



GETTING STARTED: SUPPORTING REFUGEES

Written By: Kate Ayers, Executive Director of ReEstablish Richmond and Kristen Curtis, Resource and Training Coordinator for Impact Missions

The story of God's people is largely one of refugees – Adam and Eve expelled from the Garden of Eden and into an unknown wilderness (Genesis 3); Abram called to leave his home and family to “go to the place I will show you” (Genesis 12:1); the family of Jacob driven to Egypt by drought and famine (Genesis 46:1-7); the Israelite slaves fleeing Egypt in the middle of the night (Exodus 12:31-39) and becoming desert wanderers for 40 years (Exodus 13-Joshua 3:17) ; most of Jerusalem exiled to Babylon (1 Kings 25:11); even Mary, Joseph, and Jesus spent a season as refugees when, at an angel's urging, they fled from Bethlehem to Egypt ahead of King Herod's edict that all boys aged 2 and under be killed in an attempt to kill the “newborn king of the Jews” (Matthew 2: 1-20). Christians throughout history, also, have often experienced persecution that drove them from their homes. Even when not faced with relocation, all believers are “sojourners and exiles” (1 Peter 2: 11-12) and “strangers and exiles on the earth” (Hebrews 11-13) as we are “citizens of heaven” (Philippians 3:20-21), living in the physical and political realms of this world but truly belonging to God's kingdom.



God loves and provides for refugees! And God calls His followers to love and care for them too. In the regulations God gave Moses to guide the behavior of the nation of Israel as they prepared to enter the Promised Land, He included, “You must not mistreat or oppress foreigners in any way. Remember, you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 22:21). In Leviticus 19:9-10 (and similarly in 23:22), God’s people are instructed not to “harvest the grain along the edges of your fields, and do not pick up what the harvesters drop. It is the same with your grape crop – do not strip every last bunch of grapes from the vines, and do not pick up the grapes that fall to the ground. Leave them for the poor and the foreigners living among you. I am the Lord your God.” Leviticus 19:33-34 further instructs, “Do not take advantage of foreigners who live among you in your land. Treat them like native-born Israelites, and love them as you love yourself. Remember that you were once foreigners living in the land of Egypt, I am the Lord your God.” In the New Testament, Jesus’s teachings continue to reinforce the idea that caring for “strangers” in need is part of what it means to be Christian. Matthew 25:31-46 tells us “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. . . . I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it for me.” The author of Romans admonished the church “Don’t just pretend to love others, really love them. . . . When God’s people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality” (Romans 12: 9, 13). Finally, in 2 Corinthians, we are told to share what we have with those in need. “. . . Give in proportion to what you have. Of course, I don’t mean your giving should make life easy for others and hard for yourselves. I only mean that there should be some equality. Right now, you have plenty and can help those who are in need. Later, they will have plenty and can share with you when you need it. In this way, things will be equal” (2 Corinthians 8:11b-14).

God’s instructions tell his followers to provide for those who come to a new place without the means to yet provide for themselves while also carrying the expectation that they will begin to provide for themselves and even help others over time. As a congregation who cares for your new neighbors, you will play a key role in helping provide support and encouragement, especially early on, but also take care not to encourage or enable dependency. Your care should empower people to become independent and able to thrive without your assistance. As believers, caring for the “stranger” and “foreigner” are not optional, but are commanded. How do we do this well, especially if there is energy behind making care for refugees a significant ministry within your church?

Kate Ayers, Executive Director of ReEstablish Richmond, shares the following practical advice on how churches can get started in caring well for refugees in their own communities.



Start with your "why."

Be clear on your motivation for helping refugees. This is not a "one and done" kind of work but involves building relationships and helping people navigate a social system they may be unprepared for or not understand. Their needs may be many and on-going. Knowing why you are called to help and support them through the messy process of assimilation can keep you going and help naysayers understand this kind of long-term investment in people's lives.

Then do a community mapping.

What refugee or immigrant communities are in your footprint? What services already exist in your community? If you don't know where to start with this information, you can visit the [Office of New Americans website](#) to find contact information for refugee resettlement and immigrant serving organizations. Review a report that Office of New Americans (ONA) recently released to learn about the [Barriers to Integration of Virginia's Immigrants](#).

Be sure to check out this [amazing mapping tool](#) that was done to see what communities are in your footprint and where the gaps are. It is a visualization of the immigrant community across Virginia.

Next, do an asset mapping of your congregation.

- What financial resources do you have to devote to this project?
- How many volunteers do you have? What are their skill sets and capacity?
- Who is going to take the lead on this project?

