

Moving Beyond Welcoming: The Implications of Churches in the United States Welcoming

Refugees

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the relationship American churches can have with incoming and resettled refugees. Since the United States resettles the highest amount of refugees in the world, this influx should push churches to remember and practice the biblical notion of welcoming the stranger. By using the refugee resettlement agency World Relief in Seattle, Washington mission statement to “empower the local church to serve the most vulnerable” this paper questions the role of American churches in refugees’ lives. This also paper pushes churches to recognize that welcoming refugees is not the sole purpose of the church. By welcoming refugees churches are transformed to be more of the presence of Christ to refugees, their community, and the American society. The goal of this paper asks what refugees can teach churches about social injustice issues affecting various immigrant groups and how being a disciple of Christ helps to answer these issues.

*Keywords:* Refugee, church, welcoming, bible, resettlement, immigrant

## Introduction

How should churches in the United States respond to the increase in refugees entering into American society? There are currently over 16 million refugees across the world today with another 26 million displaced from their home (UNHCR, 2009a, para 1). Out of the 16 million refugees, about one percent is considered for resettlement each year (USCRI, 2010, How Refugees come to America). Of this one percent, the United States in 2008 received 74 percent of resettled refugees, by far the greatest percentage by any host country (UNHCR, 2009b, p. 6). This influx of refugees into the American society can cause complications as some Americans have misunderstood why refugees are in the country. According to Groody (2009), “The clash of cultures, identities, and religions, along with debates over economics, resources, and rights, has polarized public discourse, making the migration debate convoluted and confused” (p.639). American churches can build relationships with refugees and be a catalyst for societal change, redefining opinions and correcting misunderstandings about refugees. Through intentionally welcoming and building relationships with refugees, churches would gain a deeper understanding of their biblical call to “care for the stranger” and clarify misunderstandings about refugees. Once awareness is raised, and injustice is uncovered, not just for refugees, but other immigrant groups as well, American churches will be compelled to seek justice for all migrants in the United States and abroad.

This paper will begin by distinguishing the circumstances leading to being classified as a refugee versus other immigrant groups. Following this is a description of how refugees are resettled in the United States with a focus on the organization World Relief in Seattle, Washington since they are a Christian resettlement organization that desires to have local churches serve and welcome refugees. Examining what the bible says about refugees will shape

the call and relationship American churches should have with refugees. Lastly, this paper will detail how churches in the United States has to move beyond simply welcoming refugees and instead become advocates for justice.

### **What Distinguishes a Refugee?**

The term “refugee” can be confused with the definitions of other groups that resettle in the United States. Asylum seekers, immigrants, and refugees often come to resettle in the U.S. for the same reasons. According to Baser and Swain (2009) “Conflicts force people to migrate. Other factors such as ecological crisis, natural disaster, poverty, underdevelopment at home and economic opportunity abroad, together account for increasing global trend in population migration” (p. 9). However, their classification can often determine the duration of their stay in the U.S. Distinguishing these terms helps to give more focus to the plight of refugees and helps the greater population of Americans to be more compassionate to those who are asylum seekers and immigrants.

### **Refugees**

Refugees are people who have fled from their home country because of an issue that endangers their life. Reasons people will flee include religious persecution or a lack of maternal rights. Those who flee usually go to the bordering country. At this stage, individuals are not legally considered refugees as certain criteria have to be met to be considered a refugee by the United Nations.

The UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees created the international law for what constitute a refugee and an asylum seeker. In order to be determined a legal refugee a person must meet two criteria: First, the individual faces persecution (Pohl and Donely, 2000, p. 9). Second, as stated by the authors, “the individual has fled his or her country” (p. 9). Pohl and

Donely also noted that the individual has to have “a well-founded fear of being persecuted” (p. 8). In other words, the individual has to prove that returning to their home country would put their life in danger. Once a refugee is resettled in the new country the government cannot return a refugee to their country of origin, this is called non-refoulement.

Some people who are being persecuted will flee their village or city to another village or city within their own country. These people are called internally displaced people (IDP). IDPs usually live in camps protected by the government. They might live in a camp for years before being able to return to their home village. Unless they become asylum seekers and escape to another country, they are not eligible to hold refugee status as they are still residing in their home country (UNHCR, 2011, Internally Displaced People). When a person flees to another country to escape persecution this is referred to as the “country of first asylum”. Asylum will be discussed later, but the person seeks resettlement through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for resettlement in another country.

### **Asylum Seekers**

Asylum seekers technically come from the same situations as refugees but did not go through the UNHCR to seek resettlement in another country. Instead a person might have legally boarded a plane to another country—usually a first-world country--and then appealed to the government to stay in the country. How open the given country’s borders are will determine the likelihood that a person who is seeking asylum will be allowed to resettle in the country. For those who desire to seek asylum in wealthier first-world nations, asylum is quite difficult.

Pohl and Donely (2000) argued that usually asylum seekers are denied asylum in wealthier nations (p. 14). The United States is one of the most hostile nations to asylum seekers, meaning that the U.S. limits the amount of asylum seekers into the country. “A denial of

admission to the United States,” according to Chip and Scaperlanda (2008), “is a denial of their best chance to escape poverty and have their children educated beyond grade school—and possibly any chance of decent health care for their families” (p. 41). Before 1996, asylum seekers were able to present their case before a judge to argue why they needed to resettle in the U.S. (Pohl & Donely, 2000, p. 15). Congress became frustrated by how backlogged the cases were, and supported by public opinion decided to not guarantee an asylum seekers right to a hearing. According to Pohl (2006), “The policy of ‘expedited removal’ allows immigration officials to detain, interview, and send asylum seekers with invalid documents back to their country of origin or to other countries in 48 hours without benefit of administrative or judicial review” (p. 89). Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) were then given power to deport anyone who, as stated by Pohl and Donely (2000), “did not have proper exit papers from their country of origin” (p. 15). The request is as ironic as those that have fled from their country were usually those who are being persecuted by their government thereby making the attainment of proper exit papers nearly impossible. To deport individuals who are seeking asylum because of a lack of exit papers could put them in more danger when they return home since the reason asylum seekers escaped were because of fear of persecution. In addition, those who are waiting for deportation are imprisoned with common criminals (p. 15).

### **Immigrants**

Refugees and asylum seekers can all be seen as immigrants. Immigrants are those who move to a country which is not their own. O’Neill and Spohn (1988) wrote that “Immigrants are those who choose to leave their homelands in order to find a better way of life. They may suffer considerable economic hardship or political repression at home, but unlike refugees, they are not regarded as subjects of persecution” (p. 86). Many immigrants migrate for less political and more

practical reasons. Some immigrants are legal while others are illegal. Some migrate to the United States for a period of time to work or go to school, while some migrate here for a better life. Even though the United States has a history of accepting all people from every nation, this ideal is starting to dissipate with the rise of terrorist attacks and financial burdens on states dealing with immigration issues.

