

NEXT CONFERENCE - KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI - MARCH 17, 2017

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Good morning everyone.

Some of the most faithful moments of my life have come when I have welcomed a refugee family upon their arrival in America.

They arrive typically at an airport... usually after a long flight from a dangerous part of the world... often after many years in a refugee camp... always after a thorough, multi-year vetting process... and, by definition, after having fled their home country due to persecution, violence and torture.

The expression on their faces as they walk into the arrival terminal... tired, anxious, uncertain... but always trusting in the opportunity for a new life in America.

And, then, to see the sense of relief appear on their faces as they realize that they, indeed, are being met by someone... typically, they don't know the names of their greeters or even the name of their church sponsor.

But they've arrived... they're embraced... a translator makes the introductions... and then we drive together to their new home.

From my perspective, the themes of this conference... *movement across barriers, new understanding, and life-giving transformation*... are beautifully fulfilled in the refugee resettlement experience.

My objectives in doing this testimonial are three-fold.

To share with you the refugee resettlement tradition at Nassau Presbyterian Church in Princeton.

To ask each of you to become an advocate on behalf of the refugee resettlement program here in the United States.

And to implore you to go back to your faith communities and urge them to sponsor a refugee family. If you've already sponsored a family, do another!

I especially ask these things of those of you who live in a community that is fearful of "the stranger"... because the most effective way to reach the hearts and minds

and souls of the fearful is to give them the opportunity to know the person behind the refugee label.

I often wonder why I have such a passion for this work. I think there are several reasons... that the Charles family came to America as refugees themselves, Anabaptists who fled northern Switzerland in the early 18th century... that my grandfather was born and raised in a Mennonite home in Lancaster, Pennsylvania ... that my parents embraced the diversity of the world, especially when we lived in Geneva, Switzerland, during my high school years...and that my wife and I were fortunate enough to find Nassau Church, a congregation that already had a tradition of welcoming refugee families, with a total of 12 families now sponsored over the past 60 years.

But, most of all, my passion comes from the realization that I am most fulfilled as a Christian when I do this work, receiving back so much more than I provide. Put very simply, it's when I am working with a refugee that I feel closest to Christ.

Ironically... very ironically, in fact... it's also when I feel most fulfilled as an American. The most patriotic thing I have ever done is welcome a refugee.

My family has also benefited from this experience, especially when we have hosted a refugee family in our home for several weeks until a more permanent residence was available. One word of warning... if the refugee family offers to do all the cooking while they live with you, be prepared for dramatic weight swings... with Bosnian cooking I gained weight... with Burmese cooking (more specifically, ethnic Chin cooking), I lost weight... a lot of it!

More seriously, it's no coincidence that my older daughter, Marisa, now lives and works in Yangon, Burma... inspired by the Burmese refugee family that stayed with us back when Marisa was in high school.

For the congregation at Nassau Church, the refugee sponsorship process represents one of the most active and sustained mission initiatives that we engage in, bringing us closer to the challenging ideal of a "missional" church.

Church members have volunteered for a host of activities, including ESL instruction, rides to medical and dental appointments, playdates for the children, and invitations to their homes.

Princeton Theological Seminary, in turn, has provided a house for the family during their first year here in America.

And our interfaith relationships have been dramatically expanded and nurtured as we have worked closely with members of the Islamic Society of Central Jersey.

Members of the mosque have introduced the family to halal food sources, helped with translation, and have driven the father to Friday prayer each week.

It's important to note that both the seminary and the mosque have played critical roles in this sponsorship... and we thank them, once again, here today.

Other folks in Princeton... university students... public school staffers... and local government service providers... have also been fervent supporters of the family.

In a broader context, a multitude of messages of support from around the country were received in our church office following the NPR stories last about the family last fall.

Some were from self-professed agnostics:

"I am not a Christian myself but, to me, this work exemplifies the message of Jesus Christ and I thank you for reminding me of that."

Some were from people questioning their faith:

"I was raised a Christian but I don't practice now. But your act of taking this family in and caring for them is the [truest] definition of living as Christ might have lived that I have heard about in a long time. I smiled and cried as I read the story."

Some were from people whose faith may still be renewed:

"I was raised in the church... but I left decades ago [as I grew] more and more embarrassed by the community in which I was raised. What your congregation [is] doing has inspired me to think again... I know that there are churches out there like yours that act in a manner that looks more like the way I understand the Gospels. Although I'm not sure I can describe myself as a person of faith, perhaps I can find a community like yours and get involved."

And some were from fellow Christians:

"Thank you for your inspirational work and for being a great example of faith in action. My own Christian faith was just strengthened by yours today."

But, of course, it's not about me and it's not about us... it's about the refugee.

