



Refugee Resettlement and New Sanctuary in Arkansas: A Case Study

CLINT SCHNEKLOTH

The kinds of people that Western nation-state walls would block out are paradoxically produced within the walls themselves—yet another way in which walls inadvertently subvert the distinction between inside and outside that they are intended to mark.

Wendy Brown¹

You become the kind of people you welcome, by the way you welcome. About sixty people sit in our congregation's multiuse room. They have devoted an entire day for this training, preparing their teams to cosponsor refugees arriving in northwest Arkansas. The trainer, Lauren Snodgrass, works for Canopy NWA (canopynwa.org), a refugee resettlement agency affiliated with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service. I serve as chairman of the board for Canopy and cofounded the nonprofit a few years ago in order to bring refugee resettlement to our state.

I'm seated at the Good Shepherd Lutheran team table. We have about a dozen folks ready to cosponsor a refugee family. After this training, they will begin collecting all the necessary household items needed to stock a new home. They will

¹ Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2017), 53.

Much of the work of welcoming and resettling refugees to America has traditionally been located on the grassroots level, with congregations and coalitions working on this. This is a case study of one such effort in a Lutheran congregation in northwest Arkansas.

also raise money to help cover the arrival costs in the first ninety days, and they will prepare themselves spiritually and emotionally to make this, our little community in the Ozarks, the new home for a family that has been displaced and in-between for far too long. They will prepare to support the work of Canopy NWA in providing a “long welcome.”²

But this moment, sitting in this room, is far more intersectional than this. The table next to ours is occupied by a cosponsor team from the Islamic Center of NWA. These are our friends in faith, and they are also, like Good Shepherd, launching their second cosponsor team to welcome refugees. This time, we’re supporting the partnership with a grant from Islamic Relief USA. We designed a model for learning and community service and applied for their Silver Anniversary grant. Our shared project is twofold. We will bring Todd Green, author of *Presumed Guilty: Why We Shouldn’t Ask Muslims to Condemn Terrorism*,³ to speak at the University of Arkansas and at the Islamic Center, and then engage in a shared service project (cosponsoring a refugee family) in order to learn from one another and illustrate shared service and mutual understanding in our community.

Refugee resettlement, it turns out, is something a very broad cross section of our community cares about and wants to support. So here they are. Ready.

But the intersections are even more complex than this. When we first launched Canopy NWA in 2016, we knew that although we needed certain kinds of institutional connections in order to make everything happen, like a partnership with a resettlement affiliate, a relationship with the state department, a good relationship with the governor’s office, local officials, and many, many local nonprofits and resources like schools and hospitals, we also couldn’t be parochial. This couldn’t be under the umbrella of one church, a Lutheran resettlement office. It needed to be ecumenical in scope, and so we formed it as a nonprofit so that any group could volunteer, participate, and support refugee resettlement.

Sitting at the training on this same day with us are community groups from surrounding towns, and church groups from the evangelical and charismatic traditions. Refugee resettlement, it turns out, is something a very broad cross section of our community cares about and wants to support. So here they are. Ready.

Last September, I traveled with the staff of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) to Tucson, Arizona, for a visit to the US-Mexico border.⁴ The border visit is in the back of my mind as I sit at the cosponsor training because although a very limited number of refugees will arrive in the United States this

² “Charting a Course for a Long Welcome,” Canopy Northwest Arkansas, February 4, 2019, <http://tinyurl.com/yylyld7h>.

³ Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018.

⁴ LIRS published my account of that visit, for those who wish to read more: Clint Schneklath, “Breaking Down Barriers,” Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, October 2, 2018, <http://tinyurl.com/y3daab4u>.

fiscal year (Donald Trump having set a historically low admissions level for the year of only thirty-five thousand), we have also simultaneously been hyper-focused as a nation on the so-called crisis at the border.

Of course, what crisis you think is at the border depends a lot on your moral and religious perspective. The crisis for the president seems to be the lack of a physical barrier, and the threat he believes is pouring into our nation due to the lack of it. But the crisis our team was observing at the border was something else altogether: a humanitarian crisis, limited resources to provide care for the needy arriving at the border, women and children in particular.