### **Resettling Refugees**

The process of being resettled as a refugee is complex and consists of more than telling the UNHCR that one is fearful of returning to their country. Going through the process of becoming a refugee is quite lengthy and detailed. The displaced person must go through an agency to prepare their case to present to the UNHCR (USCRI, 2010, How Refugees Come to America). Being interviewed can take weeks to years and even if the person has a compelling reason for being resettled the UNHCR might not accept their reason. According to Pohl and Donley (2000), “The primary focus of the UNHCR is returning people to their homes. If repatriation is not possible, integration within the community in the country of refuge is then sought” (p. 12). UNHCR believes the best possible solution is to have people stay in their native countries and wants resettlement to be the last resort for a displaced person.

Even though many refugees desire to be resettled in a different country than their own, many countries do not want to accept refugees. The UNHCR desires to resettle refugees in the country in which they sought first asylum, but many of the countries are unable to keep the refugees. For example, Iraqis who have fled to Syria are unable to seek resettlement there due to discrimination and the Syrian government’s disapproval of Iraqis in Syria (Leenders, 2008, 1564). Pohl and Donely also stated that “In some cases, the safety and security of particular refugees cannot be guaranteed in the initial host country” (p. 13). The likelihood of resettling

refugees in the neighboring country is quite low, which leads to many refugees resettling in countries and cultures that do not resemble their own. Lastly, since these first asylum countries do not desire to resettle refugees and only one percent a year are resettled in a third country (USCRI, 2010, How Refugees come to America), the rest stay in refugee camps where there is no sanitation, jobs, or freedom to move around the country.

### **The United States and Resettlement**

The United States is currently receives the largest amount of refugees out of any country throughout the world. The intake of refugees the U.S. receives is around 74 percent (UNHCR, 2009, p. 6). In 2010 alone, the U.S. received 73,311 refugees (Department of State, 2010, PRM Admission Comparison Graph). The demographics of refugees the U.S. receives is beginning to shift. Currently the largest percentage of refugees being resettled in the U.S. is Bhutanese. This small country is located near Nepal and the people's first origin of asylum is Nepal where most have been in refugee camps for over 20 years. The second largest group is Iraqis. Iraqi refugees are as a result of war in Iraq which started in 2003. Eventually Iraqis will be the largest group to resettle in America. Lastly the third largest group is Burmese people— from the country originally called Burma, now referred to Myanmar. Burmese refugees are not on the decline since the country is still in political strife.

The process of resettling refugees is determined by the U.S. government. According to Mott (2010) “The US Department of State, through the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) has cooperative agreements with voluntary resettlement agencies to deliver refugee reception and placement services” (p.2). Funding for World Relief, an organization I interned for in Seattle, Washington, and other resettlement agencies is only partially funded by the United States government. Nawyn wrote (2010), “the resettlement program is funded mostly by the federal

government but services are administered almost entirely by NGOs...” (p. 152). World Relief Seattle would like to hire more caseworkers to help resettle the increasing amount of refugees coming through their organization, but the federal government only funds World Relief by around 48 percent (World Relief, 2010, p. 2). Other funding comes from donations and profits off micro loans (World Relief, 2010, p. 2). Mott (2010) pointed out that funds for resettling refugees began to diminish at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when congress decided not to “enact legislation that would protect and provide resettlement assistance to refugee populations” (p. 2). The work that World Relief does for refugees in America requires time and energy. Not only does the organization work to resettle refugees to a new life and culture, the organization teaches refugees how to be self-sufficient.

Unlike other countries that resettle refugees, refugees in the United States have to become self-reliant less than a year after being resettled. Refugees are immediately eligible for six month of welfare assistance when they arrive to the U.S. (Nawyn, 2010, p. 151). There is extended welfare assistance for those who have children, but for those who do not have children, being released from the welfare system less than a year after arriving in the United States creates complications. If resettled refugees do not know English or have applicable work skills, these refugees will have a more difficult time finding a job. World Relief works to place refugees in jobs, but those who cannot get a job have to rely on World Relief to help pay for their cost of living. The transition of coming from a refugee camp with no possessions to coming to the U.S. where bills have to be paid can be quite daunting and stressful for refugees. Yet this is only the case in the United States.

While the United States focuses on refugees achieving economic self-sufficiently as soon as possible (Nwain, 2010, p. 151), other countries choose to concentrate on the mental health

and professional skill development of resettled refugees even though self-sufficiency is a longer process. The integration of self-sufficiency, mental health, and skill development are all needed for resettled refugees to thrive. Even though the concentration of mental health and skill development is not a priority considered by the U.S. government for resettled refugees, World Relief believes that the presence of churches in refugees' lives can fill in the gaps that the government cannot fulfill.

**World Relief Organization: Seattle, Washington office.** In the spring of 2010 I became interested in the refugee population because I had heard from various people that Seattle is a highly segregated city. I was surprised at this finding since I worked only a few miles out of the Seattle area and I encountered a variety of cultures. Suddenly I saw disconnect between local people from Seattle and the rise of diversity around the city. A focus of mine is reconciliation work and race/ethnic understanding. Through my personal experiences and research I have come to notice that the more distance a group of people are from another group the more misunderstanding and misconceptions arise. I wanted to study what reconciliation would look like in Seattle. In my quest of understanding city wide reconciliation work I was led to World Relief Organization, Seattle.

World Relief is an organization that focuses on relief work throughout the world. Outside of the United States, the organization focuses on maternal and child health, child development, agriculture and food security, disaster relief and micro financing (World Relief, 2010, International). Within the U.S. the organization mainly focuses on resettling refugees. World Relief has been providing international humanitarian assistance since 1944. The organization has also been participating in refugee resettlement in the U.S. since 1979 (World Relief, 2010, History). Currently World Relief has 23 offices throughout the U.S. and is the largest Christian

resettlement agency in the U.S. (World Relief, 2010, United States). In Washington State, World Relief is the largest resettlement agency. This is significant since Seattle is one of the largest cities in the U.S. to resettle refugees.

World Relief is a unique resettlement organization because of their focus on the church. The mission statement of World Relief is “empowering the local church to serve the most vulnerable” (World Relief, 2010, Mission & Vision). The vision statement is “In community with the local Church, World Relief envisions the most vulnerable people transformed economically, socially, and spiritually” (Mission & Vision). The organization strongly believes that the work of resettling and integrating refugees into society can only be done by partnering with the church. From my experience as an intern, I would suggest that the organization can only do so much for resettled refugees. Simply providing money is not sufficient, but rather refugees need people to come alongside them to share in their struggles and express care and attention.

The refugee’s experience can be difficult when the person does not understand the culture, language, or the concepts of paying bills. The work of resettlement agencies can be quite daunting as the numbers of refugees increase and the amount of funding and ability to hire caseworkers decreases. The church has the opportunity to bridge the gap between the funding the government cannot provide and the help resettlement agencies need. In order for this to happen, the church needs to be actively involved with agencies that are resettling refugees to understand the help resettlement agencies need.

