

Refugee and Immigration Assistance

Sometimes they leave home in the dark of night, taking only what they can carry, knowing that because of their religion, race, politics or ethnic community it is not safe to stay. Sometimes they live with packed suitcases for months or years, waiting for government permission to leave. In some places they leave in shock and despair, driven away by bombings, invasions or wars, or by earthquake, flood or drought. They leave for where there is hope for a better life.

These are refugees. They are people without a home, without a country. Although they may seem like strangers at first, they are each special persons; people with frustrations, hurts, hopes, longings, fears and loves. They are the strangers we take in for Christ's sake.

Refugees flee many different kinds of circumstances and for different reasons. There are those who flee revolutionary upheavals in their homeland; those who were the privileged elite or simply part of old regimes overthrown; people who cannot accept the new order or who believe they may not survive under the new order. Others flee the repressions undertaken to prevent revolutions; the victims of systematic violations of human rights or military counter-insurgency operations.

There are those who flee conditions under "stable" governments, conditions which may include the inability of the system to assure its citizens even the minimal means of survival or conditions of intolerable restrictions on individual liberties such as the practice of religious faith.

Some are fleeing the violent battles and struggles for change in certain nations. Other refugees flee civil wars or wars for succession among suffering ethnic groups within nations, or violent oppression against racial groups. Indeed some refugees may have little in common with others except for being a refugee.

What Does it Mean to be a Refugee?

To leave is a decision refugees do not make easily or voluntarily. Most of them leave behind virtually everything that is important to them—family, friends, homes, farms, jobs and businesses. While some have the time to gather family members and a few prized possessions, for others there is little or no time to prepare when the bombs start falling or the troops marched in.

In many places the fundamental decision to move—leave the land—is far more traumatic and serious than we in North America can imagine. To leave means a loss of roots, lifestyle, livelihood, traditions and culture. Taking the huge step of becoming a refugee signifies tremendous loss.

The ordeal of flight can be another trauma for refugees. Many do not survive the journey. Innumerable Vietnamese and Haitian "boat people" have been lost at sea, and large numbers of people in many countries have been gunned down or "disappeared" as they approached the border.

If refugees survive their escape, they are not always welcome where they seek refuge. Scenes of crowded boats being pushed out to sea or reports of people being shipped back under military escort vividly remind us of the fate of many refugees. Often they are restricted to refugee camps in the nation where they first arrive and must wait years to get to a permanent home where a normal life can begin. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) supervises refugee camps around the world, but these camps are often bleak and lonely places.

For those in refugee camps there are few certainties about the future. Will they be able to return safely to their homes? Will they remain for months or years in spartan camps as thousands of Palestinians have for more than 25 years? Will they be given the opportunity to resettle in a third country? Will they be able to rebuild shattered lives and once again become productive members of society?

What Are the Basic Requirements?

The basic requirements for a church or ACS center to sponsor a refugee family or individual include the following:

1. Meet the refugee family or individual at the local airport.
2. Supply initial food, shelter and clothing.
3. Help the refugee find a suitable job.
4. Enroll the children in school and arrange language training for the adults.
5. Assist in obtaining health care for the refugee.
6. Provide cultural orientation.
7. Introduce the refugee to the community and the congregation.
8. Extend friendship, emotional support and guidance.
9. Protect the refugee from those who may want to take advantage of their naivete and trusting nature.

When refugees arrive here they are excited by the opportunities and the new life about to begin. At the same time, they arrive exhausted—drained physically, mentally and spiritually—by their ordeal and losses. With the exception of a few who are able to earn wages while they wait in the camps, these newcomers arrive with little or no material resources, as well as diminished emotional and physical reserves to cope with new challenges and adjustments.

Once refugees arrive here in North America for resettlement, they face a process of adjustment and learning to live in a new culture. For many, this involves new beginnings and renewed hope, but also new trauma and often a new sense of loss.

Refugees find themselves facing major, generally unanticipated adjustments here. The reality is always different from the idealized images of television and hopeful imaginations. Culturally, everything significant may seem different and alien to the newcomer. Their accustomed gender roles and family patterns are replaced by new ways of living. Traditional religions and occupations seem to have little or no meaning here. Anyone who has travelled in another land without knowing its language has experienced the tremendous feeling of isolation because of the inability to communicate.

