

How Do We Welcome and Protect Refugees/Asylum Seekers Who We Are Reaching Out To And/Or Are Visiting Our Church?

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Churches in many parts of Europe are welcoming refugees into their churches and church halls whether or not they are Christian. Refugees are likely to have had traumatic experiences as both the reason they left their home country and also during the journey. As a result they may be experiencing trauma and they may also be vulnerable to those who might otherwise want to further exploit them.

Refugees and asylum seekers will be from different cultures and it is impossible to write a guide for all cultures, but we have tried to give some helpful ideas. Some are common sense and others you may have already thought of.

Safeguarding

Many churches will already have vulnerable persons/children's safeguarding policies and others may not. Either way, churches need to consider what they can do to ensure that refugee individuals and families feel safe and in a protected environment. Remember that children may initially feel anxious around who they perceive to be foreigners and in many cultures it is not appropriate for people to pick up and hug children other than their parents. Usually it is only appropriate to initiate holding hands or hugging if the child themselves initiates it and if the parents allow it.

Children

Although it will likely be alarming at first for young children to go to a school where they cannot speak the language, being with other children in the routine of a school environment in the long term will be a good thing and it is surprising how quickly particularly young children will pick up their host language. However, teachers, counselors and church workers need to understand that some children may be exceedingly anxious and this is not because they are being 'naughty' but because they are experience trauma. Both children and adults may require counseling from specialists who understand their context of where they have come from and the challenges of their 'escape route'.

Culture

Also it is usually not appropriate for men to shake women's hands or look at their eyes for any length of time, although women can do so. It is also common for men from Muslim cultures to put their hand over their heart after shaking hands. Often these cultural norms are not problematic after the refugees have been in country for a while because they become used to the ways of 'foreigners' but in the early days it is best to err on the side of caution and be conservative. It will be appreciated that you have made the effort to reach out to them. In their home culture many women may be expected to wear a head covering and they shouldn't feel that they must stop doing this in their host culture if they prefer to continue to do so. They may decide to do this at some point but this shouldn't be because of pressure from you or your community.

Checking volunteers

People volunteering to help with activities to support refugee/asylum seekers should have been police checked beforehand to ensure they are safe to work with children and vulnerable adults. Forms will include a declaration that they have not had any criminal convictions involving children or vulnerable people. For very young children the parents should be around to toilet them. When there are activities for and with children the same safeguarding measures should be made as for all children.

Listening

As people learn to appreciate you and their language skills improve they may trust you enough to talk about what has happened to them, but it is usually not appropriate to probe them to find out as they may not want to or be ready to share some of the painful things they have experienced. When and if they are ready they may share things. It is always better to listen more than to talk. You may find it hard to listen to their painful experiences and you may need to share some of this with an experienced counselor to reduce experiencing vicarious trauma.

Risk

Most churches will be used to doing a risk assessment in the area that vulnerable people are coming so that necessary things are done to minimize any problems. For example there will be easy to see fire instructions, first aid boxes and any dangerous or sharp equipment locked away.

Dark

Many countries nearer the equator are used to getting light at around 6-6.30 am and then dark at 6-6.30pm. It will take some getting used to, to adjust to Northern countries where there are darker shorter days in the winter and lighter, longer days in the Summer. They will likely not want to travel much in the dark. Make the most of the summer months and consider adjusting times for events in the winter.

Environment

Consider the location of your church or church hall or other location that you use. Make sure pathways are well lit. Some cultures will find it quite an adjustment for women to go to a strange building on their own or even with their children. If necessary ensure that men are also invited, especially on the first visit, so that they can ensure it is safe for their family. If you invite families from similar backgrounds it might provide an opportunity for peer support too. If they meet refugees from their own country it may be a relief to be able to speak in their own language rather than the constant challenge to speak a new language.

Encouragement

Make sure that members of the family can be together until they are used to travelling and doing things separately. Remember that they have likely left most of their possessions in their home country and all they have is each other. So they may find it difficult to be apart for some time. Be patient if their language is limited and they are learning your language. Encourage them in their efforts.

Food

It is always good to break bread/eat with families. Many countries put a high priority on hospitality and so if you visit them in their home or they visit you, food is likely to be involved. Even if they have very little it is usually polite to eat a little of what you are offered, even if you have recently eaten! Also remember during some festivals such as Ramadan they will be fasting and unable to eat so it is not a good time to invite them for a meal. If you are providing food then remember that for some, meat they eat may need to be especially prepared, so you can offer vegetarian or meat free food and plenty of fruit . If you offer them left-overs to take home and/or a care package this is bound to be appreciated and likely to be reciprocated!

Exploring locality

Providing support family to family, woman to woman and/or man to man could involve a walking tour of your town especially if they have recently arrived. Helping them locate immigration solicitors, the library, the gym, the adult education school/college, the farmers market, the supermarket, the parks and schools for the children, mosque, temple, and/or church etc. will help them adjust to their new home city/town/village. Ask them what else they might like to do including local 'tourist' sites. They will likely also need help completing the myriad of forms they will be expected to complete.

Financial vulnerability

Remember that refugees can be financially vulnerable and in the time that they are getting asylum they may legally be unable to work. They may be able to volunteer so when they are ready perhaps you could help them to do that. For example, helping deliveries with a charity shop, sorting out clothes or food for a food bank. Volunteering will also help them to get back to working regular hours and the discipline of work. Voluntary organizations need to appreciate that this may take some time to achieve. Some refugees may be vulnerable to being sexually exploited so they may need warning that anything that appears to be "easy money" could be dangerous and probably isn't. Inform them that no-one has the right to keep their passport or identification papers at any time.

Faith

Remember that although you may well hope to introduce the refugees to your faith that this should come out of a period of building relationships with them and gradual discussion. It isn't a race to convert them. Also nobody wants people who come to faith because they feel that they ought to do so to please you. Also remember they are particularly vulnerable and pushing them before they are ready might be considered spiritual abuse. However when you have built a relationship, you might like to get them a Bible in their language. Many translations are available through the Bible Society and links on this website.

Resources

www.eearefugees.org

<https://www.facebook.com/EEAHopeforEuropeRefugees/>
