# Welcoming Strangers: A Service for Refugee Support

―*Jim Tenford, St Andrew’s United Church, Moose Jaw, and Refugee Advisory Group Member/Liaison for Living Skies Regional Council*

## Opening Prayers

Holy God we gather here in your presence to be inspired to take part in the work you’re doing. We rejoice at the invitation to enter your realm, to sit at your banquet table and may our worship this day be our RRSP, yes, we wish to continue this journey to your side, yes, we understand that we aren’t to leave anyone behind, and yes, we know that the path to your realm will pass through places that may seem scary or unfamiliar. Yes, we wish to be your people and yes, we will follow Jesus as our guide.

We pray in the language of our hearts, the prayer that Jesus taught us (*Lord’s Prayer*).

## Hymn

“O God of Every Nation” (*Voices United* 677)

## Reflection

(*A* [*video of this sermon*](https://youtu.be/o9uRKakGGGk) *is available, starting at 4:37 and ending at 19:39. Search YouTube.com, “Welcoming Strangers St. Andrew’s.”.*

*You might also use the poem* [*“Refuge” by JJ Bola*](https://www.thebookbanque.com/literary/poetry/refuge-jjbola) *as your sermon. A video of the* [*poet reciting his poem*](https://youtu.be/R3dgPtyQ3PI) *is available on YouTube.com, search “Refuge by JJ Bola.”*)

A few years ago, we had a flood in our basement from a sewer line backup. It wasn’t a ton of water, but it was enough that the basement had to be gutted. After we had everything dried out and cleaned up, the discussions started about what we were going to do. Maybe I could have a much larger woodshop! But no, my wife Jennifer had another idea. She said that I should build a basement suite that we could rent out. I was skeptical as we were landlords once before and found it to be a terribly stressful endeavour. “No,” she said, “we’ll sponsor a refugee and they can live in the suite!” This was all happening around the same time as the Syrian crisis, and refugees were everyday news. She had me convinced. I started building while we looked into what’s involved in sponsoring refugees.

We found out that it’s not easy―not as much work as building a basement suite, but the government loves their forms and bureaucracy. Fortunately, I approached my church and St. Andrew’s was behind us. Long story short, St. Andrew’s has since sponsored several refugees and has partnered with other community groups to sponsor many more.

People fleeing their homeland is nothing new―it’s been a part of the human story since long before our modern understanding of countries. For we Christians, we can look back to our Hebrew ancestors fleeing slavery in Egypt, an event that shaped their faith and the way they have always been told to interact with the world.

In the Torah, we find instructions like this found in **Leviticus 19:34**:

The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God. (NIV)

It’s a bit like the whole do unto other as you would have them do unto you thing. The Hebrew people were foreigners; they fled slavery wandering the world in search of a new home. God is telling them to never forget that experience and treat other sojourners accordingly.

There are countless passages like this all through the 1st and 2nd Testaments―the command to offer hospitality to strangers, to care for foreigners, from Paul telling the church to “be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.” To Jesus, who started his life as a refugee fleeing political persecution at the hand of Herod, talking about those who welcome strangers welcoming Jesus himself. Really, I could just spend this whole sermon reading passages that talk about care and hospitality to foreigners and strangers. Yes, the Bible is complex and there are many topics that need to be addressed with nuance, but this is not one of those times―the evidence is overwhelming. A person who chooses the title Christian but opposes refugee support is a bit like someone calling themselves a vegetarian while chowing down on their bacon-wrapped steak deepfried in pork fat. Support of refugees is absolutely central to who we are as Christians.

That’s not to say that every church out there should immediately sign up to sponsor a bunch of refugees. As Paul writes, we are diverse people with diverse abilities, and not every church or community is well suited for sponsorship. For this reason, I encourage honest discussion and discernment. Do you have the people in place to do the work? You will be welcoming people who might have very big needs―often, there’s a whole bunch of training to do so newcomers can learn our culture, our language, and even our way of life. I remember a difficult conversation using mostly gestures trying to explain what a thermostat was to a person who never experienced the need for central heating. Also, it’s important to remember that the people we welcome have sometimes experienced the very worst of humanity and may be carrying terrible emotional scars.

It’s also important to set aside our expectations. They might not want to attend your church or fill your Sunday school with their children. They might not even be Christian but that has to be OK. Jesus didn’t make a habit of asking people about their religion before helping them, and none of the people he helped would have called themselves Christian. Maybe they won’t listen to your advice, or maybe they’ll arrive in your city and they’ll turn around and move somewhere else―but these are usually adults with every right to make their own decisions. It’s also really expensive―often, your church will be providing a year’s living expenses, which will be many thousands of dollars.

