

# It Goes Both Ways: Ministry Dynamics of Caring for Refugees

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I stood at the counter of a Bosnian restaurant owned by a former refugee, asking about my pickup order. They were running a little behind, the cook answered in broken English. I replied in Spanish that I was not in a rush and told him I would wait by the front door. The hostess observed me timidly, noticing that I, too, was Asian. We struck up a conversation in Mandarin. I learned she was a recent immigrant from China, in Houston to study; she smiled when I told her my parents were from Taiwan but that I had been born and raised in Houston. What are the odds I would have to speak Spanish and Mandarin to pick up food from a Bosnian restaurant? I drove away thinking to myself, “I love this city.”

## Everything Is Bigger in Texas

Houston is my hometown. The stereotypes about Texas pride are all true—so I’m being humble when I say that despite the traffic, humidity, and lack of interesting topography, Houston is the best place to live south of the Mason-Dixon Line. One of the things I appreciate about Houston is its cosmopolitan spirit combined with hometown friendliness. The city’s diversity has increased significantly since I was born. Houston is now a minority majority city, and one out of every four locals is foreign born.<sup>1</sup> It recently surpassed New York and Los Angeles to become

<sup>1</sup> Stephen L. Klineberg, *The 2018 Kinder Houston Area Survey*, Kinder Institute for Urban Research, Rice University, April 2018, 23, <https://kinder.rice.edu/sites/g/files/bxs1676/f/documents/Kinder%20Houston%20Area%20Survey%202018.pdf>.

America's most diverse city.<sup>2</sup>

A huge contributor to this diversity is the fact that Houston is one of the nation's top refugee resettlement cities. If Harris County in Houston proper were a nation, it would have ranked fourth for welcoming the most refugees in 2016.<sup>3</sup> Many factors draw people to Houston: our world-class medical center, a relatively low cost of living, job opportunities, an abundance of community resources, and a welcoming spirit toward immigrants. Geographically, the Greater Houston area is larger than the state of New Jersey; there is room for newcomers, *literally*. These factors make Houston an ideal setting for resettlement.

That we are a microcosm of the world's peoples means that we are also a microcosm of the world's religions. From Armenian Orthodox to Zoroastrian, Houston accounts for dozens of major and minor faiths. Today houses of worship dot our landscape, and religious holidays impact school attendance and shopping displays in ways they did not when I was growing up. Houston is home not only to many Christians megachurches but to some of the nation's *largest* megachurches such as Lakewood Church, a non-denominational church with an average weekly attendance of 43,000, and Second Baptist Church, a Southern Baptist congregation numbering 20,656 in average Sunday attendance, to name only two.<sup>4</sup> An "average" church here has hundreds if not thousands of members.

This confluence of factors that brings the world to Houston and its high number of Christians sharing the same space creates abundant opportunities for mission. How will the church respond? This is the question *houston welcomes refugees* seeks to answer.

## ***houston welcomes refugees***

In February 2019, I began working as program manager of a non-profit organization *houston welcomes refugees* (HWR), my first full-time job after fifteen years as a mom and homemaker, alongside meaningful but random part-time jobs, including research and writing on global Christianity and the global refugee crisis.<sup>5</sup> HWR's mission is "to ease the resettlement

<sup>2</sup> Brittny Mejia, "How Houston has become the most diverse place in America," *Los Angeles Times*, May 9, 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-houston-diversity-2017-htmlstory.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Katharine Shilcutt, "How Houston Became the World's Most Welcoming City for Refugees," *Houstonia*, February 5, 2016, <https://www.houstoniamag.com/articles/2016/2/5/resettling-new-country-syrian-refugees-houston-february-2016>.

<sup>4</sup> Database of Megachurches in the US, Hartford Institute for Religion Research, <http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/database.html>, accessed September 27, 2019.

process for refugees coming to Houston by mobilizing invested, caring volunteers, fostering hope amidst crisis.”<sup>6</sup> Our vision is to see the local church mobilized in response to the biblical teaching on God’s love for the nations by welcoming refugees in our city with compassion, hope, and honor. Our model is holistic and intended to empower the families we serve by addressing tangible needs as well as needs for friendship and community. My role in the organization is to help manage our volunteer programs and community and church partnerships.

