



Refugee Resettlement: One Congregation's Transforming Experience

JOANNE KARVONEN

On a dark and snowy night—Thanksgiving eve of 1978—two stalwart members of Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Church trudged the streets of Saint Paul's Cathedral Hill area in a desperate search for housing, not for themselves, but for a newly arrived Hmong family, a young single mother and her six children. Saint Paul landlords, who had never heard the term Hmong and who were suspicious of the label “refugee,” proved to be unresponsive. Only after the committee members posed as a married couple with six children of their own were they finally shown apartments.

Such was the beginning of the refugee ministry of Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Church in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Little did the congregation know then that this mission would continue for the next thirty years, during which time they would serve at least thirty-five families from fifteen troubled countries. For both the congregation and the many refugees whose lives they have touched, this has been a transforming experience, one that has placed Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Church at the forefront of refugee assistance efforts in the state of Minnesota.

The story of the involvement of Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Church con-

Working in refugee sponsorship steadily since 1978, Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Church has served at least thirty-five families from fifteen countries. The work of this congregation has transformed the lives of hundreds of refugees and their families, even as it has enlivened and enlightened its own members.

gregation in this effort is one of persistent hard work and fervent faith in the value of all human beings. Obviously, no one congregation has all the answers to a problem as huge as the world's refugee crisis, but, by focusing on one needy family at a time, the congregation at Saint Anthony Park Lutheran has succeeded in developing a systematic program that seeks to help incoming refugees become independent, contributing members of American society.

THIRTY YEARS OF SERVICE¹

In response to the tragic upheaval in southeast Asia during the 1960s and 1970s, a small group of concerned church members at Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Church gathered early in 1978 to form the Refugee Core Committee. From that time to the present, this group has lived up to its name by continuing to function as a small, but active, core of individuals committed to helping refugees. The core group, on which at least fifty members of the congregation have served over the years, has succeeded in its mission by enlisting the talents and services of many interested church members, thus making this truly an effort of the entire congregation. Currently, the core group includes eight active members who meet regularly to manage the details of refugee support. The entire congregation, however, is kept abreast of new developments, problems, and progress. And, of course, the congregation supports the program with its generous donations, financial and otherwise. Over the thirty years of this program, tons of clothing, bedding, and furniture have been contributed to the cause.

the core group, on which at least fifty members of the congregation have served over the years, has succeeded in its mission by enlisting the talents and services of many interested church members, thus making this truly an effort of the entire congregation

The history of the Refugee Core Committee mirrors the history of worldwide refugee situations since the 1970s. When the committee first came together, the focus was on southeast Asia, particularly the displaced peoples of Vietnam and Laos, so it was understandable that this congregation's first refugee family was a Hmong family from Laos—Pa Yang and her six children, mentioned earlier.² Getting to know Pa Yang and her young children was the congregation's introduction to an intriguing and delightful culture. The family even lived in the church for a while until the committee was able to locate an apartment for them. The spicy aromas of Hmong cooking in the church kitchen and the entire family sleeping in the former

¹See also Joanne Karvonen, "Refugee Sponsorship," in *One Hundred Years of Lutheran Ministry*, ed. John Rutford et al. (Saint Paul, MN: Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Church, 2002) 122–124.

²Personal names in this article have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved. All refugee names are pseudonyms.

ladies lounge signified the dramatic cultural changes the congregation was experiencing.

The committee continued to sponsor southeast Asian refugees throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, but, at the same time, citizens of Ethiopia and Eritrea were being uprooted by internal strife in those African countries. In the 1980s, the church sponsored three families from Eritrea, again a country not well known to most Americans. Also in the 1980s, the group sponsored a couple from Hungary.

In the 1990s, as the flow of southeast Asian refugees subsided, world attention shifted to Somalia, where feuding tribal leaders forced the hasty exodus of many Somali citizens. During this period, the congregation shifted gears and welcomed at least four Somali families to settlement in this country. At about the same time, the congregation sponsored a couple from Haiti and a family from Cuba.

Also, during the 1990s, what Americans knew as Yugoslavia became ravaged by civil war, this conflict resulting in a flow of refugees to this country from Bosnia and Croatia. Beginning in 1997, the committee sponsored four families from this volatile area.

