

Giants in the Land

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In the great refugee migration out of Egyptian slavery, the Hebrew children march to the Promised Land. When they reach the edge of Canaan, Moses sends twelve spies to scout the landscape (Numbers 13–14). In forty days they return with two reports. The minority report made by Caleb and Joshua is good: the land is abundant, flowing with milk and honey just as promised. The inhabitants are large and formidable, but since the Lord is with us, we shall not fear. The majority report is discouraging: the land is full of giants, and we seemed to them, *and to ourselves*, as grasshoppers. We have no chance. The majority report is driven by fear; the minority report by faith. Throughout history, fear is always the first factor in refugee response.¹

We have seen this same fear in our own country. In 1924 Congress, fearful of increasing labor unrest and rising populations of non-Northern European immigrants, passed the National Origins Act severely restricting the immigration of Asians and Southern and Eastern Europeans into the United States. As the Nazi regime consumed Europe, Jews fleeing for their lives were prohibited from finding refuge in the United States. The Diocese of Ohio was among the first in the Episcopal Church to champion the cause of these fleeing populations. In 1938 the diocese produced a poster of the Holy Family fleeing to Egypt with these words, “In the name of these refugees, aid all refugees.” This same 1938 image is the logo of today’s Episcopal Migration Ministries (EMM). History witnesses that refugees are always linked with political, religious, and economic tensions and from the beginning both Testaments have something to say about it.

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¹ For an in-depth understanding of the biblical history, theology, and contemporary reflections on refugee issues, see Susanna Snyder, “Theologies of Migration: Strangers, Aliens and Friends,” an unpublished paper delivered at All Saints’ Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia, on November 18, 2009. Dr. Snyder is the incoming Assistant Professor of Contemporary Society and Christian Ethics at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and may be contacted at ssnyder@eds.edu.

Whether the driving power is Pharaoh, Herod, a contemporary government, or warring factions, there is a perpetual migration of people fleeing their homes and countries of origin, “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, and membership of a particular social group or political opinion.”² Whether they are Iraqis aiding the West, Burmese opposing a repressive regime, Bhutanese culturally removed from their homes, or Somalis fleeing rebel soldiers, these legally designated “refugees” are part of the forty-two million uprooted people throughout the world. Refugees, the world’s “homeless,” historically raise anxieties for neighboring governments who harbor them.

Fleeing Fear: How One Becomes a Refugee

The work of Episcopal Migration Ministries is to provide a new home for a portion of those seeking refuge. EMM is one of ten refugee resettlement agencies working with the United Nations and the State Department to resettle a small portion of the world’s refugees. EMM has thirty-three affiliate offices in the United States that collaborate with the church, the State Department, and state social service agencies for successfully resettling these new arrivals. Refugee Resettlement and Immigration Services of Atlanta (RRISA) is one of these local EMM affiliates and a center for Jubilee Ministry in the Diocese of Atlanta. The Jubilee mission is to serve the poor; RRISA serves the uprooted fleeing from persecution, war, famine, and extreme poverty. We are a bridge between community resources and refugees worldwide.

The U.S. Department of State chooses refugees for resettlement based on nationality in three priorities: 1) cases of individual need identified by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a U.S. embassy, or resettlement agency (NGO); 2) groups of cases based on similar need from a priority country; and 3) individual cases from eligible countries with family members already in the United States.³ By directive of the President and the support of

² From Article 1.A.2 defining the term “refugee,” in the protocol adopted by the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees; <http://www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/3b66c2aa10.pdf>.

³ For the details on case priority for 2010 see the President’s Report to the Congress, “Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2010” at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/129393.pdf>. Historically, the UNHCR has given priority for resettlement to those who face grave concerns for their lives, women who are at risk,

Congress, the United States resettles approximately seventy thousand refugees annually. In fiscal year 2009, EMM resettled 4,792 refugees in the United States. RRISA resettled 347 in the Atlanta area through EMM. As a dual affiliate with Church World Service, RRISA received an additional 451 clients, bringing the 2009 total to 798.

Internationally, the UNHCR oversees a series of camps where people seek refuge outside their own countries. The length of stay in these compounds depends on the status of their homeland. For some the political situation can stabilize and eventually those who sought refuge may return home to rebuild their lives. For others the political exclusion is permanent and the next recourse is to seek resettlement in another country. The process becomes complex. The UNHCR, the U.S. State Department, and other countries designate priorities among refugee populations for resettlement. Processing protocols are established and a designated nongovernmental organization called an Overseas Processing Entity (OPE) then works with the UNHCR and government entities to conduct the preliminary overseas interviews. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS, one of three bureaus in the new Department of Homeland Security) manages the interview and screening process. Over and over again refugees seeking relocation must tell their story to authorities to determine their priority for resettlement. Each story is different and each story is the same; all those seeking refuge are struggling to survive.

