

## Purpose: God's Love as Seen in the Refugee Resettlement Program in Rutland, Vermont

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In the 1982 hymnal there is a hymn titled “Purpose” written by Arthur Campbell Ainger. The hymn speaks of God’s purpose in our world. It concerns mission, and it is very relevant to the story that you are about to read. The first stanza of the hymn states that “God is working his purpose out. . . . that the earth may be filled with the glory of God.” Later, about midway through, it talks of how the work we do and the life we live is God’s work. And finally, it ends with the acknowledgment that nothing that we do—neither our work nor our missions nor any of our ministries—has any worth without God’s blessing and presence. So, what is God’s purpose? What does the glory of God on earth look like? What follows is the story of a small American city whose community illustrates the purpose of God and what the glory of God on Earth could look like.

### *“God Is Working His Purpose Out”*

Rutland, Vermont is a small, rural city with a population of roughly sixteen thousand inhabitants. The town was founded by European immigrants—mostly from Italy, Poland, and Wales—who came to work the granite, marble, and slate quarries, and later the railroad. So the community of Rutland is no stranger to welcoming the stranger. But in this new millennium, “the stranger” took on a whole different connotation. With the coming of these new strangers came drugs, crime, poverty, and fear. The residents of Rutland became distrustful and no longer welcoming. Rutland became known nationally as “the heroin capital of the United States,” with articles about the city’s struggle with its epidemic appearing in national print media like *Rolling Stone* magazine and *The New York Times*. The community became divided,

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spiraling into economic and social depression. People grew more frustrated with an apparently corrupt police department, social services that did not connect with one another, a state government that seemed to lack any perception of or empathy for what was happening in the city, and a faith community that seemed to be failing them with its ignorance and apathy. Yet, in the very worst conditions that people should ever have to face, there you will find God.

Rutlanders come from hard-working, problem-solving, God-loving stock and would not be defeated by trials and tribulations set before them. Things came to a head in 2012, and the catalyst for change came when a young woman of just seventeen was killed by a driver high from huffing aerosol inhalants. The residents of that neighborhood, which had become notorious for being the hub of drug activity brought in by strangers, had finally had enough. They reached out to other neighborhoods experiencing similar crises. The good people of Rutland demanded a cleansing of the police department and the hiring of a new chief of police. They called for neighborhood and community meetings to discuss the myriad problems facing them. They chose to work together on solving problems. No more would they sit around in expectation of someone else coming to the rescue: they would rescue themselves!

Out of these gatherings came Project Vision. Project Vision is a partnership of law enforcement, medical and social services, and business owners and community members intent upon building a brighter, better, safer community. Today, Project Vision has become a beacon of hope to many other towns and cities in Vermont and across the country. Community meetings are held every month with a core group who always attend, and many others who come as they can. At these meetings, if you listen and watch with a mindful heart, you will see clearly see the presence of God as relationships are built, nurtured, and strengthened. At any given meeting, you can find medical professionals collaborating with social services to ensure that a person in need is provided the services that they require. You will see law enforcement agents working with landlords and business owners to empower changes in the infrastructure. You will find NGOs working with the faith community to provide support for work being undertaken throughout the city. You will see community members planning fun events to bring people together in fellowship, and improvement projects to increase the aesthetic appeal of Rutland's varied and diverse neighborhoods.

*And "the Earth Shall Be Filled with the Glory of God"!*

But Project Vision is not actually the purpose of this story. All of this is to set the stage for what took place in 2016, when the people of Rutland felt "safe" enough once again to welcome the stranger. Before Project Vision, the people of Rutland were guarded and insular and would not have been very receptive to the plight of refugees. Yet through the networks and relationships developed in Project Vision, rather than living in a mindset of scarcity, Rutland's denizens are now able to see the abundance within the community and what this city has to offer to the world. In May of 2016, then-Mayor Christopher Louras announced that the City of Rutland applied to the US State Department to be a resettlement site for refugees. Particularly, he planned to resettle one hundred Syrian refugees within the city. He had been working with the state's resettlement organization, Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program (VRRP), which is a field office for US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI). VRRP called for a community meeting to test the response and see how receptive the people were to resettling refugees. They were hoping for a good turnout—thirty or so would be encouraging; a turnout of fifty would be stupendous. At that initial meeting, nearly 250 people attended (of which I was one), so many that not everyone could fit in the doors. In July of 2016, the US State Department found Rutland to have the infrastructure and the community cooperation to become the country's newest site for refugee resettlement. Most of those nearly 250 at that first meeting continued on in the mission and founded a community organization called Rutland Welcomes.