HWR finds itself in a particular context—a highly diverse, highly Christianized, highly populated community that in many ways gets along—that lends itself to deep reflection on a vision of the whole gospel. The church often serves as the mouthpiece of Jesus; what if we were also the hands, feet, and heart? HWR was born out of a desire to capitalize on the resources present in Houston (hundreds of thousands of believers), while waking up the church to do what was missing (a concerted effort to welcome refugees) in response to what God is doing in our midst (bringing the nations to our city).

## **Global Migration=Missional Opportunity**

Migration has always been a part of God’s plan for making his name known (e.g., Genesis 11:1–9; Genesis 12:1–3; Ruth 1:18–22; 4:11–12). More people are migrating today than ever before in recorded history. We are in the midst of the worst forced migration crisis since World War II, with numbers skyrocketing over the past five years due to the war in Syria and most recently the Venezuelan crisis. War and persecution around the globe have resulted in a staggering total of almost eighty million forcibly displaced persons by the end of 2019. Of that number, forty-five million are internally displaced, whereas twenty-six million—roughly the entire population of Texas—have fled outside the borders of their country of origin. Refugees, this latter category, are even more vulnerable than internally displaced persons because they lose many if not all of the protections of their state.

In any given year, less than 1 percent of all refugees worldwide are eventually resettled into a third country, a legal process that takes between eighteen and twenty-four months on average. Until recently the United

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Todd M. Johnson and Cindy M. Wu, *Our Global Families: Christians Embracing Common Identity in a Changing World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015); *A Better Country: Embracing the Refugees in our Midst* (William Carey Library, 2017). View further publications at [www.cindymwu.com](http://www.cindymwu.com).

<sup>6</sup> For more information, see [www.houstonwelcomesrefugees.com](http://www.houstonwelcomesrefugees.com).

States was the world's largest receiving country for resettlement. But in fiscal year 2020, the refugee admissions ceiling was set at eighteen thousand, about one fifth our historical average since the national resettlement program was established in 1980. That admissions ceiling equates to approximately 0.072 percent of all anticipated resettled refugees worldwide in the 2020 fiscal year (compared to .12% for the 2019 fiscal year), a travesty when you consider the magnitude of the global refugee crisis and the fact that many refugees are persecuted Christians. Although the number of refugees is decreasing in the short term, followers of Christ are still granted two incredible opportunities. One is to strengthen and be strengthened by the global church. The other is to embrace the missional opportunity provided by refugees being resettled in our midst. Through tragic circumstances, the world has come to our backyard—could God have a plan?<sup>7</sup>

Mission is described today as being “from everywhere to everywhere,” and this is precisely what is happening as refugee believers from all over the world cross paths all over the world, clinging to a whole gospel that addresses material needs as well as spiritual ones, a message that unifies unlikely path-mates in the bond of their suffering.<sup>8</sup> Since 2002 over 215,000 Christians—constituting the largest religious group—have come to the US for resettlement, making the American church as a whole not only more ethnically diverse but also more theologically rich.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, as Matthew Soerens and Jenny Yang state in their seminal book, *Welcoming the Stranger*, “Migration is not just impacting the US church in significant ways, it is also impacting the global church for the furtherance of the kingdom of God.”<sup>10</sup> Many of the Christian refugees who come to the United States end up serving their diaspora community here or ministering back home, forming networks of believers who otherwise

<sup>7</sup> Despite the suffering, one cannot help but ponder this question. See Stephan Bauman, Matthew Soerens, and Issam Smeir, *Seeking Refuge: On the Shores of the Global Refugee Crisis* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2016), 28; Sam George, “Is God Reviving Europe through Refugees?” *Lausanne Global Analysis* 6, no. 3 (2017), <https://www.lausanne.org/content/lga/2017-05/god-reviving-europe-refugees>.

