



Thought Leadership Corner

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My Role in Welcoming, and Being Welcomed

I became involved with New American Pathways (New AP) through my church three years ago. I had seen a video interview of a Syrian man who had just lost his entire family in an effort to get to Greece. I had never before seen a human being who had literally lost all hope. It was beyond disturbing and it was very motivating.

Ten days later, First Presbyterian Church Atlanta received a call from New AP requesting we co-sponsor a family of five from Aleppo. For the church, it was an unscheduled and unbudgeted second family of the year. Our Mission Council unanimously approved the idea and I jumped in with both feet.

My first act with New AP, along with other church members, was welcoming that family at the airport—a smile, and a fruit basket in hand. From that point, refugee resettlement became a full-time vocation for me personally.

One of the many memorable experiences I have had with our families involved a homecoming. The father of the family had a rather involved operation. The issue was not overly complicated, but failed efforts to correct the problem in his country of origin had left him severely impacted. This had serious repercussions for both his quality of life and his work options.

I drove him home from the hospital and we arrived to his home filled beyond capacity with his brothers, their wives and all their kids. Each adult had another relative on their phone. There were sisters, parents, and brothers and sisters in-law. They were joining from all the various countries they had been scattered to.... Syria, Germany, Switzerland, Turkey, etc... all over the world. Phones were held high and maneuvered so that everyone could see and speak to everyone else. The energy was palpable, the love and care among this extended group obvious. The entire

family was present in that room, in that moment, to celebrate the success of a life-changing operation.

The man presented me a phone with his elderly mother in Syria. We had no common language, but she emphatically and insistently waved her hand over and over again as tears streamed down her face.

I was folded into this family's joy, as one of them. It was a beautiful gift I will never forget.

It would be wonderful if the need for agencies like New AP and our own involvement did not exist. To be clear, we do not live in that time. However, with fewer and fewer refugees arriving in our country and state, our roles as co-sponsors may require a shift...a bit of tweaking. There is still much to do. Now is not the time to return to our seats, but a time to redouble our efforts.

Perhaps that means working in new ways. Advocating, or digging deeper to ensure all families who are here have cultural guides. Friends who are willing to listen, understand, and provide guidance of various types and advice/ideas when wanted. Friends who can teach ESL or provide exposure to opportunities... opportunities to allow a refugee to take that next step forward... beyond their entry-level job. Perhaps we can branch out in broader ways to local and regional communities to educate our friends and neighbors as to the value of the newest among us.

Currently, 65 million fellow human beings are displaced around the world due to war, persecution, or natural disaster. These are people simply trying to survive. Each deserving dignity, compassion, and simply...a place to be, to grow and thrive, to make a difference. Skin color, ethnicity, religion, country of origin... or any other way we artificially divide ourselves... we are all the same.

We also all have a part to play... with all our gifts and skills... in weaving the threads of good in each of us to create the tapestry of good we want to see in the world. Such a force can't be ignored. Such a force lifts us all.

The ways in which I've been embraced by the families I've been involved with have left profound marks on me and give me great hope for both our country and our world. It is an honor to be involved in such a worthwhile endeavor. Let us get busy on the work ahead.