



Ministering to Immigrant and Refugee Families: A Case Study on Liberian Refugees in Minnesota

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There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:28

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

Matthew 25:35

I am a Lutheran, presently serving as a pastor in the United States. I was born in Liberia, became a victim of the Liberian Civil War, and sought a new life in America.

Through the years, I have thought much about war and being a refugee. I know that forgiveness is not an easy process. Finding peace of heart and healing the wounds of denial and betrayal take much time. When an armed rebel killed one of my relatives during the Liberian Civil War in 1992, the incident completely baffled me. I was shocked. It affected me so much that I came to hate the

It is always good to hear the voices of those who have made the long and difficult journey as a refugee from conflict. The author, a former refugee from the civil war in Liberia and now a Lutheran pastor in the United States, reflects on the needs of the refugees and what needs to be done to serve this population.

perpetrator. I became bitter and angry deep inside. The most difficult part of all was to face the perpetrator in person. When I left Liberia and took refuge in the Ivory Coast, I was surprised to find this perpetrator himself in the refugee center. Finally, when I met him, I asked him: “Why did you kill my relative?” The perpetrator was speechless, then tried to mumble an incomprehensible reason. Eventually, he merely said, “It was the war, and I need your forgiveness.” I cried and said, “I will talk to you another time.” After two years, I was able to forgive him, but I didn’t forget the incident. It takes much time and strength to bear the pain of loss, especially the loss of beloved ones. The negative state of my life, resulting from that unfavorable episode, was affecting my physical well-being. When a person holds on to anger, the holding on distracts them from performing their daily functions, which can eventually lead to troubled relationships as well as persistent stress. In order to clear the mind, it is essential to forego resentment, forgive the hurt, and divert the mind to more productive concerns to let the process of healing begin. In my case, I found it difficult to get out of my shell and forgive the person responsible for the death of my relative.

I came to realize later on that anger and frustration, building inside me, were ruining my life, health, and relationships. In fact, I was only hurting myself by not forgiving people. I had to do something about it, and I decided to let go the past. Even if the memories of my dying relative remained in me, I accepted the fact that he was no longer among us, among the living. Thus, with all those memories I cherished of him, I decided to move on with my life.

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Today, there are approximately 68.5 million people in the world who have been forced to escape from their homes. About 25.4 million are refugees, half of whom are children, who have fled atrocities in their home countries to settle in a totally new different country.¹ Each year thousands of individuals and their families worldwide are displaced by various factors—for instance, famine, war, political instabilities, and civil unrest. Thousands of such refugees have been getting into Minnesota since the early 1990s, and as a result, Minnesota is now home to the largest Liberian population in the United States. The refugee issue is a very challenging situation not only in the United States but worldwide. Mainly women and children are faced with life-threatening conditions that leave them with no other option than to search for asylum in other countries. Many also fear persecution

¹ The United Nation High Commission for Refugee Agency, “Figures at a Glance,” *Statistical Yearbooks*, <http://tinyurl.com/y4nchokd>.

based on religion, race, and nationality. This forces them to leave behind very significant possessions, family, traditions, and their homeland. Even in the host countries, the refugees find themselves in a state of anticipation and challenges.

This article focuses on the different ways of ministering to Liberian refugee families in Minnesota. The Liberian Civil War resulted in an exodus of refugees who eventually found their way to the United States, particularly the Twin Cities—Saint Paul and Minneapolis—in Minnesota. These refugees are facing enormous challenges, from linguistic and cultural barriers to education, job prospects, and child care, from physical and healthcare challenges to inadequate housing and transportation options. Ministering to refugees has biblical foundations both in the Old and New Testaments. Christians who minister to refugees should proceed in three ways: concerted interchurch and intercommunity actions, Bible-guided multilevel support, and a listening ear. They should respond to the call of ministering to their foreign brethren and recognize that Christianity is about building bridges instead of walls.

Liberia is located on the west coast of Africa, bordered on the east by Cote d'Ivoire, on the west by Sierra Leone, on the north by Guinea, and on the south by the Atlantic Ocean. In 1822, Liberia was founded as a component of the emancipation program for African Americans in the United States, the American Colonization Society (ACS), to settle freed African Americans in West Africa. In 1847, Liberia became an independent nation, the Republic of Liberia.

