



Best Practices for Congregations Engaging in Refugee Resettlement Ministry

Refugee resettlement is local. It is relational. It is deeply personal. It is the story of individuals, families, and communities, of neighbors knowing one another, caring for one another, learning from one another's stories, experiences, strengths, and gifts. And, in knowing each other, growing in understanding and compassion.

For Episcopalians, the experience goes deeper still. It is a tangible, meaningful and powerful way of being in the world: a way of living out our Baptismal Covenant to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to love our neighbors as ourselves, to strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being.

Congregations often call Episcopal Migration Ministries and ask very good questions, not only about how they can be involved in welcoming a refugee family, but how to do this work well.

- “We want to make sure we’re helping, not working at cross purposes. How can we help you?”
- “What would be best for the clients, in the long run?”
- “How do we establish healthy and safe boundaries?”

As you and your congregation discern a call to participate in refugee resettlement ministry with a local resettlement agency, here are the top 10 “guiding lights” to illuminate your path:

1. Approach refugee resettlement work with a heart for collaboration and partnership.

Refugee resettlement is best done in partnership – with national and local agencies, with interfaith and ecumenical partners, with new friends. What can you offer to this community-wide work of welcoming? How can your congregation be a supportive, contributing partner in this work?

2. Know your gifts and skills.

As you approach refugee resettlement ministry, use this opportunity to discern the gifts of your community. It is important to be aware of the assets and strengths you can offer in this ministry. We recommend the Gifts Discernment Activities published by Episcopal Migration Ministries and the discernment processes described in *Called to Transformation*.

3. Engage in responsible mission.

It is common in the non-profit sector for members of the wider community to want to support the work without first learning what would really be helpful, would make a difference, and what is truly needed. Before you volunteer in refugee resettlement ministry, meet with your local office. Prepare a list of questions to ask the volunteer coordinator or other staff. Examples:

- What needs does your organization have that could potentially be filled by a congregation?
- Can you list specific activities that are possible?
- We want to make sure that what we do helps you respond to needs – what is most helpful to you? What pitfalls should we avoid?
- How would you like us to maintain communication with you?



Compare the organization's needs with the gifts you have discerned. At the intersection of these is your call to mission.

4. Prepare to be transformed.

As you engage this new ministry, prepare yourself for more than the work at hand. Prepare yourself for the spiritual path you are about to walk. Undoubtedly, the Holy Spirit will bring new friends, colleagues, partners, and teachers into this journey. You will meet refugees: individuals who often possess great resilience, strength, perseverance, and hope. You will also meet the agency's committed staff and new people in your community – English tutors, business owners who employ refugees, property managers who care for the homes refugees live in. Your work will give you an opportunity to listen to their stories and learn from their experiences. You will notice the passion, courage and dedication that is inherent in each experience, and you may find that it transforms your understanding of mission and service. Be sure and share your story, too. New Americans want to hear about life in the United States. It helps them understand what to expect and what it means to be a citizen.

5. Establish healthy boundaries.

In any outreach activity, it is important to establish safe and healthy boundaries – around your work, your interactions, and your relationships with partners and those you support. When you join in this work, you become a partner in the journey to a new American's self-sufficiency. Work with the resettlement agency to discuss the best methods for supporting a family in achieving self-sufficiency. Oftentimes it is as simple as 1, 2, 3: "1. Demonstrate the new skill or activity. 2. Support the person as they practice the skill. 3. Observe the person as they use the skill independently." Avoid patterns of dependency; instead, empower new Americans to be independent and to navigate their new community on their own.

6. Know when to say, "no," or "not right now."

When engaging in any outreach ministry, it is important to know your limitations. Avoid over-committing yourself. If you are working on a co-sponsorship team, make sure the group has thoroughly discussed each activity it agrees to engage in, with specific individuals deputized to lead in certain areas, with certain deadlines and expectations. Being mindful from the start about what you can do and what will give you joy will be a great blessing to all involved.

7. Be flexible, patient, and of good humor.

Refugee resettlement is a busy world and, sometimes, plans change without advance notice. If your congregation is preparing to co-sponsor a family, for example, be prepared for a sudden change in their arrival date. Travel could be expedited or delayed due to any number of international factors. Be prepared for a quick turn-around on an apartment set up. This can happen if housing quickly becomes available or unavailable. Be prepared for your new American neighbors to be unaccustomed to American concepts of time, tardiness, and appointments. In essence, be prepared for some adventures – a little shifting and reorganizing, a little confusion, but a lot of love, laughter, and good memories.

8. Pray. Act. Reflect. Repeat.

In refugee resettlement ministry, as in any other outreach ministry, it is important to nurture your spiritual life and your relationship with God. Consider developing a practice of prayer around your

refugee resettlement work. As you approach the activity, invite the Holy Spirit into your work, your heart, and your interactions. When you leave your service or conclude a co-sponsorship, reflect on the experience. What went well? What could be improved? What would you like to learn to make the service more fulfilling, or higher quality for those you serve? After your reflection, listen for the Spirit's call. Are you called to this work again? How will you engage it in a new way?

9. Be an advocate. It is vital, spiritually and theologically, to remember the people behind the numbers – the families, the fear, heartache, grief, hope and yearning for safety and peace. When you read about the global refugee crisis, turn your heart to the human story behind the figures. Share your concern, your compassion, and your commitment to supporting refugee resettlement with local media and your municipal, state, and federal legislators. Share with them the story of those you have met and welcomed to your community as your neighbors.

10. Share your story; invite others to join you.

Refugee resettlement is true community-building work, strengthening bonds of friendship and partnership throughout the community, making it a better place for all. Share your story with others about your work in refugee resettlement. There are misconceptions about the process and about refugees themselves. Speak your truth and respond to misunderstanding or fear with love and compassion. Invite others to join you in this work!