

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH A RESETTLEMENT AGENCY



world relief 

Whether you're working with World Relief or another resettlement partner, here are five tips for building a fruitful relationship and getting your refugee ministry started.

1

DEVELOP MULTI-TIERED RELATIONSHIPS

It is important for churches to enter into initial conversations with refugee resettlement agencies with a posture of listening, learning, and supporting. Before offering their own ideas and plans we recommend that churches ask how their volunteers can support the agency's work. Oftentimes, it can start with more indirect opportunities such as donation drives that turn into direct engagement with refugees as trust is built.

In many cases, agencies will refer interested community members to a designated staff member, such as a volunteer coordinator, who is responsible for connecting volunteers with opportunities to serve. Churches with multiple interested volunteers should delegate two or three leaders to meet with the volunteer coordinator and report what is learned back to the group. While one leader may act as the agency's primary point of contact, it can be helpful to have multiple individuals involved in the conversation to clarify expectations and avoid misunderstandings.

Meanwhile, it is advisable for senior church leadership, such as a pastor or other staff member, to reach out to the director of the agency as well. Doing so communicates that the volunteer delegation represents a larger, engaged congregation that is eager to support refugees. Establishing multiple connections at varying levels between the church and the agency will help sustain the relationship through inevitable personnel transitions.

2

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

As you prayerfully reach out to local refugee resettlement agencies, engage in research, networking, and listening in your community so that you can quickly become an informed partner.

- **RESEARCH** | Census Bureau and local school district data can provide insight into the background and even neighborhoods of nationalities, people groups, and languages of those living in your community. Past refugee arrival data to your area can be located at wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals. Cultural profiles of different refugee groups are located at culturalorientation.net/learning/backgrounders.[†]
- **NETWORKING** | Pursue connections with government, school, non-profit and church leaders in your community who may be aware of an array of refugee ministry efforts already underway. Assume others may already be doing what you have in mind to do and find ways to collaborate and learn from them.
- **LISTENING** | Engage in appreciative inquiry to discover not just the needs but the strengths and dreams of existing refugee communities. Connect with first and second generation immigrant church leaders and come alongside their vision and gifts as they seek to welcome newcomers with their unique language and life experience capabilities.

[†] Reach out to church@wr.org for more "community exegesis" resources from World Relief.

As you research, network, and listen with an eye towards the long term, also consider what volunteer opportunities the resettlement agency already has in place and start there, building experience and trust over time.

3 REFLECT ON GIFTS, TALENTS AND CALLINGS

Helping people start new lives in a strange place with a strange language, strange culture and in many cases, few to no belongings or social support network can be daunting. Fortunately, the number of needs is easily matched by the multitude of skills and resources each community has to offer.

Prior to meeting with agency staff, volunteer groups should prayerfully consider how God may be calling their church to respond to refugees' specific needs. Some congregations have members who are skilled in a particular trade, such as construction or automobile repair, and could impart those skills to employment-seeking refugees through workshops. Some may be equipped to provide free or low-cost English classes for adults or tutoring and homework help for school-age refugees. Others may be willing to help refugees become acquainted with their new community by arranging grocery shopping trips.

Each of these provides volunteers the opportunity to engage with refugees on a personal, recurring basis, and may result in ongoing friendship after the service period ends. Over time and as expertise, trust and communication grows between the church and the agency, churches can offer specific, creative ideas of how they might contribute to the resettlement efforts in the community.

“Church health can’t be defined by attendance or budgets alone. Rather, by how well our congregation is loving their neighbors and coming alongside the most vulnerable in our community and around the world. As a partner, World Relief has played an important role in equipping and mobilizing our church to step into the lives of the vulnerable both here and around the world.”

..... **NATHAN NELSON, MISSIONS PASTOR AT BETHANY COMMUNITY CHURCH**

4 SERVE WITHOUT EXPECTATIONS

At the national level, five of the nine voluntary agencies are affiliated with one or more Christian denominations. Yet at the local level, it is not uncommon for agency staff to suspect that volunteers from churches are more interested in converting refugees rather than befriending and serving them.

Many refugees admitted to the United States come from countries where Christians are actively persecuted and where there is minimal or no local church presence. For followers of Jesus, the opportunity to share one’s faith with someone from such a background is incredibly exciting. The State Department in no way prohibits volunteers in the resettlement program from telling refugees that their faith is what motivates them to serve. When appropriate, volunteers may even offer to pray for or with refugees or invite them to visit their church. However, volunteers must be exceedingly careful not to say or do anything to make refugees feel as if they must accept such invitations in order to continue the friendship or receive services. Any attempt or perceived attempt by volunteers to directly or indirectly pressure refugees, including their children, to participate in religious activities is strictly prohibited.

The World Evangelical Alliance proposes a distinction between proselytism and evangelism. Proselytism takes place whenever our motives, methods, or message are harmful. Unfortunately, though motives may be pure, it's common for our methods to unknowingly apply indirect pressure upon refugees who are in a "power down" position and who view the world through an honor-shame cultural lens. For people who have already fled persecution, even implied expectations of social or religious conformity can recall traumatic memories, prolonging refugees' pain and delaying healing. By contrast, to evangelize is "to make an open and honest statement of the gospel, which leaves the hearers entirely free to make up their own minds about it. We wish to be sensitive to those of other faiths, and we reject any approach that seeks to force conversion on them."[†] Authentic friendships built on trust and reciprocity are the best context for spiritual conversations.

When approaching an agency, then, churches should arrive prepared to assure staff that their intentions are not to proselytize, but to serve refugees without expectations – and mean it. When the Body of Christ serves those who are vulnerable with integrity and excellence, they proclaim the good news of God's Kingdom through their deeds as well as their words.

[†] *World Evangelical Alliance statement, Secretary General Rev. Gary Edmunds, 2003.*

“Working alongside World Relief to serve the vulnerable of our community enables our church members to move past simply speaking about the Gospel to actually embodying the Gospel through compassionate service in the name of Christ. Simple acts of help lead to revealing conversations, which give birth to significant relationships.”

MARK SHETLER, EXECUTIVE PASTOR AT RIVER CITY CHRISTIAN

5 PERSEVERE AND BE CREATIVE

When possible, serving refugees in partnership with the agencies tasked with coordinating and preparing for their arrival is ideal. There are times when overtures from churches are not immediately welcomed. This can be due to a number of factors, including being understaffed, negative church experiences in the past, or even a view of volunteer groups as outside of their scope of service.

Do not give up! Pursue partnership, build trust, cultivate a long-term commitment and a level of expertise over time that make you strong partners for the future.

If you discover you are not able to collaborate with resettlement agencies in the short term, prayerfully explore how God may be leading your congregation to creatively engage in refugee ministry in partnership with others in your community. Again, after assessing their own unique gifts and skills, congregations may open their doors to refugees by providing free job skills workshops, English classes, tutoring, childcare, cooking classes, and more in their building or meeting space. Alternatively, churches with the means to do so might rent space in an apartment complex heavily populated by refugees or in a storefront location close to where they live. There, services such as those mentioned above may be offered in a convenient, neutral location, meanwhile creating a communal space where refugees and their American neighbors can get to know one another in an informal setting.