Liberia is home to about four million people.² The emancipated slaves (Americo-Liberians) took power and dominated the country for a very long time. A coup occurred in 1980, placing into power Samuel Doe, a sergeant in the Liberian army, as the new president. Following President Doe's nine-year reign, political, economic, and societal upheaval occurred. This led to the eruption of the Liberian Civil War, which lasted fourteen years (1989–2003). At the height of the civil war, millions of Liberians were forcibly displaced from their own country, fleeing for their lives into the neighboring countries.³ Thousands of Liberians died in the war as well, mostly as collateral damage, caught in the crossfire between rebel combatants and the government forces of Liberia. In the region, the total loss of life climbed up to about 250,000.

Although conflict and war are the cause of mass displacement around the world (and particularly in some African countries), an underlying cause must be well understood and addressed. Stephan Bauman, Matthew Soerens, and Issam Smeir note that the broader cause of the displacement problem is power, greed, persistent oppression, and entrenched poverty.⁴

In this complex world, the global refugee problem can be developed and exacerbated by layers of factors. Bauman, Soerens, and Smeir believe that the root

² Bureau of African Affairs, "U.S. Relations with Liberia: A BAA Fact Sheet," U.S. Department of State, July 20, 2018, <http://tinyurl.com/yyhz54pb>.

³ "U.S. Relations with Liberia."

⁴ Stephan Bauman, Matthew Soerens, and Issam Smeir, *Seeking Refuge: On the Shores of the Global Refugee Crisis* (Chicago: Moody, 2016), 153–54.

causes of violence and human displacement are factors that are more long-term than many may have expected. These are human values, beliefs, and worldview, which drive human behavior.⁵ Oppression can cause political and social tensions that can result in conflicts and wars. These conflicts, particularly where politically powerful groups control society, lead those in power to ignore, exploit, and oppress minorities, the women and the children, simply on the basis of race, gender, age, and even faith. Meanwhile, worldviews frame the human conception of reality, pushing those in power to justify the validity of an oppressive war, the massacre of innocent civilians, and the modern diaspora. Most of these worldviews are handed down undiluted from generation to generation as cultures and traditions, defining a way of life. Thus, unjust worldviews spread injustice throughout the world, causing poverty, mass displacements, and deaths.

For Christians, the way to stop the problem of forced migration is to change these unjust and violent worldviews, transforming them into just, peaceful, and gentle worldviews that value and respect human lives. Bauman, Soerens, and Smeir propose that this transformation can occur through right relationships between peoples.⁶ They argue that the causes of mass displacements are mere symptoms of broken relationships between human beings. If relationships work, injustice and violence are unnecessary options.

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A refugee is an individual who is forced to flee their country of origin to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster. Although refugees are despised by many, especially in the host country, they are still humans, and in order to ensure they are assisted, Christians need to think about what the Bible says regarding refugees. Since the Bible talks of love and accepting other people despite their differences, refugees are regarded as neighbors to Christians in host countries. Therefore, Christians are encouraged to assist refugees. The book of Ruth covers the narrative of a widow from the tribe of Moab who chooses to accompany her mother-in-law, Naomi, to Israel in order to stay with her. This story shows how Boaz accepts the widow without question, and this can be utilized in understanding how people are supposed to relate to refugees.

The Old Testament story of Ruth illustrates the hand of God in caring for refugees even from the gentile country of Moab (Kgs 11:7). Scripture also contains other stories of forced immigration, from the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden (Gen 3:23–24), to the departure of the people of Israel from Egypt

⁵ Bauman, Soerens, and Smeir, *Seeking Refuge*, 155.

⁶ Bauman, Soerens, and Smeir, *Seeking Refuge*, 161.

in their journey home to the promised land (Exod 13:17–22). In the New Testament, the flight of the Holy Family, of Jesus, Joseph, and Mary (Matt 2:1–11), to Egypt signaled the Christian diaspora, which later occurred as the local religious authorities unleashed severe persecution against the ancient church through the work of a young zealot by the name of Saul (Acts 8:1, 3–4).

The flight of the Holy Family (Joseph, Mary, and Jesus) shows them to be refugees who fled from the authority that threatened them.⁷ In Mathew 2, immediately after the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, a resounding warning is delivered to Joseph by the Lord's angel that Bethlehem will not be safe for the baby born Christ (Matt 2:12–15). This is a clear warning for the family to escape their homeland and go to another city where the authorities cannot harm them. Consequently, Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus leave for Egypt. Immediately after their departure, King Herod orders the slaughter of the male children under the age of two. This axe was meant to land on Jesus, who by good providence had fled out of Bethlehem as directed by the angel of the Lord in Joseph's dream.

