

Refugees share Christmas meal at Dallas church

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DALLAS—More than 300 refugees from 10 countries broke bread—pita, *injera* and *khubz*—together at Wilshire Baptist Church during an international potluck meal the Saturday before Christmas.

“Peace on earth, good will to mankind” was the theme of the event, sponsored by the Gateway of Grace ministry.

Timely message



Samira Izadi Page directs Gateway of Grace, the largest ministry to refugees in North Texas. (Photo by Ken Camp) “It’s a timely message, with all that has been going on, and it particularly is a good message for the refugees to hear,” said Samira Izadi Page, executive director of Gateway of Grace.

“They need to know they are loved and cared for. With all the negative rhetoric, that is important. After all they have experienced, the harsh rhetoric makes them nervous and anxious. They need a message of hope—to know that God loves them.”

Mobilize churches

Gateway of Grace, the largest refugee outreach program in North Texas, seeks to mobilize churches to adopt refugee families. About 50 churches—from Syrian Orthodox, to Anglican, to nondenominational evangelical congregations—partner with the interdenominational Christian ministry.

Volunteers from Wilshire Baptist and Cliff Temple Baptist in Dallas joined workers from several other congregations at the Christmas lunch.

‘Wilshire is home’

“Wilshire is our major partner church,” Page said. Born and raised in Iran as a Muslim, she and her family escaped the country and received political asylum in the United States.



Children of refugee families open Christmas presents at a luncheon at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, sponsored by Gateway of Grace. (Photo by Ken Camp)A lay member of Wilshire assisted in her family’s resettlement and invited them to church,

where she became a Christian and was baptized. Associate Pastor Mark Wingfield taught the Sunday school class she attended.

When she felt God's calling to minister to other refugees, Pastor George Mason encouraged her to pursue her master of divinity degree and participated in her ordination.

Although she is an Episcopal minister now, "Wilshire is home for me," she said.

Shared dishes

At the Christmas lunch, refugees shared favorite dishes from their native countries and sampled treats from other nations.



Andy Johnson, a costumed volunteer from Church of the Incarnation in Dallas, tells the true story of St. Nicholas, assisted by interpreters Jenny Al Rubaiee (left) and Samira Izadi Page. (Photo by Ken Camp) Children received Christmas presents, and a costumed volunteer from the Church of the Incarnation in Dallas told the story of St. Nicholas—the fourth century bishop of Myra, not the jolly old elf from the North Pole.

The lunch event marked the first Christmas celebration some newly arrived refugees—many of them Muslim—ever observed. While not overtly evangelistic, Page noted, Gateway of Grace wanted to plant "seeds of the gospel" by helping the families associate Christmas with joy, fellowship and

gracious giving.

Feel at home and welcomed

Jenny Al Rubaiee arrived in the United States about two years ago. In Iraq, she earned degrees in mechanical engineering and law, and she served in a key post on a district council. In Dallas, she works at a discount center.

“It’s all right,” she said. “I know when you come to a new country, you have to begin at zero.”

Although she is a Muslim, she has a close relationship with Christian workers at Gateway of Grace who have made her feel welcome and loved. At the Christmas event, she helped serve as an interpreter and liaison with Iraqi families.

Through word and deed, Page sought to make other refugee families at the Christmas luncheon feel equally at home and welcomed.

“God loves you, and we love you,” she told the group. “This is the message of Christmas—that peace on earth comes from God.”