

Project:Start helps Kenyan church in North Texas expand refugee ministry

August 17, 2017

GARLAND—Early this year, members of Upendo Baptist Church in Garland gathered to pray and fast, asking God to grow their church. Only a week later, Pastor Shadrack Ruto connected with 60 people in search of a new church home.



Moinlari Albertine, a mother of six, moved to the United States in February from the Central African Republic. (Photo by Jordan Parker)The initial three visitors to the church were not from a Kenyan background, like the majority of the church membership,

but were refugees from the Central African Republic. The families recently had moved to the United States from refugee camps and lived within 10 miles of Upendo Baptist Church.

Ruto heard story after story of trauma and need from the families and the church leaders gathered to see how they could help.

Transportation to and from church was a necessity, so church members stepped up to provide rides. There also was a language barrier, as the refugees primarily spoke French. One of the refugees was fluent in English and volunteered to translate worship services and conversations. The translator started teaching English classes after church on Sundays to help refugees learn to adapt to American culture.

While Upendo church members thanked God for answered prayers, they realized the refugees' needs far outweighed the capacity of the church. In March, Ruto learned about [Project:Start](#), a refugee resource center created to connect refugees with churches and ministries. Housed in the Vickery Meadow area, Project:Start began in 2015 to provide a centralized place for refugee resources.

Ruto recognized the value in the center and called Leonid Regheta, director of Project:Start, for help with needs. Regheta connected him with several area churches and ministries who provide resources to refugees, such as food, medical care, furniture and job-search assistance.

As needs arose, the congregation saw fellow believers serve and give far beyond what they anticipated. On one occasion, through Regheta's help, three members of Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas drove their personal vehicles to a warehouse in Plano to pick up furniture.



Members from Upendo Baptist Church in Garland and Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas join with Director of Project:Start Leonid Regheta (2nd from left) to provide furniture to refugees from the Central African Republic. (Photo by Jordan Parker) Charles Pyles with the Collin Baptist Association and Win Brown, deputy executive director of [Victim Relief Ministries](#), loaded the vehicles to the brim with bookcases, dressers, desks and other household furniture and drove 10 miles to deliver the gifts to Upendo Baptist Church.

“We are honored to have this as a joint project,” Brown said. “This is a kingdom of God initiative. We are excited this will be a blessing to many.”

The furniture, provided by Victim Relief Ministries, later was given to refugee families. Clothing donations came from Hunters Glen Baptist Church in Plano, and volunteers from First Baptist Church of Corsicana assisted with a ministry day at the church during the summer. Ruto was humbled by the support Texas Baptists offered.

“This is a true picture of the church of Christ. It is wonderful to be able to see this,” he said.

Ruto views serving refugee families as part of the church’s responsibility to live out the gospel. He also saw his church members grow in appreciation for the missionaries who shared the gospel in Kenya. Many church members also remember arriving in the United States, experiencing culture shock and uncertainties.

“We are happy to help,” Ruto said. “We understand life in America for a newcomer. We came in as strangers and learned. When they come, they

don't feel like strangers. They feel at home."

The refugee families also added a new vibrancy to the Upendo Baptist Church, leading worship songs and participating in the study of Scripture, Ruto added.

"This is a good testimony for people to see the love of believers from all cultures," he said.