The 12 refugee families sponsored by Nassau Church over the past 60 years have come from ten different countries, including Bosnia, Burma, Cambodia, Cuba, Hungary, Indonesia, Iraq, Sudan, Vietnam, and, most recently, Syria.

They have found employment as a restaurant manager... a mechanical engineer... a physical therapist... a teacher at a Montessori school... a computer network specialist... a dentist... an inventory manager... a tailor... a food preparation worker... and a librarian.

Many of them are now among my closest friends. For example, Sreten Kopanja, a refugee from Bosnia, often invites me over to his home to sample the latest batch of plum brandy made by his brother back in Belgrade, Serbia.

And refugees often give back to refugees who follow them... Sreten's wife, Jasminka, now provides free dental care for any refugee sponsored by our church.

In our experience, refugees are courageous, resilient, hard-working, selfless, peace-loving, and appreciative people... they are the ones who have been brave enough to leave behind family and friends to find a better life... they live for their children... they are the salt of the earth.

And, when they become citizens, they are some of the most patriotic Americans I know. More than any of us who were born in this country, they appreciate the security and freedom that America provides. And, for this reason, they help make America the great country it is today.

The Syrian Muslim family being sponsored by our church arrived in Princeton last May after waiting 3 years in Jordan for UNHCR and State Department approvals to come to America.

The family fled to Jordan after Osama was blinded by a mortar attack while visiting his uncle's home on the outskirts of Damascus. After Osama's first attempt to test an escape route out of Syria (and remember that he was blind at this point), he was arrested and imprisoned for several months. His second attempt to reach Jordan was successful and the rest of the family soon followed.

When we were approached by the Jersey City office of Church World Service to sponsor this family, we were told that we were the only sponsorship group in New Jersey that they thought could handle the complexities of this case. That apparent

compliment quickly became a challenge and, in turn, a faith obligation that we could not ignore.

Today the four children are doing well in school and attend an Islamic and Arabic study program at the local mosque on Saturday afternoons. Ghada is benefiting from daily ESL classes and will soon have her driver's license and proud possession of a donated minivan. And Osama is participating in a mobility and vocational training program and regularly attends Friday prayer.

In an effort to share these experiences and to encourage more faith communities to sponsor refugees, we have recently compiled a refugee resettlement guide that has been written from our perspective as a community sponsor. The guide provides a step-by-step description of the resettlement activities required of the sponsor and includes examples of many of the documents that a sponsor will encounter. A PDF file of this guide has been posted to the conference website. Copies can also be requested by email to our church office or you can simply share your email address with me here at the conference.

A brief comment on the Executive Order, reissued last week, that reduces the number of refugee admissions from 110,000 to 50,000 for the current fiscal year and ends, at least for now, the admission of Syrian refugees, among others...

The impact of this reduction in admission numbers will be to severely damage the already fragile refugee resettlement network here in the United States. Church World Service alone is projecting hundreds of layoffs of overseas staff and the closing of some of their resettlement offices here in the States. If their Jersey City office is among those closed, then community sponsors in New Jersey may have nowhere to go to find their next refugee family, since a sponsor can only receive a family from an in-state referral office.

And the banning of Syrian refugees not only ignores the population of greatest need in the world but also feeds into the terrorist narrative that the United States is anti-Muslim.

If you agree with me, calls to your congressional representatives challenging these restrictions would be appreciated.

An even briefer comment on the vetting of refugees... the vetting process... that was in place even before the Executive Orders were issued... was already the most complete and thorough security review of any individual entering the United

States. And I have never, ever, had reason to fear a refugee, even when they have lived with my family in our home.

For these reasons, the proposed restrictions on the refugee resettlement program make absolutely no sense to me.

One final response to the NPR stories came as a surprise to us... a letter from an Indonesian refugee sponsored by our church over 50 years ago but whose name was missing from our records:

“On July 24, 1960, my family and I arrived at [JFK] airport as a refugee family sponsored by Nassau Church... I am delighted that the community that helped my family to find its way to the United States and then into its culture and economy continues to make this commitment to other families in need... Nassau Church will always be a very special community to me.”

This letter was sent by Erica Dumpel of Atlanta, Georgia... the owner, with her husband, of an insurance brokerage business... the mother of three college graduates... and now an American citizen.

So, if you are looking for a way to challenge... and reinvigorate... and grow a congregation...

If you are seeking to embody the “missional church” spirit in the lives of your congregants...

If you are searching for an intense and personal way to welcome “the stranger”...

Then please... please... sponsor a refugee family.

Finally, let us together live out our faith as “doers” and provide a positive, informed, and faith-based counter-narrative to the current opposition to refugees.

Thanks be to God.