

# Refugees in the Urban Wilderness: Plight of Refugees in Landing Cities and Opportunities for Response

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**Abstract:** *Perceptions about refugees have been colored by popular culture portrayals of refugees in rural camps with basic needs provided by relief agencies. Today, more than half of the world's refugees are based in cities and are responsible for their own shelter and sustenance. In many instances, refugees seeking resettlement must first go to a city in a third country where they are screened by the United Nations for resettlement. This process takes a number of years and involves a unique set of challenges. In this article, the author examines the realities faced by refugees/asylum seekers in these landing cities and explores opportunities for response by the church.*

During the time of the pharaohs, the people of Israel grew large in number and became a threat to the Egyptian people. In response to this perceived threat the Egyptians turned the people of Israel into slaves and oppressed them terribly (Ex. 1:8-22). Moses led Israel out of Egypt and brought this nation of refugees to the Promised Land, but not without first going through the wilderness for forty years. Much happened during these years in the wilderness that would forever impact who Israel is. Their time in the wilderness was challenging in so many ways, but it was also a catalyst to reliance on God and the formation of his people. When we tell the story of Israel making their way to the Promised Land without mention of the wilderness, we do a disservice to the church. The story of Israel in the wilderness offers an example that helps us understand the plight of many refugees today.

Refugees today are displaced from the nation they have known as home. And, as they await resettlement in a land that holds much promise, many must endure years in cities where they remain an unwelcomed presence. Most likely your perceptions about the refugee life is skewed by a combination of news media and Hollywood. From the sound of comments on social media, many anticipate refugees simply hop in a dingy and arrive in the United States. Increasingly, asylum seekers take up residence in a global city and apply for recognition as refugees and await resettlement in a third country. This is a rigorous, arduous process that takes years.

In a few weeks, my wife and I will be saying goodbye to good friends, Hannah and Roger, who are leaving our city to be resettled in North America. They arrived in our city seeking asylum for religious reasons but have faced terrible difficulties over the last five years as they progress through the refugee process. Work, transportation, and even education for the children is full of challenges. As in many locations, they are given legal status as refugees, but not given the freedom to survive for five years. As we will cover in this article, refugees in landing cities often have restricts on working, education, and sometimes even remaining in the city. Philip Marfleet (2007, p. 36) notes the new urban reality faced by many refugees when he says, "More and more refugees are city dwellers whose existence is denied by governments and agencies."

The population of refugees around the world is at an all-time high. Only a few countries will accept refugees for long-term resettlement, but many of those countries are inaccessible to the asylum seeker. Facing few options, many asylum seekers are taking up residence in “landing cities” that allow refugees temporarily. A limited number of refugees are resettled in other countries. This leaves hundreds of thousands of refugees in limbo in a city where their legal status is ambiguous at best. While there is a lot written about work with refugees in resettlement countries (Edu-Bekoe & Wan, 2013; Wan & Casey, 2014; Wan & Le, 2014), there is very little on work with refugees in this time of transition in landing cities. In this article, we seek to understand the realities these asylum seekers/refugees face in these landing cities and suggest opportunities for response.

Before we drill down deeper into the notion of urban refugees and the realities they face, it is important to clarify our terminology. According to the UN, a refugee is “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence” (“What is a refugee,” 2016). An asylum seeker is one who seeks recognition as a refugee as he or she seeks safe harbor in another nation (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016a). An asylum seeker appeals to the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) office to become officially recognized as a refugee. This process is described in more detail in this article. These “landing cities” described in this article are the points of first arrival for the asylum seeker after fleeing the country of origin. These cities are officially transitory homes for the refugees as they seek to move to a resettlement country. Resettlement countries are ones who are signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention and who allow refugees to settle long-term with a path to permanent residency or citizenship (Coath, Akamine, Krepp, Hui-En, & Sparkes, 2015, p. 67).

### **The Changing Nature of the Refugee**

I was raised in Southeast Asia from the 1970s through the early 1990s. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, there were many refugees fleeing Vietnam on boats and being forced to live in designated camps. Their whole life was relegated to those camps. Movies most often depict this kind of refugee life, rows of tents in a dusty, no-man’s-land surrounded by barbed wire. While many millions of refugees still live this way, more and more are arriving in cities to seek asylum. They have much more freedom to roam than those fenced in in more traditional refugee camps. The United Nations now reports that more than half of the world’s refugees are based in cities (Kamal, 2016). This is a significant shift, as just ten years ago only 18% of the world’s refugees were urban (Jacobsen, 2006). The challenges faced by these urban refugees differ somewhat from those based in camps.