*"By the Mouth of Many Messengers Goes Forth the Voice of God"*

However, there were many in the community who were adamantly opposed to the mayor's pet project. They were angry that the preliminary research and footwork was done in secret without input from the city's aldermen and without consent of or even notification to the citizens. These people coalesced into their own group and called themselves Rutland First. While their numbers were smaller, they were far more vocal and far more adept at inciting controversy in the media. Understand, Rutland First are not evil people, filled with hate and loathing. In fact, their concerns are the same as Rutland Welcomes, but from a different perspective. They, too, want to live in a safe and happy community. They simply weren't convinced that welcoming

refugees was conducive to making that happen. Yet their issues weren't trivial. Their chief concerns were for the economic and physical health and well-being of Rutland. Did the city even have the capacity to support an influx of refugees? They feared Rutland's and the state's welfare systems would end up paying for derelicts who would never become viable members of the community. "Isn't it true that refugees coming from living in refugee camps are rife with contagious diseases like tuberculosis?" they challenged. They were worried that the local hospital would be incapable of handling an outbreak of TB. "And Syrians? They are terrorists! Why would we want to invite terrorists into our community?" Once again, Rutland was thrust into national media limelight. News articles were published in print and for TV and radio; Internet blogs ran rampant. It would take time and effort to answer these questions and allay the fears. It would take a lot of people from all sides of the issue working together to build healthy relationships to effect change in our community.

*"Give Ear to Me, Ye Continents, Ye Isles, Give Ear to Me"*

One of the kindest things Jesus ever did for us through his ministry was to simplify all our laws and morals and ethics and missions into two simple benchmarks: "And he said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matt. 22:37–39). Using these two commandments, we need only ask ourselves, "How is what I'm doing loving God or my neighbor as myself?" to measure the value of our actions and deeds. Yet, we all know that we humans are quite skilled at justifying ourselves. And because we actually can justify ourselves, there is some truth in any justification—even those with which we adamantly disagree. Thus, we're compelled to dig deeper and find further evidence to support our justifications. So perhaps a little clarification of terms would not go amiss. Justice and mercy are often contrasted with one another. I'm convinced this is a mistake: the two are actually closely related.

We define justice by what our immediate and current situation necessitates. When we hear the word *justice*, the immediate connotation that informs our definition is of a court system, and the term is punitive in nature—something to be executed. But that detrimentally limits the power of the word. Leviticus 19:15 offers insight into

the true nature of justice: "You shall not render an unjust judgement; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor." There are two important aspects to note. First, justice is about balance. In the passage, neither the poor nor the great have greater value in the sight of God; they are balanced, with no partiality given to either party. Our understanding of justice must also be about balance. Second, justice is about relationship. Judging our neighbor with justice is a clear instruction to work on our relationships, to keep them in balance where one person is not higher, more dominant (or any other comparative or superlative) than the other. Justice, therefore, is not merely about who is right and who is wrong and casting judgment and blame. It's about reconciling the two into an agreement and balance. In Matthew 7:1–2, Jesus tells us, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get." Jesus implores us to apply justice without casting blame. We are expected to omit judgements of right/wrong, good/evil, us/them and simply rectify the imbalance. "The measure you give will be the measure you get" suggests that if we limit our reconciliatory efforts to who's right and who's wrong, a true balance will never be managed. We'll just be piling up the weights on either side of the scale, swinging the power from one side to the other.