Currently the mission and vision that World Relief has is not being realized due to minimal local church involvement. The resettlement support manager and internship supervisor, L. Williams, added the role of director of church engagement to his job description. I had the opportunity to interview him and get his assessment on current church engagement with working

with refugees. L. Williams does not feel that church involvement with refugees has been sufficient or successful (personal communication, December 2, 2010). When asked about how World Relief and Williams himself reaches out to churches to get them involved working with refugees, he answered that World Relief offers a variety of ways for the church to be a part of their work. Activities as simple as being a cultural companion—meaning befriending a refugee—and volunteering to help teach English classes are ways churches can be part of refugees' lives (personal communication, December 2, 2010). There is also recognition from L. Williams that World Relief's engagement with the church has at times slipped into "pray, pay, and get out the way," meaning World Relief wanted to continue their current work but have the church at a distance. L. Williams recognized that when he reaches out to churches to get them involved in refugees' lives he has to provide ways for them to be involved (personal communication, December 2, 2010). World Relief offers training and education about refugees and how to work with them. L. Williams stated that World Relief has the tools to reach out and empower the church to work with refugees, there just needs to be a willingness to proactively work with refugees (personal communication, December 2, 2010).

World Relief wants the church to be involved with resettling refugees because they believe the church is integral to the process. L. Williams stated that World Relief wants to impact the church by helping them to become what God desires for them to be (personal communication, December 2, 2010). World Relief wants the church to be the hands and feet of God to refugees. This is based on the life and teaching of Christ. L. Williams has recognized that the church—currently and in the past—has spent millions of dollars to share the gospel and reach other people groups in foreign countries. But now, according to L. Williams, "The world is coming to us" (personal communication, December 2, 2010); meaning that God has made it

easier for the church to reach remote people groups. Although the world has come to Seattle, Williams acknowledges that the church still has trouble making the 30 minute drive to invest continuous time with refugees. S. Sommerman stated “For people to succeed they need someone to come alongside them” (personal communication, December 6, 2010). Part of S. Sommerman’s church mission was to defend the causes of the weak in Africa and other countries, but since refugees are coming to her church the task of going to the most vulnerable has been more simplified. “We don’t have to keep going to Africa anymore,” S. Sommerman declared, “because they are right here. God has brought these people to our doorstep; he has made it so easy” (personal communication, December 6, 2010). It is still noble to go abroad and defend the causes of the weak, but it can be forgotten that there are vulnerable populations in the United States.

It is important to understand that refugees are often unseen to American churches since this population is hidden and many church members do not know about the rise of refugees in the U.S. As a result of being unnoticed in society, many churches have not considered working with this population. Instead they focus on other noticeable vulnerable groups. Working with the refugees is not meant to be separate from extending care to other vulnerable groups. L. Williams stated that some churches work with refugees and others do not (personal communication, December 2, 2010). Rather than having the church work exclusively with refugees, L. Williams would like to see working with refugees as another aspect of churches’ ministries.

World Relief wants to be an organization that acts as a bridge between the church and refugees. World Relief Seattle is resettling refugees in the Seattle area to become permanent U.S. citizens and wants the church to embrace this opportunity. By bringing more diversity to the Seattle area, the church can experience the Kingdom of God now by encountering other cultures.

On speaking about heaven on earth Williams stated, “Do we want to get to heaven and have culture shock?” (personal communication, December 2, 2010). He also added that diversity enhances a person’s understanding of scripture, God, and themselves. According to Williams, working with refugees enhances how one views and understands pain (personal communication, December 2, 2010). These enhancements, along with many others, come from the God who calls the church into a life living and working among refugees.

### **Why American Churches and Refugees?**

Pohl (2006) wrote, “It is striking that discussions of public policy among Christians today typically give little attention to refugee and asylum concerns” (p. 85). The author is making the argument for the lack of consideration Christians have in regards to refugees. Even though the United States accepts the largest amount of refugees out of any country, many refugees are simply resettled in America and go uncared for. The U.S. government will provide six months of assistance then it is up to the capacity packed resettlement agency or the sheer will of the refugee to provide for themselves. Many refugees do not have a personal relationship with an American. “There are no more vulnerable persons,” Pohl stated, “than those who have been forced from their homes into alien setting and are dependent on the kindness of strangers. If part of Christian identity involves caring for the weakest, welcoming strangers... then one might properly expect Christian leaders and communities to be significantly engaged” (p. 85). By the Christian community learning to embrace refugees the gap between being a stranger and being welcomed can be bridged.

Through welcoming refugees the church can engage with the United States’ most vulnerable population. The Bible clearly shows that God’s heart is reaching out to the most vulnerable groups and this also what churches should embrace. In direct contrast, according to

Conn and Ortiz (2001), the rise of charities and voluntarism developed as a result of churches disengaging from social realities (p.56). L. Williams explains why he thinks it is difficult for churches to work with refugees by saying, “We are uncomfortable with the pain, the suffering, and the lament. . . . We don’t engage in pain. We set ourselves to be very distant from pain. We see that stuff on TV, it doesn’t happen here” (personal communication, December 2, 2010). To engage with refugees means touching on issues that does not have quick solutions. Meaningful engagement has to take place. S. Sommerman—the pastor at Kent Covenant Church—stated “[we] can’t just send money; we have to build relationships with them” (personal communication, December 6, 2010). Americans are growing more individualistic and disconnected from society, and sadly so are churches.

White (2006) wrote how the church is privately engaging but socially irrelevant” (p. 117). To engage with the refugee population means churches in the U.S. are adapting to the changing American society and staying socially relevant. In the media, churches have been known for their political views rather than for standing for the vulnerable (Perkins, 1982, p. 12). One reason churches have trouble initiating contact with vulnerable populations is because solutions to issues are not easily found. White (2006) stated “But so many churches are still designing outreach that makes sense in monoethnic [sic] contexts, without regard for the realities and changing rules of life in a migrant system” (p. 79). American churches can embrace this reality by adapting to the changing American society and the implications that come with it.

### **The Bible and Refugees**

The biblical notion of welcoming means to extent hospitality, build relationships and care for those who have migrated to a given country is grounded in theology. The Bible does not use the word “refugee” to describe those who have left their country or land for another residency.

The common words used to describe those who are considered refugees are: foreigner, alien, stranger and sojourner. From the Old Testament to the New Testament there is biblical mandate on how to treat those who are strangers to the land. According to Groody (2009a), “in the Old Testament, the Jewish people were called to welcome the stranger because they themselves had once been strangers, in the New Testament, the Christian obligation to do so derives from the conviction that, in the face of the stranger, the Christian community encounters the face of Jesus” (p. 663). This section will highlight the journey of welcoming the stranger in the Old Testament to experiencing and understanding the importance of the stranger through the life and teaching of Christ.

### **The Old Testament**

In the Old Testament the Israelites were called by God as His people and were led to be strangers in a foreign land. The father of the Israelites, Abraham was called by God to leave his land for an unknown land. God spoke to Abraham in Genesis 12 by saying:

Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth. (Genesis 12: 1-3, New International Version)

Even though Abraham was quite wealthy with his immense amount of livestock, silver and gold, and land, the Lord wanted him to leave this behind for a land unforeseen (Genesis 13: 1-3). In this land was God’s blessing. This is the land where Abraham became the father of the Israelites and the twelve tribes of Israel. In fact, Judaism, Christianity and Islam can trace their foundation

of faith from Abraham. Understanding the journey of Abraham as a stranger in the Old Testament shapes the Old Testament appreciation for those who are strangers.