I met one brother and sister from Central Asia for a curry lunch in Kuala Lumpur. The next day they were planning to fly to Jakarta with the goal of boarding a boat that would take them to Australia. They had done their research and felt that their best option for securing long-term escape from persecution in their home country, was to take the chance in a boat to Australia. With the increase of mobility and accessibility of information, desperate people have options for escape. Some still take boats that drift prayerfully towards a welcoming and hospitable land mass. Others travel over land to their destination city. And many now fly on commercial airlines to a city they know will receive them, at least initially, as tourists. As a result, global cities all over the world have growing refugee populations. Of note in this study are Istanbul, Amman, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Nairobi, and Johannesburg.

Many have a preconceived notion that a refugee should be poor, uneducated and helpless in some manner. This brother and sister were both already studying for their bachelor’s degrees and were from a

middle class background. Their chosen path to fly to Jakarta and then take a boat to Australia was a terribly treacherous one, and I tried everything I could to persuade them not to proceed with their plan. These boats that take desperate refugees to another country are organized by criminals, called coyotes, who exploit their clients by charging many thousands of dollars. In some cases the coyotes take the money and disappear without ever delivering on the boat. If the refugees do make it on the boat, they are generally packed beyond capacity on a boat that is under-maintained. Just a month before I met this brother and sister, one such boat from Jakarta bound for Australia sank with no survivors. If the boat defies the odds and makes it safely to Australia, chances are the Australian government will arrest them and send them to a remote island to be placed in detention. Would such young, educated, middle class individuals risk such peril if it weren't already a matter of life and death?

### **From Seeking Asylum to Resettled Refugee**

Typically, refugees do not have the option of fleeing to a country that will allow them to settle and become citizens of the new nation. Very few nations receive refugees for long-term settlement. "Mass movements of refugees are seldom welcome, unless they fulfill a specific economic or ideological function, and states may go to great lengths to exclude incomers and/or to isolate them from the wider society" (Marfleet, 2007, p. 36).

In ideal circumstances, refugees are permitted to return to their nation of origin after the conflict has subsided. Only one percent of refugees are sent to a third nation for resettlement (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016b). Such a small percentage is resettled because the few nations who receive refugees have annual quotas permitted each year. There are a number of key issues asylum seekers face as they seek to be recognized as refugees.

### ***Interviewing with UNHCR***

One friend arose early one weekday morning to beat the crowds at the UNHCR office. He was lining up to make an appointment for his first interview to receive refugee status. They gave him an appointment card with a date two years in the future. This was to be only the first of three interviews with UNHCR. We have known several who have waited months or years for their appointment only to have it cancelled because there was no translator that day. Others have had trouble with translators mistranslating their answers to the UNHCR representative. The future of those seeking asylum rests on these interviews.

Those from the UNHCR office have the unenviable job of discerning between those who are truly refugees and those who see an opportunity to live in a developed nation. We have seen some asylum seekers ask churches to be baptized so they can claim religious persecution. Strangely enough, a UNHCR representative will be quizzing asylum seekers claiming to be Christians escaping persecution on finer points of Christian theology even though they themselves may not be Christians.

Once an asylum seeker proves to have a legitimate case after a series of interviews and background checks, UNHCR will grant him or her refugee status. In some countries this gives limited protection and permission to remain in the city in which they have sought asylum while awaiting resettlement. But the waiting list to be resettled is long which means thousands of refugees are forced to wait for several years before they can move. For example, in Kuala Lumpur there are more than 150,000 refugees and only a few thousand will be resettled this year. Every year the list grows longer.

After being recognized as refugees by UNHCR, they are then matched up with a resettlement country. The resettlement country will conduct a series of interviews and background checks. In the case of the United States, the refugee is interviewed by the State department and then several agencies perform strenuous background checks. This process can sometimes take a number of years. As an added stress, the refugee has little idea when or if they will know something about their resettlement. Planned limbo is one thing; unpredictable limbo is even more difficult.