In addition, we know that many crossing the border, although legally distinguished from refugees and classified as asylum-seekers (because they are seeking direct asylum here, inside our borders), have experienced the same kinds of trauma, are fleeing the same kinds of threats, and have many of the same needs, as those arriving as refugees. In fact, increasingly, those crossing the border are more and more frequently from the same countries as the refugee population.

Here in northwest Arkansas, many of the first families we resettled through Canopy NWA came from the Congo. Congolese refugees fled in many directions, so they have come to us from countries like Namibia, Rwanda, and Kenya. But some Congolese refugees have fled the Congo, made their way to Brazil (where they do not need a visa to enter), and then made the overland trek from Brazil to Texas. This then leaves us wondering, should an organization like Canopy NWA consider building capacity to resettle not only the refugees arriving through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) process but also those who have arrived and are in the middle of making their asylum claims.

At a very basic level, when the asylum seeker arrives at your border, in your community, at your door, the face of this neighbor requires a decision from you: will you treat them as threat and burden, or will you welcome them as a responsibility and a neighbor to love? This is the moral crisis at the border, any border, and it is the reason faith-based organizations and churches care so much about the plight of refugees and migrants the world over.

The face of this neighbor requires a decision from you: will you treat them as threat and burden, or will you welcome them as a responsibility and a neighbor to love? This is the moral crisis at the border, any border.

Very early in the formation of Canopy NWA, it really was the case that we imagined starting it as a form of protest. That year, 2015, news of the Syrian refugee crisis was prominent on all the media outlets. Some governors in certain states across the country, including our own governor, Asa Hutchinson, issued statements declaring their opposition to resettling Syrian refugees in their states.

For many, this was the first time they'd heard much about refugee resettlement, so very quickly, in the mind of many, refugee and Syrian refugee became

synonyms. Although this was all unfortunate political theater on the part of the governors, it nevertheless energized various bases. Those afraid of foreigners, and Muslims in particular, began calling all their local refugee resettlement agencies expressing their fear and anger. Meanwhile, those who perceived the need of a refugee to be a responsibility started calling those same agencies offering to help.

It was in that moment Canopy NWA was formed. We began to gather all those who were interested in helping, and then we figured out how to put all the right pieces together so when we brought representatives from LIRS to Arkansas, they shifted very quickly from thinking “Arkansas?” to “Arkansas!” I don’t know exactly what to call a positive movement energized by negative statements. Maybe creative resistance. But that’s a big part of the story of the launch of our refugee resettlement agency.

By the time the Muslim ban was happening in 2016, Senator Tom Cotton was home for a town-hall meeting, which meant we could show up at the town hall and spar with him in a publicly compelling enough way it ended up on MSNBC.⁵ In this sense, you begin to see how the local ministry of a congregation becomes woven together with the development of local organizations and nonprofits and then impacts and is impacted by state level and national concerns as they play out in the public square.

I’ve written at greater length about this aspect of our work in an essay, “Reimagining a Progressive South through the Gaze of New Media,” forthcoming in a Civic Imagination Case Book.⁶ In there, I argue, “The resources for social change are grounded in the way media layers and re-centers regional and religious imaginations, with institution building, television and newspaper presence, and new social media platforming all interlocking in a seamless fashion to energize religiously informed civic imagination.”

So, for example, the development of our refugee resettlement agency, Canopy NWA, only happened because we began local conversations after a Twitter post from the governor of the state opposing refugee resettlement. We were strengthened and made more streamlined by our ability to organize like-minded people of faith online to form the nonprofit and solicit resources. Our presence on television, radio, and in the newspaper⁷ not only meant that our model was inspiring others to replicate the development in other locations, but the widespread media coverage affected our regional identity and external stereotypes of our region. Transform how the wider world perceives the southern Christian imagination and you expand the civic imagination of contemporary Christianity on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line. As John Edge describes such a transition in his recent book on the changes in southern food culture:

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/joshuacmahony/videos/vb.20613111/10102580240803747/?type=2&theater>

⁶ H. Jenkins, G. Peters-Lazaro, and S. Shresthova, eds., *Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination: A Casebook* (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming).

