

From the Bishop

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” Matthew 25:35

I first began working with refugees back in 1975 when I was a young pastor serving my first congregation in Oklahoma. I received a phone call from a staff member of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service working at Ft. Chaffee, Arkansas. He asked if our congregation would work with a local Oklahoma businessman in the resettlement of refugees from Vietnam. A short time later in the spring and summer of 1975 I found myself heavily involved with the coordination of local efforts to resettle a busload of refugees.

Many in this synod have their own experiences with refugees. On several occasions I have heard rich stories of congregations working with the Hmong refugees. People have spoken of the joy, satisfaction, and the enrichment of life that has come from welcoming the stranger and helping people who have experienced traumatic upheaval in their lives.

June 20 is World Refugee Day, the date established by the United Nations in 2000. As Christians we are motivated by the compassion of Christ to do our part as global citizens to welcome refugees. As Lutherans we have a long history in the welcoming and resettlement of refugees and decades of experience on the national and local level. We are grateful that Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service is one of nine national organizations that resettle refugees on behalf of the United States government.

There is a lot of fear in this country based on misunderstanding. Here is what LIRS says about refugees:

Refugees are people who cannot return home ...

People whose own government cannot or will not protect them.

People who are persecuted for their religious or political beliefs.

People who flee war or genocide.

People who are brutalized by a military regime.

People for whom escaping to another country is the only means of survival.

Refugees are people...and every person has a story. Stories of family and friends. Stories of love and loss. Stories of rebuilding hope and establishing self-sufficiency in a new land.

When refugees arrive in the United States they immediately begin the process of putting roots down and establishing themselves in their new communities.

They enroll their children in school. They learn the local transit system. They sign up for English or computer classes. And they are eager to find employment to be able to provide for themselves and their families. As they work their way to self-sufficiency, refugees prove to be some of the most dependable, hardworking and committed members of our communities, congregations and workplaces.

Self-sufficiency is key to successful integration into American society. LIRS helps newcomers by engaging local churches and communities in the resettlement process and by promoting employment and providing training and support to local job developers.

Refugees are people with stories. Their stories are about the traumatic loss of friends and loved ones, and community, home and work. Their stories are about defying all odds and surviving and then leaving behind discrimination, threats, and violence.

I was in Washington D.C. recently for a meeting about refugees. A staff member of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service talked about an Iraqi woman whose mother had recently died. She could not return home for the funeral because of the threats to her life. Refugees are people who long to provide a safe place for their family and children.

As Christians we respond to the needs of refugees out of love for neighbor. Jesus calls us to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and then adds, "...you shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:38)

But it also makes political sense for the citizens of this country. As we help refugees we send a message of hope and healing to the world. We let people of the world know that the United States is on the forefront of freedom and social justice for all. That message counters the narrative of death and destruction from terrorist groups around the world. We want the world to look upon the United States as a beacon of hope for people who do not enjoy the freedom we have in this country.