<sup>8</sup> Al Tizon, *Whole and Reconciled: Gospel, Church, and Mission in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 32–24.

<sup>9</sup> Author's analysis of State Department WRAPS data, <http://www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/>. Since the enactment of the Refugee Act in 1980, the United States has historically resettled more Christians than any other religious group. However, admissions data prior to 2002 was migrated from a legacy system, and therefore data prior to this date is not as reliable.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Soerens and Jenny Yang, *Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion, and Truth in the Immigration Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 193.

would never be connected.

As for missional opportunity, consider Afghanistan. Afghanistan is 99 percent unevangelized, with an evangelical annual growth rate of 0 percent.<sup>11</sup> In Houston, Afghanistan is the top nationality to receive Special Immigrant Visas (SIV), granted to those who have served as military aids to the US government. By welcoming Afghan SIVs, volunteers have the opportunity to reach some of the world's most unevangelized people groups.<sup>12</sup> All it takes is hopping in a car—and sitting through some traffic is still less trouble than flying to Central Asia. We must not underestimate the potential of this opportunity.

## **Empowerment and Dignity**

At *houston welcomes refugees*, our conviction to share Christ is an inescapable part of our identity. We channel the love of God by being the hands and feet and heart of Jesus in tangible and practical ways. We do this through ongoing programs that meet immediate needs while aiming to empower refugees. We collect specified household items used for setting up apartments on arrival day. Imagine a refugee family walking off a plane, bone-weary and anxious after a long international flight, followed by at least one hour in customs and immigration, and then another hour through Houston traffic. They enter an apartment that volunteers prayed over earlier in the day, with beds made, food in the pantry and refrigerator, and towels hung in the bathroom. This is what our families experience when they step into what might be their first real home in years if not decades. The money saved by the family's not having to purchase towels, pots, toiletries, and so on allows them to use personal funds and government welcome money on other necessities, easing some of their financial burden and giving them greater discretionary spending power.

Logistical and material provisions are a huge blessing, but the heartbeat of our organization is our Welcome Teams, groups of volunteers who walk alongside refugees for six months to support them as they acclimate to their new life in Houston. Welcome Teams do not replace the case managers who work tirelessly for dozens of families at a time, but they assist in the official resettlement process wherever possible while focusing primarily on friendship.

One challenge that volunteers often face when helping refugees is wanting to do too much for them, especially when some types of help

<sup>11</sup> Joshua Project, "Country: Afghanistan," <https://joshuaproject.net/countries/AF>.

<sup>12</sup> Joshua Project, "Frontier Unreached Peoples," <https://joshuaproject.net/frontier>.

are so easily within the volunteer's reach. As an organization we try to be mindful about leveling power dynamics and maintaining dignity. What may appear as kindness can end up disempowering or even insulting refugees, especially the many who come from an honor/shame culture. Moreover, it may reveal a subconscious savior complex wherein the American becomes the Benefactor, the Giver, the Hero.<sup>13</sup>

Consider a typical scenario of how this plays out. "Shakir" is a former refugee from Afghanistan. His family was paired with a Welcome Team who had a big heart but did not understand the honor/shame culture from which Shakir came. Whenever the team took the family shopping, they would insist on paying for the family's purchases, knowing that Shakir was working two part-time jobs yet still barely able to pay expenses. When the team visited, they would bring gifts for the children but reject offers of tea and bread out of pity for the family. Over time, Shakir started to make excuses for not being home when the team wanted to visit, eventually not answering the team's texts and calls. The team felt rejected and confused because they had only been friendly and generous with the family. They did not realize they were diminishing Shakir's dignity by drawing attention to the challenges he experienced in providing for his family and then refusing the hospitality extended by his family.

To preserve relationship, HWR encourages Welcome Teams to limit financial giving, waiting until friendship is established before offering any type of substantial gift (as refugees may feel pressured to reciprocate) and teaching refugees how to navigate systems rather than doing things for them (recognizing that there are situations in which direct provision is appropriate). For example, instead of automatically buying new clothes for a family, a volunteer might show them how to shop second-hand at Goodwill, garage sales, and clothing pantries. Instead of offering to drive them to work every day, a team might show them how to ride the bus or encourage them to enroll in a driving class. Teaching refugees how to meet needs on their own brings dignity and imparts valuable life skills along the way.

