



041: How Can the Church Respond to the Global Refugee Crisis? – Matthew Soerens

Matthew Soerens serves as the US Director of Church Mobilization for [World Relief](#). In this role, he helps evangelical churches to understand the realities of refugees and immigration and to respond in ways guided by biblical values. Originally from Neenah, Wisconsin, Matthew lives in Aurora, Illinois with his wife, Diana, and their two children. He is the co-author of [Seeking Refuge: On the Shores of the Global Refugee Crisis](#).

Could you define for us what is a refugee?

- Under international law, a refugee is someone who has been forced to leave their country of origin due to persecution or well-founded fear of persecution due to race, religion, political opinion, or social group. They are a subset of all immigrants.

Can you give us an update on the refugee crisis?

- There are 21.3 million refugees are on the globe today – this is an unprecedented number. This doesn't include people who are internally displaced – that's another 40 million or so.
- The resettlement of refugees in North America is the solution for very few of the refugees in the world – it's less than 1%. The US and Canada are the main countries resettling refugees in the world. The US resettled 85,000 refugees in 2016. In Canada, the numbers have increased significantly in the last year or so – particularly in response to the Syrian refugee crisis.

What is the North American church's role in responding to this crisis?

- The church globally, and the North American church, can be at the center of the solution of the refugee crisis.
- Our vision at World Relief is that every refugee family that arrives in America will be welcomed by a group of church members at the airport and then support them and be their friends throughout the first year of their time in North America.
- It is a unique opportunity to live out the Great Commandment, to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to stand with the persecuted church – as many of the refugees coming are already believers and have fled because of their faith.
- During this horrific situation, we believe that God can and is working redemptively, and we're seeing that all around the world.



Are we, the church, embracing this opportunity?

- There are many North American churches who are stepping up to this opportunity, but of course there is room to grow.
- In the US, we commissioned some research among Protestant pastors. 86% affirmed that we have a Biblical responsibility to care for the refugees but only 8% of pastors said their local church was involved in serving refugees in their community – so there is a significant gap between what we believe and our actions that follow.
- I think we'd see great fruit if the church stepped up in a greater way.

As people are arriving as refugees, what are some of their immediate needs?

- We can apply the Golden Rule and treat refugees the way we'd want to be treated.
- They need to learn English, find a job, adjust to a new culture, enrolling children into school and a lot of refugees are suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other disorders from what they've experienced.
- The biggest need a refugee has when they arrive in North America is friendship. There's a spiritual opportunity there as well.
- We have a lot to learn from our refugee brothers and sisters who are a part of the persecuted church.
- Of course, reaching out to the non-believers as well gives us an opportunity to share with them why we can for them and point them to Jesus.
- These are things that lay people can be a part of – aside from the counselling piece, everything can be done by ordinary people. There are professional caseworkers involved in resettling refugees, however, because of their caseload, it's unlikely they're able to be best friends with each of the refugees they work with. But it is possible that church members can each become friends with one or two refugees and provide that need of friendship.

In the discussion guide from your book, the author asks us to consider the ways that a refugee may become an agent of God's mission in the world. Can you give an example of what this might look like?

- I have a colleague that came as a refugee from Laos – he has become a pastor and is pastoring a multi-ethnic congregation. Many people in his church are refugees who have become Christians, having coming from a non-Christian background. At least one of these are now working with my colleague as a pastor and is preparing to return to his country to as a missionary.

What makes us hesitant about engaging more adequately in the refugee crisis?

- There are two major concerns:
 - *Economic* – a lot of North American people want to be generous and compassionate but they are struggling economically themselves. However, the net economic impact of refugees and immigrants is positive for the country that receives them. It



isn't always true in the beginning, but eventually they will become American or Canadian and be a part of the economy – paying into taxes, job creation, etc.

- Even if refugees were bad for the economy, it wouldn't change Christ's commandment to love our neighbor.
- *Security* – In the last year it's become a huge concern for a lot of people – their concern is that the people coming in are terrorist, seeking to do us harm.
 - There is a very strong vetting process before a refugee is admitted into North America. This process happens before anyone is allowed onto an airplane. It's the most thorough vetting process of any demographic coming to North America.
 - In the US, we've had our current refugee resettlement process since the 1980 and there's been about 3 million refugees resettled to the United States and there have been zero Americans killed by a terrorist attacked perpetrated by refugees who have been resettled.
 - These people have been welcomed - that in some ways is the best antidote to any ISIS rhetoric about Americans and Canadians being their enemies. When they are warmly welcomed by us, it negates any belief about us being their enemies.

What are some of the fears that refugees face as they are arriving here?

- The reality of entering a new country and culture – it can be very socially isolating to enter a country that has a different culture and language.
- The fear of being a religious minority in North America. It draws attention to them especially at a time when our political discourse hasn't been warm and welcoming. We've had politicians talk about sending the refugees back and realistically that is going to happen but when you've already been kicked out of your own country by your government, that can bring back fears and issues from their past.

If there is a church listening to this interview and they want to take some first steps towards being involved in welcoming and resettling refugees, what is your advice to them?

- There are agencies in both America and Canada that can help your church through the process. They provide training and information about when these families are arriving.
- Training would include specific contexts that refugees are coming from, understanding cultural cues, and understanding how trauma works.
- Clarifying responsibilities and what services are available to this newly arrived family and where to go to find certain things.



What other resources might you recommend to our listeners?

- WeWelcomeRefugees.com

If our listeners want to learn more from you, how might they do that?

- [@matthewsoerens](https://twitter.com/matthewsoerens)