And how are we to reconcile justly? Mercy, it stands to reason, is the action that allows for a return to balance. We must take care, though, in thinking that mercy can only be given to the downtrodden. Mercy must happen to both sides of an imbalance to create a new balance. In our human frailty, we limit mercy in this manner: mercy to the wrongdoer is forgiveness, while mercy to the righteous is alleviation of a pain. But according to the word of God, this is restrictive and incomplete. Mercy is translated out of three different Hebrew words: *kaporreth*, *racham*, and *chesed*, further suggesting that our single definition for mercy is inadequate. *Kapporeth* is a place or moment of atonement, or regaining goodwill. *Racham* is the word we most identify with mercy. It means to show compassion or pity. *Chesed* is a kind of mercy that happens as a preventive measure. It is the term used for loving kindness or general goodness.<sup>1</sup> Having or giving mercy in

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *God/Creation* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House Publishers, 2003), 385.

completeness, as God-like as we humans are able, means we must access all three levels of mercy. We begin with an attitude of kindness to all; we continue by having compassion for others (compassion, meaning “suffer together”); and we come to balance by meeting in mutual atonement and goodwill.

*“What Can We Do to Work God’s Work, to Prosper and Increase the Love of God in All Mankind?”*

Scripture offers plenty to teach us about justice and mercy in relation to welcoming the stranger. Again and again, both directly in instruction (Exod. 23:9; Deut. 10:17–19; Lev. 19:15; Heb. 13:2; 1 Pet. 4:9, to name but a few passages) and indirectly through demonstration (Matt. 15:21–28, where Jesus shows mercy to a stranger, and John 4 where Jesus is given hospitality as a stranger in Samaria), we are taught precisely how to treat one another. Deuteronomy 10:17–19, for example, gives clear instruction:

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

The context of this passage is set in an instruction that while Israel is God’s chosen people, “the stranger” is the first person cited whom we must love in the manner of God’s love, having no partiality but executing justice for the weakest of human society.

Arguably, one of the most telling stories depicting how we are to treat one another is that of the Syrophenician woman with the possessed daughter. We’re expected to learn how to act justly and mercifully from how Jesus ultimately responds to the woman as she begs him for mercy on her daughter (Matt. 15:21–28). There is no direct imperative dictating love for the stranger in this story. But the message is enacted for us to witness. For all intents and purposes, the Syrophenician woman is not only a widow (at least, one may assume she is, since no husband or male relative is mentioned as a provider) with a child, she is a stranger—that is, she is not from Jesus’ people. At first, he does not even answer her. Then at her persistence,

Jesus states his reluctance to aid her because “it is not fair. . . .” But Jesus knows better. The woman’s faith is enough. She is equal in the eyes of God because her faith makes her so. Justice dictates that if she is to be in balance with the rest of the assembled, then kindness, compassion, goodwill must be rendered. In her case, Jesus acknowledges her faith has justified her with God and the people. When Jesus promises that he has come not to abolish the law but to uphold it, how glad the news! Because the law is simple—love God, love neighbor. We are the neighbor and the lucky recipients of Jesus’ love. In loving one another, we strengthen and empower our own relationship with God.

The word of God is quite clear in how we are to treat strangers (aliens, foreigners, immigrants, refugees, or any other term describing people outside of our known circle). Less clear in our minds and hearts is the *why* of the matter, although the Bible intimates that “for you were once a stranger”; “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”; “for the glory of God.” It offers all of these as righteous motivations. But we are human and weak and selfish and in trying to justify our own selves, we ask, “What’s in it for me?” We want tangible, practical benefits for our mercy. Intrinsic benefits are not good enough, even if our relationship with God is made stronger. We do not feel balanced in justice. To give mercy and welcome without knowing the odds of one’s own return is just not adequate to us. We deem it unfair and unjust. We are left to our own consideration to provide the whys and wherefores. And this is where our disagreements and conflicts arise.

