

How to Develop Ministry to Refugees¹

Refugees and their Needs



Australia is one of the major destinations for providing refugees with a new home.

In international law a refugee is *someone who cannot return to the country from which he or she fled because of a well-founded fear of persecution or because of war or civil conflict*. Some people have pretended to be refugees for their own advantage. However, there are a great many genuine refugees in Australia.

International Teams estimates that world-wide there are 35 million refugees and internally displaced people. Half of them are presently living in some kind of refugee camp. Some may stay in such camps for a few months. But there are many who live in such conditions for many years - the average stay is 5 years.

Refugees are different from migrants. Migrants enjoy the protection of their home government. Refugees do not. Refugees are people who in desperation have fled their homelands. They do so because of war, violence, persecution, famine or economic despair. Refugees have experienced fear and some unspeakable horrors or torture. They have suffered great loss and separation and often betrayal, abandonment or deception. As they seek another home they typically experience repeated knock-backs. They may arrive with physical illnesses or even disabilities arising from past trauma.

The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.
Leviticus 19:34

Refugees are often victims of exploitation. Arguably, people trafficking is bigger business than drug trafficking. Some refugees are forced to work as prostitutes or 'soldiers' for criminal gangs.

Refugees will often find it very difficult to adjust to life in Australia. But it is not just the cultural differences

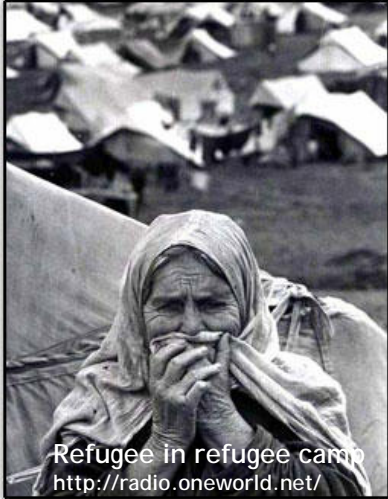
that create difficulties. Phin Tang observes that most refugees are "dying for friendship and support, especially if they are living in isolated rural communities". Most refugees who arrive in Australia do not receive a warm welcome from resident Australians. Many refugees and new migrants have never been invited to have a meal in the home of a resident Australian.

Practical Measures

- Simply open up conversation with refugees you meet on the street.
- Extend hospitality.
- Include them in church activities, e.g. picnics and outings.
- Organise and promote (via local community centres, etc.) a free excursion or outing or sightseeing trip - they probably won't have the opportunity otherwise.
- Get involved (either as a committee member, volunteer or participant) in local community activities and thereby keep abreast of issues and needs for refugees in the community.
- Connect with the local school where refugee children attend. Possibly approach the primary and high school principal to offer voluntary assistance for refugee children with English tuition, either during or after school hours. (Expect the school to show concern about the safety and privacy of its pupils, as it should)
- Link the refugee children into local sporting activities (especially soccer and basketball, which are typically their favourite sports). This may involve providing transport for training on weekdays and matches on weekends. This can be arranged by parents who have children who are also playing soccer or by church volunteers. Most refugees are struggling financially and would not be able to afford the joining/registration fees, which often cost over \$100 per season. In Sydney (and perhaps other areas by negotiation), the sports clubs will either sponsor refugee children by either waiving their fees or only charging them say \$30 to cover the insurance cost.
- Get involved in the English Home Tutor Scheme - a voluntary service administered by a charitable organisation (Mission Australia for Sydney). Through this scheme volunteers are linked to refugees and migrants who wish to learn English at their home, especially those who are housebound and therefore are unable to attend the formal Adult English classes.
- Offer free driving lessons and practice to refugees who have learned to drive or had driven in their home country but are currently on an L plate. The RTA requires them to acquire over 50 hours of driving practice before they can sit for the driving test. In Sydney it costs about \$30 per hour through the Driving schools. By the time they gain their 50 over hours, it would have cost them over \$1500 which they would not be able to afford in the short term. Having a full driving licence makes it easier for them to gain employment, especially if jobs are located further away from town.
 - ❖ Option 1: Ask the refugee to save up (from their Centrelink payments) to buy a cheap second hand car (aprox. \$1000 to \$2000). Alternatively, if a church member has an old car then this can be used for giving the refugee his/her practice up to the required 50 hours. St Peter's Anglican Church, Seven Hills, is presently operating this scheme.



- ❖ Option 2: A special church project whereby the church purchases the second hand car (through fund raising) and use that car for the sole purpose of helping refugees to gain their driving licence in due course. This option would certainly attract a lot of interest especially if you promote it through community centres. Get this printed up in the local magazine. This will bring free advertisement and publicity for the local church as well.