⁷ Miriam Jordan, “A Refugee Family Arrives in Arkansas, Before the Door Shuts,” *New York Times*, July 13, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/y7ewdda6>.

The South was once a place that did not brook intrusion. Now it's the region with the highest immigration rates. When I was a boy in 1970s Georgia, a barbecue sandwich and a Brunswick stew with soda crackers was my go-to meal. Jess (my son) prefers *tacos al pastor*, hold the cilantro, and cheese dip with fryer-hot tortilla chips. In his South, Punjabi truck stop owners in Arkansas fry okra for turban-wearing reefer jockeys. And Korean bakers in Alabama turn out sweet potato-gorged breakfast pastries. His South is changing. For the better, mostly. In fits and starts, yes. New peoples and new foods and new stories are making their marks on the region. In those exchanges, much is gained. What was a once a region of black and white, locked in a struggle for power, has become a society of many hues and many hometowns. His generation now weaves new narratives about what it means to be Southern, about what it takes to claim this place as their own. Given time to reconcile the mistakes my generation made with the beauty we forged amid adversity, his generation might challenge the region of our birth to own up to its promise.⁸

We are now at a similar turning point in our culture and nation around the treatment and welcome of immigrants, so it is not surprising that as Canopy expands its work, we also expand our partnership with all those faith-based and secular groups working on behalf of and alongside immigrants. For the past two months, we have been gathering with leaders from churches up and down the northwest Arkansas corridor in order to center our civic imagination around new sanctuary.

We are now at a similar turning point in our culture and nation around the treatment and welcome of immigrants, so it is not surprising that as Canopy expands its work, we also expand our partnership with all those faith-based and secular groups working on behalf of and alongside immigrants.

We know other communities around the country have declared themselves sanctuary networks, and so we have been at work learning from them and preparing to launch our own. Our site visit to Tucson, Arizona, was especially centering in this work, as a Presbyterian congregation there was the birth place of the sanctuary movement in the United States, offering sanctuary to El Salvadoran refugees crossing the border in the 1980s. Such sanctuary networks and congregations now exist all across the country, including in larger cities like Denver and New York.

⁸ John T. Edge, *The Potlikker Papers: A Food History of the Modern South* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 350.

Having learned through the development of Canopy NWA the importance of reading the audience locally while also accessing the resources of organizations nationally, we've been in conversation with Church World Service and will be bringing a trainer to Northwest Arkansas this spring from their network, Sanctuary Not Deportation (sanctuarynotdeportation.org), to train us in the various complexities of declaring sanctuary as congregations and the wider set of considerations that attend protecting asylum-seekers in place. Some of our faith communities already have experience in this work, having successfully fended off deportation orders for their pastors and parishioners.⁹

Coincidentally, and returning to the power of watching for the creative capacity of intersections, our connection to Church World Service, and their New Sanctuary trainer Noel Anderson, came through conversations I've had with Sameerah Siddiqui, the Yemen Campaign Lead for Oxfam International, who then pointed me in Anderson's direction. I find it often to be the case that the way forward in big-picture organizing is to imagine where you might be called to go and then wait for God to open a door through interesting connections and conversations.

All of this hopefully illustrates the way the pastoral office, exercised in the local congregation through its public voice and presence, can connect church life in creative ways to ministries of welcome for migrants and refugees. It sometimes takes protest. Other times it takes a lot of bridge-building and one-on-one conversations. It may take multiple phone calls to big agencies until you finally connect with the right people. And it often can be creatively stirred and charged through the right kind of media presence. It is certainly made more likely, God-willing, through sustained, regular, focused attention on a moral issue you grounded in biblical faith and centered in the flourishing of our common humanity. ⊕

CLINT SCHNEKLOTH is a graduate of Luther Seminary and is a Lutheran pastor serving Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Fayetteville, Arkansas. He is also a member of the Council of Advisors of Word & World.

⁹ Bill Bowden, "Deportation Stayed for 2 Guatemalans Who Have Lived Illegally in Arkansas since 2001," *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, March 30, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/y6lu5ysm>.