*“March We Forth in the Strength of God . . . That the Light of the Glorious Gospel of Truth May Shine throughout the World”*

In Vermont, the refugee resettlement organization is USCRI. Of the nine resettlement organizations operating in the United States, USCRI is the only one not faith-based. This means its motivation to resettle refugees will not be described in religious terms. Yet, its mission is founded on a moral belief: “We believe we have a shared responsibility to clear obstacles and uncover opportunities for people everywhere. So, when lives are uprooted by force or by choice, we fight alongside those on the path to independence.”<sup>2</sup> It is not necessary

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, “Serving the Uprooted,” <http://refugees.org/serving-the-uprooted/>.

to explain where this belief derives from; it is enough that it is so. It allows that people with deep-rooted faith in God and those with no theology at all might work together for a common cause. In Rutland, as Syrian refugee families began to arrive, hundreds of volunteers gathered to create a welcoming environment. They volunteer for reasons known only to themselves. They may be there because their faith prescribes their actions. Or they may be there simply because volunteering puts them in favorable social standing. Maybe they come for the prospect of making a new friend. The point is, VRRP does not draw its volunteers from a single faith community (Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, or LIRS, volunteers are predominantly Lutheran; EMM draws volunteers from Episcopal Church congregations; Hebrew Immigration Aid Society, or HIAS, is comprised of Jewish volunteers, for instance) and therefore the organization itself doesn't care how one identifies with God's purpose. In spite of VRRP's lack of religiously inspired motivation, its volunteers do come from faith communities and do act in God's prescribed direction.

*"All We Can Do Is Nothing Worth Unless God Blesses the Deed"*

When VRRP and the City of Rutland announced plans to resettle one hundred Syrian refugees there, calls came into Trinity Episcopal Church from all around the Diocese of Vermont asking how to help. People called from other denominations as well, offering donations of household goods and money, labor, and time. The offices of VRRP were also inundated with calls to volunteer—so much so that the staff couldn't field all the questions and offers. And there were so many questions. So very little was known in the community about the process of resettling refugees in the United States. Compound general ignorance with blatant misinformation and sow that with a hefty dose of "fear of the stranger" and Rutland was ripe for conflict. In a state that thrives on its renown for being "the most unchurched" state in the Union, working with a resettlement organization not affiliated with any religion, God continued working his purpose out. For in the face of outspoken fear and opposition based on ignorance, it was the people of traditions of faith, people who identified with area churches and synagogues, who began to change the dialogue. Churches and congregations began holding forums to educate the populace about the facts of our world's refugee crisis. Faith leaders encouraged showings of movies and documentaries that illustrated

the trauma of life as a refugee—someone fleeing their homeland in fear for their life and the lives of their loved ones. Vigils and prayer services were scheduled. And the dissent lessened. When our country's administration took steps to shut down migration and halt refugee resettlement, people of faith systematically began to learn how to counter the orders. Lay leaders participated in webinars, seminars, conferences, and workshops to learn more about advocacy and how to use our faith to inform our country's laws.

*“Vainly We Hope for the Harvest-Tide 'Til God Gives Life to the Seed”*

Over the course of just one year, refugee resettlement in this country has endured significant disruption. The on-again, off-again interruptions have wreaked havoc on thousands of lives. Many who applied for resettlement lost their place in the process and their window of opportunity to come to the United States. Hundreds lost their jobs when field offices had to be closed. But the truth of God's mission perseveres and faith finds its way. Attention to resettling has shifted from the process to increasing skills and talents for advocacy. Because our leaders in government do not act on faith, we who live by faith must speak out. Yet we are timid. We worry about causing offense when we base the premise of our motivations on our beliefs. Yet why should that be when the truth of the matter is we all want the same thing—love, peace, safety, life, and happiness? If what we do offers that to others, even the feared stranger, then why should we fear speaking out? We are God's instruments. We are how God works his purpose out. Through our actions and words, by welcoming the stranger in our midst, by allaying others' fear of the stranger, by speaking of mercy and offering justice for all (don't we pledge that?), *we* are the glory of God that fills the earth.