Refugees possess great inner strength and still have a measure of that strength left for the resettlement process. They bring with them rich heritages and traditions, and the determination to maintain and share them with their hosts. Much of the culture in the U.S. and Canada has its roots in the combined heritages brought here by the immigrants and refugees who populated North America.

Part of the challenge of refugee ministry is helping the newcomer to rediscover his or her own strength. More important, that the actual mechanics of resettlement—finding housing, jobs, and learning the language and laws—is the process by which refugees grasp the renewal of their lives. For ACS volunteers involved in refugee ministry, this means providing a caring context within which such growth can take place.

The Bible Basis for Refugee Ministry

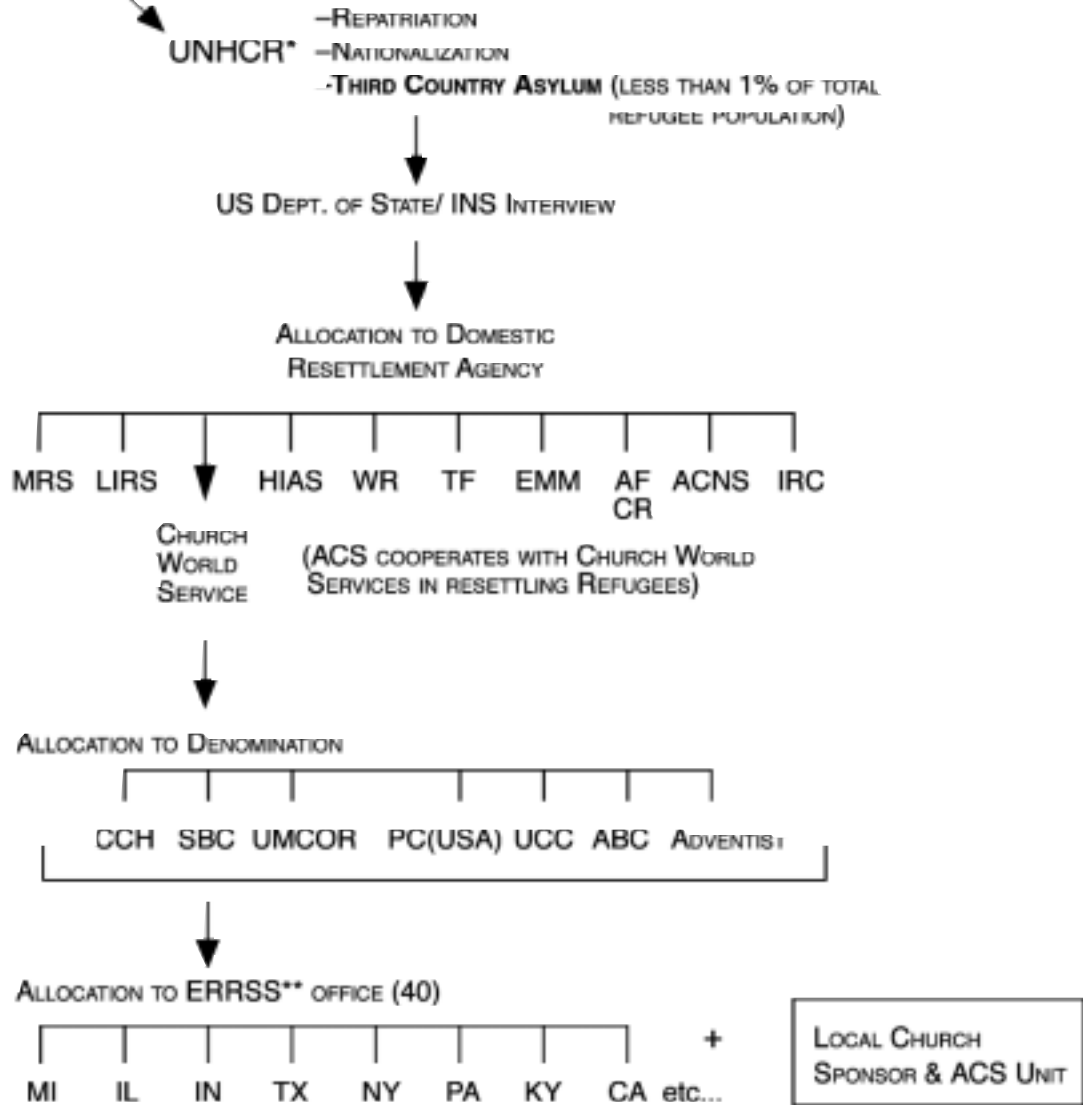
In the Old Testament, God gives particular attention to “the widow, the orphan and the alien” in repeated passages. (Deuteronomy 10:17-19, Psalms 146:9, Jeremiah 7:5-7, etc.; the King James Version uses the word “stranger.”) These represented the marginalized elements of society at the time; those who could not own land, the primary means of making a living. Because women could not own land at that time, the widow was often left without any means of supporting herself. Orphans were often left without any inheritance and therefore were cut off from working the land. The alien, because he was of a different nationality or ethnicity and not a citizen of the country, was also denied access to a livelihood.

