

LEARNER BOOK  
DIGITAL SAMPLER

# DIALOGUES

— ON —

THE REFUGEE  
CRISIS

SPARK  
HOUSE

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#### **DIALOGUES ON THE REFUGEE CRISIS**

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# 1

## THE STORY WE LIVE IN

### THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO REFUGEES

BY BRIANNE CASEY

With more than 65.5 million people displaced in the world today, no one can dispute that we are in the midst of a refugee crisis. For most of us in the United States, the crisis has been characterized by media images of overcrowded boats traveling tenuously across the Mediterranean, lines of migrant families crossing borders, and seas of white tents crowded into refugee camps. These images and the people and complex conflicts behind them evoke a broad range of emotional responses—fear, compassion, resignation. While the images are real and important, they can also blur our understanding of both what this crisis is about and how we might respond in meaningful ways. For those who see such images and find their hearts moved, there can be a tendency to be so overwhelmed with emotion that they are unable to act. For those who find themselves anxious, afraid, or even angry at the thought of refugees coming to their own country, the sheer number of people represented in the images can reinforce their fears about what will be asked of countries that offer aid. Even among Christians, there is a resistance to reaching out to refugees. A 2016 survey by LifeWay Research reports that only 8 percent of Protestant churches were assisting refugees in their local community at the time.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, as Christians—as human beings—we can't turn away from the suffering of others. It is the call of the church in our time to overcome our own fears

and biases in order to determine how best to address this growing crisis. It's an opportunity to explore our history as the body of Christ and the ways in which the church has responded to the needs of refugees. The challenges facing refugees, as well as communities seeking to help them, are many and deserve our honest and thoughtful attention—even when it's overwhelming, even when it pushes us outside of what's comfortable. Moving beyond the complex emotions of the current crisis and focusing on facts doesn't lessen the impact of this issue; it sharpens it by providing a more accurate, intelligent, and actionable response—the kind of response the world needs.

## "ACTION AS SHALL JUSTIFY FAITH"

The last time the world faced a refugee crisis of this size was the World War II era, when more than 40 million Europeans were displaced.<sup>2</sup> At that time, far fewer structures and organizations were in place than today to respond to displacement at a global level. Into that deficit stepped the church, which was able to respond in ways the government could not.

One of the initial elements of response was to acknowledge what was happening half a world away. Leading up to the war, church voices mounted, urging acknowledgment of the human rights abuses in Nazi Germany and underscoring the need to offer assistance to those fleeing the situation. In 1936, the Baptist Observer's single editorial urged American churches to pray for and welcome refugees. Public awareness sharply increased with the international reporting and images of Kristallnacht, or the Night of Broken Glass, when over 250 synagogues and 7,000 Jewish-owned businesses were destroyed in November 1938.<sup>3</sup> Fifty-three prominent church leaders signed a 1939 petition in support of admitting 20,000 German refugee children to the United States, saying that "[Sympathies], however deep, are not enough . . . these must translate themselves into action as shall justify faith."<sup>4</sup> The newly unified Methodist Church urged individuals and churches to assist refugees of any faith. The 1939 Presbyterian General Assembly referenced "common morality and decency" in responding to the crisis.<sup>5</sup> Although the growth of widespread awareness and advocacy was slow, as the war continued, the church's prayers did turn to action.

Immigration laws at the time admitted only people with the financial means to support themselves—those not likely to become "public charges." But most war refugees had long since lost possessions and wealth due to Nazi

policies. So when President Truman's directive allowed for "corporate affidavits"—essentially, pledges from US organizations to guarantee financial support for refugees—at least 2,500 were submitted by church organizations.<sup>6</sup> In 1948, US churches agreed to resettle 60,000 individuals.<sup>7</sup> Several denominations also established organizations to support refugees arriving in large cities. The Episcopal Church established the Episcopal Committee on German Refugees with a staff serving displaced persons arriving in New York City. The National Lutheran Council, which had been established to serve World War I refugees, also provided assistance in New York City.<sup>8</sup> Other faith-based refugee-serving organizations such as Church World Service (CWS), the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society also have their origins in the 1940s post-war resettlement surge. Even at a time when the United States was concerned with post-Depression era unemployment and when anti-Semitism was clearly present, Americans in churches assisted arriving refugees locally and by supporting their particular denomination's refugee assistance organizations.

Dean Neher currently sits on the Refugee Resettlement Committee at Bridgewater Church of the Brethren in Bridgewater, Virginia. The congregation has been involved in refugee resettlement for more than fifty years, working with other churches to help settle refugees from sixteen countries.<sup>9</sup> Neher himself has been doing this work even longer, including serving as a church volunteer in both Germany and Greece after World War II.<sup>10</sup> He recalls that in the face of the overwhelming need, combined with lack of resources, the church didn't hesitate to step in and offer aid. "There was a need and awareness that something needed to be done. The war was over, and we'd get things to improve," he says. In the face of what might have been seen as a desperate and even hopeless situation, Neher notes, "There was a sense of optimism."

Back in the United States, much of the post-war effort centered on the East Coast, where refugees arrived by ship to begin the long, arduous process of resettlement. Yet, churches across the country banded together in other ways to meet the needs of displaced people worldwide. In 1947, with severe food shortages in Europe and a successful harvest season in the US, churches organized what became known as the Friendship Train, which traveled across the wheat belt collecting surplus food to be shipped overseas. In the words of journalist Drew Person, this aid came from "every dinner

table in America,” with the church often providing the infrastructure to collect and distribute it.<sup>11</sup> Packages of relief aid were labeled with the words: “All races and creeds make up the vast melting pot of America, and in a democratic and Christian spirit of good will toward men, we, the American people, have worked together to bring this food to your doorsteps.”<sup>12</sup> Even with governments contributing post-war relief, churches and community members recognized a need and acted to fill it.

## **"MAN'S DISORDER"**

To some degree, the ability to respond in the face of such a daunting crisis may be connected to the willingness of people and churches to work together, giving rise to an ecumenical and interfaith collaboration in the 1930s and '40s that is still the hallmark of refugee assistance today. For example, the Federal Council of Churches (FCC), a Protestant collaborative organization, turned its attention to the refugee crisis, beginning with a 1937

**END OF SAMPLER**