family? Probably just keep doing what they’re doing now—being friends. Jennifer smiles, “We just want to be with them until their kids graduate from high school, and I’ll probably need to wait more than a year to have my first English conversation with their mother.”

With Spring Comes Hope and New Life

The first couple weeks their Congolese family spent in St. Paul were great. “They were so joyful,” says Refugee Life Ministries (RLM) volunteer Jessica Ponthan, who welcomed this family at MSP airport last fall, along with her husband Ryan and three other couples. The family had spent the last 20 years in a Ugandan refugee camp.

Soon, however, the weather got cold and living got hard. “It felt like they were not moving forward,” says Jessica. They seemed depressed and stopped attending English classes. Handling money was confusing and the family of six couldn’t find jobs.

Finally things turned a corner, Jessica recalls. Just as their public assistance ran out, the daughter and a brother got jobs bussing tables at a restaurant. Then the dad got a job and another son got temporary work. As the weather grew warmer, the family could do more things for themselves—like get their own groceries. “We celebrated these as small successes,” says Jessica.

Refugees really do go through phases:

1. Honeymoon Stage – The first few weeks in a new culture feel like vacation. Everything is new and exciting.
2. Rejection Stage – Realities of life like housing, transportation, employment and family pressures become difficult, and things don’t go as planned.
3. Regression Stage – To survive negative emotions, refugees pull in and drop out. They choose to spend time only with people of their own culture and language.
4. Recovery Stage – Working through the previous stages, refugees come to see their new country more objectively. Admitting the good and the bad, they let go of earlier expectations and eventually feel at home.

Arriving in Minnesota late last year, Sarah* (the mother) asked where the fields were. She was used to growing things. Likewise, Elijah* (the father) saw all the bare trees and assumed this was how his new country looked all year long.

Now, they are excited to see the leaves on the trees, and gardens, flowers, fresh vegetables and opportunities to get their hands dirty. “There is something healing about being busy—and out in nature,” observes Jessica. She adds, “With spring comes hope and new life.” *pseudonyms

The Ponthan Family
Gardens of Hope

By Christine Arulanantham, Arrive Ministries Volunteer

The roads are wet and fresh as snow litters the roof of a nondescript building with its terra cotta exterior. Inside, stories were being told that are often not heard but need to be shared. They inspire hope, Agape love and a desire to serve God’s children from faraway lands in our own backyard.

Their Story

Her slightly calloused hands and bent frame were telling of a life built on hardship and hope, far removed from the comforts and freedom of the Twin Cities. His poised posture and smile eclipsed the suffering of a life once lived in persecution. Her name is Dai and he is Kumar. This is the story about a son and his step-mother with a common beginning in Bhutan, a predominantly Buddhist country nestled between China and India. Its mountainous Himalayan kingdom is known for being a land of happiness. However, the indigenous Nepalese people living in Bhutan, like Dai and Kumar, were increasingly ostracized as Bhutan sought to establish a national identity.

They sought refuge in Nepal. Refuge, however, did not come swiftly for them as the Nepalese government also shunned this group, even though their forefathers were originally from Nepal and they spoke the Nepali language. It was within the confines of a refugee camp that Dai and Kumar sought ways to re-build a life. And, it is within this prison, that Dai and Kumar and many like them began to do what is almost instinctual. They began to plant, grow and tend gardens.

It soon became a kind of work that brought people together and helped them survive. For 19 arduous years, their situation seemed permanent in the camps. Hope and the message of Christ’s love was brought through missionaries that served within the camps. It is here that Dai and Kumar first found the love, peace and the kindness of Jesus. They learned of God’s gift and accepted Christ’s love and forgiveness.

Pastor Rick Wallace was one of these strangers at Rose Hill Alliance Church who has a heart of servitude. His passion to work with the Bhutanese refugees led him and those that served with him to show God’s love in practical ways. Rose Hill provides resources, time and skills for those seeking refuge to come together and learn about the way of life in the Cities. The church connects with those displaced by offering English and Citizenship classes and other support to facilitate a successful transition. This partnership with the Bhutanese refugee community brought into focus a vision that Rick Wallace had long before God led him to work with the Bhutanese population.

