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AN UNPRECEDENTED GLOBAL CRISIS

Today, an estimated sixty million people worldwide have been forcibly displaced from their homes, a number larger than at any time in recorded history.¹ While many remain within the borders of their country, about twenty million individuals have been forced by persecution to escape, seeking refuge in a neighboring land. More than half of those refugees are children.²

Our minds can only scarcely comprehend these statistics. Individual stories and images are what have ignited unprecedented global attention to the plight of refugees. In September 2015, nearly five years into a deadly civil war, the world's attention dramatically focused upon the conflict in Syria and the displacement it has engendered. With one photograph that hit newspapers and social media, millions witnessed the lifeless body of a three-year-old boy, Alan Kurdi, washed up on a Turkish beach after a failed attempt to reach safety in Europe. Filmmaker Ken Burns, reflecting on that photograph, observed: “The power of the single image to convey complex information is still there. It has that power to shock and arrest us. To make us stop for just a second and interrupt the flow.”³

Wincing as we glanced at the little boy, still wearing tiny shoes and

a red T-shirt, we could not help but think of our own children. We grieve the loss of innocent life. We shudder to imagine the horror that would inspire a parent to embark upon such a dangerous journey, and, in a subconscious pivot from compassion to fear, wonder if such terror could reach our shores—our children—as well. We

ask God why He allows such horrific injustice and suffering. And in response, we might hear the still, small voice of God asking His church, *How will you respond?*

In recent years, about 105,000 refugees have been resettled annually to developed countries. Nearly one million more have made their way to Europe to seek asylum. Yet these numbers account for only a small fraction of the world's displaced people.

This book is designed to be a tool for the church—followers of Jesus in every part of the world—to answer that question in ways informed both by the Bible and by the facts of the current crisis. While we hope what's written here will be useful to those of any faith or of no faith, our focus is particularly informed by our shared Christian worldview and by our conviction that, to quote pastor Bill Hybels, “The local church is the hope of the world.”⁴ We believe that

the church, in its many local incarnations throughout the world, must be at the center of the response to the global refugee crisis. That includes those, like the three of us, who form the church in the West: as columnist Michael Gerson, writing from Lebanon, a nation where nearly one in four residents is now a refugee, observes, “If American churches . . . are not relevant here, they are irrelevant.”⁵

As American citizens (two of us by birth, one by naturalization),

our focus in *Seeking Refuge* is primarily on how local churches and individual Christ followers in the West—in the United States, in particular, but also in Canada, Europe, and beyond—might best respond to the refugee crisis. In recent years, about 105,000 refugees (from all countries, not just Syria) have been resettled annually to developed countries, including around 70,000 that the United States accepted in 2015. Nearly one million more have made their own way to Europe in 2015 to seek asylum.⁶ Yet these numbers account for only a small fraction of the world's displaced people.⁷ The vast majority of refugees live *outside* of the West, generally in developing countries adjacent to the homelands they have been forced to flee. Most of those people find shelter in refugee camps or urban settings where basic needs such as food and water are often in short supply, and where most are barred from working to support themselves. As Christians in the West, our primary focus must be to support our brothers and sisters in these countries bearing the most significant weight of the refugee crisis.

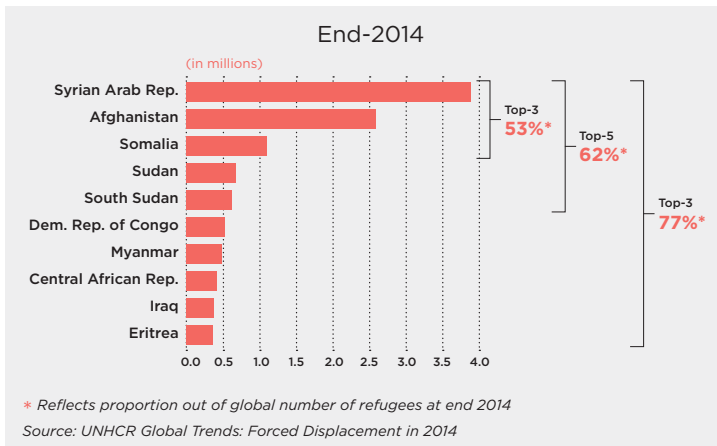
Nevertheless, while the number of refugees who arrive on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay or Lake Michigan (near to our respective homes) or elsewhere in North America account for just a small fraction of all displaced people globally, they present the most proximate opportunity to respond with compassion. We need not and ought not choose between caring for refugees locally and caring for refugees overseas, because how we respond *here* directly impacts what happens *there*. The world is watching how we in the United States respond to the relatively few refugees who reach our shores, and our government's encouragement to other nations to protect those fleeing persecution lacks credibility if we do not do our part.

