

How we meet God through working with refugees

Arisnel Mesidor and Brian Dyck

For several years, we have been privileged to work with refugees and newcomers to Canada who have a refugee background. We believe that we have met God in the context of our work with refugees. Our experience working with refugees has demonstrated that God is indeed omnipresent and can be met (and worshiped) anywhere.

In addition to being an immigrant to Canada, I (Arisnel) have worked for ten years with many newcomers to Canada. I started at Accueil francophone, a settlement agency in Winnipeg. Three years later, I moved to Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Manitoba to be the associate



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coordinator and then coordinator of MCC's refugee sponsorship program. Today, I work as a self-employed regulated Canadian immigration consultant, serving asylum seekers, refugee claimants, protected persons, and newcomers to Canada from a refugee background.

Though I (Brian) was born in Canada, I grew up hearing stories of my grandparents fleeing Ukraine in the 1920s. Those stories shaped the way I understand my faith and how we treat others. My first real encounter with refugees happened in the 1990s when my wife, Lynell Bergen, and I pastored in southern Manitoba. After an appeal from MCC, the church agreed to sponsor not just one but two families of refugees. Later, after serving as a missionary in South Africa, I returned to Manitoba and took a job with MCC Manitoba's refugee resettlement program. When my job shifted to the national level, Arisnel joined me in the Manitoba office. Five years ago, I became MCC Canada's migration and resettlement coordinator.

Encountering God in refugees and their sponsors

In the Bible, we find dramatic interactions between God and humans. Abram heard God telling him to leave his home and set out for a place he did not know. Moses spoke with God directly and intimately and received the Law. In the New Testament, Stephen testified, “Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56,



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NIV). However, encounters with God do not have to be as dramatic as these biblical examples. Many Christians’ encounters with God are subtle and easily missed. What brings us to faith in God and keeps us in faith is the realization that God is manifested in an infinite number of ways.

Our personal encounters with God through working with refugees have not been as dramatic as what Abraham, Moses, or Stephen experienced. However,

we are convinced we have met God both in the faith and resilience of the refugees we have encountered and in the care and compassion of those who have welcomed refugees into their lives as sponsors. Indeed, more than once, we have found ourselves emotional and speechless before the vast generosity Canadian sponsors have shown toward refugees—complete strangers whom they know nothing about and with whom they do not share religious beliefs, culture, or values.

In Canada, private individuals and groups who sponsor refugees make a large commitment. They need to raise funds, mobilize volunteers, and do a lot of paperwork. The financial commitment alone is approximately \$16,500 to sponsor an individual or \$28,000 for a family of four. After completing a sponsorship application, it can take two to twenty-four months for the refugees to arrive in Canada. Following their arrival, the sponsorship group enrolls children in schools, helps acquire government documents, facilitates access to settlement services, and so on. Private sponsors are required to accompany the newcomer family and pay for their living expenses for an entire year. Most importantly, sponsors provide friendships that sometimes last for decades. We have been privileged to walk with sponsoring groups on this journey. We have seen them struggle but also grow in their faith and in their understanding of the world and others.

Personally, each of us has learned a lot about faith and trust from the refugees we have helped resettle in Canada. When we hear refugees' stories about narrowly escaping death, torture, and other mistreatment to finally arrive in Canada—and when we observe how Canadian church members and others mobilize to provide refugees with a safe place to rebuild their lives—we cannot help but meet and see God at work. In an individualistic world where most people fear the other, it is amazing to see how God works through people to provide for those in need. In a world where there is often a lack of trust, it is remarkable to see the degree of faith refugees have by agreeing to set out for a place where they have never been and to entrust their lives to complete strangers.

Encountering God through our work with refugees

An encounter with God should enable a person to know and draw closer to God. The encounter should display the power of God tangibly and give a personal sense of God's loving-kindness. People like Moses experienced God's power and love in dramatic ways. In more subtle ways, our encounters with God through our work with refugees have done this as well. During those encounters, we have gone beyond reading Scripture about what God can do. As mentioned above, we believe we have seen God at work through the hands of those who welcome refugees by feeding the hungry, providing a home for the homeless, clothing the naked, and setting captives free (Matthew 25:35–36; Luke 4:18).

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with which we have been involved always take us back to the story of the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17. This story shows God at work with and for both Elijah (the “refugee”) and the widow (the “refugee sponsor”). God brought together, in a way that only God can, two complete strangers who were in some

ways enemies. Through the widow, God provided Elijah with safety, shelter, and food. Through Elijah, God alleviated the widow's poor economic conditions and spared her unique child from death. We have seen the same mutual transformation and mutual support in the lives of refugees and sponsors—probably the most inspiring thing we see and experience in our work.

Working with refugees has taught us much. We have seen God open the eyes of the blind—of whom we are the first. These strangers have helped us and other sponsors understand what it means to have faith. It is one thing to talk about faith and even say that one has faith. It is



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another thing to live and walk by faith. Whether they are conscious of it or not, refugees live and walk by faith. When we meet them, they cause our faith in God to grow. Through them, we meet God.

The experiences and stories refugees share with us open our eyes and broaden our understanding of the true nature of our humanity. Refugees remind us how vulnerable we all are. Refugees teach us not to take anything for granted, something for which we are too often guilty.

Refugees are the embodiment of Jesus's words, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33, NIV). In refugee sponsorships, we have the opportunity of being the hands and feet of Christ, but we also have the privilege of meeting Christ in the refugees we welcome into our communities.

About the authors

Arisnel Mesidor is a self-employed regulated Canadian immigration consultant. Brian Dyck is MCC Canada's migration and resettlement coordinator. Both live in Winnipeg, Manitoba.