In 2000, the terribly cruel war in Sierra Leone brought a large family from that country to Saint Paul and Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Church. Then, because of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in this country, the flow of refugees was temporarily suspended, leaving refugee-support groups in limbo until the U.S. government loosened its restrictions. Gradually, in 2002 and 2003, refugees from Liberia and Ethiopia began coming to the Twin Cities. The Saint Anthony Park committee and congregation cosponsored five families from Liberia and one from Ethiopia. In 2005, when the last of the refugee camps in Thailand was closed, the committee worked closely with three Hmong families who had spent the major part of their lives in this camp.

Most recently, in 2007 and 2008, the committee has cosponsored a family from Myanmar (Burma) and another one from Bhutan. Although U.S. media have kept Americans informed about the strife in Myanmar, most Americans know nothing about the serious ethnic conflicts in Bhutan and, thus, are shocked to learn of the hardships there.

FAMILY STORIES

This thirty-year history of Saint Anthony Park Lutheran's mission to refugees is just a skeletal account. The real story is one of unique individuals, each of whom comes from a country so mired in war or economic difficulties that life there became untenable. Their stories are bloodcurdling, humiliating, painful, and unspeakably tragic. But we need to hear these stories. Indeed, members of the Refugee Core Committee at Saint Anthony Park Lutheran feel that hearing the stories is essential to their mission, so they attempt to listen to each family's story soon after a family arrives. Sometimes the details of the story are so horrific that the family or individual is not able to speak about them until several years have passed.

A Family from Sierra Leone

One such story was related to the committee members as they and a newly arrived refugee couple shared an evening meal. This elderly couple, Samuel and Edriam Musa, said that they had been married for more than forty years and had lived, worked, and raised a large family in a provincial town of Sierra Leone. Rebel troops from neighboring Liberia began killing and maiming innocent citizens in their town. At one point, the couple and their eight younger children were forced to flee into the snake-infested bush where they hid out for a month. On their return, their home was invaded once again. This time, the family was rounded up in their living room while the invaders demanded money. When Samuel refused, the rebels threatened to kill them all. Instead, they knocked out Samuel's front teeth and beat the entire family. Fortunately, the rebels were then diverted by an explosion in another part of the city, thus allowing the family to escape. After walking forty miles in search of transportation to the neighboring country of Guinea, they came upon a truck large enough to accommodate the family. Paying the driver with money they had hidden in their Bible, they reached the relative safety of Guinea. Although a refugee camp existed there, conditions proved so unsanitary and unsafe that the family's adult children in other parts of the world managed to pay for housing outside the dangerous camp. Here the family lived a hand-to-mouth existence for a year before they were finally allowed to come to Minnesota. Now Samuel has become a naturalized citizen. This past November he voted in his first presidential election, and he is struggling valiantly to understand the electoral college! Edriam and all the children have good jobs. While they continue to be haunted by memories of their inhuman torture, this particular family is extremely resilient and determined to make new lives for themselves in this country.

A Unique Hmong Couple

Possibly the biggest challenge for the Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Refugee Core Committee was a Hmong couple who came to Minnesota in 1991. Toua Her (age 61) and his wife May Phang (age 56) arrived at the beginning of a cold winter. It was apparent immediately that they would need a great deal of help. Because of wounds incurred while fighting with the CIA in Laos back in the 1970s, Toua's leg had been amputated at the knee, and he had lost an eye. An even more serious problem was that he had leprosy or Hansen's disease. After conferring with several Twin Cities medical experts, the committee members learned that as long as his leprosy was treated with appropriate medications, the disease posed no threat for those who came in contact with the couple. For the Hmong community, however, leprosy was one of the most feared diseases, and Hmong individuals afflicted with this disease were completely ostracized. Thus, Toua and May were not only living in a strange new country, but they were pariahs in a community that usually takes care of its own.

Sobered by the reality of the situation, the committee dug in and started the arduous task of finding housing for the couple. By this time, there were many

Hmong landlords in Saint Paul, all of whom turned the couple away. After weeks of searching, an apartment was finally found, but, in a few months, Hmong neighbors so feared for their lives that they pressured the American landlord to turn the couple out. Thus, the search started all over again; another apartment was found, Toua and May were settled in, and, again, neighbors forced them out. Eventually, the committee succeeded in moving them into Ramsey County public housing, where they lived safely but in total isolation from the Hmong community.

members of the committee feel that hearing the stories is essential to their mission, so they attempt to listen to each family's story soon after a family arrives

