

Matthew House ministries make refugees feel at home

July 26, 2012

TORONTO—A ministry inspired by Matthew 25:35—“I was a stranger and you welcomed me”—has changed the lives of thousands of refugees in Canada.



Anne Woolger points to a garden in the backyard of the Shirley Street Matthew House in Toronto.

Seven Matthew House ministries in Canada serve newly arrived refugee claimants who come without a visa or assistance from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Matthew Houses welcome them in Christ's name and assist them in their transition.

Recently, a Texas Baptist group spent a week in Canada touring three Matthew House locations. They met refugees who would otherwise be homeless, listened to stories of hope and were encouraged by the passion of Matthew House volunteers and workers.

God used the calling and determination of one woman, Anne Woolger, to

open the first Matthew House in Toronto.

“Nobody was truly welcoming them. And I thought, ‘Where are God’s people?’” Woolger said.

Woolger opened Matthew House Toronto with the help and financial support of the Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec, Canadian Baptists Ministries, Baptist Women of Ontario and Quebec and the Texas Baptist Hunger Offering.



Anne Woolger opened the first Matthew House in Toronto.

Woolger recalls the blessing Hunger Offering funds provided for refugee claimants during the first months of Matthew House Toronto when the ministry had to choose between feeding homeless refugees or buying a new washer and dryer so the refugees could have clean clothes.

“It truly did feed some hungry mouths. Thank you. Bless you,” Woolger said.

That was 14 years ago. Toronto is now home to three Matthew House sites,

along with locations in Ft. Erie, Windsor, Montreal and Ottawa—not to mention other refugee ministries modeled after Matthew House.

Since then, the Texas Baptist Hunger Offering has given funds to Matthew House for its ministries in Ft. Erie, Windsor and Ottawa, and Hunger Offering funding has assisted in laying the groundwork for Matthew House Montreal that will be funded in 2013. Recently, Matthew House Ottawa used hunger offering funds to buy a new freezer.

Watching her vision grow and inspire others to aid refugees feels good, Woolger said, but “Sometimes things are tough but there has been fruit. And I do see God’s faithfulness.”

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship missionaries, Marc and Kim Wyatt, have worked with Matthew House since it opened in 1998, first in Toronto and later in Ottawa.

The Wyatts first served two hard years in Thailand, but they believe that experience prepared them for their work in Canada. The “imbalance” the Wyatts felt as newcomers to Thailand helped them empathize with refugees.

“That sense of vulnerability coupled with a bit of healthy panic really shaped our hearts for how refugees and immigrants feel when they arrive here in North America. We were really at the mercy of strangers for an extended time,” Marc said.

The Wyatts helped start the Furniture Bank of Ottawa that is now part of Matthew House Ottawa. The Furniture Bank houses everything refugees and other persons who are starting from nothing would need to fill an apartment.

With only a few paid workers, the Furniture Bank uses volunteers to help keep the place running. Volunteers include refugees who had been residents of Matthew House or given furniture by the Furniture Bank.

Every year, 30,000 refugee claimants arrive in Canada.

“The world lives here,” Kim Wyatt said, as she stood in a park located in an Ottawa neighborhood of refugees. In fact, Ottawa, Canada’s capital city, has 13 refugee neighborhoods.

“We are the welcomers. We can invite the person from far away to come with us,” she said.

“Matthew House Ottawa fills a gap that our government does not. It is said over and over to me on a regular basis the Matthew House Ottawa has provided ‘a family’ to these lonely and scared individuals. What a blessing it is to serve God’s people in this way,” said Jan Long-Mills, executive director of Matthew House Ottawa.

Seid, a former refugee from Sierra Leone, also shares this mission of welcoming newcomers.

When he arrived in Canada, Seid lived in a homeless shelter for the mentally ill. Finding himself more scared in the homeless shelter than he had been in Sierra Leone, Seid decided that if he ever got out of his circumstances, he would help other refugees.

Eventually, Seid discovered Matthew House.

“Matthew House is like a paradise in Toronto. It is like heaven. It doesn’t look like a shelter, and it’s very welcoming with lots of smiles,” Seid said.

Today, he serves as a settlement counselor for Matthew House Toronto—fulfilling his mission. He sits down with refugees to explain how to meet Canadian society’s expectations, to teach them how public transportation works and to help them find housing, among other things.

“I walk through the process with them and tell them there is hope,” Seid said.

Jim and Shirley McNair were both retired schoolteachers when she stepped in to serve as the interim director for Matthew House Ft. Erie. It's been 12 years since then, and the McNairs have continued to serve as directors at Matthew House.

Ft. Erie is located just across the Niagara River from Buffalo, N.Y. The McNairs have seen many refugee claimants arrive in Canada after first seeking refuge in the United States.

First Baptist Church of Ft. Erie helped launch Matthew House next door to the church campus. When the Texas Baptist group visited, they witnessed first-hand the hope and restoration God's people can freely give to refugees.

A Columbian family of four, who had stayed a short time at Matthew House, stood before the church as the teenage son read a letter of thanks. The family, who first fled their homeland to enter the United States and later moved to Canada, was relocating to another Canadian province. After thanking specific families and individuals, the family's letter said, "Thank you, church, for accepting and loving us long before we were 'Canadian.'"

Matthew House helped revitalize First Baptist Church. Today, young and old, Canadian and African, Colombian, Haitian and Bohemian worship together, welcoming all who enter the church's doors.

"It was truly inspiring to meet refugees who have fled to Canada with nothing, lost and alone, whose new family became Matthew House ... and to know that Texas Baptist Hunger Offering funds have been a great support through the years. This group was challenged to return home to Texas and speak for those who cannot speak for themselves in a way that they have never experienced before," said Joyce Gilbreath, Texas Baptist Hunger Offering specialist.

Workers and volunteers at Matthew House have a passion for giving the

hope of Christ to refugee claimants who come to Canada from hopeless situations.

The Above Ground Railroad: The Story of the Matthew House Movement in Canada recently has been released. It tells the story of Matthew House in Canada. To order a copy, contact wyatt@thefellowship.info .