

‘A community of support’

Churches, temples and synagogues here and nationwide still helping refugees seeking shelter in U.S.



From left, Hsa Moo, 17, Hsar Law, 12, and Dah Dah, 16, hold candles Saturday evening during the Easter Vigil service at St. Alban’s Episcopal Church in El Cajon. (Hayne Palmour IV u-t)



Members of St. Alban's Episcopal Church in El Cajon participate in a Palm Sunday procession last week. (Nancee E. Lewis)

BY PETER ROWE

To witness the universal power of Easter's message, drop in on St. Alban's Episcopal Church in El Cajon for today's 9:30 a.m. service.

Here, the Gospel account of Jesus Christ's resurrection rings out in English, Arabic and Karen, the tongue of Myanmar's Karen people.

"We always print the readings in all three languages," said the pastor, the Rev. David Madsen. "And there's a Spanish congregation that meets after us."

Even as Washington moves to reduce the number of refugees allowed into the U.S., churches, temples and synagogues in San Diego and across the nation are seeing growing support for foreigners who seek shelter here.

That's true even among white evangelical Christians, despite some polls showing this group strongly opposed to welcoming refugees.

"Our experience has not necessarily borne that out," said Matthew Soerens, U.S. director of church mobilization for World Relief, the humanitarian arm of the National Association of Evangelicals. "We've really seen an uptick in volunteers."

The Trump administration's attempts to ban refugees from some majority-Muslim countries may have unintentionally spurred more people to champion these newcomers.

"We definitely have seen a lot more interest from the community to help," said Etleva Bejko, director of refugee and immigration services for Jewish Family Service of San Diego. "Especially since last year, when the refugees have been such a hot topic."

Still, this is not a spiritual slam dunk. Like their secular neighbors, churchgoers worry about terrorists pretending to be refugees. And they're concerned that even genuine refugees will tax the economy and burden our schools.

Religious tensions, too, can be a hurdle.

When Oceanside's St. Thomas More Catholic Church decided to sponsor a refugee family, some were dismayed when the congregation was assigned a Muslim clan.

"We heard, 'why didn't we look for a Catholic family?'" said Sister Maureen Brown, a pastoral associate at the parish.

Her answer: "We took who had the greatest need. They are all our brothers and sisters in God."

So, no, this isn't easy. Yet Bejko has been surprised by the many people who have rallied to this cause.

"Everybody is willing to help and work and create this network of support," she said, "regardless of whether it's Catholic Charities or Jewish Family Service or another church.

"It's just becoming a community of support."

A new life and a tragedy

About two years ago, a global tragedy — the war in Syria — prompted a local response.

"We decided we wanted to do something," said St. Thomas More's Brown, a nun who belongs to the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet.

After consulting with the pastor, the Rev. Michael Ratajczak, she asked Catholic Charities of San Diego if they had a needy Syrian refugee family. They did: the al-Mustafas, a Muslim family of seven.

Catholic Charities is one of four local agencies that helps resettle refugees. (The others are Jewish Family Service, the Alliance for African Assistance and the International Rescue Committee.) Although the Trump administration has called for "more extreme vetting" of refugees, the al-Mustafas had already endured years of background checks.

To be classified as a refugee, people must flee their native country due to fear of persecution due to race, national origin, religious or political affiliations, or membership in an unpopular social group, such as the LGBT community.

Once in a new country, they can apply to the United Nations for refugee status and move into a refugee camp. The U.N. High Commission for Refugees performs a background check and recommends a placement.

If they are routed to the U.S., most face years of waiting. All are subjected to further investigations.

“The FBI’s counter-terrorism people, the Department of Defense, the Department of Homeland Security — refugees have to go through all these checks as well as a health screening,” said Jewish Family Service’s Bejko. “The refugees are the most vetted group of immigrants who enter this country.”

Refugees are also subject to annual quotas set by the U.S. president. In the Obama administration’s last year, the number was 110,000.

