

2017 Special Offering

Photo: Paul Jeffrey



You are here

Week of Compassion

Access special offering resources at weekofcompassion.org/special-offering

February 28th, 2017

A Highway of Hospitality in the Greater Kansas City Region

By Rev. Sharon Stanley-Rea, Director, Refugee & Immigration Ministries Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

Our current world has over 21 million refugees - more than at any point since World War II. One in every 113 persons around the globe is either a refugee, an immigrant, or a displaced person. Yet, misunderstandings about our U.S. refugee screening process abound, despite the fact that refugees receive the most rigid and secure vetting of any individuals who enter the country. Over an 18-24 month process, refugee applicants to the U.S. are examined by eight federal government agencies, six different security databases, five separate background checks, four biometric security checks, three separate in-person interviews, and two inter-agency security checks before approval. (View UNHCR infographic at a link within this article at weekofcompassion.org/our-impact) In the midst of such overwhelming challenges, faith communities often ask, "How can we possibly have an impact?"

The Greater Kansas City region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and congregations like St. Andrew Christian Church in Olathe and Overland Park Christian

Church, have formed a set of partnerships for refugees that have built a "hospitality highway" in the heart of the Midwest. Regional churches initially participated in an action in November of 2015 to gather "Refugee Hospitality Kits" for delivery to their closest Church World Service refugee resettlement office. While Disciples link closely with 34 national CWS refugee offices around the country, the nearest to Kansas City was actually in Omaha, Nebraska. Thus, congregations brought their items to Overland Park Christian Church and loaded them in a U-Haul van for delivery four hours and several states away.

Yet, as congregations continued to hear of the global refugee crisis, they desired to connect with refugees more deeply and geographically closer to their Greater Kansas City Region churches. It was then that St. Andrew Church began a six month discernment project that built upon their friendship with local leader Dr. Sophia Khan, and the Greater Kansas City Multi-faith Alliance. While Dr. Khan united multiple faiths to initiate a "Kansas City for Refugees" movement, Rev. Erin Wathen from St. Andrew organized weekly meetings to help church members learn more about the refugee resettlement crisis, root causes that produce refugees, and local refugee resettlement needs.

"Then" says St. Andrew Church mission leader Judi Barkema, "we began to talk about moving from this learning and discernment phase into action. As a group we decided that the church's involvement in the refugee ministry was going to be a core justice issue for us, and we named our ministry Hand of Welcome." As the group considered ways for engagement, Barkema recalls, "our goal was to create reach, even if it took us outside of our comfort zone. And that means we can't guarantee our success with each effort, but it creates more opportunities for stretching and growing." And stretch and grow they did! The church connected with all three local resettlement agencies, asked how they could help them, created options for involvement, and matched each need with interests of church members. "Our first efforts included a drive to collect gently used household items, moving teams to help set up apartments for arriving refugees, ESL tutoring, and a family mentor team for a family of five from Ethiopia. Activities ranged from ones that required high time commitment to nearly no time commitment, and from direct contact with resettlement families to almost no contact" says Barkema. Thus, church members were able to find the best fit for their own gifts and life situations. Barkema views the church's careful discernment process as critical to the success of their ministry. "It created a base of understanding of the issues and needs in our



community before we moved forward, and I have yet to have somebody tell me 'no' when I've asked them for help."

In recent months, as the Executive Order on refugees has reduced overall refugee numbers by half, the Kansas City Region has been conditioned by their previous refugee work to demonstrate their support publicly. On February 5th, Overland Park Christian Church hosted twelve hundred persons who gathered through KC for Refugees to express welcome for refugees. Public Radio KCUR reported, "No single room was big enough for the crowd that showed up, so the speeches were streamed through the fellowship hall, sanctuary and outdoor courtyard...and the message was one of solidarity." Read more about the travel ban at a link within this article at weekofcompassion.org/our-impact.

Kansas City Regional Minister, Rev. Bill Rose-Heim, reflects on the importance of strong partnerships for justice and hospitality that have grown within the region: "Building relationships of high trust in 'blue sky' times, deciding in advance to stay informed and working collaboratively with allies demonstrates the enduring value and power of our covenant relationships. When we Disciples keep, nourish, and support covenant relationships we lead and serve more faithfully and effectively among the most vulnerable populations around us."

Our Global Responses

Since February 22nd, 2017

Where you build relationships with struggling neighbors



Florida, Long term Hurricane Recovery



North Carolina, Long term Hurricane Recovery