

# Care for refugees first; conversion a possibility later

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DENVER (RNS)—Ask Wah Nay Htoo how an evangelical church helped her refugee family after they arrived in Colorado, and her list is long.

“Oh my goodness, Cornerstone helped our family a lot—everything,” said Htoo, 38, a Burmese woman who lived most of her life in a refugee camp in Thailand before moving to the Denver suburb of Lafayette, Colo., in 2008.

The church helped her children enroll in school and do their homework. A member of the church with a landscaping business hired her husband.

“And for me, Cornerstone helped me to find teachers to teach me English,” she said.

Although evangelism is the lifeblood of evangelical Christians, some say service is, too. While both may drive their efforts as they reach refugees, care comes before—and, sometimes, without—conversion.

## **‘Not so they’ll become Christians, but because we are Christians’**

“When I serve in a local elementary school or when I serve people like refugees, we feel like as a church our first step is to serve, and to do that not so that they’ll become Christians, but because we are Christians,” said Andy McCullough, a pastor of Cornerstone Church in Boulder, Colo.

Htoo, who was a Christian before she came to the United States, said her husband, a former Buddhist, became a Christian convert at Cornerstone about a year after their arrival.

With her new knowledge of English, she translates for a chapter-a-week

Bible study another refugee asked McCullough to lead. Four families meet every Tuesday at the couple's government-subsidized apartment—Buddhists, animists and Christians.

### **Confronting reality**

Religious groups, including evangelicals, are confronting both the realities of the present needs of refugees and the future of their churches, sociologist Peggy Levitt said.

“More and more groups are working with immigrants and refugees, in part because it is the right thing to do, in part, because they want to attract new members, and, in part, because they see the future demographic face of our nation,” she said. “If religious institutions want to remain vital, the people inside their doors need to look more like the people outside them.”

The Evangelical Immigration Table, a network that has pushed for bipartisan immigration reform, has acknowledged all these reasons in its documentary, “The Stranger.”

In a trailer, a Southern Baptist minister gets right to the point: “As an American Christian, is it your job, your duty, are you called to keep people who are different than you out of the United States, or are you called to get them into the kingdom of God?”

### **Balance between service and evangelism**

That could be interpreted to suggest the point of bringing refugees to America is ultimately to have them embrace Christianity—and it's a line that sums up the delicate balance between serving and evangelizing.

Evangelical humanitarian groups that focus on refugees and receive government funding, such as World Vision, have policies that forbid proselytizing. But leaders say opportunities certainly arise where staffers

and volunteers can discuss what they believe.

“The government grants don’t prevent us from talking about our faith,” said Rich Stearns, president of World Vision U.S., who said such funds cannot be used to build churches or distribute Christian literature.

“If a person says, ‘Why are you here and care?’ our staff can say: ‘We’re here because we are Christians. This is what we believe. We’re called to love our neighbors as ourselves.’ We can do that.”

Jenny Yang, vice president of advocacy and policy for World Relief, the humanitarian organization of the National Association of Evangelicals, said proselytizing is not their policy, and conversion is not the focus when they partner with churches in their work with refugees.

“It’s just the fact of loving them and welcoming them that speaks for itself,” she said. “Now, in the process of us building that relationship, do we share about what motivates us and our own faith? Yes, there’s opportunity, but a lot of times we just welcome them and that, in and of itself, is something that we feel like we’re called to do.”

Some church-state separationists, who successfully pushed for stronger federal rules on protecting the religious rights of beneficiaries of government-funded programs, remain wary of the motivations of some faith-based groups that work with refugees—a population that often has limited English skills and little knowledge of their rights.

“The federal government has a duty and, I believe, an obligation to protect this vulnerable population,” said Rob Boston, spokesman for Americans United for Separation of Church and State. “It can best do that by limiting grants to groups that want to help, not preach.”

**Be a good neighbor**

Like other evangelicals, Southern Baptist pastor and author J.D. Greear, who has hosted a Buddhist couple from Myanmar at his house for two weeks, said his approach is two-pronged—be a good neighbor and help people with housing, food and other physical needs, but speak of belief in Jesus’ saving grace, too, if possible.

“Even if we know that there’s not a chance that we can share the gospel, even if we knew there was not that chance, we would still do it,” said Greear, pastor of The Summit Church in Durham, N.C. “In fact, for us, the couple that came from Myanmar couldn’t speak a word of English. So, there was not a lot of gospel conversation happening while they were there.”

More than 600 members of The Summit Church, which draws 10,000 on weekends, have been involved in World Relief’s refugee programs, and at least 80 have joined teams to help refugees since October.

### **Making friends, building relationships**

Some refugees and evangelicals move beyond the initial stage of helping into strong friendships.

When Bushra al-Shalah left Iraq in 2014, her husband was a marked man, threatened for working as a supplier for the U.S. Army. Her family of seven didn’t know a soul in Spokane, Wash. Now, her family shares barbecues and birthday parties with Lisa Mularski and her family.

Mularski, 42, a World Relief volunteer and a member of a Foursquare congregation, said they shared “jump-up-and-down excitement” when al-Shalah passed her driving test on her second try: “It’s really about being someone’s friend.”

Al-Shalah, 39, a Shia Muslim, has visited Mularski’s church once but practices her faith at home, because there are no mosques nearby. The two

women say they focus on joint family activities rather than their faiths.

“She helps me because I’m human, not because I’m Muslim or a Christian,” said al-Shalah.

Evangelicals report their example can lead non-Christian refugees to convert or to be open to learning more about the Christian faith.

### **A child shall lead them**

Kelli Czaykowsky, who runs a Clarkston, Ga., ministry that provides refugees with scholarships to attend Seventh-day Adventist schools, aims to help Christians and non-Christians alike. But many of the kids she has worked with—53 in the recent school year—have converted.

“So far, in the last five years, I think about 20 kids have been baptized,” Czaykowsky said of former Buddhists who have come to the United States from Myanmar.

“We don’t pressure the kids, but they’re surrounded by love every day and Christianity through the school system. And all the kids feel that, and then they start asking.”

Parents sometimes convert when they see onetime strangers caring about their children.

“I think when you really are doing it for the right reason, out of love, people see that and they’re drawn to you,” said Czaykowsky, 42, president of Friends of Refugees Providing Education and Empowerment. “The doors will open automatically.”

### **Not universally welcoming**

Not all evangelicals are as welcoming of all refugees, however. For example, studies show fewer than half of white evangelicals support

allowing Syrian refugees, most of whom are Muslim, into the United States.

Evangelist Franklin Graham, whose Samaritan's Purse relief agency works with Muslims overseas, agreed with Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump: "Muslim immigration into the United States should be stopped until we can properly vet them."

But McCullough, 52, the Boulder evangelical pastor, takes a different view of refugees who may not share his faith.

"The Good Samaritan was a Samaritan, and he helped a Jew," he said. "I think we can cross cultural and religious boundaries just to do good, just to help people. And that's what it means to follow Jesus."