



**SEEKING REFUGE:
FAITH-BASED APPROACHES
TO FORCED MIGRATION**

Poverty and Peacemaking II
March 3–4, 2017 at Princeton University

Refugee Resettlement: From Global to Local

Larry Yungk, The UN Refugee Agency in DC (UNHCR-DC) (Moderator)
Tom Charles, Nassau Presbyterian Church
Heba Gowayed, Princeton University
Erol Kekic, Church World Service
Matthew Martinez, Princeton University (Student Rapporteur)

Larry Yungk began by outlining the broad implications of the Trump administration’s stance on refugees. Yungk emphasized that the United States takes in many refugees, but the country still has so much more capacity. In terms of safety concerns, he stressed that refugees are already the most-screened group of people “by far” entering the United States. Further security measures (as well as the suspension of the program for 4 months as desired by President Trump) would have a negative impact on resettlement agencies, who rely on federal funding to maintain the support network for refugee resettlement. Without this money, the programs must cut back and will be unprepared/understaffed when refugee resettlement begins again. From a local perspective, it is not as easy as simply starting again after months of suspension.

Tom Charles from the Nassau Presbyterian Church followed with a presentation on his work as the leader of the refugee sponsorship program at the church. Over the last 60 years, Nassau Presbyterian has sponsored 12 families without religious preference from diverse places around the world, from Bosnia to Burma and Iraq to Cambodia. Most recently, the church is involved with helping a Syrian family. Charles stressed that although the church helped anyone regardless of religious preference, the church’s motivation comes from a deep conviction that “it’s certainly welcoming the stranger, but in our case, it’s a sense of being doers and not just listeners of the Word.”

Charles explained some of the technical aspects of building capacity within the church to sponsor a family and discussed the connection to both Church World Service—the referral agency that takes the pool of potential refugees and matches them with sponsor agencies—and a local mosque as a resource for the Muslim Syrian family. However, Charles quickly moved to actionable items on a local level. He suggested getting involved with pro-refugee campaigns, but more importantly telling the refugee story in a positive manner by increasing the number of local, community sponsors. Although it is good to be active in liberal/diverse places, it is more important to be so in “the places that are currently fearful and uneducated.” Charles then shared his goal of having at least one Presbyterian church in every red state sponsor a family. Only 10% of refugees that come into the country have a sponsor, which is a major area of need that can be filled by local activists who encourage their churches to engage in sponsorship.



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Following Charles's presentation, Erol Kekic of Church World Service gave a presentation about the work of referral agencies and about the daunting and exhausting process that refugees trying to get resettled in the United States must endure before finally being able to resettle. First, refugees arrive in refugee camps, where the average stay is 21 years (as less than 1% of refugees end up actually being resettled in a new country). The United States government will select a small number of refugees to begin the process and will go out to every individual to determine if each person meets the definition of a refugee and are in need of resettlement as a "durable solution." A total of 18 agencies do security checks on the refugees, who must get approval at each step of the way. Unfortunately, each step in the process carries an expiration date, and the window of departure for when all those dates align is only a period of about four to five weeks. "If there's a new baby, if there's a new phone number, if Uncle Louis gets sick, no one travels" and everyone has to go back to the beginning of the process as one clearance expires, then another, and so on.

The last presenter was Heba Gowayed, a researcher studying Syrian refugees. Gowayed compared different approaches to Syrian refugee resettlement in different areas around the world. She began with a quick overview of the history of resettlement in the United States, explaining how we started from a basic principle that every human being has rights. We decided we were not going to discriminate based on country of origin, given that human rights are universal. This belief has eroded nationally with the rise of Islamophobia. Gowayed compared the swift response of President Bush after September 11, when he defended Muslims and clearly outlined that there is a difference between an extremist and a religious person, to the rhetoric of Donald Trump.

Gowayed then personalized the discussion by telling the story of a mother who had to go through the process that Kekic described. This mother was beaten and incarcerated in Syria, so she fled to Jordan with her two daughters. She finally made it through the rigorous screening process, but then Trump was elected and she was told she was banned. She had to wait for American activists to fight back, knowing that the four- to five-week window was quickly closing on her. Finally, she got a call to go to the airport, and she hurriedly packed her belongings and was sent to the United States, where thankfully she was welcomed. However, her daughter had gotten married in the interim and was unable to travel with the rest of the family.

Gowayed used this story to show that being a refugee causes people to lose a series of capital: human capital, social capital, financial capital, language capital, and so on. In addition to these obstacles, refugees are now concerned whether or not the rights that they have in the United States will be protected in the face of so much hatred. Women who wear hijabs are afraid to leave their houses, as there has been a spike in hate crimes against Muslims. Women have stopped driving and going out in public for fear of hate crimes.

The speakers then took questions, and Yungk began by explaining that the problem of how to approach refugee resettlement in such a negative political climate is one that does not have any readily apparent answers and all of us must try our best to come up with solutions, as "very small, very negative voices are having a disproportionate effect on policy in Washington."



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The first question from the audience was about the difference between the Canadian approach to refugee resettlement (full private sponsorship) and the United States' approach, which seems like a hybrid. Kekic explained that although private sponsorship is a model that works well in Canada and appeals to a broad range of people, it would be almost impossible to use it in the United States. The Canadian government can measure how well the program is doing by looking at how many refugees apply for government aid, especially healthcare and welfare benefits. These applications signal a failed sponsorship effort, so more aid applications means that there is something wrong. Because healthcare is not universal in the United States, it is difficult to replicate the model with the same accountability. As the welfare laws in each state are different, there is no easy way to get good measurements on the strengths and weaknesses of a private sponsorship model here in the United States. However, the United States does employ, as the speaker noted, a hybrid model.

After further discussion, the group concluded that maybe the answer in the United States is not private sponsorship, but congregational sponsorship.

The next question dealt with different approaches to the prioritization of refugee placement next to coethnic communities. Kekic pointed out that the United States will not use "integration potential" as a determining factor in the decision to admit refugees, but once they are accepted, a certain level of coethnic community might be helpful. Gowayed gave contrasting examples of Italy, where there is no attempt to foster coethnic community, and Toronto, where great effort is made. She explained that refugees in Toronto seemed to be better off because of this prioritization of coethnic community.

Towards the end of the discussion, one of the participants, Joseph Sackor, stood up and explained that he had been a refugee from Liberia. He emphasized that outreach to other Americans goes "bottom to top." He gave a story of talking to elementary students at his daughter's school, where a child explained that her parents had told her that refugees "take taxes away from citizens and need to go home." Sackor said that this attitude is common, but it is fundamentally untrue. Refugees only get assistance for three months, then they are on their own. After they have established themselves, refugees then pay taxes for the rest of their lives. Looking at the return on investment of resettling refugees leaves no doubt that the money is paid back plus so much more.

Yungk ended the conversation with a reminder that refugees themselves need to be part of any discussion and part of any solution. Part of the role of citizens is giving refugees a platform because now is a receptive time to speak up due to refugee resettlement's place in the current political discourse.