We emphasize mutuality and reciprocity in our friendships with refugees. We come into the relationship as both teacher and learner, helper and helped. Refugees are not "projects"; we do not try to fix all their problems or make them more like us but focus instead on relationship.

<sup>13</sup> Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012), 61; see especially chapters 5 and 7.

Refugees are not monolithic; they have different stories and backgrounds and talents, and so we take the time to learn. Some are more educated than our volunteers but through circumstances beyond their control are not able to thrive in the same way they could back home.

Contrary to some public opinion, refugees want to be independent, contributing members of society. They are incentivized through federal grant program requirements to work or enroll in English classes. They understand that they are expected to become “self-sufficient” in a very short amount of time. One of the best ways to achieve self-sufficiency is with the support of an American friend or mentor, but we do not want to stunt refugees’ progress through excessive helping.

## **Sacred Partnerships**

Christians cannot do the work of welcoming refugees alone—nor should we. HWR relies on our partnerships with others to expand our work, equip our volunteers, and ultimately benefit refugees. In less than four years, HWR has mobilized over eight hundred volunteers from over one hundred twenty churches in the Houston area. We partner with churches and faith-based community organizations that generously care for immigrants and refugees and the underserved. We do not provide direct services like English classes, job placement, or medical care; rather, we connect volunteers and their refugee families to existing providers. Through kingdom-minded partnerships we do a lot of the leg work so that churches can mobilize greater numbers of people. We also pursue opportunities to educate the community on the refugee crisis and God’s heart for the nations.

HWR partners with a resettlement agency, YMCA International Services, a local affiliate of the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants and one of the nine national agencies that work with the US government to resettle refugees. Most people are familiar with the YMCA for their gyms, but few know that they also offer immigration services. In Houston the YMCA is the largest of the five local resettlement agencies. These local agencies cooperate as a consortium to plan special events and keep one another abreast of their respective programs.

Besides the five local agencies, dozens of community organizations partner with these agencies in the resettlement process, HWR among them. I always marvel when I look around the room at the stakeholder meetings and see people of all faiths and skin tones who care about welcoming the stranger and advocating for the vulnerable. Though we come from different perspectives and convictions, we are bound together

by our common goal of working to improve the lives of refugees. Global problems require globally minded solutions. I feel privileged to be a part of the solution in Houston, Texas.

### **When Helping Heals**

North Americans have a tendency to judge people by standards that have nothing to do with one's worth: English fluency, hygiene, dress, or occupation. Interacting with refugees forces us to confront our prejudices. For me, helping refugees has been, above all, a spiritual journey that has brought me closer to God. It has made me more grateful for what I have and helped me see the grace of God in my life and the lives of others. My own story of coming to care for refugees had to do with examining my biases against a particular people group about whom I knew little but had judged based on their portrayal in the media. God convicted me of the stereotyping I had committed against an entire community, people made in the image of God, before I had even met someone of that group.

The cross-cultural friendships I enjoy with refugees have opened my eyes to an expanded way of being and living that awakens my soul and causes me to think more about peacemaking and reconciliation. Serving refugees has become for me a theological exercise. Theologian Amos Yong states,

Each member of the body of Christ...is a recipient of and a conduit of God....[T]here is not only a continual reversal of roles...but, sometimes, we play both roles simultaneously, discerning through the Holy Spirit how best to act and respond in each case. So on the one hand, we receive the hospitality of God through the welcome of others, but, on the other hand, we enact the hospitality of God to our hosts.<sup>14</sup>

And so we offer a warm welcome as an act of worship, embracing the strangers in our midst with good news and good works, and yet we receive.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), 106–107.

<sup>15</sup> See further reflection on the facets of hospitality in Johnson and Wu, *Our Global Families*, chapter 9.