

Houston churches provide food baskets to refugees

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HOUSTON—Next month, 50 refugee families new to Houston will receive a welcome food basket, courtesy of 10 area churches.

“We want these newly resettled refugees to understand we care about them. We want them to know we are there to help them adjust to new customs in our country,” said Butch Green, a Houston-based worker with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, who coordinates the ministry to refugees.



A refugee gladly receives a welcome basket from Houston-area Christians. (Photo courtesy of Butch Green)

Interfaith Ministries of Houston provides Green and his wife, Nell, the names and addresses of newly resettled refugees, and they work with

volunteers to make them feel welcome, delivering food baskets around Easter and Thanksgiving.

The Greens began the welcoming ministry to refugees eight years ago when they recognized five resettlement agencies were at work in their city.

Although the number of refugees entering the United States has dropped from 80,000 a year to 20,000 or less, those who arrive still have needs. The Greens and the churches with whom they partner are committed to meet those needs in Christ's name.

People from varied cultures and religions

"In our area, we have families from Iraq, Syria, the Congo, Nigeria, Afghanistan and other countries that represent a variety of cultures and religions," Green said.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the U.S. Embassy or an approved nongovernmental organization refers prospective refugees for resettlement to the United States.

After they are screened, those who receive refugee status are assigned a location for resettlement. They receive a Social Security number and work permit, and they are provided an allowance for up to a maximum six months. At that point, they are expected to have found employment and housing.

Due to the brief time frame, many refugees accept jobs below their educational and skill level. Individuals with engineering backgrounds may stock shelves, and people with degrees in medical fields may work in fast-food restaurants.

Green recalled delivering a food basket to a home. Taped to the front door, he saw a Scripture verse, John 11:25: “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.”

Showing love to people who experienced trauma



Volunteers at Tallowood Baptist Church in Houston assemble gift baskets for refugees. (Photo courtesy of Butch Green)

Inside, he met an Iranian family who had all come to faith in Christ and fled to Turkey. In the short time the father had been in Houston, he was sharing his story with others, asking, “Why do Americans take all of these freedoms and their faith for granted?”

Green reflected on the trauma many refugees experienced in their homelands. He remembered a man from Syria who spoke in broken English, saying, “Bomb, bomb, bomb everywhere.” Another refugee told

how he arrived at his home in Syria to find his wife's throat cut and his daughter's leg sliced open. Both survived.

"In our area, we see refugee families where language is a barrier to finding jobs," Green said. "Often their English is limited and even non-existent. Providing English-as-a-Second-Language classes is a basic need.

"Another urgent essential is finding employment. Imagine being in a new country where everything is different, and you can't understand the language. Public transportation—riding a bus and finding the right address—can be very stressful to a non-English-speaking person."

Letting people know God loves them

The Greens enlist volunteers from 10 supporting churches to pack the welcome baskets that contain gift cards, staple food items and contact information.

"I always include my contact number if they have a need. Then, I make this call or pass it on to a volunteer," said Green.



Volunteers from South Main Baptist Church have assembled welcome

baskets to deliver to newly arrived refugee families. (Photo courtesy of Butch Green)

When the Greens or the volunteers who work with them deliver the baskets to apartments, they often discover refugees who need help in making appointments, filling out forms, and finding information about public transportation.

“If they ask, we can tell them about our ministry. And if they ask us to pray, we can,” Green said.

Some families are surprised to learn some Americans want them to feel welcomed.

Green recalled a conversation with one woman. When he presented her a welcome basket, she responded incredulously, “You mean, you’re glad we’re here?”

Those kind of encounters give Green the opportunity to assure refugees that God loves them, and Christians in the area care about them.

The refugee program receives support not only from the 10 Houston-area churches, but also from churches around the state through their gifts to the [Texas Baptist Hunger Offering](#). The offering helps support 134 ministries in 30 countries and 37 Texas communities.

Impact on volunteers

The refugee welcome ministry helps church volunteers get over the initial fear and misunderstanding of refugees, Green noted. As the volunteers pack the baskets and visit homes, they connect with people. Often, refugees invite the volunteers into their home for tea and cookies.

As a result, the volunteers—and the churches they represent—sometimes end up “adopting” refugee families and establishing long-term relationships with them.

The Greens believe God put them in Houston to work with refugees.

“We were overseas in Africa and Europe and worked with refugees for 20 years of a 31-year ministry. Then, God called us to Houston,” Butch Green said. “We didn’t want to start just another program. We wanted to fill in the gaps and partner with other agencies.

“We’ll retire in a couple of years, so we want our church partners to catch a vision and see the needs of these wonderful people who are settling here.”

This is part of an ongoing series about how Christians respond to hunger and poverty. Substantive coverage of significant issues facing Texas Baptists is made possible in part by a grant from the Prichard Family Foundation.

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