

Voices: A Christlike welcome for Afghan and other refugees

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The Biden administration recently [notified states](#) how many Afghan refugees would be resettled in them. Texas will receive 4,481, behind only California at 5,225. This means churches and Christians in Texas will have the opportunity to welcome them as Christ would.

As churches and many followers of Jesus follow the clear commands of Scripture by beginning to welcome and care for Afghan refugees, I wanted to offer some ways not just to love with the heart of Jesus, but also love Afghan refugees by being culturally sensitive.

Northwood Church not only has worked with refugees from different countries for decades, we also have worked with Muslims and in Middle Eastern countries and want to share our experiences and a few things we've learned.

Refugees are people, not projects.

All people are made in the image of God and have inherent worth and value. Our relationships with refugees—and all people—should begin and end with this premise. See refugees as people first, not as projects to accomplished.

Seeing refugees first as people humanizes them; they feel seen as a person. This especially is important for refugees coming from traumatic events and leaving homelands they never wanted to leave.

When you are treated as a project, you know it and feel it. We as Christians

are notorious for going and serving people, then taking pictures with them and posting the pictures to social media. This treats people as projects and establishes us as heroes.

You're not their savior, only Jesus can be that. So, don't view or treat refugees as projects needing saving. Instead, meet and love them as the people they are. Then, care for and serve them because of who you are in Jesus.

Listen; then, listen some more.

The trauma refugees are coming out of does not need to be met by us unintentionally causing more trauma by trying to help. As Texans—where everything is bigger and better—our loud, sometimes aggressive “get 'er done” mentality is the exact opposite of what refugees need.

Sending a welcome party of 20 people from the sweetest Sunday school class you have sounds like a great idea—and might be when welcoming a new family or staff member)—but to a refugee woman with two little kids and who just lost her husband to violence, a welcome party would not be received as sweet. It would be traumatic, overwhelming, uncomfortable and intimidating.

We need to take the servant's posture of listening and learning. Listen to the refugees' stories and get to know them so they feel seen and heard. Talk less, listen more. Send two, instead of 20. Go slow, instead of fast. Be gentle, instead of aggressive. Tread lightly and carry a big heart.

Take the time to learn their culture.

Nothing makes someone coming to a brand new place, culture and country feel more human and seen than when we take the time and intention to

learn their culture.

For Afghans, men don't need to talk to women—or children—first, but only to the man until he allows or invites you to do otherwise.

Many Muslim men—and the majority of Afghan refugees will be Muslim—don't shake hands with women, hug women—not even the good ol' Baptist side hug—or touch women in any way, shape or form.

Similarly, Muslim women need to talk only with women and children, not men, and never to touch a man. So, men need to interact with men and women with women.

To meet them where they are, rather than expecting them always to meet Americans where we are, we should learn some phrases in their native language.

We need to help refugees understand American culture, so they can navigate their new land. However, we need to do teach our culture in a way that doesn't require refugees to give up their culture in the process.

We also need to understand the majority of Afghan refugees will be Muslim—as noted above. They will need [halal](#) grocery stores—[halal](#) is similar in meaning to kosher—mosques to pray in, and freedom to worship as they please.

Please take the time to learn from Muslim sources and people what Muslims truly believe, so you can, over time, have conversations of faith and religion.

Go slow at church.

What may seem to you and your church like honoring refugees may seem to them very intimidating and threatening, and may indicate they are being

used.

Don't expect or require refugee families of a different religion to come to your church if they are going to be helped. When refugees do come to your church, don't parade them in front of your congregation during a service or large gathering—even to pray for them.

Instead, go slow. If refugees are invited to church and do want to come, let them come, and love and serve them quietly.

This is a moment for the church to rise up to love and serve others with the love of Jesus, to point people to the Father's heart for them. But let's not love and serve with ignorance. Instead, let's love with intentionality, purpose and by following the Holy Spirit.

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