Christ’s compassion for the alien is not limited by the fact that they may cause economic dislocation in the country where they arrive, “For the Lord your God ... shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the ... alien, giving him food and clothing.” (Deuteronomy 10:17-18) God follows this statement with an admonition that is particularly relevant to attitudes in North America today; “you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens” (Verse 19).



THE REFUGEE'S JOURNEY

FLEES HOMELAND



* UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSION FOR REFUGEES
** ECUMENICAL REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT AND SPONSORSHIP SERVICES

Figure 11.1

Pre-Arrival Checklist

1. Arrange for housing but do not rent or put a deposit on housing until the refugees arrive because there are often unexpected delays.
2. Secure donations or commitments of necessary furniture and household goods.
3. Obtain clothing just prior to or immediately after arrival.
4. Locate ESL classes or ESL learning materials.
5. Make a list of employment possibilities.
6. Read background materials on the culture from which the refugee is coming so as to improve your understanding of the newcomer.
7. Locate a supermarket that provides appropriate ethnic foods, if possible.
8. Contact medical facilities. A volunteer physician and/or dentist may be willing to provide initial examinations free of charge. What public health clinics and programs are available to the refugee?
9. Establish contact with others involved in refugee sponsorship in your community.
10. Raise the necessary funding.
11. Arrange for volunteers to provide transportation.
12. Find an interpreter.

Most important, prepare to meet the refugee at the airport. In cold weather, you may wish to take along extra coats and other items just in case the refugee is wearing light clothing. A quiet, friendly reception is usually best. Avoid crowds and photographers. Remember that the refugee will have traveled many miles and will be extremely tired. Their body may be on a "time-clock" that is six, ten or even twelve hours different than yours.

God knows that refugee sponsorship is one of the least popular of compassion ministries, so He specifically instructs, "Do not deprive the alien ... of justice" (Deuteronomy 24:17). The next verse says because "your God redeemed you ... I command you to do this." It is one of the most difficult things your congregation may ever get involved in, but it is a specific sign of the redeemed people of God.

The current attitudes of exclusion expressed toward immigrants and refugees by many in the United States and Canada do not come as a surprise to God. It has always been in the heart of sinners to selfishly keep for themselves and their own kind the blessings of education and economic success. "The Lord watches over the alien and ... frustrates the ways of the wicked." (Psalms 146:9) He long ago noticed the tendency of human beings to forget the source of their homes and jobs, and reminds the converted, "If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly and ... do not oppress the alien, ... then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers" (Jeremiah 7:5-7).

God gives specific instruction that offerings are to be taken to support refugee ministry. "When you have finished setting aside a tenth of all your produce ... you shall give it to ... the alien ... so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied." (Deuteronomy 26:12) If God's people (the church) do not raise the funds, do the work and find the in-kind donations needed to help resettle refugees, who will?