Throughout the beginning of the Old Testament the Israelites are known as people who are strangers in a foreign land. When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, God set out Moses to lead them into a land where they would be free from oppression (Exodus 3:1-10). After they were exiled and the Israelites arrived in the promise land, the Old Testaments began to describe how to treat those who are a stranger in their land. By remembering the Israelites past journey and God's faithfulness to protect them, the Israelites are called to treat the strangers justly and rightly (Exodus 23: 9). The books of Genesis and Exodus exemplify the role of Abraham and Moses being and leading strangers into a new land, the rest of the books of the OT describe how to treat strangers in three ways: the same as other Israelites under the law, to be loved, and to be cared for.

The Old Testament describes how the Israelites are to treat those who are strangers in the land. In Exodus 22 it is written, "You shall neither mistreat a stranger nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:21). These words were written after God just spoke the Ten Commandments to Moses. God assured his people that if those who are strangers are afflicted, He will hear their cries and bring wrath on the people (Exodus 22:23). God is commanding Israel to treat strangers justly. This implies that strangers are meant to be under Israelite laws. If strangers work as servants, they are under the same law as Israelites to remember the Sabbath (Exodus 2:12) and to observe the Passover (Numbers 9:14). God is requiring the Israelites to consider the strangers in the land to be the same as they are.

However, God goes beyond requiring equitable treatment of strangers, and challenges the Israelites to love the stranger. The commandment to love strangers is written in the book of

Leviticus, which is known as the book of laws. In Leviticus 19 it is written, “The stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:34). According to the book of Deuteronomy, God’s love extends to both the stranger and the Israelites (Deuteronomy 1: 16-18). The Israelites are commanded to love the strangers in the same love God has bestowed upon them by caring for their physical needs.

Strangers are also to be viewed the same ways as neighbors because they share in Israel’s history of being forced to leave their land. Leviticus 25 stated, “If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and stranger, so they can continue to live among you” (Leviticus 25:35). God equates the Israelites to the strangers, which means the principles for caring for Israelites apply to strangers. The provision the Lord has set up for Israelites to provide for the stranger is seen in chapter 22 of Deuteronomy. The Lord wants the stranger to be considered when the Israelites are reaping their Harvest in order not to “pervert justice due [to] the stranger” (Deuteronomy 24:17). “When you reap your harvest in your field, and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the stranger... that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands” (Deuteronomy 24:19). Since strangers who come to the new land do not have land and, therefore, are not able to provide for themselves, Israelites are forced to remember their history and provide for the strangers in their land.

### **Preferential Option for the Poor**

Before moving on to describing the New Testaments teaching in regards to considering strangers, it is important to describe God’s preferential option for the poor throughout the Old Testament. Many of the passages that have been highlighted not only make mention of strangers

but also widows and orphans. As I referenced earlier God cares for everyone who has been treated unjustly. As exemplified in the book of Deuteronomy, “He administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing” (Deuteronomy 10:18). In the Old Testament the widow, orphans, and strangers were considered to be the most vulnerable since they had no land rights. Recognizing that these are the most vulnerable groups in society, God established laws on how to care for these groups. This in turn is God’s preferential option for the poor. According to Groody (2007), “‘Preferential’ does not mean exclusive, as if God loves only the poor” (p. 194). Instead “God’s love is boundless, but when any of us are hungry, homeless, abandoned, or vulnerable, God is moved by love in the direction of the greatest need” (p. 195). God’s preferential option for the poor is seen in the New Testament, but includes different vulnerable groups expanding God’s love to those with the greatest need.

### **The New Testament**

The life and teaching of Christ demonstrates how strangers are meant to be treated in society. From his birth, Christ has been considered a stranger as his residency was Nazareth in Galilee, but his place of ministry was from Galilee to Judea. The stereotype that surrounded Nazareth was that nothing good could come from Nazareth (John 1:46). Jesus changed the stereotype surrounding his home town by being a model citizen to those around him. By focusing on the outcast of those from Galilee to Judea, Christ modeled how to care for those who are strangers and outcast in society.

Ways in which Christ modeled how to care for strangers and outcast is by equating serving those who are strangers to serving him. Before Christ was crucified he describes those who will inherit the kingdom of heaven:

Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. (Matthew 25:34-36).

At this point the religious leaders begin to question his involvement with these vulnerable groups. Christ replies by saying, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25: 40). Actively serving those who are strangers is serving Christ. This also alludes to the verse in Hebrews stating that being hospitable to strangers could mean being hospitable to angels (Hebrews 13:2). Keeping in mind that serving strangers is serving God, this shows the intimacy between God and strangers.

Not only does Christ reveal the importance of serving strangers because it is indeed serving him, he also puts into perspective the question, “who is my neighbor?” In the New Testament Christ states that the two great commands are, “To love the Lord with your with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22: 37-39). Pohl (2006) quotes Gustavo Gutierrez by writing, “to be a Christian is to draw near, to make oneself a neighbor, not the one I encounter but the one in whose journey I place myself” (p. 104). Christ shows others who his neighbors are by entering into the suffering of those around him. Jesus wept when Lazarus died, despite later raising him back to life. Jesus welcomed those who were social outcasts into his presence to provide an example of how God meets the needs of those who are not in the religious fold.

An important aspect of the emphasis on strangers in the New Testament is that through Christ all now have common citizenship. Ephesians chapter two is a letter to the Gentiles. Prior to the death and resurrection of Christ, Gentiles were considered to be second class citizens and outside of God's grace. Through the sacrifice of Christ all are accepted into God's kingdom. Citizenship in Christ is expressed in chapter two in this way: "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:19-20). This verse expresses that those who were considered strangers are now welcomed to be part of the kingdom of God. Strangers are no longer considered foreigners, aliens, or sojourners. Instead they are referred to as fellow citizens of God in his kingdom.

Welcoming the stranger is a biblical mandate in both the Old and the New Testament. Also seen throughout the Bible is God's preferential option for the poor: those who are orphaned, widowed, or resource poor. Many times those who are strangers are ignored by Christians in God's consideration for preferential option for the poor, but the Bible has shown that God values those who are strangers in a new country. From the Old to New testament God doesn't demand his people to show strangers hospitality simply because they are new to the land, but because of the worth and value each person carries.

### **Implications for American Churches**

Welcoming refugees does not have to stop once relationships are built. Many churches that have built relationships with a particular refugee population have changed the focus of their church. Kent Covenant Church in Kent, Washington has a thriving ministry to Nepali refugees that pairs refugees with Americans that serve as conversational partners. The church holds

weekly English classes, and the church pushed an initiative for a refugee center in the Kent School district. In Utica, New York, one church brought in local bankers to teach a class on the importance of establishing a positive credit history in the United States (McGill, 2007, p. 100). There are individual Christians who are also going beyond just welcoming refugees by working in refugee specific non-profits to help refugees obtain jobs or to assist their personal development. These churches, along with individuals who are dedicating their vocation to work with refugees, are just a few examples of how the church can extend true hospitality to refugees. Pohl (2006) stated:

In conclusion, it is important to restate that offering hospitality to strangers is not a full solution in contexts of gross injustice; in fact, hospitality in such settings can be used to further entrench positions of power and powerlessness. But hospitality combined with attention to structural issues can help to shape a response to strangers that is adequate to the need. As the Christian community engages the complex but rich resources of its own tradition of hospitality, it will be better equipped to respond to the needs and the gifts of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants. (p. 101)

Indeed American churches are resource rich with a variety of church members who have gifts and talents that can impact the refugee population resettled in the United States society. In order for church members to know how to impact refugees with their talent requires reciprocal relationship. Refugees can teach churches about a variety of issues and the church is then able to respond to their needs. This is what White (2006) calls experiential discipleship. Experiential discipleship involves reflection, action, and whole-life application (p. 26). What exactly are the implications for American churches welcoming refugees and how will this impact churches and

the American society? The act of welcoming and building relationships with refugees leads to gaining a perspective on immigrants and migration, justice and rights, transformation, advocacy, and discipleship, in order for justice to prevail.

