

Voices: Religious freedom is a key concern for refugees, too

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As a Christian living in the United States I am grateful, along with Rev. Ramiro Peña, for the [Trump administration's achievements](#) to secure religious freedom. However, I do not see persecution where he does.

Though Christians have faced challenges over the past several decades, we should be under no pretense that we share in the persecution of our brothers and sisters around the world. After all, in several countries, openly declaring faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior brings with it a death sentence or, at least, severe physical harm and real economic ramifications.

Our forefathers tried to protect us from such conditions and created a safe haven for persecuted people of faith the world over.

Trend in resettling religiously persecuted

With this in mind, I find the [recent report by Open Doors USA and World Relief](#) to be troubling. The report reveals the number of Christian refugees resettled to the United States from countries where Christians face the most severe persecution is on track for a 90 percent decline since 2015.

The Trump administration's response to resettling refugees has only exasperated a disturbing trend that predates the COVID-19 crisis.

The report also reveals just how dramatically the United States has stepped back from offering refuge to those fleeing persecution on account of their faith. In 2015, more than 18,000 Christian refugees were resettled to the

United States from the 50 countries on the Open Doors 2020 World Watch List of countries where Christians face persecution. Midway through 2020, fewer than 950 Christian refugees had arrived from these countries.

Matthew Soerens, U.S. director of church mobilization for World Relief—the humanitarian arm of the National Association of Evangelicals—writes: “The decline is particularly pronounced for Christians from Iran (on track for a decline of 97 percent compared to 2015), Iraq (down 95 percent) and Burma (down 94 percent), all countries where Christians face particularly harsh persecution. The report also outlines the harm done to the other persecuted religious minorities, including Yazidis from Iraq, Jewish and Zoroastrian refugees from Iran and Muslims from Burma (which includes most of the Rohingya people), all of whom are on track for declines of at least 92 percent compared to 2015.”

How we welcome our brothers and sisters

Baptist heritage is rooted in the concept of religious freedom. As a Baptist, I am concerned about the religious freedom of everyone, not only those of my own creed or sect.

Most importantly, the steady decline since 2015 in resettling religious refugees reflects changes and proposed changes to our asylum policies as a nation. This redefinition of who is eligible to enter the United States makes the process much more difficult for those who often have to flee violence with little or no preparation. Many of those fleeing violence and being rejected are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

When Jesus prepared his disciples for the difficult days ahead of them, he painted a clear picture of severe persecution. Jesus said, “Anyone who receives you receives me, and anyone who receives me receives the Father

who sent me” (Matthew 10:40).

Matthew later records how our response to one of “the least of these my brothers and sisters” ultimately is our treatment of Jesus himself (Matthew 25:31-46).

How can we honestly celebrate our own religious freedom when the country we live in rejects our brothers and sisters in Christ who are being severely persecuted and are seeking sanctuary here?

In addition, James teaches the church: “What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don’t show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing [*or safety or sanctuary*], and you say, ‘Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well’—but then you don’t give that person any food or clothing [*or safety or sanctuary*]. What good does that do? So you see, faith by itself isn’t enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless” (James 2:14-17, emphasis added).

This passage has motivated me during my life to feed the poor, to work against racial injustice and to take up the cause of the sanctity of life. Now, it also motivates me to speak up for my brothers and sisters in Christ who are being rejected at our borders.

In light of this, I will use my newly preserved religious freedom to promote religious freedom for all.

Amos Humphries is the senior pastor of Park Lake Drive Baptist Church of Waco.