



January 24 2023

WELCOME: stories from Week of Compassion's Refugee and Immigrant Response

In this four-part series, over the course of a year, we are in conversation with some California Disciples and their ecumenical collaborators as they welcome an Afghan family into their community, offering radical hospitality and welcome to new neighbors in their midst. We also include a few brief check-ins with other Disciples doing similar work in their own communities.



WELCOME 
stories of
REFUGEE & IMMIGRANT RESPONSE
~ sustainable ~ accessible ~ visible ~

Reconnect with part one, [How It All Started](#).
Find part two, [From Idea to Action](#).

In part three, we see the meaning, impact, and sense of congregational identity for one church involved in this powerful ministry.

MORE THAN THEY IMAGINED

This was something new for Church of the Foothills. There had been significant ministries before - outreach that engaged the community, ministries that were responses to follow Christ's call for justice in the world, connections that were transformative. Few, however, resulted in the kind of impact currently rippling through Church of the Foothills as they support families evacuated from Afghanistan.

First the church had to look beyond itself. This pressing need for welcome in their community led the church to expand outward. Knowing that this ministry would not thrive unless entered into via partnership, there was an immediate need to connect with churches across denominational lines. This resulted in a truly beautiful model of relational mission where four congregations were able to come together to do so much more than any one individual church could hope to accomplish on their own.

In a time when many churches are seeing decline in resources and in volunteers, it felt good to see the way the church was able to adapt to meet the changing needs. **Instead of giving up on a ministry that seemed "too big," there was a recognition that the call was too big to say no.**

The second step was to see the church deepen its capacity for compassion. Foothills is already filled with people who are generous, thoughtful, prayerful, and giving. **Deepening often active and cheerful generosity into gentle and steady compassion is a different way of being** - to come face to face with people who have survived harrowing and traumatic experiences and who now become friends and neighbors. Pastor Bill Jacobs recalls:

"We connected each family right away with government services, schools and service agencies, with doctors and landlords and mosques, getting to know them as we did so. They were ever so

grateful for anything we could do.

Some were teens needing beds and phones and social skills and language training. They were the primary translators in most cases. Some were older family members needing medical care and companionship and a sense of self-worth, having to start over. They were wage-earners trying to live on less than full employment and struggling to pay the rent each month.

We secured bus passes and often found volunteers to drive them across town to immigration interviews and to trauma therapy appointments. We were overwhelmed by the dangers they faced as they fled the tyranny of the Taliban and endured the ordeals of forced migration.

Church members helped in small ways and large, providing rolls of quarters for laundry and rounding up household items including a sewing machine, a meat grinder, a vacuum cleaner, a blood pressure monitor, a platform bed and dining table. We set up their mobile phone services and found old laptops that would give them at least some measure of social independence. Perhaps soon their lives might return to some sort of normalcy and they would feel at home again.

At a recent dinner, all four families [being cared for by local congregations] came together in one place to share their immigrant experiences speaking in their native tongues. They shared with each other some of their deepest frustrations and they celebrated private triumphs in this, their new home.”

This is a congregation forever changed, learning they have the capacity to do more than they ever imagined. With lessons learned and a strengthened community, as currently connected Afghan families gain greater independence, Foothills will be ready to serve again as additional families resettle and become new neighbors.

Church of the Foothills members have come to see the love of God in a new light, and the church is connecting with neighboring congregations in ways that had never been open before, finding once more that they are stronger together. Thanks be to God.

MANY GIFTS, ONE SPIRIT

There are countless ways to WELCOME. Not every church can do every part of the vast work of refugee welcome and resettlement - and not every church goes about it the same way. Here are a few glimpses of how others have discovered more than they imagined:

* **Mt. Pleasant Christian Church** in Greensboro, North Carolina is a predominantly Black church that has been involved in refugee resettlement work for decades. Claretta Witherspoon, a lay leader and member of the Week of Compassion Board of Stewards helps coordinate her congregation's response. She says that now instead of Church World Service asking them if they are able to host another family, the church goes to CWS to request another family to host as soon as possible. "One of our members is 88 years old. I asked him if he was up for another round of hosting and his wife said, 'Goodness yes! He won't be quiet about how much he enjoys spending time with these families!"

* **First Christian Church of Falls Church**, Virginia has been a helpful part of responding to the needs of Afghan evacuees who are new to the community. Pastor Steven Moore has said that word got around the neighborhood that if folks needed help, they could come to the church. This was especially important after official and government-sponsored assistance ran out. The congregation was able

to provide financial resources, bus passes, food and supplies, and other community connections for several Afghan families.

* [Disciples Christian Church](#) in Cleveland Heights, Ohio hadn't resettled families in decades, but when they heard about the evacuations from Afghanistan to the U.S., they reached out to see how they could help. Bonnie Goldner, a lay leader at the church, helped coordinate the response. She says the congregation now knows more about halal food and Afghan culture, and even know their own neighborhoods better through hosting an Afghan family. The church found it to be such a rewarding experience, they've already begun to assist a second family in their resettling!

We are eager to connect with Disciples across the diversity of our church, and the breadth of our experience - whether you have long experience in refugee response or just need help getting started. There are so many great stories to tell about this vital response to Christ's call to welcome the stranger. We look forward to sharing yours!



For more ways you and your church can engage
in refugee resettlement, contact

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Associate Director for

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Week of Compassion is the relief, refugee, and development mission fund of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada.

Week of Compassion works with partners to alleviate suffering around the world, toward the vision of a world where God's people transform suffering into hope.



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