### **Understanding the Migrant Population**

By welcoming refugees, churches open the gateway for working with other vulnerable migrant groups. With the rate of refugees increasing in America, churches should be challenged to enter into the lives of refugees and other immigrant groups. The purpose is not evangelism or to build church membership; the purpose is to follow the example of Christ by sharing his love with them and learning from this population. The refugee population is bringing different cultures and inaccessible groups to the American society. Instead of seeing this population as a changing force in American society, churches need to embrace this as a gift, seeing how this population can move the church in a trajectory towards God and towards changing society as a whole.

As stated earlier, the bible does not make clear distinctions between refugees and other migrants. Instead the bible uses the same names for all migrant groups: strangers, foreigners, and aliens. Even though refugees come under the protection of the U.S. government under refugee status and are here legally and welcomed by the government, there are still other migrant groups in American society that are not received warmly. Instead these migrant groups are usually given a name that classifies their status in the U.S. which dehumanizes them (i.e. illegal immigrant). In spite of the vast amount of immigrants that resettled in the U.S., there are smaller subsections that are more vulnerable to discrimination, primarily Mexican and Muslim immigrants. It might be easy to extend hospitality to immigrants from Europe, for example, but churches need to

recognize that not all immigrants are from culturally acceptable areas. Regardless of the political or religious implications, all migrant groups are vulnerable and deserve care.

Even though by definition refugees are a population who has fled from their home because of fear of persecution, in the United States they are also known as immigrants as they have migrated from one country to another. Refugees have different needs than other immigrant groups, but this does not discredit the fact that refugees and other immigrants have migrated here for a specific purpose and need, and that misconceptions are identified with both groups. Mexican Immigrants and Muslim immigrants will be discussed specifically since these are two groups that are highly debated in American political discourse. American churches' response to these immigrant groups should not be related to politics, but needs to address the social injustice and discrimination this population contends with.

**Continued injustice against immigrants in the United States.** By understanding that people have a right to migrate and continuing to learn how to welcome and build relationships with immigrants, the church will learn about the injustice immigrants still face in the United States. Discriminate against those who migrate into the United States has been on the rise over the years. The American society is hostile against immigrants because of recent and past terrorist attack against the U.S. as well as a fear that jobs are being lost to immigrants since the national unemployment fluctuates around nine percent. If churches were to recognize the injustice and discrimination migrant—in particular Mexican and Muslim immigrants—still face in the U.S., churches could learn to speak against these social injustices.

***Mexican Immigrants.*** In the U.S. there are around 12 million unauthorized immigrants, 60 percent being Mexican (Groody, 2009b, 298-299). Despite efforts and money spent to control the U.S. border, this has not reduced migration from Mexico into the U.S. (p. 314). Since this

population does not have legal status to work in the U.S., many of them are day laborers or work low-skilled, yet very difficult, jobs. According to Heyer (2008), currently the U.S. immigration law only supplies “5,000 permanent H2A and H2B visas, whereas the labor market demands an estimated 500,000 full-time low-skilled service jobs per year” (p. 444). Without the supply of visas many industries seek to hire undocumented immigrants. Industries that demand this labor market include agriculture, food processing, and child care, that are forcing these industries to hire undocumented immigrants because of competition. (p. 428). Even though immigrants have jobs that provide them with income, Heyer stated, “it appears that overall increases in immigration do not result in increases in unemployment among native-born workers” (p. 446). Also, undocumented immigrants are not able to enjoy the benefits of being a legally paid laborer. The author argued, “In reality virtually all undocumented Mexican immigrants have little if any security, benefits, health care, or guarantee of long-term work, and the average immigrant contributes \$1800 more in taxes to the U.S. government than he/she receives in services” (p. 446). Without receiving benefits from their due labor, an undocumented immigrant's worth is only based on what they can contribute in their labor. Undocumented Mexican immigrants contribute to the American economy, receive no benefits, and are still seen as an ill in society.

Rather than welcoming and trying to understand why there is such an influx of Mexican immigrants, Americans choose to exploit them for their work. Pohl (2006) wanted to challenge this practice of using Mexican immigrants solely for the work they contribute to society by writing, “If immigration... is going to be considered only as it benefits the receiving country... then at least at the national level it is probably best not to imagine that admission has anything to do with hospitality” (p. 94). Instead, the author suggested, “if immigrants are admitted, then hospitality at the local level becomes vitally important to their well-being. The

church can be a significant voice in calling attention to those people and places that are desperately in need but have little strategic importance” (p. 94). This is the call to churches in the United States. Mexican immigrants move from a state of poverty into a state of exploitation while living in the U.S. (Groody, 2009b, p. 311). It is often forgotten that Mexican immigrants are victims of injustice and feel marginalized, dehumanized and suffer a sense of displacement. The needs of this population go unnoticed because of their ethnicity and presence in the United States. The church can learn about the injustice Mexican immigrants face and defend them because they are vulnerable, despite the political consequences.

***Muslim Immigrants.*** The most recent statistics show that the majority of Muslims in America are immigrants (Islam for Today, 2007, Islam in the United States). *Time Magazine* recently found that 37 percent of Americans say they know a Muslim and 46 percent believe that Islam promotes violence against non-believers (Ghosh, 2010, p. 23). This data is in light of the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and continued terrorist attempts in the U.S. and around the world. Takim (2004) stated that “The terrorist attacks of September 11 revived such prejudices against Islam as that it is a religion that promotes violence and that Muslims are inherently militant and irrational people” (p. 334). Due to these preconceived notions, Muslim immigrants are not entering into the most welcoming environment. The rate of Muslim immigrants is increasing in America and Iraqi Muslims are now the third largest refugee group to resettle in America (UNHCR, 2009, p. 6). The need to learn and share with others about Muslim immigrants, and Muslims as a whole is necessary to reduce discrimination and prejudices against the adherents of this religion.

Engaging in dialogue with Muslim immigrants is a way forward to understanding who and what Muslims believe. During my internship at World Relief I encountered many Iraqi refugees. According to Leenders (2008), “More than 4.6 million, or nearly one in five, Iraqis are

believed to have deserted their homes in a bid to find safety away from the violence that continues to engulf major parts of their country” (p. 1563). Through my times with Iraqi refugees I have never felt more welcomed to be part of someone’s life than I have with them. Many of them taught me about the different Muslim holidays and what the Hijab (headdress) meant. One particular family (sisters) considered themselves to be my aunts. When I go a few weeks after not visiting them they first berate me for not visiting and then cook me a “special” meal. Our different religions were never a dividing factor during our interactions. I began to recognize that the peaceful life they live was breathing peace and patience into me as a result of engaging in dialogue with them. Takim (2004) wrote this about dialogue, “Dialogue provides access to windows of understanding of how others define themselves and challenges us to grow in our own faith through the experience of the other” (p. 347). Dialogue is missing in Christian-Muslim relations. Engaging with Muslim immigrants can bring about a new healthy direction for Muslim relations in the U.S.