### ***Education for Refugee Children***

Many refugees arrive as families with school-aged children. If a family arrives with a ten year old daughter and they have to wait six years before they are resettled, those six years are critical for that daughter in terms of education and stability. In most of these landing cities, refugee children are not permitted in the government-run schools. In response in some landing cities, churches and social organizations have started learning centers all over the city. The UN helps with a small amount of funding and the rest is supported by volunteer teachers and donations. The NGO International Rescue Committee did a study on refugees from Myanmar in Kuala Lumpur. In this study of 1000 households: 84% of children ages 6-11 are in some kind of learning program. 37% of children ages 12-18 are in a learning program. "Refugee youth between the ages of 11 and 18 in Malaysia are at high risk of missing out on the opportunity to obtain an education" (*In Search of Survival and Sanctuary in the City: Refugees from Myanmar/Burma in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2012, p. 11*). We have known two girls who dropped out of these schools as they reached adolescence because they were drawing too much attention from local police. As refugees, they have no certainty of their rights being honored.

### ***Employment Opportunities***

In a number of landing cities, refugees are not allowed to work officially. This is a challenge for most refugees because the length of the interview and resettlement process takes several years. Those in refugee camps have basic needs (lodging, food, medical care, simple education) met, but urban refugees must pay for their own rent, food, and any education for their children. Very few refugees have enough financial savings to see them through years of living in a global city. Therefore, most urban refugees must work illegally.

I have met refugees who were once doctors, engineers, and academicians in their former countries who now come to cities like Istanbul, Bangkok, and Jakarta with no other choice but to work in simple jobs for long hours. Many work for wages paid under the table. I have seen several places where employers exploit refugee labor knowing their desperation. I met one Syrian refugee working at a retail kiosk. The owner of a competing kiosk called the immigration authorities and soon this Syrian man was put in a detention center. After his time in the detention center he trembles at the thought of working again and being exposed to the authorities.

Every description I have heard about the detention centers is horrifying. In most cases, however, local business owners will not even hire a refugee to begin with. This is especially true of refugees who look different from the local population. For example, African refugees in Bangkok find it nearly impossible to find work because they stand out as obviously not Thai nationals (den Otter, 2007, p. 49).

The refugees I have met have desperately wanted to work and provide for their families. Aside from the legal obstacles to working, refugees often have to learn another language to work and adjust to different cultural norms of work. Those that do manage to find work often have to endure long hours

and few, if any, days off. Even commuting to work is rife with danger due to random police check points causing many refugees to remain in a confined urban area for fear of detainment.

Whether it is navigating the interview process or finding employment and education, urban refugees face nearly overwhelming obstacles as they search for a life free from oppression.

### **Unsettled Refugees**

Many, if not most, refugees are never resettled in a third country. With nearly 20 million recognized refugees around the world, there simply are not enough countries willing to receive refugees for resettlement. With only 80,000 refugees being resettled each year, Brad Coath (2015, p. 66) notes “it doesn’t take a degree in mathematics to realize that that’s like trying to pour an entire beach worth of sand through an egg timer.” This means there are thousands of refugees who will remain in the cities mentioned in this article for decades or even the rest of their lives. When the phenomenon of the urban refugees became more prevalent in the late 1990s UNHCR issued a report that indicated that these “spontaneous” or “self-settled” refugees were illegal and circumventing the process designed for those coming from rural settings (Marfleet, 2007, p. 40).

For many refugees, returning to their country of origin is not a possibility. But this leaves refugees in legal limbo because they are no longer recognized as citizens of any nation. This even includes children born in the landing cities as very few nations will automatically recognize the citizenship of those born within their borders. This means these refugee families never gain legal freedom to work and enter children into government sponsored schools. This means life continues in the margins of society.

The situation for refugees differs in each city. In cities like Bangkok or Jakarta, it is very difficult for refugees to ever create a sustainable future due to government restrictions (den Otter, 2007, p. 50; Nah, 2010). Cities like Nairobi or Cairo have developed neighborhoods of refugees from Somalia, Ethiopia, and South Sudan that create their own micro-economy (Ghazaleh, 2003; Halais, 2016). Other cities, like Istanbul, demonstrate a higher level of tolerance for these refugee communities (H., 2016).

There are also a number of factors that can derail a resettlement. The stress families endure sometimes leads to divorces or other family splits. At times single refugees have children with refugees from other nations or with citizens of the host nation. This sometimes leads to a paperwork gridlock that never gets resolved. If the refugee wants to stay with the child, they need to remain in the landing city, legal or not.