As Christians, our faith compels us to respond with welcome even as we support those helping the much larger numbers of displaced

people elsewhere in the world. Reacting to this crisis will require much more from the Western church than simply sending a check overseas: while we can and should help financially, we must also emulate our brothers and sisters throughout the world who are responding with generous hospitality.

It is also important to note that, while much of the recent media coverage on refugees has been focused on the shores of the Mediterranean—on the refugee crisis emanating from Syria’s civil war in particular, which has driven hundreds of thousands to seek safety in Europe and ignited fiery debates over whether Syrian refugees should be welcomed into the United States—this refugee crisis is much broader. This crisis is indeed global, affecting people on the shores of Africa’s Lake Kivu and Lake Tanganyika, of the Andaman and South China Seas in Southeast Asia, and of the Pacific Ocean in Central America, among others.

Major Source Countries of Refugees



Until recently, the response of most Westerners to refugees was generally one of sympathy. The US refugee resettlement program,

though perhaps not widely understood, enjoyed bipartisan support in Congress and drew criticism only from a small segment of Americans. While broader immigration issues, including border security and how to respond to those in the country unlawfully, have long been controversial, refugees—who all enter the United States with full legal status, and who, by definition, have fled persecution and thus almost always have compelling stories—have not been particularly controversial.⁸

By late 2015, however, the question of refugee resettlement had become contentious, particularly as the refugee crisis fueled by the Syrian conflict and the arrival of hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers into Europe dominated news headlines. Anti-refugee sentiment further intensified after the horrific terrorist attacks in Paris and then in California, which led many to speculate that the US refugee resettlement program could be infiltrated by terrorists. The US House of Representatives, where refugee resettlement had long enjoyed broad bipartisan support, voted in November 2015 to dramatically halt resettlement of refugees from Syria and Iraq, while another bill proposed a moratorium on refugee resettlement altogether. Governors of more than thirty states announced their opposition to Syrian refugees being resettled within their states. A Bloomberg News poll found that a slim majority of Americans (53 percent) now wanted the United States to abandon an announced plan to resettle ten thousand Syrian refugees in the upcoming year.⁹

The question of refugees—and refugee resettlement, in particular—has divided the church as well. Many Christians feel torn between the natural desire to protect themselves and their families and the desire to minister compassionately to the vulnerable. Given the scope of this crisis, how Christ followers respond to this tension could define the church for a generation or more.

OUR PERSPECTIVE

Our perspective on the refugee crisis is closely informed by our many years of experience in serving and resettling refugees in partnership with local churches through World Relief, the organization we serve. World Relief was formed in 1944, in response to the devastation and displacement of millions of refugees caused by World War II. The people of Park Street Church in Boston resolved to forego meals and send the money they would have spent on food to what they called the “War Relief Fund.” When other churches, linked through the National Association of Evangelicals, joined the effort, they collectively raised \$600,000—in today’s dollars, nearly \$8 million—to help rebuild Europe. Over time, as that sacrificial compassion extended to serve other regions plagued by poverty and conflict, the War Relief Fund became World Relief.

Since the late 1970s, World Relief has been one of fewer than a dozen national agencies—and the only distinctly evangelical organization—authorized by the US State Department to resettle refugees within the United States. Our resettlement program began when a couple named Grady and Evelyn Mangham, who had served for many years as missionaries in Vietnam with The Christian and Missionary Alliance, wanted to help churches in the United States welcome Vietnamese refugees. The Manghams worked with the US State Department, as well as their denomination and World Relief, to find local churches throughout the country to welcome refugees. From those origins, World Relief has helped to welcome more than 275,000 refugees into our nation, partnering alongside thousands of local churches and tens of thousands of church-based volunteers.

While we are committed to presenting fairly the diverging views on this complex and now controversial topic, we do not come to the question of how to respond to refugees as dispassionate observ-

ers: in our work with World Relief, each of us, from different vantage points, has been a practitioner deeply involved in serving refugees, driven by our belief that doing so is an important way that we can live out Jesus' command to love our neighbors (Matt. 22:39). Though we each work toward the same mission of empowering local churches to serve the vulnerable, we bring different experiences and perspectives to this topic.

Stephan's Story

In our early twenties, my wife, Belinda, and I left our rural hometown in Wisconsin for what was meant to be a six-month stint in West Africa, working with Mercy Ships. I took a leave of absence from my career in business and Belinda from hers as a schoolteacher. Having barely traveled, we were inexperienced and naïve. Within months the directors asked us to colead a medical team among two warring tribes in Northern Ghana. It was here, in the bush, where we first experienced how violence devastates people, often destroying their homes and tearing families apart.