Al-Mariati (2004) stated that the Christian-Muslim relations needs to move past historic and present difference and “see the possibilities and opportunities for the kind of dialogue that will foster our cooperation in working together on contemporary problems, both here and abroad” (p. 374). What this would look like relies on how much the churches or a particular ministry chooses to engage in issues relating to Muslims. Takim (2004) offers some examples of ways the church can move forward in Muslim relations by writing:

Words and dialogue cannot, by themselves, lead to reconciliation. We need to create institutions for dialogue, to institute cultural exchange programs, and create platforms for a common study of Muslim-Christian history and theology. In

particular, shared study and other modes of reconciliation can yield new intimacies and create empathy for the other. (p. 374)

This process of dialoguing and creating spaces for education about Muslims in America can be developed and enacted by the church. In Seattle, Quest Church puts on various discussions and topics surrounding issues of discrimination. One series the church put on was discussing Christian-Muslim relations. The goal was to educate the congregation about Muslims and increase Christian-Muslim relations. These are the kinds of opportunities that exist within the church to learn about Muslim immigrants and educate congregations about building positive relationships with Muslims.

**Insights on immigration.** According to Brenner (2010), “American sentiment toward immigrants has swung from boomtown hospitality to churlish xenophobia in the course of the present recession” (p. 37). The American society is growing weary of the amount of immigrants that are arriving in the U.S. However there is a lack of discussion on the reasons why people are migrating to the U.S. Even though the church has a mandate to welcome strangers, it seems as though mainline protestant churches are not aggressive in welcoming immigrants. Knoll (2009) research revealed that religious minority groups support a liberal immigration reform, meaning they support more immigrants in the U.S., because these “groups that have been ‘marginalized’ by society through political or social discrimination feel a sense of shared experience with other marginalized groups” (p. 317). These groups include Jews, Latter-day Saints, and “other,” which include Hinduism, Buddhism, Pagan, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh - day Adventist, and more (p. 317). The one majority religious group that has a strong liberal stance on immigration is the Catholic Church, mainly because of its Catholic Social Teaching (CST). Groody’s work details CST and its relation to migration and refugees.

Groody (2009) argued that Catholic Social Teaching can impact our view of immigrants. According to the author, “In its efforts to safeguard the dignity of all people, Catholic social teaching has consistently argued that the moral health of an economy is measured not in terms of financial metrics like the gross national product or stock prices but in terms of how the economy affects the quality of life in the community as a whole” (p. 646). Migration, as stated by Groody, is based on “to what extent the economy of a country enhances the dignity of every human being, especially of those who are vulnerable and deemed insignificant” (p. 646). If the economy is negatively affecting the quality of life for people, CST teaches that people have the right to migrate.

Catholic Social Teaching believes that countries have the right to have borders and to control them, but borders are only acceptable if human dignity is preserved. Groody stated, “when a state cannot provide the conditions necessary for human dignity, people have a right to migrate to foreign lands, even without proper legal documentation” (p. 646). The author found that people’s perspectives on breaking the law impacted their view of immigration. “In public discourse,” Groody asserted, “people commonly say they have no problem with immigration, but they do have a problem with people breaking the law. The problem with this perspective is that it makes no distinction between various kinds of law and assumes equal binding force for all law” (p. 654). People are obeying the law of human nature, which Groody described as “the need to find work so as to feed their families and attain more dignified lives” (p. 656). There needs to be consideration of the injustice that led them to migrate is more important than upholding specific immigration laws.

### **Justice and Rights**

By welcoming and working with refugees opens the churches' eyes to the plight of other immigrant groups in the U.S. and also sets an unambiguous definition of justice and rights. Welcoming and ultimately ensuring that refugees are treated fairly is a biblical mandate from God and it also comes from acknowledging that refugees deserve justice and have rights. Recognizing the framework of justice and rights forms a basis for not only serving refugees, but the most vulnerable immigrant population and creates a standard of how to treat all human beings.

According to Wolterstoff (2008), justice and right are different (p. 1). Wolterstoff details through his writings how justice and rights are interconnected in that "justice is ultimately grounded on inherent rights" (p. 4). Rights are said to be congruent with obligation as in humans have an obligation to treat one another friendly. Leading the argument by discussing rights, Wolterstoff defines the concept of natural rights. Inherent natural rights are those rights that are innate in a human being. "A human right," as insisted by Wolterstoff, "is a right such that the only status one needs is order to possess the right, the only credential required is that of being a human being" (p. 65). Wolterstoff's development of justice as inherent rights leads to understanding justice and rights in the Bible.

The rationalization for justice as an inherent right is found in the Bible. Wolterstoff (2008) stated "...I continue the counter-narrative by showing that inherent natural rights were assumed and recognized by the writers of the Hebrew and Christians scripture" (p. 65). In the Old Testament God describes how to treat those who are strangers, widows, orphans, or poor by caring and loving them. This is an act of justice because of their inherent rights. The author argued that the religion of the Israelites was a religion of salvation for the lowly from injustice in this earthly existence (p. 79). Wolterstoff wrote, "The prophets and the psalmist do not argue the

case that alleviating the plight of the lowly is required by justice. They assume it” (p. 76). In order for the Israelites to be considered holy and to know God, they must act justly for the lowly (p. 83, 81).

Understanding justice as an inherent right influences how one views and understands human worth. God said to treat others justly because he is just. People are also to treat people the same way God would treat them. This is seen in the book of Genesis when people are created in God’s image. Wolterstoff (2008) stated, “Once one has said that God has worth, that worth grounds God’s right to worship and obedience, and that human being likewise have worth, it proves impossible not to continue in this line of thought and hold that human beings have rights on account of their worth. The writer of Genesis took the first step down that road” (p. 95). At this point the author is beginning to set up the argument that human worth cannot be distinguished from God. The failure of a secular approach is that it is based on certain human capacities (p. 340). It is important to get away from this view of capacities establishing worth because according to this standard many people are not considered to have worth.

An essential aspect of Wolterstoff writings is his expansion of the notion of *imago dei*. One argument for working with refugees and other immigrant groups is that they are created in the image of God (*imago dei*). Wolterstoff does not disagree with this notion as it is often discussed, but wants to take this concept further. According to Wolterstoff, “The image of God, on the interpretation proposed, consists of *resembling God with respect* to possessing capacities necessary for exercising dominion” (p. 348). Since not all that is created in the image of God can exercise dominion—for example, those who have Alzheimer do not have the capacity to exercise dominion—grounding an argument for worth based on *imago dei* is flawed. “What we need,” Wolterstoff declared, “for a theistic grounding of natural human rights, is some worth-imparting

relation of human beings to God that does not in any way involve a reference to human capacities” (p. 352). The argument for a theistic grounding of natural human rights is found in being loved by God. This act of being loved is what Wolterstoffs calls *bestowed* worth (p. 353). This bestowed worth from God is what all human beings possess that gives human dignity.