Ellen White comments on the anti-immigrant attitudes that were widely held in her time. In an article in the *Review and Herald*, April 20, 1886, entitled "Whom Will Christ Welcome?" she writes, "Christ ... made a sacrifice that he might provide a home for pilgrims and strangers in the world seeking for a better country ... Shall those who are subjects of his grace, who are expecting to be heirs of immortality, refuse or even feel reluctant to share their homes with the homeless and needy? ... Has the injunction of the apostle no force in this age,— 'Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares'?"

By 1894 immigration to North America was running at an even higher volume, and in an article in the May 28 issue of *Bible Echo* that year, Ellen White stated, "This very work is needed ..."

In different places are families and individual members of families who have left their native land, and are sojourners and strangers in a strange land. In leaving their own country and coming to a new place ... many perplexities have engaged their minds, and cares have come in between their souls and Jesus, who has assured them that He is

a present help in every time of need. ... This class need Jesus, and the ministers should educate them, pointing them, as did John, to the “Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.” If they will only come to Jesus, He will hear them. Present to such souls not doctrinal points, but a living Savior....”

By the turn of the century, when Christ’s Object Lessons was published, ministry to refugees and immigrants was even more needed. In the context of a devotional book, Ellen White wrote:

In the courts and lanes of the great cities, in the lonely byways of the country, are families and individuals—perhaps strangers in a strange land—who are without church relations, and who, in their loneliness, come to feel that God has forgotten them. They do not understand what they must do to be saved. Many are sunken in sin. Many are in distress. They are pressed with suffering, want, unbelief, despondency. Disease of every type afflicts them, both in body and in soul. They long to find a solace for their troubles, and Satan tempts them to seek it in lusts and pleasures that lead to ruin and death. He is offering them the apples of Sodom, that will turn to ashes upon their lips. They are spending their money for that which is not bread, and their labor for that which satisfieth not. (Pages 232-233)

Of one particular immigrant, Mrs. White wrote, “Brother Ottosen ... is a retiring man, but one of great promise.... His family are all unbelievers ... He may be diffident in speaking the language. But I entreat of you to do just what that institution was brought into existence to do. Take these strangers and put them under the most favorable circumstances, giving them every advantage possible, encouraging them, helping them, educating them for God’s work.” (Letter 56, 1889; to W. H. Hall, October 25, 1889; in Manuscript Releases, Volume Nine, page 41)

This is the same challenge that Ellen White would present to your local church today. Her messages are still authoritative for Seventh-day Adventists. Do “just what” your church “was brought into existence to do. Take these strangers and put them under the most favorable circum-

Post-Arrival Checklist

1. Be sure housing is in order, utilities hooked up, telephone installed, heat turned on, etc.
2. Post phone number(s) of contact person(s) in the sponsoring church and/or the local ACS center.
3. If the refugees have their own apartment when they arrive, you may wish to ask if they would feel more comfortable with someone staying with them for the first few nights until they feel at home.
4. Purchase a supply of groceries and related necessities.
5. Arrange for regular access to an interpreter, if necessary.
6. Enroll the refugee in an ESL class or tutoring.
7. Discuss the various aspects of the sponsorship and resettlement process with the refugees, including finances and the various appointments and offices you will be visiting with them.
8. During the initial verbal communication, write down important words or phrases if the refugee does not understand all of your spoken words. Many refugees understand written English better than conversational language.
9. Arrange for children to be enrolled in school shortly after the refugees arrive.
10. Assist in obtaining Social Security cards.
11. Schedule appointments for medical and dental examinations.
12. Be sure that immigration papers, medical records and other documents are intact. Make copies of all of these documents for your file and as a backup precaution.
13. Explain the various costs of the household.
14. Explain emergency procedures for fire and accidents. Provide a list of emergency phone numbers.
15. Provide materials giving some introduction to the culture here in North America and your local community.
16. Take the refugee on an orientation tour of their neighborhood.
17. Assist the refugee with orientation to other aspects of life here in North America such as banking, education, employment, home life, etc.
18. Discuss the refugee’s job credentials and experience.
19. Help the refugee obtain employment.
20. Aid the refugee in becoming introduced to others of same ethnicity and cultural background. These community links are important.
21. Invite the refugee to church, and introduce him or her to those who can be helpful or interesting friends.
22. If appropriate, assist in securing learner’s permit or driver’s license.
23. Continue to build and strengthen your friendship by making appointments for future visits.