There’s also what this kind of work can do to your heart. After you are assigned a refugee file and you start making preparations for their arrival, a funny thing often happens. This person or family, whom you have never met, have a completely different background, language, and tradition; someone who on paper may seem to have nothing in common all of a sudden becomes one of the most important people in your life―this is a family member you’ve never met. It’s an odd thing in a world with almost 7 billion people to care this deeply for someone simply because you saw their name on a government form, and because at some time in the future you’ll be partially responsible for their care.

This is a wonderful, painful blessing. One of the reasons our world isn’t healthier than it is is because we can so often hide behind “Out of sight, out of mind.” Yes, there’s tragedy. Yes, children are dying of starvation and lives are being destroyed by war, but that’s over there happening to people I don’t know. Well, now you do. Now there’s a name; now there’s a face. And sometimes that hurts. But you know, maybe it should hurt because we are all siblings, tethered together by our divine parent. That pain can birth compassion for those hidden from our sight. That pain can inspire us to help change the world.

So what can you and your church do? Well, obviously, if you’ve got the means and ability, if you live in a community that can offer settlement support and eventual employment opportunities, you could undertake a sponsorship. It’s a ton of work, but we have good people in our church with loads of experience that can help. There is also, in certain instances, financial help from government and charities that provide some funding. And this is not only good for the people you sponsor but it’s also good for your faith community―it gives you a goal to work toward. It makes the practice of our faith a bit more tangible; it gets attention―people outside the church see what you’re doing, and while there might be some objection, for the most part people really appreciate seeing Christians churches acting in ways that are, dare we say, Christ-like.

If sponsorship isn’t for you, there might be community organizations that help newcomers that could use some volunteer help, or maybe you could host a fundraising dinner to help. You could also write letters to politicians as individuals or as a congregation urging a strong and generous refugee program since, while some governments do try to help, others see this as a wedge issue to get their base fearful and angry.

And of course, the very best strategy for helping refugees is to help ensure that people don’t have to flee their homes in the first place. Vote for people who support strong foreign aid spending.

Be mindful of how you spend your money, and ask questions of corporations on whether their products and policies support exploitation of the world’s most vulnerable.

And of course, the biggest driver of human conflict and displacement in this century is going to be climate change and the resulting conflict and loss of arable land, so simply being mindful of our carbon footprint can be our small part in helping people live lives of peace and prosperity.

All through the gospels, Jesus talks about the coming age, the realm of God when all people will recognize that we are all kin. I don’t believe that Jesus would recognize international borders or nationalities because we are one people under one God, all citizens of God’s realm. We therefore, in showing hospitality to strangers, are not flooding our land with foreigners but instead helping to create God’s realm. We are simply fulfilling what Paul said in his letter to the Ephesians: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,” (ESV).

## Prayers

*“When I Needed a Neighbour,” VU 600, v. 1*

Holy God, we give you thanks for life in all its wonderful diversity. There are so many ways to live and speak, the beautiful tapestry of different skin colours, shapes, and sizes. We give thanks for different ways of expressing your love and living in family―from the global family of humanity to our LGBT neighbours, from two parents with 2.5 children to all the other ways we create bonds to share your love. We thank you for the many ways people have invented to praise you. Inspire us to see each other as neighbours, as siblings, as friends and not-yet friends.

*“When I Needed a Neighbour,” v. 2*

We pray for those who are trying to get through each day without the simple advantages that so many of us take for granted. You have given us stewardship of a planet that can easily support all humanity’s need but is groaning under humanity’s greed. We pray for those who are being left behind―not enough to eat, lack of clean water, and lack of simple medicines. We also pray for the courage to keep our hearts open to the plight of our neighbour and keep our minds open to see ways of bringing relief.

*“When I Needed a Neighbour,” v. 3*

We pray for our planet. You have given us stewardship of your creation, and we have not always fulfilled our obligations to you. We often choose our immediate comfort over the health of our home and are stealing a livable environment from our children. Forgive us, but also inspire us to care for our neighbours by caring for our home.

*“When I Needed a Neighbour,” VU 600, v. 4*

We pray for the end of this terrible pandemic and for the restoration of our relationships. So many of us have lost jobs and are feeling alone. May your presence be felt by all people but especially those whose lives and mental health have taken a beating. Guide our doctors, nurses, and politicians as they try to figure out the best way forward, and lend wisdom and compassion for those who choose wilful ignorance and egocentrism.

*“When I Needed a Neighbour,” VU 600, v. 5*

We pray for all those who are fleeing their homes. May their journeys be safe, and may they reach destinations where hospitality is offered. May all people who claim to worship you hear your frequent call to care for the stranger and foreigner, and may we all work toward the day of your favour―when hostility will finally cease, when we finally experience shalom. Amen

## Hymn

“When a Poor One” (VU 702)

## Blessing

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.