It was several years later, though, while working in the Balkans near the end of the Bosnian war, that I began to seriously grapple with forced migration. I met refugees in the process of fleeing—Bosnians, mainly, but also Croatians and Serbians—who were forced to escape their homes because of the conflict. Some were nearly killed; many had lost family members. All wished they could return home. But they couldn't.

One man had fled his home in Bosnia with his wife and his accordion. Although he had lost everything else, including family members, he remained hopeful that someday he could rebuild his life. His accordion became his means to earn a living.

Today, two decades later, I serve as president of World Relief.

Helping refugees, both internationally and domestically, is a major area of focus for us. It's an honor to work alongside my colleagues on the front lines in the United States and in countries where people are displaced, such as Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, South Sudan, Congo, and many others.

I recently returned from Jordan where I met a pastor who opened his church to Syrian refugee children and their mothers to learn life skills and participate in activities to overcome their trauma. When he did, however, many people from his congregation left for good. Even kids from the community taunted Syrian children as they walked to the church.

"They come to us bleeding," he said. But he told me how his church has changed for the better. "For so many years we tried to share God's love to the people in Syria but we were stopped. Now Syria has come to us and to our church." It is a privilege to work with churches like this one and others throughout the globe who are responding to the crisis in profound ways.

Issam's Story

I was born in Mafraq, Jordan, a city that is known today for hosting the largest Syrian refugee camp in the world. At that time, however, Mafraq was a small Bedouin town on the edge of the desert that hardly anyone had heard of.

While growing up in Jordan, I became accustomed to wars, crises, and refugees. Over the years Jordan became an oasis of peace in a troubled region, hosting millions of refugees (Palestinians, Lebanese, Iraqis, Libyans, and finally Syrians). When I was seven years old, our local church welcomed several Lebanese families who had fled civil war in their country. At that time, the idea of refugees did not mean much to me. The children whom I befriended from Lebanon were just like other friends who came to live in our town and attended

school with us. They moved with their families after a year or two, to settle in a faraway country called the USA. I never heard from my friends again, but often wondered what had become of them.

My first encounter with the word *refugee* was quite personal. One day as a child I opened the door to an old woman whom I did not recognize. The woman was wearing a colorful dress and carried many bags. She knew my name, so I ran deeper into the house to call my mom. My mom was very excited: this old woman was my grandmother. She had come to visit us from the West Bank/Palestine. I later learned that my parents had left their small town of Nisf Jubail in the West Bank and moved to live in Jordan after the second Arab-Israeli war. They could not go back. That day *refugee* became personal. I was a refugee's son.

Twenty-five years after that incident, in 2000, I came to the United States to study clinical psychology at Wheaton College. The peace process between the Israelis and Palestinians had just collapsed. The news from the region was bad. I recalled spending most of my day reading and listening to disturbing reports that left me angry and resentful. During that time one of my professors asked another international student, who I discovered later was an Israeli, to open the class with a prayer for peace in the Middle East.

A few days later, the Israeli student approached me and invited me to his house for dinner. I was surprised by his invitation, but more stunned that I accepted. I walked to his house that evening with many questions ruminating in my mind. What if we ended up arguing about politics? What if he was rude or insensitive to me?

Fortunately, none of that happened, and the evening turned out to be pleasant. While playing with his children after dinner, for the first time it hit me that this man was just like me. We were experiencing opportunities that our fathers never had. We were both told things

about each other that were not true.

Over the years our friendship deepened. Whenever I heard news that made me angry and resentful, I remembered my friend and his family. I needed him, as much as he needed me, to give me the right perspective, that we are all created in God's image. Today as I look back at that encounter, I have come to believe that God was preparing me for the next chapter of my life. I needed to find inner peace before I could help others find it.

As I was finishing my studies in the United States, I received a call from the director of the counseling center at a World Relief office, asking me to help a newly resettled Iraqi refugee who was struggling to adjust to his new life in this country. The refugee was a military officer in the Iraqi army. He was having such a difficult time adjusting to his new entry-level job that he had threatened to go on a hunger strike until World Relief would find him different work. Later I joined World Relief as a full-time counselor, and for the last fifteen years, I have counseled traumatized refugees who are dealing with a haunting past and a challenging present.

If I had one word with which to summarize my work with refugees, it would be *stories*. Most whom I have spent time with have had one thing in common: a horrific story of trauma and loss. Day in and day out, young moms have shared with me about being forced to abandon their babies. Men have told me about being raped repeatedly in prison, and boys have recalled walking for months in jungles, seeking safety and witnessing friends eaten alive by wild animals.

Stories of triumph against all odds are common as well. I always enjoy working with new groups of people. The Somali Bantu population, an ethnic group systematically enslaved for decades in Africa, was particularly interesting. They came to the United States after living for many years in tents in Kenya. When they arrived in this

country, they had to catch up on hundreds of years of technology. I witnessed Somali Bantu children on their first day in the United States stand in the shower and squeal with delight at the sight of water sprinkles, which they had never seen before. Today some of those children are in college.