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stances,” providing encouragement, practical help and education. That is what refugee ministry is all about.

Do Adventists Help Refugees?

Yes! Adventists help refugees through Adventist Immigration and Refugee Ministries, a program of Adventist Community Services which involves a network of individuals, local churches, and helping agencies working together to resettle refugees accepted into the United States. A similar program is operated by ADRA Community Services in Canada.

In the United States ACS works with a consortium of Christian organizations through Church World Service (CWS) which has a contract with the U.S. State Department to oversee the resettlement of refugees. Services are provided by volunteers, local churches and ACS centers in conjunction with local CWS Affiliate Offices. These offices are staffed by case managers and other professionals necessary to assist refugee and immigrant families. They are an important part of the refugee resettlement network with which the Seventh-day Adventist Church works. For this reason they are to be considered as field offices of the North American ACS headquarters refugee program.

Figure 11.1 illustrates the roles and relationships within the refugee ministry network. It follows the journey of the refugee from overseas to a new home and community here in North America.

Many of the refugees that ACS units and Adventist churches are asked to sponsor are those who have been referred to ACS by CWS because they have identified themselves as Adventists. They may be baptized members of the church in another country, or they may identify themselves with the church because of their contact with missionaries or ADRA workers. They may be completed Bible studies in a refugee camp and have been baptized under circumstances where no organized, local congregation can be established. In most cases, even if they are a baptized member, their membership records will be lost and contact with their home church impossible. It is recommended that the provision in the Seventh-day

Adventist Church Manual for accepting members on Profession of Faith be used in these cases.

Adventist Immigration and Refugee Ministry, coordinated by the ACS office at the North American Division, does not provide financial resources to CWS, CWS Affiliate offices, ACS centers or local churches for resettling refugees. Local units are expected to find the necessary funding and in-kind resources to help the newly arrived families get started and become self-supporting as soon as possible. Most refugees have proven to be hard-working, with strong initiative and quickly become responsible for themselves.

Since Adventist Refugee Ministry largely involves local churches or ACS centers who welcome and adopt an individual refugee or refugee family, the remainder of this chapter will focus on this process. It is called “sponsor” or “cosponsor” in all of the literature from the organizations involved.

What Does it Mean to Sponsor Refugees?

As Christians ministering to refugees we become instruments of God’s grace and love showing to these displaced people that the world is not a cold, merciless place but a world of warmth and compassion. The successful resettlement of refugees requires a caring and supportive community in which they can begin their lives again. In return, refugees enrich the lives of the sponsoring community in many ways, both through their material contributions and the unique dimensions of the fresh and varied perspectives they bring. Not only does the sponsorship process involve giving to refugees but also being open to receiving gifts of life and hope from them.

Sponsorship is one form of ministry to the world refugee problem. Local churches in North America can open their hospitality to actually receive the oppressed and hungry from around the world. In microcosm, one family can teach your church about the needs and conditions across the globe that you would normally only read about. Sponsorship of refugees involves commitment and responsibilities, but it also has great benefits. Sponsoring individuals and churches are

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enriched not only by their contribution to healing a broken world, but also by the new friendships they make and their broadened knowledge of the world.

The work of the refugee sponsor or team of cosponsors consists of three essential responsibilities. The first responsibility is that of empowerment, assisting the refugee with initial material needs and helping the refugee achieve economic self-sufficiency. The second is that of friendship, providing the crucial emotional support and guidance needed by the refugee to meet the challenges of overcoming great personal losses and making the major adjustments to the new society. Third is that of advocacy, ensuring just and decent treatment for the newcomer in the community and promoting respect for the cultural heritage and identity of the refugee.

The First Three to Six Months

The empowerment responsibility starts early in the process of sponsoring a refugee and involves a number of specific responsibilities to be carried out during the first three to six months after arrival.