Other issues that can slow things down for a refugee awaiting resettlement include health issues (Basavapatna, 2009), legal issues (Fabos & Kibreab, 2007), or a failure to be cleared by the third nation (Ghazaleh, 2003). One family we know ended up in a lawsuit, being sued by a citizen of the host country at which point the refugee process became stalled. Refugees often flee their country of origin with very little, sometimes just the clothes on their backs. I am aware of some refugee minors who fled their home country after their parents were killed and made their way through Southeast Asian jungles to get to Bangkok or Kuala Lumpur. The dilemma for UNHCR is they have no paper trail to verify their stories.

Refugees in these extended holding patterns have no choice but to join the informal economy of the landing cities. If they have families they need to find ways for children to have documentation and education. For some this means changing their status from refugee to obtaining another type of visa (i.e. student or employment visas). Others remain in legal ambiguity, always facing the threat of being sent to a detention center or expelled from the country.

## Opportunities to Serve

From the first chapters of Genesis through the rest of the Bible, we have accounts of people who are displaced because of humanity's sinful condition. Abraham was asked by God to leave his home and go to a land with other occupants. We have already seen how the nation of Israel became refugees after they were delivered from Egyptian slavery. And in Matthew 2, Jesus and his family become refugees when Herod ordered the massacre of all children under the age of two. In other words, the notion of refugees is not a foreign concept in the Bible (pardon the pun). "The biblical mandate to care for refugees is clear and binding" (Vimalasekaran, 2016, p. 216)

God's people are clearly told to love the sojourner/stranger (noted by Hebrew terms *ger* and *towshab* used over 100 times in the Old Testament) in their midst. There are a number of passages calling God's people to welcome the strangers among us, to show mercy, and even to love them as our own family (Lev. 19:9-10, 19, 34; 23:22; Deut. 24:19; Heb. 13:2, etc.). These commands to love the stranger rooted in the nature of God, who is love (1 John 4:8) and loves sojourners specifically (Deut. 10:18; Psalm 9:9). Space does not permit a detailed survey of the biblical passages that inform ministry among refugees, so I draw on Anthony Casey's conclusion (2016, p. 16); "God's care for the foreigner is so strong throughout Scripture, that regardless of the political laws of our (or any country), Christians must care for the foreigner among us while we have a chance." Broadly speaking, there are three areas of response for the church: social justice, physical welfare, and spiritual welfare.

### ***Social Justice***

In many of these cities there is a risk in helping refugees. Since many of the landing cities are in countries that are not signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the international community has little input into refugee rights in those countries. For example, refugees in Malaysia or Thailand have no legal status. This means Malaysian or Thai citizens who help refugees are themselves in grey legal area. However, if the biblical calling is to help refugees, that overrides earthly legality.

One important way for the church in these landing cities to respond is through advocacy both through legal channels as well as at a grassroots level. Refugees, due to their limited legal status, have few options to appeal to the government structures of the host countries. Christian lawyers and political representatives can work for changes in laws as well as strive to shine a light on police and immigration exploitation, which is so rampant in many of the landing cities. When there are specific legal cases involving refugees, Christian lawyers can provide counsel and representation.

On a grassroots level, the church can help other citizens understand the plight of urban refugees and call for a change in how the public treats refugees. Refugees are often exploited by landlords, employers, and other power-holders. The church should take the lead in promoting just rental agreements, adherence to employment laws, and safe passage for refugees throughout the city. Even in multicultural cities like these landing cities, many people operate out of xenophobia and a lack of trust (Bauman, 2016, p. 13). Christians can be advocates for refugees as a viable segment of the city's population.

### ***Physical and Social Welfare***

A clear aspect of the biblical mandate to care for the sojourners among us is to see to their physical and social needs. The church in each of these cities is blessed with many resources that can be used for

these who have been forced from their homelands. Refugees often do not have the means with which to see to their own needs due to language obstacles, legal restrictions, and a lack of funds. The church can respond in a number of ways.

The starting point is to gain an understanding of the needs. One easy way to do this is to network with the local UNHCR office, NGOs, and local aid organizations. The needs of these refugees is far beyond what any organization can handle, therefore an offer of help is usually welcomed. Through collaboration, the impact on refugee lives is multiplied (Coath et al., 2015, p. 76). Once there is an understanding of the needs, the church can assess her resources that will help meet the needs. Similar to serving in any under-resourced community, it is best to work collaboratively with the community to ensure the help rendered is helpful (See Fikkert & Corbett, 2009).