Distinguishing justice from rights, yet showing their interconnectedness, helps to shape the argument for why the church needs to work with refugees since Wolterstoffs argues justice and rights from a Christian perspective. The bestowed worth that refugees possess is grounds for welcoming and caring for refugees. Understanding this worth changes how we treat and interact with refugees, and ultimately all migrant groups.

### **Transformation**

This combination of expanding welcoming to migrant groups and understanding their justice and rights based on their bestowed worth leads to American churches being transformed by this interaction. Transformation is the word that best describes how the church is changed when it welcomes refugees and other migrant groups. Palmer (1993) wrote, “To learn is to face transformation” (p. 40). During my time as an intern for World Relief the greatest transformation I faced was the discrimination in my heart. My previous lack of encounters with other immigrant groups caused me to generalize and hold prejudices against them without even knowing who they are or why they are here. Working with refugees taught me that there are a variety of reasons why people have migrated to the U.S. and I should not assume that they do not have a right to be here. Also, before I worked with refugees I did not know how I consider Muslims in America, especially Muslim immigrants. I was quite hesitant to work with Muslim refugees. Yet after I started to work and build more relationships with Muslim refugees my perceptions on all Muslims changed. They encourage me in my faith and have taught me about patience. My desire

now is to reduce discrimination around the Muslim population, especially all incoming Muslim immigrants. I first had to realize the prejudice and discrimination in my heart in order to move forward in relationships with refugees, immigrants, and Muslims.

This process of transformation requires dialoguing—as stated earlier—with the stranger to build solidarity. Takim (2004) observed that, “When people engage in dialogue, they soon realize that they hold a great number of convictions and values in common and face similar difficulties and challenges” (p. 351). The beauty of working with those who are strangers in American society is seeing the similarities and diversity these groups bring to the United States. Bretherton (2006) wrote, “Refugees call us to extend human solidarity and question our limits as to whom we recognise as persons” (p.58). This is what the Old Testament argues when God commands the Israelites to welcome strangers. According to Groody (2009b) if we were to examine the journey of undocumented Mexican immigrant into the U.S. we would see similarities to the Israelites.

They migrate toward a “promised land,” but it is a perilous journey. The parallels of the immigrant narrative to the Exodus story are striking (Exod 13:17-17:7).

The conditions of economic oppression, the burdensome yoke of poverty, and the hope of freedom lead migrants to wander through deserts or cross over bodies of water to evade border guards and to struggle to believe that they are moving toward a better future. (p. 302)

Members of churches in the U.S. might not have the same personal journey as immigrants or refugees, but by viewing the Bible as a testament of our spiritual history then we realize we have commonality.

In realizing our commonality both the church and refugees are being transformed. According to White (2006), “Transformational relationships bring change to both parties, opening our eyes to new dimensions of faith, opening doors of opportunity, giving birth to new prospects for community partnerships. Transformational relationships cannot be one-way” (p. 148-149). Transformation can be how we read scripture differently because we have encountered refugees who have different life experiences and have risen through adversity (L. Williams, personal communication, December 2, 2010). Church members can be changed to use their talents and skills to help the refugee population. S. Sommerman stated that through interacting with refugees, members began to transform their understanding of what it meant to give, not only of their material possessions, but also of their skills (personal communication, December 6, 2010). S. Sommerman shared how her church began to actively work with refugees. The church bought translation headphones for those who do not speak English so they can hear the Sunday message preached. The congregation became more active in working with refugees by picking them up for church and offering to teach English as a Second Language classes in the church. Working with refugees not only transformed the congregation, but inspire the congregation to work to transform the city’s treatment of refugees by successfully lobbying for a refugee center in the Kent school district. S. Sommerman emphasized, “It [working with refugees] evolved because people were passionate about it” (personal communication, December 6, 2010). Refugees were able to benefit from the actions of the church by being able to take free classes and were also able to gain personal relationships with Americans.

As stated by White (2006), “Transformed people can transform a society” (p.119). Williams stated the same notion as White, but highlighted that working with the most vulnerable will transform the church (personal communication, December 2, 2010). The church can be

transformed by the refugee population and then move beyond their personal interacting with refugees to impact and teach the whole of society how to interact with and accept refugees. Advocacy can develop from this interaction as a way to transform the American society's understanding about refugees and other migrant groups.

### **Advocacy**

Advocacy, according to Tollestrup (2001), is “addressing the issues of power and the marginalisation of weaker individuals or groups who lack the broader access, leverage or authority and the influence of the advocate” (p. 1). Indeed it is in biblical to advocate for the vulnerable as exemplified in the Book of Psalm, “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute” (Psalm 31:8). As the amount of refugees and immigrants are increasing in America, churches in the U.S. have to address issues that are affecting refugees in America and abroad.

Advocating for refugees and other immigrant groups in America means addressing social systems and popular misconceptions that don't allow them to experience full freedom in America. Currently in Washington State, budget cuts are going to affect monthly cash assistance and funding for Limited English Proficient (LEP) classes and job training (Valdes, 2011, para. 15). This greatly reduces the ability of incoming refugees to become self-sufficient in America. Another advocacy issue is that some institutions discriminate against undocumented Mexican immigrants. Undocumented Mexican immigrants are paid below their value but the institutions that hire them do not get reprimanded meaning the workers are the only ones who suffer. Lastly, the church can advocate for increasing dialogue between Muslim-Christian relations in America. Takim stated (2004) that “Dialogue provides access to windows of understanding of how others define themselves and challenges us to grow in our own faith through the experience of the

other” (p. 347). Churches can advocate on behalf of Muslims by showing the similarities between groups and communicating that Muslims do not have to be feared. By advocating for the stranger, the American church can be the voice that stands on the side of the vulnerable and works to seek justice for them.

Advocating for refugees in America also means addressing what is happening in their home country. There are 16 million refugees in the world and about one percent get resettled a year, which begs the questions as to what happens to those who do not get resettled. Many of them stay in the country of first-asylum until they can be resettled. Many of them have waited for over 20 years to be resettled. The truth of the matter is that not all refugees will be resettled. In my opinion it is easier for countries to resettle refugees, particularly the United States, but it is much more difficult to work at peace building from their country of origin. This is where the church comes in. Messer (1983) argued, “The break-through for social justice, evangelism, church growth, and increased civility in human life will come not by all of us trading places, but by everyone of us, in each and every place, rising up, speaking out, and walking forward into the heartaches and headaches, the storms and stresses of life” (p. 6). The church can work at peace building in countries that are experiencing conflict. This might range from community development in the conflict region or advocating to government agencies for conflict resolution.

Advocating for refugees can be extended to other large migrant groups that are choosing to resettle in the U.S. by recognizing how the U.S. impacted their migration. Instead of placing the blame on the immigrants for the impact immigration has on American society, the church can unmask how American’s sins played a role in their migration. For instance, the increase of Iraqi immigrants and refugees is directly related to America’s invasion of Iraq. Our increased demand cheap manufactured items created low wage jobs in Mexico and other countries that provide

goods to America. The church can work at advocacy by providing resources to educate people about what is happening abroad and how the church is working to reduce these injustices (Toulesup, 2001, p. 1-2).