Camps are temporary settings. Depending on the location, they can look like tents in the desert or bamboo-and-thatch structures that have stood for decades. Considering that less than half of one percent of the world's refugees will be resettled permanently in another country, it is not unusual for people to live "temporarily" in camps for years. Often RRISA receives clients who have spent their whole lives living in camps outside their native country. Host countries provide the space, but refugees are often expected to stay sequestered. In most countries they are not allowed access to jobs, schools, or meaningful connections with the culture around them. The United Nations or partner agency provides a weekly ration of food. The rest of the time they wait. A former refugee named Narayan now works in RRISA's office and he is also a busy, part-time student. "So you work here all week and then on the

victims of torture and violence, the disabled, and those who need immediate medical treatment. For concise interpretation of U.S. immigration policy, the author credits the Rev. Jennifer Riggs, director of Refugee and Immigration Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

weekends you go to class?” I asked. “Yes,” he said. “I have wasted a lot of time.” When I asked him what he meant by “wasting time,” he replied, “For seventeen years, I have lived in a camp.”

Coming to the Promised Land

All resettlement staff know the irony of this slogan: “They have survived war, famine, and persecution. Can they survive the United States?” The land of milk, honey, and abundance is often different from what newcomers expect.

The day comes when the refugees make the long flight from the camps to resettlement in a new land. Carrying their possessions in one bag (or often with no luggage), some go to countries with expansive social safety nets and some come to countries like the United States, where finding a job and earning a living are expected. Some reunite with their families who are already established. Others will arrive in the United States knowing no one. It is the job of the local EMM resettlement agency to provide housing and basic services to help the new arrivals get settled and launched in this new life. RRISA invites local parishes to “co-sponsor” a family for three or four months which includes:

- furnishing an apartment;
- giving the equivalent of three months’ rent/utilities (if possible);
- greeting the family at the airport;
- introducing them to their new apartment;
- providing friendship; and
- building the relationships which say to the family, “You are welcome here.”

So far the story is bright.

However, there are giants in the Promised Land. The economic downturn that began in 2008 has hit the refugee community hard and the supporting resettlement agencies even harder. In Atlanta the unemployment rate is holding steady at 10.6 percent; those who work with minority communities estimate this number is much higher within these groups. The U.S. government brings new arrivals into this country with a ready-to-work status. The expectation is that refugees will find jobs within three months and certainly by the sixth month. The reality is that as the economy softened, the “starter” jobs

dwindled. The number of basic jobs in the hospitality industry (hotels), manufacturing, food services, and food processing declined as discretionary income declined. With good budgeting, a combination of government funding and private donations can help a family of four cover rent and utilities for four to six months, with the assumption that most families will achieve self-sufficiency by the sixth month. But by the summer of 2009 many refugees in Atlanta were not securing employment until their ninth month.⁴

With the economic downturn, we could not turn away those who were already in deficit, but as the recession unfolded, RRISA began to run out of emergency funds and many of our families were facing eviction. Dreams of a new life were tempered by continual economic stress.

As the summer of 2009 came to a close we were continuing to receive new families, dealing with weekly eviction notices, searching for jobs, and sinking into significant debt. While many parishes had diminished income, many others were already in emergency mode, cutting staff positions and delving into contingency funds, if they had them. That same summer our founding director, who had weathered these storms for many years, accepted a new position with another agency. With our veteran leader gone, the giants loomed larger and appeared to be winning.

Facing the Giants

When Caleb and Joshua came back from scouting the Promised Land, they believed the land was theirs and they could face any giant. They had the mind of victors. The majority of the people, however, still had the mind of victims, and were willing to return to their familiar roles as slaves. In the face of the giants, they believed themselves to be as grasshoppers.

In the face of economic hard times fear is everywhere. Evictions, with all the household possessions thrown in the yard, become a common sight, even in substantial neighborhoods. Decline and loss become daily news, depressing parish members, families, friends, and co-workers. We were experiencing ourselves as “grasshoppers” and

⁴ The 2009 government stipend for an incoming family is a one-time grant of \$450 per person, food stamps, and in Georgia, Refugee Cash Assistance, which is \$330 per month for a family of four. Many will qualify for a federal-private program called Match Grant.

began to accept our role as victims, no match for the threatening giants.

While locally and nationally we were feeling least confident, our refugee families continued to come. As “invited guests” seeking refuge, at long last they had found a new home, a new start. The next step was to begin living in this new place, and that meant taking on responsibilities along with the new freedoms. No longer victims, they were new residents with major giants to face: finding a job, paying the rent, learning a new culture and a new language, to name a few. It is a steep learning curve that takes courage and hope for all of us, but especially for refugees. If they can face the overwhelming odds, then so can we who lead them!