Fruits of Labor

The vision centered around an underutilized garden plot that belonged to the church. The land is now tilled and harvested by 40 refugee families who have been given garden plots.

Dal and Kumar are filled with deep gratitude when talking about this garden that has brought them all together, and a place where they have found solace as they shared their parallel journeys. It is a place of healing where they can talk about their losses and hopes for a better life. It was gardening that gave them a sense of empowerment within the confines of a refugee camp, and today, it continues to bring hope and a sense of community spirit.

Rick’s messages from this ministry speaks volumes to anyone who is hesitant to serve. He believes this current climate of fear, hate and rejection toward our brothers and sisters, is the perfect time to let God’s love shine.

Rick sees “faces, people and friends” and a sense of “fulfillment and joy that cannot be duplicated.” He is thankful for the way the Bhutanese refugees challenge him, for their resilience and gratitude and the way they impact his life through their stories, which expand his world. This project is far greater than himself, Rick says, as the church through this forged partnership with the Bhutanese community has also found an increased desire to serve God right here in the Twin Cities.

Dal and Kumar say they have found hope and are eternally grateful for Rose Hill Alliance Church and all the people they have met along their journey. As they sit and talk with Pastor Rick these three have formed a lifelong bond that may have never happened if they were not willing to trust God and be mutually vulnerable.

A New Beginning in Far Away Minnesota

In 2007, the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, initiated the application process to resettle some Bhutanese refugees to the U.S. Dai and Kumar wanted to leave but were afraid. They feared another move, of being thrown into unfamiliarity and starting all over again. They spoke of many who are waiting with hope to return to Bhutan one day, some are compelled to leave because their families have gone ahead to resettle here and they did not have any family left in the camp. But for Dai and Kumar and the thousands who have walked in similar shoes, they longed for freedom and a new beginning for their family.

It has been almost a decade since the US resettlement program first brought Bhutanese refugees to Minnesota and now there are almost 1,500 who call the Twin Cities home. Arrive Ministries has helped to welcome and resettle almost 300 of our new friends.

The Friendship

Dal now shares a home with her children and grandchildren. Kumar lives with his wife and two children. They share their early thoughts of life in the Twin Cities and the kindness of strangers who have helped them navigate a way of life here that was unlike anything they have known.
Recently we had a refugee family in our office doing paperwork with our Immigration Legal Service staff member, Timothy Paulson. We love this drawing a young girl in the family draw on the back of an Arrive Ministries envelope. It is now hanging on one of our bulletin boards as a reminder of what we do to help restore lives and what loss, dislocation and fear refugees face every day.

"WE ARE A HAPPY FAMILY BECAUSE OF ARRIVE MINISTRIES"

By Amber Kerrigan, Immigration Legal Services

Hla, a young Karen (Burmese) woman, was resettled as a refugee by our organization in 2005. Upon entry, she filed papers for her mother to join her in Minnesota and to have the opportunity to have a refugee interview through the Affidavit of Relationship Program (AOR).

The AOR program and all pending cases from 2008-2012 were closed, but then reopened in 2012 with a new DNA requirement. Immediately when the program reopened, Hla returned to our office to refine for her mother to join her in Minnesota.

The case has been processing (and pending) since then, but in March we received notification from World Relief HQ that the case was denied and again closed. Hla was devastated. Her mother is in her 70s and is the only member of their family not in the United States.

I sent an email to our HQ asking for a reason for the denial and whether there was anything we could do to reopen the case. Our HQ emailed the Refugee Support Center with the same question, and the Refugee Support Center responded: “This case has been re-adjudicated and the result has been changed from “Rejected” to “Forward,” meaning that, they “will inform when the case is scheduled for final interview and flight.”

When I forwarded the email to Hla, she responded, “Praise the Lord!! Thanks so much for the good news. I cannot wait to tell my mom.”