



From Strawberries to Bicycles

how one community welcomes refugees

A car full of strawberries and a classroom full of clothes. Applause for asking questions and quick-thumbed typing into Google Translate. Well-coordinated schedules and unexpected on-call moments. Local congregations involved in refugee response know all these challenges, rejoice in every success, and have countless stories to tell. For some, that story of welcome, assistance, and compassion for refugees settling in new communities is deeply personal, too.

Lily Cameron was born in Iran in 1979, where her father worked for the Shah (king). When the revolution started that same year, anyone connected to the Shah was targeted by the rebels and likely to be killed. Knowing their fate should they stay, her parents (who had been educated in the U.S. and England) took Lily and her older sister and fled.

With \$8 to their names when they arrived in the States, Lily's father worked three jobs, while her mother took care of the two little girls at home; when her dad came home after his workday, her mother left for an overnight shift. The girls got used to going to work with their parents on weekends, doing their homework somewhere out of the way. In escaping Iran for the U.S., the family's primary goal was safety and survival; but the strongest emphasis in the family was on education, studying, and hard work.

One thing Lily's family could not find when they arrived was support. *"It was the '80s, there wasn't much in place to welcome people, and no one was interested in someone who was different from them."* Fearful of public spaces because of the lingering suspicions following the Iran hostage crisis, Lily's mom still found ways for them to venture into the community. She loved Christmas and its music, so at nearby churches, she would sneak into the back row with the girls to listen to services. Even then, Lily says, *"No one greeted us, supported us, welcomed us. My mom felt very alone."*

Years later, during her medical residency, Lily met her now-husband, whose family were longtime members at Ashland Christian Church in Ashland, Virginia. It was at this church, after so long seeing her mother feel like an outsider, that Lily found a warm welcome and an embrace of differences (and the joys of southern foods!).

 Ashland Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)

 FIRST BAPTIST
CHURCH ASHLAND

WELCOME
BIENVENIDOS
خوش آمدی

image courtesy Ashland CC

In the fall of 2021, as Afghans were evacuated en masse and many were resettled to the United States, a friend from First Baptist Church of Ashland called Lily with an idea. Their church was moved to start a refugee response and this pastor friend asked Lily to help them lead it. Not having any idea what it would mean to lead in this way, but **knowing quite well what it would mean for families to find welcome and hope, Lily said yes.**

Working alongside Reestablish Richmond, a local assistance agency, volunteers were

trained, and with some work getting the word out to the refugee communities, soon First Baptist was hosting English as a second language (ESL) classes and youth art programs. The effort became an ecumenical response – English classes were led at First Baptist, while volunteers from Ashland Christian served as drivers for any who needed help, provided childcare during classes and other programs, and served as conversation partners in class. A local restaurant owner even used halal beef to make hamburgers - an American treat the primarily Muslim Afghan youth had yet to experience!

As the ESL students moved through their coursework, volunteers took them on field trips to local libraries, businesses, and events to practice ordinary conversation: 'Hi. My name is ____.' 'Where is ____?' 'How much is this?' Summoning the courage to ask a question of a store clerk, whether at the local Target or the farmer's market for strawberry picking, would earn a chorus of cheers from the proud and supportive friends looking on.

Volunteers are quick to point out that language skills aren't a requirement. *"With good humor, lots of gestures, and a phone open to Google Translate, they've found that lacking a common language doesn't have to be an actual barrier."*

One day, the question came: 'Why do people have ghosts and skeletons on their doors?' And a new stretch of cultural connection began: Holidays! Halloween, and a trunk-or-treat event with the children at First Baptist Church. Thanksgiving, and a dinner with the families at Ashland Christian - where many of the Afghan families brought their favorite foods to share as well, reminding everyone involved that **hospitality and generosity aren't culturally bound, but flow freely from willing hearts.**

When Christmas came, volunteers from both churches created an angel tree. While not the faith or tradition of the Afghan families in their English classes (which by now also included local Latino families eager for the ESL courses as well), it showed the truth that 'proximity brings familiarity': connecting with others revealed their needs, wants, and wishes - and the ways neighbors could help. The outpouring of support and resources from the Ashland community led to yet another expression of hospitality ...



Since January, on the third Saturday of each month, more than 150 people now visit the Disciples Depot. With this continued partnership - this time hosted Ashland Christian Church, with volunteers joining from First Baptist and the community - families select from clothes, toys, kitchen items, even furniture and bicycles. In August, there will be a back to school event to ensure students at all ages are ready for their new year.

With an ongoing influx of refugees from recent crises, as well as families who have been in the resettlement process for years, congregations can step up in many ways. **Week of Compassion's [Immigrant and Refugee Response](#) can help** experienced Disciples continue their ministry, and those new to the response find ways to get started: whether sponsoring a family, supporting another congregation in doing so, collecting needed items, volunteering in support services and classes, and making connections not just in immediate neighborhoods but with agencies serving entire regions. Week of Compassion's support includes a broad network of resources, grant funding, and supportive connections with others doing this vital, life-giving work.

Reflecting on the power of such genuinely responsive ministry to transform the lives of all involved - those warmly welcomed *and* their eager hosts - Lily Cameron says,

"To see members from both Ashland congregations, laughing and talking,



sharing meals and conversation and everyday interactions with Afghan families, especially noticing the women in headscarves - I wish my mom had had that kind of community when we came here.