Even though churches should advocate for refugees and migrants, churches are also meant to partner with these groups to develop change. Toulesup stated, “The mistake that is too often made is that we deem marginalized as incapable or lacking the ability and imagination to take an active part in changing those things that oppress them” (p. 3). This partnership creates a strong consensus on what exactly needs to be advocated and allows the oppressed voices to be heard so the church can get their concerns across. Hinson-Hasty (2009) observed that, “A diversity of voices should be consciously and intentionally brought to the table in local churches when discussing social justice issues and discerning ways to address them. This strategy necessitates the participation of persons of privilege in movements for change sponsored by those” (p. 72). According to Baser and Swain (2008) various Diaspora groups have advocated for peace building for their country of origin:

There are many evidences of diaspora communities significantly contributing to promotion of peace in their homelands. They have been highly or partially effective in assisting conflict transformation processes and actively engaged in post-conflict reconstruction activities. There is an increasing belief that through lobbying governments, particularly of the host nations, and international organizations and aiding the process of transition and reconstruction, diasporas are increasingly playing an important role in achieving political compromise and peaceful conflict resolution in their homelands. (p. 11)

By keeping relationships with refugees and other immigrant groups, churches can work to empower these groups to be change-agents for their country. Churches' role can be one that helps to advocate on behalf of them or be a system of support. The role of the church in advocacy for refugees and immigrant groups needs to be present. Messer (1983) stated, "If we are exposed to human conditions crying out for justice, and become sensitized to human problems, we are more likely to become change-agents for Christ" (p. 9). Encountering these groups that have experienced or are currently experiencing injustices can teach the church how to advocate for justice.

### **Discipleship**

Welcoming refugees—ultimately other immigrant groups as a whole—and addressing various social injustice issues is the work of being a disciple of Christ. Groody (2007) stated, "Jesus reveals that following him demands ascending to the values, ideals, and ethical demands of the Kingdom of God. In order to see the world as God sees it, they must begin to see with the eyes of the heart" (p. 242). Throughout this paper I have been advocating for churches in the U.S. to welcome refugees and help address current issues in American society. What shouldn't be forgotten is that the church must find its foundation in Christ and cultivate the same heart that Christ has for those who have and had faced injustice. The author asserted, "The challenge of Christian spirituality, lived as following Jesus, deals with making the mind and heart of Christ one's own" (p. 243). To address the needs of refugees the American church must continue to learn what it mean to be a disciple of Christ.

Following Christ, as Groody (2007) expressed, "means accepting the gifts and responsibilities of Christian love expressed in a faith that does justice" (p. 247). Accepting these gifts and responsibilities means looking at the world and people the way that God would. As

stated by the author, “No longer judging people by external appearances, they are able to see deeper into the heart of other people, as if to begin to behold others as God does (I Sm 16:7), as if to see the glory that resides within each and every person” (p. 243). Developing these sorts of lenses to see people the way God sees them is to enter into discipleship. The foundations of discipleship include fasting and praying, community and solidarity, nature and simplicity, and recollection and the Sabbath (p. 247).

These components of discipleship are used as a catalyst of change in the disciple to address issues in social injustice. Fasting and praying are used to renew ourselves to God. Fasting, as noted by Groody, is “not to eliminate desire but to intensify it and orient it toward flourishing human relationships and the prospering of human life” (p. 248). Prayer is to keep us connected to the heart of God and more to our hearts. Through this interconnectedness the disciple is more receptive to the Holy Spirit of God. According to Groody “Prayer opens us up to the Spirit, who alone can change all that which does not conform to the mind and heart of Christ (Rom 12:2). The desire to change the world begins with a commitment to change ourselves” (251).

The next components of discipleship are community and solidarity which renew our relationship to others. The focus of community is to remember how this foundation is found in Christ. Groody (2007) stated, “Because Christian community is rooted in Christ, it opens up a space to love even those whom the world considers the most unlovable” (p. 252). This community speaks to the presence that Christ’s disciples need to have with those who are currently the most vulnerable in the U.S., refugees, Mexican and Muslim immigrants. Groody asserted, “In contrast to a society that frequently discriminates based on race, ethnicity, religion, and social class, Christian community opens the door to all, offering hospitality in an

increasingly inhospitable world” (p. 252). Community leads to solidarity. Solidarity since we are all interrelated, as the author suggest, “connects us with those most disconnected from the human family” (p. 254).

The last two components of discipleship help to us to renew our relationship with the environment and self. Groody insisted that renewing our relationship to nature helps us to remember our connection to the earth (p. 256), while simplicity “seeks to free us from the slavery of inordinate human wants” (p. 258). Lastly recollection and Sabbath brings us more in touch with ourselves. According to Groody, “recollection helps ground our lives in the liberating truth of self-knowledge. Without self-knowledge, our relationships begin to unravel on the most basic level, namely, with ourselves (p. 261). The Sabbath, as Groody reminds the readers, is a gift from God. As stated by the author, “It is a gift of God that reminds us we are worth more than the work of our hands, the effectiveness of our ministry, and the efficiency-mindedness that often controls us (p. 263). These four components of discipleship create disciples who are more in tune with God, their surroundings, and themselves.

The purpose of describing discipleship in regards to empowering churches is to establish disciplines that are needed to work with refugees and other migrant groups and to ultimately stay grounded in God. Groody (2007) stated, “The more we are guided from the vision on the mountaintop, and the more we realize that the challenges of ascent and descent are daily demands, the more we will see that disciplines are liberating because they help us change” (p. 265). As stated earlier, transformed people transform societies. With discipleship we are shaping ourselves to become more like Christ by sharing in people’s suffering and seeking justice on behalf of them. The disciplines that are developed through discipleship help us to enter into community with those who are considered to be outcast. Indeed learning disciplines first is

needed in order to fully enter into work with refugees and be a true disciple of Christ welcoming and walking with refugees.

### **Conclusion**

Learning how to welcome refugees can be both beneficial to American churches as to well as refugees. From my personal experience I have learned what it means to be a follower of Christ by entering into the unknown with refugees. Through this Christ has taught me the importance of being in relationships with those who are vulnerable. Many times refugees do not want someone to solve their problems, but just someone who is willing to stand on their side.

With the large amount of refugees and immigrants entering into the U.S., American churches need to practice the biblical mandate to welcome all strangers. As stated earlier, churches are being known more for where they stand on moral issues rather than their advocacy for vulnerable groups. It is understandable that refugees might not be present around many cities in America. Regardless of this lack of presence, churches still need to have a biblical stance to “welcome the stranger” and to use this stance to include all migrant groups. It might seem as though entering into the lives of refugees can seem like a daunting task for churches that are currently not engaged with refugees, but once those first steps are taken to welcome them, things become simpler than expected.

By welcoming refugees churches in America can speak volumes into the American society about how everyone should welcome the stranger. It is a voice that takes seriously God’s command to welcome the stranger and to advocate on behalf of them. It is a voice that allows the church to become more relevant to today’s society rather than staying distant on social issues. The voice the American church can have in today’s society has the ability to change society.

Instead of standing on the side of those who mistreat and do not see the worth of strangers, the church can speak on behalf of them.

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