

**Refugee Resettlement Ministry: Joining the Circle of Welcome**

*“… I was a stranger and you invited me in.”* Matthew 25:35

The United Nations estimates that of the 89.3 million displaced people worldwide in 2021, 27.1 million of them were refugees – people forced to leave their country to escape war, persecution or natural disaster. These individuals and families have endured unimaginable situations, many having left their homeland with little more than the clothes on their backs. Lutheran Services of the Carolinas is one of several resettlement organizations that helps place refugees that are received into the United States, and the group is looking for local church volunteers to partner with a family arriving in the Midlands in the coming months.

Lutheran Services of the Carolinas has been helping to resettle families since 1992. They are certified and approved by the government to place refugees in three South Carolina cities – Columbia, Greenville and Charleston. The agency helped to settle about 200 Afghans between September 2021 and February 2022 and currently has a need to develop new local volunteer partners to the process.

Director of Refugee Resettlement Services Bedrija Jazic says the agency provides training and ongoing support for the “Circle of Welcome,” a committed group of 6-10 volunteers, and the refugee family they pair with them. The partnership includes ongoing support from Lutheran services “which is ultimately responsible for the family. The church group helps to provide support seen as a ‘long welcome,’ rather than providing the core services of the resettling agency,” Jazic explains, adding that churches are not expected to provide any financial support of the family.

Ryan Dupree is the Internationals Pastor at First Baptist Columbia and volunteers to connect members of the CMBA Family of Churches through ministries to the international community. According to Dupree, Circle of Welcome should not be viewed as a project but rather an investment. CMBA has the privilege of reaching the refugees and immigrants that God is bringing to the Midlands of South Carolina with the hope of the gospel.

The process is simple - interested volunteers first meet with Jazic to learn about the training process and partnership expectations. Those individuals return to their church and gather a group of 6-10 to commit to their “Circle of Welcome” which serves the refugee family for a minimum of six months and up to a maximum of 12 months, as the family works to become self-sufficient. The team training includes specific cultural background of the family they will be working with.

According to Jazic, Lutheran Services looks for volunteers passionate about serving people and who will “love the refugees for who they are and will be there to welcome them and offer friendship.” Church groups not only help to meet the immediate needs of the family, they also offer long term impacts on their spiritual and emotional wellbeing.

The means of supporting these families vary from transportation to appointments to helping them understand how to use grocery coupons. Jazic says conversational English or organized English as a Second Language classes are extremely important, along with employment assistance like filing online applications or offering church preschool scholarships to further support parents pursuing work. Imagine the relief a resettled family would feel arriving to a furnished apartment, ready with the basic items they need to start their new life in America.

“One of the goals of the resettlement is a successful integration of refugees into our communities. In order for someone to become integrated, they have to feel like they belong and that is what a church Circle of Welcome can offer - that feeling of belonging to the community and not feeling like an isolated outsider or someone who is not welcome,” Jazic says.

Our One Priority Mobilizer Robbie McAlister has a heart for ethnic “outsiders” around the world and that passion has led him to be concerned with the needs of all immigrants. He participates in regular ministry through refugee camps in Greece and his family has built local relationships with refugees over the years. According to McAlister, friendship with a resettled family looks a lot like friendship with someone new to the neighborhood, and it is a natural way to share the love of God.

“It’s serving people in our own backyard who are from around the world. It’s relationship building and naturally sharing your faith as part of that relationship, but you can’t make their response to the gospel a criteria for loving them,” McAlister says.

For her part, Jazic says there is a current special need to support Afghan refugees and she hopes South Carolinians will be able to readily “offer love to this group that has suffered tremendous trauma, not just through the evacuation process but from years of the conditions they have been living in.”

For more information or to begin the Circle of Welcome training process, contact Sarah Lewis, Lutheran Services Outreach Coordinator, at 803.461.2642.