Being part of this, it's like I'm reaching back in the past and helping my own family: my aunt who moved to California in 1985 not knowing English, and who continues to go to classes after all these years, because she loves it so much. Helping high school graduates prepare college applications reminds me that my father helped my cousin get started when he moved here to go to college.

*Everything we do - English classes, providing lunch, helping connect them with social services, food pantries, job applications, transportation options, even a local restaurant owner bringing pounds and pounds of leftover produce so families could have what they need - it's to say **you are welcome here. We want you to know you're part of our community. You are our neighbor, and we are happy you're here.***

It's not just about getting tasks done or providing needed supplies; there's always the opportunity to ask 'How are you?' and then to really listen for the answer. There are times I'm worn out and I call Alan [Dicken, Associate Director for Immigrant and Refugee Response], and he says, 'You can do it. We're here. You've got the whole church behind you.'

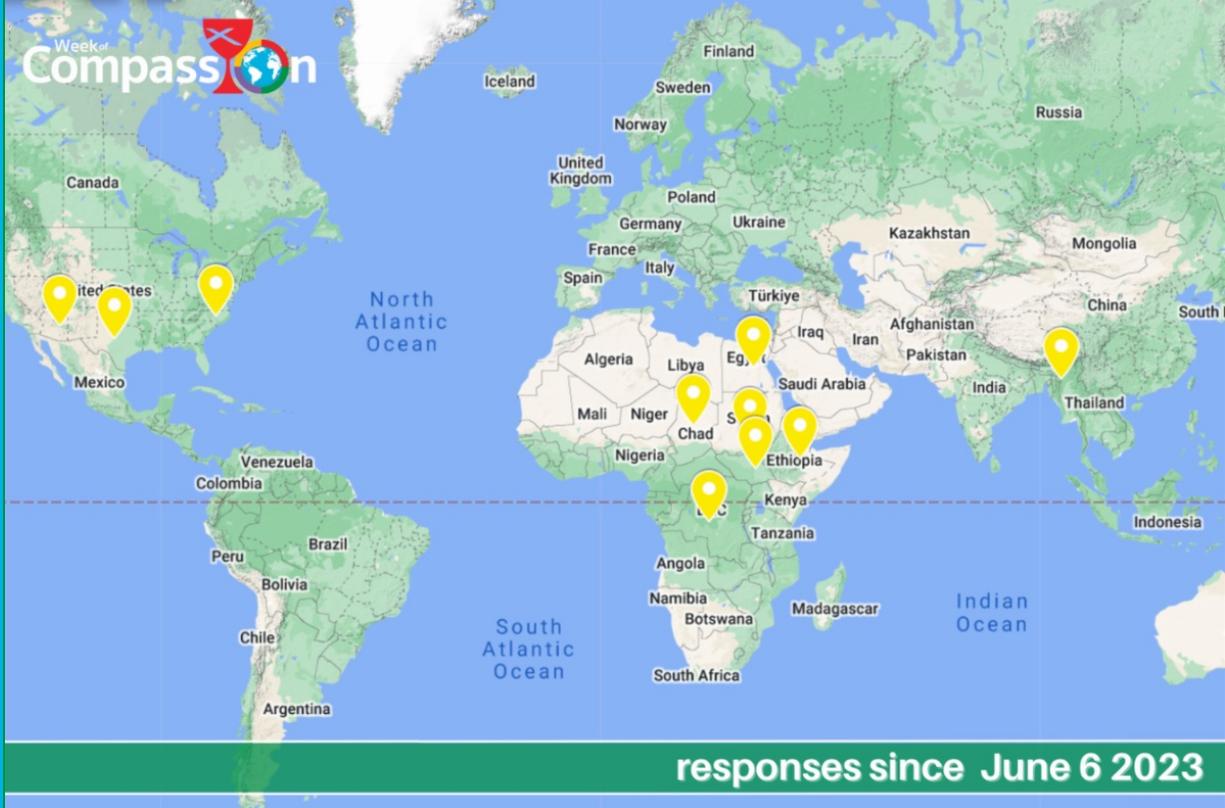


*We see the impact on individuals, when you put any preconceptions, biases, and prejudices aside, and do what needs doing to care for another human being. Things are new and different, but **when we're willing to be open to the experience, 'love your neighbor' is literal. We put our beliefs into practice. We hear Jesus saying, 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me.'***

Our thanks to Lily Cameron for the conversation that led to this Story, and for sharing these photos, used with permission of Ashland Christian Church.

Refugee resettlement involves a variety of entry points for congregations and individuals, at any capacity of time and resource. Those willing to respond can connect, advocate, give, and prepare to welcome refugees, whether or not a crisis is present. Week of Compassion provides support and resources, connects you to your closest resettlement office, and accompanies you as you do the work to be ready when family resettlement is needed. Visit the [ministry page](#) and [contact Rev. Alan Dicken](#), Week of Compassion's Associate Director for Immigrant and Refugee Response.

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responses since June 6 2023



NORTH CAROLINA
- storm relief



SOUTH SUDAN
- emergency response



TEXAS (2)
- storm relief



EGYPT
- emergency response



ARIZONA
- Disciples Border Initiative



CHAD
- emergency response



MANIPUR, INDIA
- emergency response



DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO
- flood response



SUDAN
- emergency response



ETHIOPIA
- emergency response

Click the map for an [interactive look](#) at Week of Compassion responses.

The **mission** of Week of Compassion is to work with partners to alleviate suffering throughout the world, with a **vision** of a world where God's people transform suffering into hope.

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**immigrant and
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