It can be extremely challenging to make a new life, even for someone who has not experienced utter chaos, like the Liberian war refugees have. The refugee experience can bring staggering moments of change. However, the church has unique gifts to make it an instant support system for refugees. The church teaches the importance of serving others, particularly the poor. It fosters a community of support as a way of life. The gift of community in the church has already established the very conditions needed to support families of refugees from Liberia or anywhere in the world.

The presence of refugees or immigrants is also a gift and a blessing to the church and an opportunity for the church to look for new ways of ministry that go beyond the traditional processes of mission. In fact, the refugee crisis has bridged the distance between the missionary and the mission. Instead of Christian missionaries leaving their homes to do missionary work outside the United States, the migration of refugees and other immigrants has instead brought the world and the mission field to the church.

There will be some miscommunication from time to time when people from one culture try to reach out and help people from another culture. The early disciples had to face the same challenge when bringing the good news to the gentiles. Thus, the contemporary church must be prepared to deal with the same challenge in the present. However, the church has access to diverse resources that will help members learn how to communicate effectively with people from other cultures and, conversely, will help the refugee population assimilate successfully with American society.

If Christ must be present for the resettled refugees of today, the church should be among these refugees, ministering to their needs. Many of these strangers may not share the Christian faith. However, they are spiritual siblings, fellow adopted

⁷ Manlio Simonetti and Thomas C Oden, *Matthew 1–13*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament 1a (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 31.

sons and daughters of God the Father, and brothers and sisters of the Lord. In this moment in history, the church is given the task to be her brothers' keeper (Mark 12:31). The church's response to this divine call reflects the commitment to the commandment of Christ to love our neighbors.⁸

Adjustment is most challenging to refugees during the initial months of their arrival in the United States. They have significant needs after years of struggling in their first or second settlement country.⁹ They are in a new country, new community, and new culture, among new people who are as strange to them as they are to us. Moreover, of all the skills that the resettled refugees must learn to enable them to make a living, the most important skill to learn is understanding, speaking, and writing the English language. This is because language, or rather lack of, is a strong barrier between peoples.

The churches also use the Bible as the primary guide in their activities. The churches that minister to the refugees and immigrants must not choose the refugees based on any criteria but must simply take them into their congregations as human beings and brethren. It is good in helping refugees with refugee services, workforce development, and education. The fact that difficulties arise, now and then, can be a challenge to deal with. The suggestion that the Bible gives us to help those in need means that we need to seek a way to fight through those challenges. We can help refugees by answering the call that Jesus gave us to love our neighbors as ourselves and provide care for people who simply lack the means to do so.

The needs of the Liberian refugees are just too diverse to be adequately addressed using a unilateral strategy. Among other needs, refugees need a place to leave their children while they are out looking for a job or after school while the parents are still working; this helps the refugees build a new life for themselves. Thus, the Christian community can put together special child-care programs, including after-school child-care programs or youngster mentoring programs, to address these needs—different activities of a recreational, educational, or motivational nature.

One way to minister to an immigrant community, such as the refugees in the Twin Cities, is to learn their stories. Stories allow better knowledge and understanding of unfamiliar contexts to flourish. Understanding the situation from which these refugees want to escape allows those who want to minister to them to have a look at the different needs, motivations, and hopes that the refugees keep in their hearts.

A listening ear also allows a look at the cultural differences between refugees and the people ministering to them, which ensures a sensitivity that fosters a loving, empathic, and responsible engagement that builds stronger interpersonal relationships instead of straining a relationship that is either weak or nonexistent. This adaptive process builds bridges instead of walls and helps both parties feel more comfortable with each other, making the ministry even more effective and

⁸ Bauman, Soerens, and Smeir, *Seeking Refuge*, 153.

⁹ Bauman, Soerens, and Smeir, *Seeking Refuge*, 113.

fruitful. Listening to the stories of refugees who have escaped from their country is another way of establishing a communication-mediated connection. It can sometimes just be valuable to be present with a refugee.