- Provide free knitting lessons for refugee mothers while their children attend playgroup activities or even Sunday school. Maybe start a craft group. This helps these women to integrate and learn conversational English from the church ladies at the same time.
- Use the practical skills and expertise of people in your church to provide basic services such as plumbing, electrical work, putting up curtain rails, laying carpets and providing food.
- Get word of mouth referrals. Once you know a refugee, he/she will be more than happy to recommend and refer you to their relatives and friends who are also living in the area.

- The church should plan for a special mission Sunday on refugee ministry. Invite a guest speaker with significant experience in refugee ministry or cross-cultural ministry. Follow this up with seminar or forum after church for those who wish to be involved or who want to find out more.
- The church as a whole must be committed to pray for this refugee ministry. Build it into the intercessory prayers offered to the Lord during the church service. Incorporate prayers for this ministry into the church bulletin and prayer notes. Ask for God's guidance and wisdom in reaching out to these precious people.
- Where appropriate develop a specialized church-based team to provide leadership for multicultural ministry, including ministry to refugees. At least make this a core component of the meetings conducted by the group in your church, which is responsible for local ministry and outreach.
- Organise for a competent person to help those involved in this ministry to understand cultural differences. For

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt.

Deuteronomy 10:17-19

- example, eye contact, body contact, attitudes to time and the way people relate to the opposite sex may vary considerably across cultures. It is helpful to be informed about the particular cross-cultural differences you will experience in relating to local refugees. But adequate training should also include a basic understanding of culture and intercultural dynamics. This will enable church members not merely to avoid giving unnecessary offence and the forming of hasty judgments, but also to see cultural differences from the perspective of the worldview and value system of the refugees.
- Organise a team of volunteers to collect donated secondhand furniture for distribution to newly arrived refugees. (Under DIMIA's present refugee resettlement program, all new entrants are provided with a very basic 'household formation package' delivered by a funded service provider in the community where the refugees reside. The package includes a fridge, washing machine, a bed and mattress each, a set of bedding and a blanket each, iron and ironing board, toaster, kettle, cutlery and kitchen knives, kitchen utensils, a radio cassette player, a small TV, a fan or a heater, a vacuum cleaner, dining table and chairs and one two-seater sofa/couch regardless of the number of persons in the family.)
 - Collect and deliver Christmas hampers during the Christmas season and take the opportunity to invite them to the church or a community organized Christmas carol event. This is an excellent opportunity to share/expose refugees to the gospel. For example, Muslim refugees may resist attending church but may be prepared to attend a special festivity or occasion.
 - Put together a Welcome to Australia Pack for refugees. This might include such things as the following:
 - ❖ Basic information about the church and community services (ideally in the heart language of the people concerned, but at the very least in simple English - you may need to spend time ensuring it is understood)
 - ❖ Basic household items for kitchen (bowls, cutlery, etc.), bathroom, bedroom and cleaning. Basic food items. A tool kit, etc. An alternative way of helping is to take refugees shopping for some or all of these items and help them develop confidence in shopping for themselves.



Suggested Tips for Home Visiting²

- Wear appropriate and modest clothes
- Visit in daylight
- Prearrange visit if possible being clear when you will visit, why, and for how long
- Explain clearly who you are and carry ID
- Respect privacy: don't enter house unless you are invited in and not if children are alone.
- Remember you're their guest
- Observe cultural expectations regarding greetings, shoes off, opposite sex
- Accept hospitality, leave enough time for your visit, don't stay too long (nor be too quick to leave!)
- Be gentle and listen
- Recognise what feelings belong to your friend but may be projected onto you
- Don't offer too much and don't over commit yourself
- Know your limits and know where to refer people and try to recognise when to refer on
- Never take away documents, papers or letters
- Leave a clear, short follow-up message
- Remember confidentiality
- Enjoy yourself!

Prerequisite for Effective Refugee Ministry

Appoint a committed key church member to lead this ministry. Phin Tang comments, I personally believe that such a venture will not be successful unless the church minister, or at least a committed key member, is inspired to lead and take on this window of opportunity to reach out to refugees.

¹ This information has been culled from a number of sources. I am especially grateful for advice provided by Phin Tang, [Refugee Ministry Coordinator, Sydney Anglican Diocese](#). In addition I acknowledge the helpfulness of the PowerPoint Presentation (downloadable from the Internet so that you can show this to church members) put together by International Teams: <http://www.refugeehighway.net/resources/CD/pp/RefMin-PowerPointI.ppt>

² Warren Powell and Dr Sue Leather, "When I was a stranger you welcomed me" *Asylum Seeker & Refugee Befriending Pack*. The Welcome Centre, Cornerstone Christian Centre, Bromley, Kent, UK. June 2000.