While working with this unfortunate but highly spirited couple, the Saint Anthony Park committee was perhaps at its most active. Between Toua's serious health problems and May's high blood pressure, three or four committee members drove them to many medical appointments each month. One member of the committee met with them weekly to tutor them in English. The treasurer of the committee regularly helped them with financial matters. Other members took them for outings; the couple particularly enjoyed visiting the Como Park Conservatory. Members of the congregation, sensing the isolation and vulnerability of this couple, pitched in also—helping with carpentry projects, sewing curtains, shopping for groceries, bringing them to church. In 1994, when Toua died of complications from his leprosy, the entire congregation mourned his passing. A devout Christian, Toua had requested that he be buried dressed all in white so that he would be prepared to join the angels. His wish was granted, and he was buried in a Saint Paul cemetery after a moving service at Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Church. His widow, then completely alone in Saint Paul, moved to the Boston area to join her son.

A Family from Bhutan

In the summer of 2008, the Saint Anthony Park committee welcomed a Bhutanese family of five—a grandmother, her son and daughter-in-law, and their two adult sons. The male head of this family, a leader of an unpopular ethnic minority in Bhutan, had been imprisoned and tortured by the Bhutanese government. The seventy-eight-year-old grandmother had witnessed her serene family life in a beautiful setting completely disrupted by reprisals against her ethnic group. Fortunately, the refugee camp in Nepal where this family took refuge is a model camp, and during their seventeen years there the family held itself together, provided an education for their children, and maintained an energetic optimism that they are now putting to good use in this country. The two sons, who are both in their early twenties and can just barely remember their home country, have found good jobs and have applied for admission to local colleges, where they intend to further their

education. They look forward to obtaining their U.S. citizenship as soon as possible, after which at least one of them hopes to return to Bhutan to do community service. The young men's parents attend English classes five nights a week and are making good progress. The grandmother feels safe and much loved by the extended family that surrounds her in Saint Paul. Needless to say, getting acquainted with this family has been a rewarding and encouraging experience for the committee members, almost a respite from previous challenges.

just as the group encourages newly arrived refugees to share their stories, members of the core committee make a valiant attempt to share their Christian motivation and mission with their assigned families

THE MISSION

With the three families portrayed above and with all the families sponsored by the Saint Anthony Park group, the goal has always been to facilitate the transformation of lives—from broken, wounded, dependent beings to strong, independent individuals, well equipped to become productive citizens of the United States. The mission statement of the group expresses it this way:

The St. Anthony Park Lutheran Church Refugee Core Committee seeks to express the love of Christ in acts of service by befriending and assisting new refugees, providing financial assistance, helping with resettlement needs such as housing, medical care and public assistance, clothing, education, and transportation. The committee maintains a relationship with refugee families as they assimilate into a new culture and become independent and self-sufficient.

Just as the group encourages newly arrived refugees to share their stories, members of the core committee make a valiant attempt to share their Christian motivation and mission with their assigned families. Sometime within the first month or so after arrival, at least one committee member tries to have this conversation with the family. The group also emphasizes with each new family that we are all descendants of refugees, and that, even though these earlier refugees were almost all from northern Europe, they faced many of the same hardships as today's refugees. When present-day refugees hear the story of Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish immigrants who came to this country in the nineteenth century because they were starving and in many cases fleeing conscription, they look at these big healthy American committee members in a new light, and smiles of recognition light up their faces.

Back in the 1970s and 1980s, when refugee resettlement was novel and even somewhat glamorous, many Lutheran churches successfully sponsored Vietnamese and Hmong families. But as the years went by and it became apparent that the number of refugees was growing rather than decreasing, the prospect of working

with refugees forever was daunting and discouraging. Given the intensity of work with new refugees in the first months after their arrival, it is not surprising that congregational support for this effort diminished greatly until the present day, when very few congregations are actively involved with new refugee families.

As of December 31, 2007, it was estimated that there were fourteen million refugees throughout the world.³ Many of them have languished in refugee camps all their lives and have almost become accustomed to the inhumane prospect of life in an environment where there is no meaningful employment, little or no chance for a good education, and no real hope for the future. Even though these tragic injustices can be verified by facts, headlines in the U.S. press rarely acknowledge the problem.

Organizations such as Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) and its affiliate Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota (LSS)—along with other regional LSS organizations—remain active in their quest to welcome the stranger (see Matt 25:31–46) by providing ministries of service and justice. They offer support for local congregations in the form of caseworkers for new refugee families, employment advice, immigration legal advice, and much more. For those who are unable to aid in the actual hands-on sponsorship of families, LSS offers many opportunities for donations of money or goods. But the hands-on work of welcoming specific families and helping them settle in this country has fallen to individual congregations. With only a handful of congregations still active in this ministry, many new families arrive here only to be left adrift in their attempt at establishing a new home.