The story of one such family, the Hassans,⁵ is an extreme example of the suffering endured by refugees, and the importance of this work. The family includes a father, mother, and their five children. They came to us from Iraq where Mr. Hassan worked as a truck driver. He is a gaunt, tall man with dark eyes and little expression. He is eager to work and willing to do anything to support his family. His biography says he suffered a facial wound which was not properly treated. As the story unfolded we learned he had been shot in the face and left for dead. His wounds were not properly attended and he has since been unable to open his mouth or to eat anything except a liquid diet. Due to severe beatings, he is unable to bend or to lift any significant weight. The reconstructive surgery he will require is complex and requires several different specialists. In addition, Mrs. Hassan is congenitally blind and is also unable to work, as is their oldest daughter. In such extreme cases the federal government is willing to assist with disability support under the Supplemental Security Income program, but it takes months for the process to unfold.

In the summer some friends took the family to a lake outing for an afternoon respite. The children could play in the water and the parents could talk, relax, prepare a meal, and take a break from the stress of their lives. It was in these moments of relaxation that the youngest daughter wandered onto a dock, fell into the water, and drowned. The next week the apartment complex where they lived filed an eviction notice.

The Hassan family, with so much loss, was saved from eviction. RRISA put out an appeal to every parish in the Diocese of Atlanta,

⁵ Name changed to protect client confidentiality.

telling their story. If twenty parishes could give \$200 apiece, the family would be safe. The first to step up was Holy Comforter Episcopal Church. The parish shares openly that 60 percent of its membership lives with mental illness. Their vicar brought our appeal to the congregation, and their response was unanimous. From their own limited incomes, the people of Holy Comforter sent us our first check, the full \$200. In all, twenty-four parishes shared what they had with us; twelve were first-time donors. Needing \$3,600 to reverse the eviction, we received exactly \$3,600.

The New Start

With a major funding deficit, some Calebs, Joshuas, and hopeful Miriams stepped forward at RRISA. It was time to set the example. It was time to face the giants. Working with the RRISA board, a former board chair assumed the responsibility for daily operations. He immediately began totaling the deficit and looking for funding. That year the former associate director transferred her energy and experience into funding development and was already moving on many fronts. Aware of the clients depending on us, the whole staff got involved. Team RRISA was not afraid to ask anyone anywhere for support, and the support began to come—large donors, small donors, big parishes, small parishes. Incrementally, the deficit began to fall.

When RRISA's new executive director began in 2009, she worked with board and staff to develop a strategy for overcoming the crisis. First, all short-term fundraising efforts were focused on raising emergency rent funds to prevent eviction. Second, the agency refocused resources on the employment team, hiring new staff and promoting a new program manager, who in turn helped clients get jobs more quickly. In other areas RRISA made substantial cuts in spending and decreased contracted arrival numbers for 2010 to a manageable 550. Finally, RRISA's development team created an aggressive and creative fundraising campaign for 2010. The U.S. government also played a role in RRISA's recovery, providing Refugee Emergency Housing Assistance (REHA) funds in late 2009 and increasing resettlement dollars dramatically in January 2010.

A new fundraising campaign helped build momentum and increase community support. Our development director had previously run a project for apartment set-ups modeled after popular cable decorating shows called "Design for a New Start." School groups, community organizations, and law firms were invited to participate, and they

enthusiastically stepped into the competition. Attorneys from some of the most prestigious and competitive firms in town went after each other not in the courtrooms but in the apartment kitchens and living rooms, where they crafted beautiful homes for our new arrivals. Our new director and her graphic designer husband developed the New Start logo—an Astroturf “Welcome” doormat, complete with daisy, in front of an open door. The name and the logo stuck. In a few months we had

- Design for a New Start
- Consign for a New Start
- Shop for a New Start
- Dine for a New Start
- Break for a New Start (college students on alternative spring break).

As the possibilities continued, our director identified our resettlement mission in terms of helping people start new lives, and the New Start energy grew in the hearts and minds of our leadership. Instead of focusing on the refugees as poor, uneducated, lost, and suffering people coming to us for safety, we began to recognize them as hopeful and resilient fellow residents who were eager for a new start. The leadership, direct service providers, education specialists, case managers, employment staff, development people, AmeriCorps, Recovery Corps, and finance team caught the wave of hope.

Have all the giants gone away? Not hardly. They are always on the horizon waiting for another opportunity to threaten, intimidate, and take back the field. The antidote might be found in this chance encounter. I was leaving the office in the midafternoon when I saw Mahdi, our Somali-born and Dutch-educated employment specialist, coming out to his car. One of four staff members who spend every day training, encouraging, and recruiting for employment, he and his co-workers are always looking for jobs. “Calling it a day?” I asked.

“No, I’m going out to knock on some doors. When you call employers on the phone you get one response. But when you go out and look them in the eye, you can get another.”

Every week, we find jobs where there are no jobs. Every week, we receive funds when there are no funds. The Promised Land is full of milk and honey. Extracting it takes some creativity, some knocking on doors.