

## Refugee Sunday talk

As we gather for worship today on Refugee Sunday, it is a pleasure and honour for me to speak with you about refugee sponsorship in our community. Although I am not an expert in the area, I have learned much about Canada's private sponsorship of refugees program through my recent work with AURA's board of directors. I hope to share some of what I have learned, as well as some personal reflections, with you today.

In preparing for this morning's talk, I found the following definition of refugee:

A refugee is a person who has fled their country of origin due to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

There are currently an estimated 26.6 million people who currently meet this definition of refugee around the world. That is more than 2/3 of the whole population of Canada, or almost twice the number of people living in Ontario.

As hard as it is to picture 26.6 million refugees, the reality is that many more people who do not meet the full definition of refugee have needed to flee their homes in recent years due to violence and persecution. For example, people may need to flee their home community, but are then unable to cross the borders of their country. If we include these people in estimates, there are 84 million displaced people around the world – more than 3 times the entire population of Canada.

These kinds of numbers can be hard for us to understand and can make the problem faced seem impossible to tackle. Political, social, economic, and environmental forces outside of our control continue to force people out of their homelands in higher and higher numbers. Images and stories in the news of civilians, including small children, being murdered and orphaned in conflict zones can leave us feeling horrified, helpless and maybe even paralyzed.

Thanks be to God that neither we nor any refugee around the world is truly alone in distress. No suffering is too great for our God to bear and no problem too large for God to take on. As we heard today in our readings, Jesus commands us to love one another. Peter shared the new understanding given to him by God that the gift of the Holy Spirit was being shared with all people, rather than being only for an exclusive group. Jesus' life and such stories of the early Christian church give us ideas as to how we can respond to our refugee neighbours who are suffering around the world.

First, I believe it can be helpful to reflect on personal stories of refugees. In His time on earth, Jesus saw each person as a beloved child of God, whose story was fully known by Him. For many of us here at St Barnabas, our ancestors were not indigenous to this land, so that when we or our families first came, we were strangers here. In my own family, while my great-grandparents on my mother's side were economic immigrants escaping poverty in Finland, my grandparents on my father's side were refugees, escaping violence and persecution in the

former Yugoslavia. Although my grandparents hardly spoke of their experiences in and following World War II, I do know that they spent many years in refugee camps in Austria and came to Canada without any knowledge of the country or of English. Canada was chosen as a new homeland, simply because it was one of the few countries around the world willing to take in Yugoslavian refugees. It is understandably very difficult and painful to talk openly about experiences in fleeing one's homeland, or about life in refugee camps. On the other hand, I know that I have been enriched by hearing personal stories from former and recent refugees. Such stories help me to understand more about the world and how precarious a safe and stable community or society can be. Personal stories also allow me to more easily see each person as an individual beloved and precious to God. To this end, I recommend to anyone who has internet access that they watch video interviews of 3 recent refugees to Canada by a fellow AURA board member. Each refugee, from Afghanistan, Georgia/Ukraine, and Burundi, has a unique story of the forces that drove them out of their homelands and the route they took to eventually arrive in Toronto.

Second, I believe the early Church's focus on loving all people, regardless of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion is one of utmost importance today. Jesus' view of family and neighbour extended far beyond the circles of blood relatives or people living next door. Canada's private sponsorship program allows a small group of people to gather together resources and commit to supporting an unknown refugee or family of refugees for the first year of their new life in Canada. Of course, many sponsorships occur through friends and family of refugees, which is also needed. However, Jesus' radical love seems to be fully realized in the act of helping someone unknown, whose values and way of life may be completely different from our own. As our Lord said in Luke chapter 6, "if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?" Jesus calls us to a more radical love that seems strange to the rest of the world – love your neighbours, love your enemies, do not care only for those who look or act like you.

Finally, I would like to briefly talk about how private sponsorship of refugees through AURA works and to invite each of us to consider how we can do more to support our refugee neighbours. AURA has a sponsorship agreement with the Anglican Diocese of Toronto, which allows it to submit applications for a certain number of refugees to come to Canada through private sponsorship each year. AURA submits applications on behalf of sponsorship groups who provide financial and other assistance to an individual refugee or family over one year. Details of sponsor responsibilities can be found on this handout [*refer to handout*] If a group of us from St Barnabas comes together as a sponsorship group and agrees to sponsor a refugee or family, we would have responsibilities such as meeting newcomers at the airport, setting up housing and basic supplies for living, as well as helping newcomers to get settled over their first year of life in Canada. All those I've spoken to who have been involved in refugee sponsorship

have found the experience to be very rewarding, and even life-altering, although not without challenges. Please don't hesitate to ask me more about getting involved with sponsorship. AURA receives thousands of requests for sponsorship every year and more Anglican parishes are needed in order to welcome refugees.

To conclude my time speaking with you this morning, I would ask you to join me in a prayer written by Catholic Relief Services *[see prayer from Refugee Sunday materials]*