President Donald Trump set this year’s quota at 45,000, the lowest number since Congress passed the 1980 Refugee Act.

In San Diego County, the flow of refugees — once several thousand a month — has slowed to a trickle.

“We’ve received only about 160 refugees in the last five months throughout all of San Diego,” said Robert Moser, executive director of Catholic Charities of San Diego.

Husan al-Mustafa, his wife and their five children flew into San Diego International Airport in early 2017.

Catholic Charities found them an El Cajon apartment, where some neighbors speak Arabic. Parishioners from St. Thomas More donated furnishings for the family’s new home and helped meet some other needs.

Some, not all.

“There are things you can pay for and things you cannot pay for,” Sister Brown said. “For instance, we cannot give them cash — if we do, they have to report that and then the government deducts that from what they receive.”

On their arrival in the U.S., refugees without other financial resources receive payments from the federal government. The amounts are modest — \$420 a month for a couple — and limited to the first eight months.

That’s an investment, said World Relief’s Soerens, who cited studies that show most refugees are self-sufficient taxpayers within their first year.

“I tell people it’s like my four-year-old daughter,” Soerens said. “If you look at her today, she’s a big drain on taxpayers.”

This new life comes with no guarantees. In April 2017, the al-Mustafa’s son, Mohammed, drowned during an outing to Mission Beach. While still in mourning, the family trekked from El Cajon to St. Thomas More in Oceanside.

“They came to the church after Mohammed died to say thank you,” Sister Brown said. “Not just for the support after Mohammed died, but for the whole thing. If there had been any barriers at all in the congregation, I think the death of Mohammed broke them down.”

Dueling narratives

As the numbers of refugees admitted to the U.S. plunges, the networks built to assist these newcomers are shrinking.

“A lot of agencies are losing staff,” said Catholic Charities’ Moser.

Some employees have been laid off, while others — many of them multi-lingual — have left for more stable employment.

While individual congregations are not equipped to replace these agencies, many are supplementing these efforts. World Relief last year partnered with 424 new churches, a record number, despite lingering concerns in the pews.

“Pastors call and ask, ‘How do we help our congregations who are often divided on this?’” said Soerens.

When Soerens speaks at churches — as he will at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Encinitas on April 29 — he cites biblical commands to love “the stranger that dwelleth with you” (Leviticus 19:33). He then discusses refugees’ extensive vetting before they arrive and strong work ethic and record of successful integration after they arrive.

He’s mindful that many have absorbed alarming messages from the internet and some radio and TV commentators.

“That’s the association a lot of Americans have in their mind,” he said.

“To people who consume a certain type of media, the question is, ‘Do you want to welcome terrorists into the United States?’”

Another narrative, though, touched Lynne Calkins. Reading a news story about St. Thomas More’s support of the al-Mustafa family, she decided her own church, San Dieguito United Methodist in Encinitas, should do something similar.

Her minister was supportive and so was a friend — Lisa Attardo, a St. Thomas More parishioner who had been involved in helping the al-Mustafas.

“We put together a little evening, a simple refugee dinner of soup and salad that was open to all parishioners,” Attardo said.

The session was a success. “We had some offers of donations from that very first dinner,” Calkins said.

Working through Catholic Charities, San Dieguito Methodist arranged to assist a Congolese family of eight. They arrived Feb. 14 and were quickly settled in the same El Cajon apartment complex where the al-Mustafa family lives.

Calkins said she had braced for some “push back,” some grumbling in the church about this new mission. It never happened.

“If anybody is unhappy about this, I haven’t heard it,” she said. “It’s our mission. Christians are taught to be as Christ-like as possible, to be the hands and feet of Jesus, and that God loves us all equally.”

That’s not a political stance, said St. Alban’s pastor, nor does it shift with political administrations.

“We haven’t changed our approach to our work,” Madsen said. “We still welcome those who come here and offer assistance to people trying to make ends meet.”

No matter where those people came from.

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