The church should consider helping with needs that are not easily met by individuals. Some ministries try to deliver a small amount of food to refugee families, but they would rather be able to work to earn their own income. Churches can provide help in finding work (the church in a city is a surprisingly vast network), vocational training, and teaching the trade language(s) necessary to work in the city. Christian business owners might consider hiring refugees and ensuring fair wages and work hours.

Another way the church can help is through education. In Kuala Lumpur there are over a hundred rag-tag schools/learning centers for refugee children. During the years refugees spend in landing cities, they need educational alternatives for the children. Many churches are already involved in several ways. Some churches provide classroom space for refugee children to study. In addition, Christians can volunteer to teach the kids or help secure school books and other necessities for these schools. If children miss five years of education, it could be devastating for their adjustment in the resettlement country.

There are many other services the church can provide (see Ng & Crane, 2015). Medical and dental needs are always important. Many refugees need help negotiating fare rental agreements and finding apartments near public transportation. In some cases, refugees need help navigating the UN's interview process and accessing services being offered by various NGOs. But one of the greatest gifts you can give a refugee is your friendship. Throughout the process with UNHCR and government agencies, refugees are treated like paperwork in need of a number of signatures. What better way to introduce a small dose of dignity into the life of a refugee than offering genuine friendship?

### ***Spiritual Welfare***

The church is called to make disciples of every nation (Matt. 28:18-20). This mandate certainly includes seeing to the spiritual welfare of refugees. Deuteronomy clearly indicates we are to include refugees and other people in transition in our spiritual community (31:12). Similar to the physical and social welfare of refugees, the church needs to first spend time understanding the spiritual needs of a refugee community. Some refugees come from places where gospel witness is suppressed and the greatest need is evangelism. Other refugees come from a deeply rooted Christian background. And yet others are fleeing persecution due to their Christian faith. In every case we want to make disciples and foster healthy churches. But in each case the starting point will differ.

Refugees coming from places where there is very little gospel witness will need people who can lovingly and patiently share the gospel with them. This can be a wonderful opportunity to share the gospel with those from countries few Christians can enter. We do need to be mindful that persecution can persist

even within a particular community. If people from a particular nation repeatedly come to a particular city, churches should be ready with Bibles and other materials in the refugee's language. Those who come to faith in Jesus may then be able to share the gospel among their own people.

Those who are Christians leaving an environment of heavy persecution may lack sufficient discipleship. We worked with one young man who was involved in distributing Christian literature in his home country and when he discovered he was going to be arrested, left immediately. When my wife and I met with him we soon discovered he knew very little about the Christian faith even though he was being persecuted for it. This time of transition for refugees can be a critical time of discipleship. There is a need for mature Christians willing to invest their time with these refugees.

Other refugees come from places where the church is already quite developed. For example, in Southeast Asia there are many refugees coming from tribes in Myanmar that are majority Christian (i.e. Chin, Karen, and Kachin tribes all have heavily Christian populations). For many refugees the distractions and temptations of city life can draw people away from spiritual vitality. There is a need for the planting of healthy churches and biblically solid leadership development (Crane, 2014). I have found that refugee churches can become wonderful partners in trying to engage the rest of the city with the gospel.

Whether we are sharing the gospel with someone who is hearing for the first time or equipping a mature Christian with leadership skills, there are vital opportunities to make disciples who make disciples (2 Tim. 2:2). The church must be careful that it does not focus on either the physical needs or the spiritual needs alone. Loving the refugees in our midst means showing concern about them physically *and* spiritually. But we also need to remember that other organizations might do a better job of addressing their physical needs, but the church has a responsibility to meet the spiritual needs. This time of transition can be pivotal for refugees' spiritual growth. Returning to the example of Israel in the wilderness, Bruce Waltke (2007, p. 540) observes: "In short, lacking normal human structures of society and life and confronted with the hostility of the environment and enemies, Israel finds its life in God."

### **Conclusion**

At a time when more than half of the world's refugees are urban, it is important for the church to understand their process of going from their original home country to a landing city and then, sometimes, on to a resettlement country. While the church has been involved with refugees in resettlement countries, there is a great need for the church to minister among refugees in these landing cities. The church can play an important role in ministering to people that have undergone severe pain and hardship. The church can minister best by first understanding the realities of refugees in these landing cities. With a firm grasp of the biblical mandate to love refugees in our midst, we must respond to address physical, social, and spiritual needs while simultaneously addressing issues of injustice directed at refugees. As refugees struggle through the urban wilderness while waiting for their eventual new home, this can be a critical time to learn how to rely on God.

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