SCRIPTURAL GUIDANCE

The Refugee Core Committee at Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Church has remained active primarily because of its reliance on Scripture. Inspired by the great commandment, which concludes, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:39), committee members have sought to combine political awareness with Christian service. Reading further in the New Testament, they are reminded by Gal 5:13, “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.” And in Heb 13:2 is the great admonition, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Additionally, the Old Testament reminds all that God’s chosen people have often been refugees, and this reminder extends to subsequent generations, all of whom have at some time been refugees and then aliens: “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with

³U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, “Refugee and Asylum Seekers Worldwide,” in *World Refugee Survey 2008* (Arlington, VA: USCRI, 2007), 31. Accessed in PDF form 4 May 2009, at http://www.refugees.org/uploadedFiles/Investigate/Publications_&_Archives/WRS_Archives/2008/refugees%20and%20asylum%20seekers%20worldwide.pdf.

you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God” (Lev 19:33–34).

THE OUTCOME

Welcoming the alien, serving the stranger with loving care, and acknowledging that we are all in this together obviously benefits the needy victims of worldwide chaos, and that, of course, is the ultimate goal of refugee service. But caregivers who have been so involved testify passionately that another highly important goal has been to transform their own worldviews. First of all, congregations who sponsor refugees soon become aware that these uprooted people are more than just characters in pathetic horror stories. They are not babies or pets to be coddled and shown off in their native garb. They are human beings who love their native countries but for various reasons have been forced to flee. As all human beings, they want the best for their children; they want meaningful employment; and they want to establish safe and comfortable homes for their families. They do not want to be dependent on the local welfare system; instead, they crave and work toward the dignity of being able to support themselves. In other words, those who truly get to know refugees quickly come to realize that as unfortunate as these people might be, as strange as they might look, as alien as their culture might seem, they are not really strangers but are members of the human family to which we all belong.

Congregations who sponsor refugees soon become aware that these uprooted people are more than just characters in pathetic horror stories. They are not babies or pets to be coddled and shown off in their native garb.

For privileged Americans, it is almost impossible to comprehend the unspeakable experiences that refugees endure—physical violence, rape, torture, sudden and cruel eviction from their homes, imprisonment, prolonged separation from family members. Hearing about these experiences is bad enough, but coming to recognize how these atrocities continue to affect lives, even many years after the events, attests to the far-reaching effects of war. For example, refugee women who have been raped often deal with paranoia and depression for decades after the attacks. They are also frequently ostracized by their particular families or tribes, and this is often a lifetime abandonment. Here in the United States, wartime animosities continue for refugees, and for some the war never ends, leading to a lifetime of fear and suspicion.

The majority of refugees, however, rise above their pasts. They are amazingly strong, resilient, and energetic. They use these assets to endure and even prosper in American society. Refugees sponsored by Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Church

have gone on to become teachers, mechanics, scientific researchers, store clerks, restaurant owners, health care workers, bus drivers, factory workers. They hold degrees ranging from high school diplomas to PhDs. Church members are especially proud of a former Somali refugee who in November of 2008 was named by the McKnight Foundation as one of seven awardees with long histories of service to their communities in Minnesota. New citizens like this man have succeeded in blending into the fabric of American society, but, in so doing, they have added an amazing texture and color that have most certainly enriched the sponsoring congregation and the United States at large.

Before the 1970s, most Americans had not seen the beautifully intricate needlework or the lush green vegetables sold by Hmong families today at the Saint Paul Farmers' Market. We were not aware of the tightly-knit, loving, and supportive Somali family structure. We hadn't heard about the joyous three-day church festivals at Easter and Christmastime in Sierra Leone. And we had not seen pictures of the achingly beautiful Bosnian and Croatian countryside.

At the time of Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Church's inception, church members were not far from being refugees themselves. Indeed, the official language of the congregation was Norwegian until well into the twentieth century. Now this same church cherishes these new refugees who have once again made our society more diverse, colorful, and exciting. The Refugee Core Committee and their Saint Paul congregation have been fortunate to be part of this massive humanitarian effort. They welcome other congregations to join them. ☩

JOANNE KARVONEN is a member of Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Church in Saint Paul, Minnesota. She has been an active member of the Refugee Core Committee since 1979, serving as chair, secretary, and treasurer of the group.