1. Meet the refugee upon arrival at the airport, provide temporary accommodations as necessary, and assist in obtaining initial housing and essential furniture and household goods.
2. Assure that food or a food allowance is provided and that the other basic needs of the refugee are met.
3. Provide minimum clothing for refugees upon arrival if necessary. Some may come from warm climates and be ill-equipped for the winters in North America, or need clothes suitable for work.
4. Assist the refugee in applying for a Social Security card and in registering children for school.
5. Provide general orientation to the new community and the North American culture.
6. Invite the refugee to church, arrange transportation if necessary and introduce them to people who can become their friends. They may wish to get Sabbath School materials in their original language.
7. Assist in learning English and with enroll-

ment in English as a Second Language (ESL) courses.

8. Help the refugee as soon as possible after arrival to seek public or private health services and assist the refugee in dealing with known health problems.
9. Provide job counseling and assist employable refugees in finding jobs.
10. Advise the refugee on the availability and procedure for applying for various training programs and/or continued education.
11. Follow through until the refugee achieves self-sufficiency.

Long-term Responsibility

The responsibility of friendship starts as soon as you become acquainted with the newly-arrived refugee and continues as long as the two of you maintain contact. Specific duties include:

1. Offer your friendship and hospitality to the individual or family.
2. Provide emotional support as needed.
3. Respect the refugee and treat him or her as an equal.
4. Make yourself available for orientation and appropriate assistance with adjustment problems and concerns.
5. Help the refugee maintain and share essential elements of their own cultural heritage. Encourage them to share from their background and tell their story as they are able and willing.

Close friendship may not develop and should not be forced. Respect for privacy, the personality of the refugee and a sense of personal limits as dictated by the refugee's culture must be maintained.

The responsibility of advocacy includes both a specific responsibility for the individual or family being sponsored, and a wider responsibility for the role of refugees and immigrants in the local community. The following duties are involved:

1. Ensure that the refugee is not taken advantage of, discriminated against, or exploited in their work place or personal lives. They may be naive and trusting, and sometimes treated unjustly by well-meaning persons. The sponsor is expected to be the protector of the refugee, especially during the first year after arrival.
2. Encourage contact, communication, and

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bonds with other refugees and mutual support organizations.

Getting Organized to Sponsor a Refugee

Agreement to sponsor a refugee is often set up months in advance, although in some emergencies the refugee may arrive in a week or two. Sponsorship duties can be organized in several ways, and it is important to have the plan in place before the day that the welcoming party goes to the airport.

The first step in planning is to list the various tasks that must be accomplished. Then, various individuals in the congregation can be recruited to take assignments based on their gifts, skills and resources. Other people in the community should also be invited to get involved.

Some sponsor groups organize into small committees, each with a designated task. For example, one committee could be responsible for securing housing, another arranging transportation, another for coordination of donated goods, and so on. Other congregations prefer to have one Refugee Committee with each committee member assigned a particular task and encouraged to recruit help from outside the committee.

One person or couple should be appointed as coordinator for the entire project. A lack of leadership and accountability may result in failure to deliver necessary items at the time they are needed. The coordinator needs to make copies of a master check-list, listing the person responsible for each item, and double-check every detail before the day that the refugee arrives at the airport.

In many cases refugees are resettled through “family reunification” policies. This means that a member of the family is already living in North America, and relatives and friends will be the primary sponsors of the newly-arrived refugee. A local church or ACS unit will be asked to serve as “backup sponsor” in these cases, to ensure that the needs of the refugee can be cared for. This involves significantly less responsibility than a regular sponsorship.

Organizing for refugee sponsorship involves both pre-arrival arrangements and a process of working with the refugee after he or she arrives. Whichever way your church or ACS unit chooses

to accomplish the various tasks involved, it is important to remember that the involvement of a number of church members and others who volunteer their time and services is crucial. The need for volunteer time and energy will be greatest at first, and then diminish over time.

The Responsibilities and Rights of the Refugee

Persons admitted to the United States under the provisions of the Refugee Act of 1980 are protected by the same laws, subject to the same obligations and penalties, and entitled to the same basic rights enjoyed by U.S. citizens. Similar provisions exist in the relevant laws of Canada.