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However, listening to stories is not just about learning the stories of conflict. It is about listening to personal realities and experiences through which the pain and trauma can be better understood and, in God's grace, effectively engaged and resolved. After all, these are the memories that many refugees may not want to discuss at all because of the pain that they caused. Thus, this listening to stories includes talking with refugees about the differences between their lives in their home country and in the United States, the expectations they had and the realities they have to accept. Talking with them in this way builds a common ground, much like talking with new friends about the practicalities of everyday life. Through a listening ear, the bridge of trust keeps on building until different cultures can share a walk on this bridge together. Storytelling is a uniquely human attribute. It creates a connection between people and allows individuals to freely express themselves. Storytelling serves as a means to share cultural experiences, educate, and entertain. Refugees have powerful stories to tell today, as they did in biblical times, and this storytelling can be a source of healing for refugees.

Sports can be beneficial in connecting with refugees, particularly in the social aspect. It is important for the children and youth to feel connected. It is relevant to make time available to connect with children or youth through the art of playfulness and games. Integrating refugees in the community with a device such as a sporting activity encourages peace, fosters international understanding, and promotes human rights. Mutual respect between the participants is the spirit that underlines the social connection between the locals and refugees in a framework of shared interests and values. Sports create the opportunity to bring everyone together under one roof, thereby reducing intolerance, overcoming various differences, and promoting dialogue between the different cultures. Implementing a playfulness practice would entail encouraging children, youth, and parents to participate in fun activities more often. Consider participation in activities, such as dancing and singing, as important ways to help the children become more optimistic about different activities in life.

The significance of music to humans is very vital. Music has the ability to provide healing and make someone joyful. "Music has the power to cheer you up when you are feeling down, make you more joyful when you are happy, and inspire

you to become a better musician and a better Christian.”¹⁰ Music is a powerful basis of inspiration, strength, and comfort. Some refugees have had to go through difficult times, for example, loss of property, forced change of locations, poor economy, marginalized living conditions, and extreme change of social conditions. Music can play a significant role by gradually striking an emotional depth and harmony and becoming a testimony that proves the human spirit’s remarkable resilience. The progressive force of music to impact social change is one of the factors that make it an influencing aspect in the refugee situation. Music also recreates connection and empowers and helps individuals to deal with their challenges.

The provision of concrete refugee services establishes a strong connection between the churches and the refugee community. It creates an environment of mutual trust, which is the first step in a closer relationship and the integration of the refugee community into the Christian community. The next step is then to present the gospel in ways that are not intrusive but, instead, an organic part of building the human connection. Now that the refugees feel that the church is genuinely interested in their own well-being, evangelism has a much greater likelihood of success. Offering a space for the refugees to hold Christian services in their own language and welcoming them to the church’s existing services are helpful steps at this point in the community integration. Offering prayers and praying with refugees bring some form of psychological and sociocultural release. Praying for hope, peace, protection, healing, and strength are preferred. Reading Scriptures is also important during home visits. Singing serves a significant role when it comes to therapy. Refugees and immigrants are deeply rooted in cultural and traditional practices and beliefs. If the refugees and their families do not have Bibles, this would be a welcome step for church members to take. It is important to respect boundaries that people have, but these steps are appropriate after building connections in ways that show that the church wants to help the refugees settle.

It is important to remember that life as a refugee is a traumatic experience. It is good to work more effectively to serve those who have gone through these types of situations and give them help they need to develop a sense of comfort and contentment in their new lives in the United States.

It is important to remember that life as a refugee is a traumatic experience. It is good to work more effectively to serve those who have gone through these types of situations and give them help they need to develop a sense of comfort and contentment in their new lives in the United States. It is about being our brethren’s keepers (Gen 4:9). It is about being a good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). Refugees need pastoral care to go along with humanitarian care. The International Institute

¹⁰ Momoh Freeman, “I’m a Lutheran,” *Living Lutheran* (January 2019): 13–14.

of Minnesota has observed that refugees who migrate to the United States are skilled, educated, and come with unique skill sets, perspectives, and experiences. Refugees are strengthened by misfortune, and they make proficient, resilient, and loyal employees.¹¹ While some become successful entrepreneurs, others study to become professionals in their chosen fields, such as nursing, law, engineering, education, religion, and medicine. ⊕

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¹¹ International Institute of Minnesota, "For Employers," <https://iimn.org/for-employers/>.