

#WeWelcomeRefugees FAQ's

1. WHAT IS THE DEFINITION OF A REFUGEE?

Under both international and U.S. law, a refugee is an individual who

has fled his or her country of origin

because of a credible fear of persecution

on account of their race, religion, political opinion, national origin, or social group.

This definition of a refugee does not include those who flee their homes but stay within the boundaries of their country, who are classified as “Internally Displaced Persons.” It also does not include those who flee a situation of poverty, a natural disaster, or even violence, unless the violence was specifically motivated by their race, religion, political opinion, or one of the other grounds under the legal definition.

The U.S. government admits individuals for resettlement within the United States only after a thorough individual screening abroad to ensure both that they meet the legal definition of a refugee and that they in no way pose a national security or health threat to the United States. Those selected for resettlement in the U.S. are admitted with legal status and are resettled by one of nine national voluntary agencies, one of which is World Relief.

2. HOW MIGHT THE BIBLE INFORM OUR THINKING ABOUT THIS SITUATION?

The Bible has a lot to say about how God’s people should respond to refugees and other migrants. In fact the Hebrew word *ger*—translated into English variously as foreigner, sojourner, stranger, or immigrant—appears 92 times just in the Old Testament, often in the context of God commanding his people to love and welcome those who came as foreigners into their land. Many of the heroes of our Christian faith—David, Elijah, even Jesus himself—had to flee persecution from tyrannical governments seeking to do them harm. The New Testament repeatedly commands us to “practice hospitality” (Rom. 12:13), which literally means to practice loving strangers—with the hint that, by doing so, we may be welcoming angels (Heb. 13:2).

Welcoming refugees is a tangible way to love our neighbors, part of Jesus’ Great Commandment (Luke 10:27) and to practice the Golden Rule (Luke 6:31), treating others as each of us would hope to be treated if we were to find ourselves in a desperate situation, forced to flee to a foreign land.

Welcoming refugees also presents an opportunity to stand with our brothers and sisters in Christ who are persecuted for their faith—which includes a significant number of refugees from various parts of the world—as well as to witness to the love and welcome of Jesus to those of other religious traditions. Since we believe that each person is made in the Image of God, we seek to serve and welcome all those fleeing persecution, regardless of their religious or cultural background.

3. WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A REFUGEE AND AN UNDOCUMENTED (OR "ILLEGAL") IMMIGRANT?

In the United States, anyone admitted as a refugee has legal status from the moment that they enter. While these individuals could still face deportation if they committed serious crimes or otherwise violated U.S. immigration law, in the vast majority of cases they become Lawful Permanent

Residents and then become eligible after five years to apply for U.S. citizenship. (Canada, Australia, Sweden and other countries have similar resettlement programs).

In the U.S., Canada, and in most parts of Europe, there are also processes to request asylum. Asylum-seekers arrive in a country either on a temporary visa or unlawfully, but claim that they meet the legal definition of a refugee described above. In most cases, these individuals are allowed to stay temporarily in the country while their cases are adjudicated: they must present sufficient evidence to a judge or other governmental official to prove that they are indeed fleeing persecution for one of the reasons elaborated under the law. If approved, in most situations they will be allowed to stay; if denied, they will generally face deportation.

In both the U.S. and in other parts of the world, many immigrants have either entered the country unlawfully or overstayed a temporary visa. While some of these individuals may have valid claims to asylum, others are driven by economic factors, such as poverty or unemployment in their countries of origin, and as such do not qualify as refugees under the law. Under U.S. law, at least, these individuals who are unlawfully present are generally not eligible for the benefits afforded to refugees such as employment authorization, resettlement support, and limited public assistance.

4. HOW CAN WE BE SURE THAT THESE "REFUGEES" ARE NOT ACTUALLY TERRORISTS SEEKING TO INFILTRATE OUR COUNTRY?

Any refugee admitted into the United States undergoes a thorough screening process led by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security in consultation with the Department of Defense and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. This is an absolutely vital element of the refugee resettlement program. In fact, these checks are among the most thorough background checks undergone by any immigrants or visitors coming to the United States. Other countries with resettlement programs have similar checks in place.

