

Bringing Home the Stranger

St. Columba by-the-Lake Presbyterian Church, Pointe-Claire, QC

St. Columba by-the-Lake is an active, mid-sized congregation located in the Montreal suburb of Pointe-Claire, Quebec. In June of 2010 the congregation answered the call to sponsor a refugee family. Since then, a group called “Team for Refugee Action” has been working towards bringing a refugee family to Canada. They soon realized how much it would transform their relationship with Jesus, their connection to a new culture and what it means to welcome a stranger.

Read about St. Columba’s journey and response to call, questions and action.

Why Sponsor a Refugee?

It all started from a study group in which we read *Everything Must Change* by Brian D. McLaren. We were concerned that we were living in a society of so much wealth when others had so little. Moreover, much of our wealth is dependent on the exploitation of others. We determined that we needed to make at least one small change and so we decided to sponsor a refugee family. As we looked into the possibility of sponsorship we quickly faced questions that challenged our idea of sponsorship.

- There are over 15 million refugees and internally-displaced persons in the world. What difference could we make to sponsor a family or two?
- There are so many important needs in our own community; shouldn’t we be helping them first?
- How could we justify raising all that money and potentially depriving other much needed projects?

We wrestled with these questions. As we realized how great and numerous the needs of refugees really are, it

became more and more overwhelming! Yet we came to the understanding that if we could make a very real difference in the life of one family, that was where we would begin. Is this not what Jesus asked us to do? To be a good Samaritan to strangers? Sponsoring a refugee family would in no way stop us from continuing to support our local initiatives: it was not a question of either-or.

When you hear the call to sponsor a refugee family, it is important to ask questions, share your thoughts and answer them together before making this long-term commitment. Once you have made the commitment, you will find the way.

Fundraising and the Miracle of the Loaves

When it came to the considerable amount required to sponsor a family for one year we were intimidated. Our target objective was \$24,000, a huge amount for our congregation. Could we really pull this off? We had fun trying new events (e.g., a 24 hour fast, an Ethiopian supper) and, bit by bit, the money started adding up. It was like the miracle of the loaves: it kept multiplying and there was enough for everyone.

We took the responsibility of financially supporting a refugee family very seriously. We made sure we had at least one half of the targeted amount plus a fundraising strategy for the remainder before submitting our application for sponsorship to the Immigration et Communautés culturelles Québec. Trusting in the Spirit and taking one step at a time, we truly experienced the miracle of the loaves and there was enough for everyone.



The refugee nativity scene created by St. Columba by-the-Lake, Pointe-Claire, QC

The Team for Refugee Action

The steering committee initially consisted of six individuals (4 adults and 2 youth) along with the active support of our minister Ian Fraser and the invaluable guidance of then, Executive Director of Action Réfugiés Montréal, Glynis Williams followed by interim director Rob Shropshire, a not-for-profit organization based in Montreal and supported by The Presbyterian Church in Canada through gifts to *Presbyterians Sharing* and the Anglican Diocese of Montreal.

It was crucial to have someone working with us that knew how the refugee sponsorship system worked in Canada and Quebec. They walked us through the bureaucratic twists and turns and acted as liaison providing the very important updates about our family.

This committee has now expanded to 12 with the support of an enthusiastic congregation. Our youth have a major role in welcoming the stranger. They have inspired us with the extent of their global understanding and the leadership they have provided.

We understood that sponsoring a refugee family was simply the catalyst for a larger mission and we quickly became the Team for Refugee Action.

The Journey

It is almost three years since we have been working towards sponsoring our refugee family. It has been a period of global awareness, bureaucratic challenges, emotional bonding, and personal growth. We initially believed the process would take a year or two. We have since learned what it means to be patient and in so doing realize how insignificant our frustrations (and there have been a few!) have been compared to refugees who wait for years to be sponsored. We simply cannot imagine.

Incredibly, even after three years, we are far from understanding the complexities of immigration—it defies understanding. Along the way we benefited from some very helpful resources. It is essential that you connect with an organization, such as we did with Action Réfugiés Montréal. Without their invaluable support we would not have been able to navigate the bureaucratic maze.

Another important resource is the handbook provided by the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program from Citizenship and Immigration Canada. It contains specific details for sponsoring groups.

In addition, we read a number of books which helped us to better understand what it really means to be a refugee. We appreciated *The Other Face of God: When the Stranger Calls us Home*, by Mary Jo Leddy. We often judge refugees from our North American armchair. How different might you act after living as a nonperson with your children in a refugee camp for five years?



The Latest Update

In December, we were told that our family had cleared their medical exams and then another email indicating that they would be arriving on December 18! Hang on to your toques! In -30C degree weather, St. Columba rolled out the welcome mat. Our family walked out onto the tarmac with courageous spirits and open hearts. A warm and welcoming St. Columba family took our five member family in over the Christmas season; it will be a Christmas they will never forget. Our Christmas theme was “Great Unexpectations” and we were, and continue to be, truly blessed with many of them. We scrambled to find an apartment and on December 31, found the perfect one: since then, we and our family have never looked back. We have a small group of people going in to visit the family and support them with grocery shopping, public transportation, banking, phone and internet connections, medical exams, and the list goes on. We can only imagine how our family is feeling as they try to adapt to everything being different, although they continue to welcome our visits with enthusiasm and smiles that have melted our hearts. Already we have wonderful anecdotes (like putting the eggs in the freezer)

and a wonderful connection like the hugs from the little ones and Mama dancing in the kitchen as she was so happy to have her own place. We have so many stories that we would love to share with you. We are truly blessed to have sponsored such an incredible family—they are teaching us what a rich and ongoing gift it can be to meet the stranger, and to realize that as God’s children, we are all the same.

The process is long and complicated but the journey is rich with experience, growth and transformation. It is also a pendulum between waiting patiently and rushing around to get things ready only to have to put the brakes on again.

The Transformation and the Gift of the Stranger

During this time, each of us has been blessed with epiphanies of our own faith and our connection with refugees, and even before the family arrived! We anticipate with excitement how this initiative will continue to transform us, even as it offers hope to others.

To read more about the experience of St. Columba by-the-Lake, visit stcolumba.ca.

For more information on the ministry of Action Réfugiés Montréal, visit actionr.org.



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