Between the tears, I have also heard many funny stories of cultural misunderstandings that, though perhaps frustrating at the time, we could eventually all laugh at. Once, a refugee who was not aware of the “daylight savings time” concept went to work one hour early for several days before finally understanding the time change. It actually ended up helping him with his reputation for tardiness at work!

While I continued to serve refugees resettled to suburban Chicago, in 2011, I also began to spend three months each year in countries such as Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon. As one of a few Arabic-speaking experts in trauma therapy, I train local mental health professionals and supervise their work from a distance via the Internet. While this experience has been extremely rewarding, it has not involved the local church in these afflicted nations. I have prayed for an opportunity to help the church shine as a city on a hill, serving as an oasis for healing.

In 2015, my prayers were answered when a local Syrian church leader, whom I had never met, called and asked me to train Syrian Christian leaders in the area of trauma therapy. Two months later, I spent four days with fifteen Syrian church leaders—Jesuit priests, nuns, doctors, and others from the provinces of Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus—at a monastery in Lebanon. Every morning, I awoke to the sound of hymns, eager to meet with these brothers and sisters who were filled with a joy and peace that “transcends all understanding” (Phil. 4:7).

In the last day of training, I noticed a shift in the mood among

the group. The road between Damascus and Beirut had been captured by rebel groups, which meant that the nine church leaders from Aleppo would not be able to go home. I had to leave the next day. On my way back to the States, I remembered God's promise to those among us who have suffered most: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:4). It is that promise that I hold dear to my heart. I pray that you and I will be part of God's work as we yearn for that day when He makes all things right.

Matthew's Story

Quite in contrast to Issam, for most of my life, I had little to no awareness of immigration issues. I grew up in a small city in north-eastern Wisconsin where, though a small Hmong population lived nearby, I do not ever recall personally interacting with a refugee.

My first exposure to these issues came as a senior at Wheaton College in suburban Chicago. A friend, Anna Ruth, had signed up to volunteer with the local World Relief office and had been paired with a family of seven from Rwanda. Anna Ruth had spent a lot of time with the four daughters in this family, but she thought that their adolescent son, Denis, would benefit from a male mentor, so she invited me to come with her.

Denis and his family quickly became my close friends. When I graduated from college, I rented an apartment in their apartment complex, a remarkably vibrant neighborhood where World Relief had resettled refugees from more than a dozen countries. I lived there for about eight years and, in that time, many of my refugee and other immigrant neighbors became my close friends.

I also began working for World Relief's local Immigrant Legal Services program, where a major component of my job was to help

refugees apply for their green cards (one year after their arrival, per US law) and then for citizenship (five years after arrival). Becoming acquainted with US immigration law gave me a much deeper understanding of the barriers refugees must overcome to make it to the United States, and of the need for governmental policy changes.

For the past several years, the focus of my work with World Relief has been to equip local churches throughout the country to think about refugees and other immigrants from a distinctly biblical perspective and then to apply the teachings of Scripture to welcome and serve these vulnerable populations. Much of my work has focused on the long-controversial question of how both the church and our government ought to respond to the complex question of immigrants who are present unlawfully in the United States. By contrast, refugees, who enter the States with full legal status, have always been relatively uncontroversial. In the past year, though, that has changed, with refugee resettlement becoming a politically charged issue. More than ever, my passion is to see the church respond well, in biblically informed, missionally minded ways, to these complex issues.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Our personal experiences have convinced us that Christ followers ought to be at the center of the global refugee crisis solution—which is where we hope your story intersects with ours. In the chapters that follow, we have sought to provide a biblically grounded perspective and orientation to the topic of refugees. As we consider what the Bible has to say about these displaced people, we become better able to engage this complex issue. With that foundation, we will unpack who these vulnerable individuals are and how refugee resettlement works, addressing many of the most common concerns and, by conveying stories, seek to put human faces on these displaced people so

often described merely as statistics. We will also explore the situations that refugees are fleeing, provide practical guidance on how to minister to them effectively, and explore the policy issues that impact their lives and well-being. Finally, we will cast a vision for how local churches might respond, applying our faith to one of the most urgent yet complicated issues of our time.

Our core conviction is that the church is God's solution to this unprecedented global crisis, and it requires us to rise up to respond in mission-driven, fact-based ways to this tremendous crisis. While we would not attempt to explain why God has allowed the persecution and violence that has compelled so many people to flee, we believe that He has purposes even in the midst of horrendous suffering, and that He is already working to build His church and expand His kingdom through the global refugee crisis. We hope and pray that you will join in what God is doing in the midst of this unique time in history.