The U.S. system of refugee resettlement has a long history of successfully integrating refugees, having welcomed more than 3 million refugees since 1975: the vast majority of refugees are grateful to their adopted country for receiving them. Those selected for resettlement are the victims of governmental persecution and/or terrorism, not the perpetrators, and they tend to be the fiercest critics of extremist groups and tyrannical governments, having suffered at their hands. Throughout this history, there has never been a terrorist attack successfully perpetrated on U.S. soil by an individual who had been admitted to the country as a refugee. In the exceptionally rare cases where someone admitted as a refugee has been suspected of ties to groups interested in harming the United States, it has often been other former refugees from within the same ethnic community who have alerted law enforcement.

5. THIS PROBLEM IS JUST TOO BIG—WE CAN'T ALLOW ALL THESE PEOPLE TO ENTER THE U.S., CANADA, AND EUROPE, CAN WE?

Resettlement to a third country outside of the Middle East is a last resort, and the vast majority of refugees will stay within their region. For example, Turkey is currently the host country for about 2 million refugees from Syria, with more than 1 million in Lebanon and 600,000 in Jordan; each of these countries also have additional refugees from earlier conflicts in Iraq and other neighboring countries.

No one is proposing that resettlement to the U.S. or other countries outside of the region should be the primary solution to this crisis, as the ultimate hope is that people who were forced to flee will be able to return home when the conflict is peacefully resolved. A primary focus of our efforts is on

addressing the root causes, so that individuals would not be forced to flee, and we are seeking to empower local churches in the Middle East who are responding to human need.

However, given the desperation that at present has left many with no option but to flee, governments in North America and Europe can do their share by accepting a small overall portion of these refugees, relieving pressure on allies in the Middle East who are bearing the most significant weight of this crisis, while also providing support for efforts in those countries to meet basic human needs.

6. WON'T THESE REFUGEES BE AN ECONOMIC DRAIN ON THE COUNTRIES THAT RECEIVE THEM?

Actually, like other immigrants, the arrival of refugees could actually be a significant economic opportunity for the countries that receive them. While most countries provide refugees with a limited amount of basic assistance when they first arrive, almost all refugees are eager to work and be self-sufficient. A growing national economy depends upon a growing population—who play crucial roles in an economy as workers, consumers, taxpayers and entrepreneurs. While our primary concern for refugees is driven by our faith and our desire to welcome those in a desperate situation in Jesus' name, the reality is that the arrival of refugees also presents an economic opportunity (listen to this explanation from Oliver August of The Economist).

7. CAN I (OR MY CHURCH) SPONSOR A REFUGEE FAMILY TO COME TO THE UNITED STATES?

In order to be lawfully admitted to the United States as a refugee, an individual (or family) must be identified and screened by the U.S. government abroad (often based on initial referrals from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). There is not a mechanism for individual Americans or churches to directly sponsor a refugee family.

However, the number of how many refugees that the U.S. accepts is set by the President each year, in consultation with Congress, and these elected officials' decisions are influenced by the views of their voting constituents. You can be a steward of the influence that God has given you as a resident of the U.S. by sending a message to the President and to your Members of Congress, asking them to significantly increase the number of refugees admitted to the United States. You can multiply your influence by asking others—whether in your local church, via social media, or in a letter to the editor of a local newspaper—to send the same message. (And, if you're in a country other than the United States, you can urge your elected officials to take similar actions).

Though there is not a formal legal sponsorship process to bring refugees to the United States, there are many, many opportunities for individual volunteers and for groups from local churches to help welcome and help integrate refugees. The refugee resettlement process is a public-private partnership, with limited funds from the U.S. government being leveraged alongside volunteer hours and privately-raised resources from nine national resettlement organizations, including World Relief. World Relief's president Stephan Bauman, President of World Relief has challenged each local church in the U.S. to commit to welcoming one refugee family in response to the current crisis.