There are many laws and regulations which refugees from some cultures will find unfamiliar. These differences require some orientation and discussion. The role and responsibilities of the police is something that should be given special attention. In both the U.S. and Canada, the police are civil, not military, authorities. They both enforce the law and work to protect and serve the people. This is quite different from the way in which police function in many countries, and refugees will need to be told that police officers will assist them in emergencies and when they are lost. The police need not be feared, and this will seem new and strange for many refugees; a concept that will take time for them to become comfortable with.

Much additional information regarding the documents issued to refugees by the government is contained in current manuals and bulletins available through ACS at the North American Division office. This includes how refugees can apply for an adjustment in status, bring in family members and seek citizenship. When a refugee is assigned to a local church or ACS unit for sponsorship, the latest editions of these documents are made available. Updates are distributed regularly to active sponsors.

Helping Refugees Find Social and Spiritual Integration

Those who make it to North America possess great inner strength and one of the most important tasks for sponsors is to enable refugees to re-dis-

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cover this strength when they need it. The combined impact of the loss of their former world the adjustment to a complex, new world may become problematic. Sponsors should be sensitive to the emotional strain that results. There can be a delayed reaction to the trauma and grief of the process they have been through which is experienced after the refugees are settled. It is also important to be aware of the tremendous culture shock refugees experience. The different expectations of gender roles, class status, and other transitions can pose problems.

Assimilation of the refugee as a productive and participating member of the community is the aim of resettlement. To define exactly what constitutes integration is not easy; it is a complex process which involves preservation of elements of the refugee's cultural heritage along with the acceptance of North American ways leading to self-sufficiency and responsibility.

Refugees face tremendous stress from a multitude of factors upon arrival. These factors generally include:

1. Physical exhaustion complicated by poor nutrition and unhealthy conditions in the refugee camps and in transit.

2. Culture shock, which includes disorientation in time, unusual fatigue, extreme mood swings, crying easily or laughing inappropriately, nervousness and restlessness, fearfulness, anxiety, withdrawal, an inappropriate level of distress over small matters, and antagonism or suspicion toward members of the new culture.

There is no danger is the existence of these symptoms during the first days after a refugee arrives. In fact, it is normal. Concern is appropriate when symptoms persist at a high level of reaction. The best treatment for culture shock is time, good orientation and sympathetic support during the stressful periods. The case manager at the ERRSS office and/or a mental health professional should be consulted if questions or concerns arise.

The willingness of the church to sponsor refugees is based in its doctrines and values. ACS is involved in refugee ministry because of the command of God to care for "the stranger," and the compassion of Jesus Christ which motivates our entire organization. Of course, this leads to

questions about sharing faith and the response of the refugee to witnessing opportunities. Experience has shown that the area of religious beliefs and practices can be a very delicate one in relations between refugees and sponsors. This requires special sensitivity on the part of sponsors.

Even if the refugee comes to you identified as a member of the Adventist Church, you may find that their beliefs and practices are not entirely what is familiar to you. Rushed or pressured conversions can be disastrous both psychologically and spiritually for refugees. Traditional religious beliefs can reassert themselves because relinquishing these beliefs adds one more loss to their already overflowing burden of grief, and thus further complicates their adjustment, mental health and ultimate integration. Where refugees can participate in a church made up of immigrants from their country of origin, it most likely that they will handle religious conversion without major difficulty. It is important for your church to behave in an accepting and inclusive way with refugee and not place undue expectations or demands on the newcomer.

Resource Materials

Manual for Refugee Sponsorship by the Immigration and Refugee Program at Church World Service is the major resource for refugee ministry. If your church or ACS unit is considering sponsorship, you can obtain a copy from the North American office of Adventist Community Services, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904; (301) 680-6438.

Adventist Immigration and Refugee Ministry is a small brochure that describes the Adventist Immigration and Refugee Ministry program. You can obtain copies (including quantities) from the North American office of ACS.

Refugee Ministry in the Local Congregation by J. Ronald Mummert with Jeff Bach (1992, Herald Press, Scottdale, Pennsylvania, and Waterloo, Ontario) is written from a Mennonite perspective, but contains much that is practical and nothing that is objectionable to Seventh-day Adventists.