Finally, determine if you are going to do your own thing or partner with an existing organization

-- that may already have programs and processes in place to assist immigrants or may have resources that dovetail nicely with the resources you identified within your own congregation. Either way, it is important to consult with existing programs and agencies in your area to avoid duplication of services. Two good resources for making connections are [Refugee Services - Virginia Department of Social Services](#) and [Immigrant Services - Virginia Department of Social Services](#).



What to consider when doing your own thing:

The THREE biggest resources needed in serving our refugee and immigrant friends well are **childcare, transportation and language access.**

Some questions to consider include:

- Do you have volunteers or financial resources to transport people to in-person programs?
- Do you have ways to communicate with people who don't speak English as their primary language?
- Will you serve adults, children, or both?
- How will you recruit participants to your program?
- How will you address cultural barriers?
- How will you ensure your volunteers know how to provide trauma-informed care?
- What materials do you need?
- How will participants get there?
- How will you overcome language barriers to communicating with participants?
- How will you address the need for childcare if you are serving adults?
- Is evangelism going to be a part of your program? If so, what will this look like?
- How will you support your volunteers and make sure they maintain appropriate boundaries so that cycles of dependency don't develop?

Examples of common programs that congregations can offer on their own include:

- English classes
- Citizenship Preparation
- GED or other professional job preparation programs
- Job readiness training
- Sponsor a family on your own. [Learn more here.](#)

Successful programs offered by faith communities have these things in common:

- They have a paid staff person to oversee the program and/or to recruit and support volunteers.
- They offer childcare (and sometimes transportation) during their programs for adults.
- They consult professionals when developing a curriculum or designing their program.
- They have a measurable way to determine what success looks like.



If you choose to partner with an agency rather than striking out on your own, some common models for this include:

- **Sponsoring a family in partnership with a resettlement agency.** [Find a list of agencies to contact here.](#) Sponsorship responsibilities vary with each resettlement agency, so the best way to start is to reach out directly.
- If you have a small group of congregants interested in getting involved, the **group could sign up to volunteer for another organization.** The organization will train and support volunteers and connect them to the services that are most needed. Some examples include:
 - A group of volunteers can work together to be **English tutors.**
 - A group of volunteers can commit to **providing transportation** or **childcare** for a program that already exists within the agency.

The benefit of partnering with another agency is that it can provide volunteer training and support as well as **connections to interpreters** to overcome the language barrier.

The following groups may be a good place to start when looking for partnerships that fit the identity, resources, and desires to serve within your congregation:

- [Refugee Services - Virginia Department of Social Services](#)
- [Immigrant Services - Virginia Department of Social Services](#)
- [International Rescue Committee](#)
- [Sacred Heart Center](#)
- [Church World Service](#)
- [Virginia Council of Churches](#)
- [HIAS](#)
- [Commonwealth Catholic Charities](#)
- [Refugee Welcome Collective](#)
- [ReEstablish Richmond](#)

A Note on Evangelism:

Whatever approach you take to evangelism, please be aware that many refugees and immigrants have experienced extreme trauma and rely heavily on the faith that they grew up in to help them cope. In many cases, this faith is not Christianity. It may take time to build safety, stability, and trust in order to effectively share the gospel message. While evangelism is, perhaps, one motivation for assisting refugees, churches and volunteers need to recognize that **SHOWING** the love and consistency of God's care is the first witnessing tool and conversations around faith may come much later.



Consider Cultural Differences when building trust.

For a helpful resource in thinking about how the trauma of becoming a refugee effects how you might connect with people across culture lines, check out [A practical Guide: Building Bridges of Trust for Virginia's Newest Refugee Families](#) on ReEstablish Richmond's website. Practice cultural humility. Recognize how you are perceived by those you would like to help. How do you interpret what they say and do and how do you respond to it?

If you'd like to read (or listen to) more about how to care for refugees well, check out some of these resources:

- <https://www.reestablishrichmond.org/>
- [Seeking Refuge by Stephan Bauman, Matthew Soerens, and Dr. Issam Smeir](#)
- [Assimilate or Go Home: Notes from a Failed Missionary Rediscovering Faith](#) by DL Mayfield
- [Ministering Cross-Culturally: A Model for Effective Personal Relationships](#) by Sherwin Lingenfelter and Marvin Mayers
- [Expand Your Borders: Discover 10 Cultural Clusters \(CQ Insight Series\)](#) by David Livermore
- Click [here](#) for another curated and annotated list of books (fiction and nonfiction), movies, and podcasts about refugee resettlement.