For example, you and your church could provide basic furnishings for a new apartment, help newcomers to learn English, assist kids in their adjustment to a new school context, and, perhaps most importantly, simply be a friend to people who have in many cases left behind everything and everyone they know. World Relief has programs that empower local churches to respond in about

25 cities. If there is not a World Relief office in your community, use this directory to see if one of the other eight national resettlement agencies has an affiliate office in your community.

8. CAN I ADOPT A CHILD REFUGEE?

It is probably not possible to adopt the children whose images you have seen on television fleeing the refugee crisis in Syria at this time. International adoption law is governed by the Hague Convention, of which Syria is not a signatory. It is also important to note that the refugee crisis has separated many families, so many of the children at risk right now may not actually be orphaned, and reunification with their families should be the ultimate goal.

In response to the larger global refugee crisis, however, there may be opportunities in some parts of the country to serve as a foster parent for an unaccompanied refugee minor. This program is operated by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services in collaboration with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service as primary implementers.

9. CAN WE JUST HELP THOSE REFUGEES WHO ARE CHRISTIANS?

Many of the refugees in the world today *are* Christians, in some cases Christians who were persecuted particularly because of their faith in Jesus. As fellow believers, we certainly want to do everything that we can to assist them, and the U.S. Refugee Resettlement program in which World Relief participates is one way to do so: in fact, the plurality of refugees admitted into the U.S. over the past five years have been Christians, many of whom were particularly persecuted because of their faith in Jesus. Of approximately 125,000 Iraqi refugees admitted since 2007, for example, about 35% have been of a Christian tradition (Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, etc.), far higher than the percentage of all Iraqis who were Christian as of 2003. Welcoming refugees is an important way to stand with the persecuted Church—and efforts to restrict refugee resettlement could negatively impact many fellow Christ-followers who have been forced to flee.

At the same time, we also believe that we should welcome refugees who are Muslims or of other religious traditions. First of all, Jesus made explicitly clear in his parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:21-37) that the Great Commandment to love our neighbors compels us to love all those who are in need, not just those who share our ethnicity or religion. Welcoming those of other religious traditions also allows us to live out Jesus' "Golden Rule," responding to those who have been forced to flee their homes with the same compassionate and respect with which we would hope to be treated if we were forced to flee our country.

While World Relief does not engage in proselytism or provide preferential services based upon one's religious background, we do believe that the arrival of refugees from non-Christian backgrounds also presents the North American Church with a Great Commission opportunity to extend the love of Christ in tangible ways and to share the hope of the gospel—never in a coercive way, but as "an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have," always shared "with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15). When the Church responds with welcome to those of other religious traditions, they are much more likely to be drawn to Jesus; to the contrary, if our response is one of misplaced fear and hostility, we risk repelling these individuals whom we believe God made in his image and loves uniquely.

While there is much misinformation about refugees that seeks to instill fear, our response as followers of Jesus must be guided by the repeated biblical command to "be not afraid," motivated by the compassionate hospitality that we believe was personified for us in Jesus Christ.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A "REFUGEE" AND AN "ASYLUM SEEKER"?

A refugee is someone who has fled their country because a credible fear of persecution on account of one of the reasons described above. However, there are many individuals who may in fact meet that definition, but who have not yet had their case examined and verified by a governmental authority. For example, most of those from Syria currently arriving in Europe likely will eventually be shown to meet the definition of a refugee, but until their individual cases have been adjudicated, they are classified as asylum seekers.

In the United States, those admitted as refugees through the U.S. refugee resettlement program have undergone a thorough interview and background check by various agencies of the U.S. government to ensure that they both meet the definition of a refugee *and* that they do not present a security or health threat to the American public. Those who arrive in the United States by other means—such as on a temporary tourist visa—and make the claim once already present in the U.S. that they meet the legal definition of a refugee, are considered asylum seekers. An asylum officer or immigration judge will make the ultimate determination, based upon the evidence that the asylum seeker provides, whether the individual will be allowed to stay permanently in the United States or will be deported.

It is important to note that, unlike those admitted as refugees, asylum seekers in the United States are generally ineligible for governmental assistance and, for at least the first several months, for employment authorization, making it very difficult to sustain oneself in the United States. Asylum seekers present a uniquely vulnerable population for the Church in the U.S. and globally to support.