



April 15, 2015

Dear Classis,

Thank you for your letter urging the Christian Reformed Church to respond to the needs of our brothers and sisters in the Middle East. I am pleased to report that as a denomination we are already reaching out in love to the needs of hurting populations in Syria and Iraq. I am also happy to say that World Renew, Diaconal Ministries and the Centre for Public Dialogue are eager to do even more to encourage congregations to sponsor refugees and to work with their refugee neighbours for justice and hospitality as refugees are settled in Canada.

In the following letter, we hope to provide information that will clarify some of the challenges that we face following the Canadian government's announced promises regarding the resettlement of Syrian and Iraqi refugees, outline what the church is currently doing in response to the crisis in the Middle East, and highlight some areas for consideration as we plan to move forward. It is our hope to be available during upcoming classis meeting as well (Fall, 2015) in order to engage the churches in this conversation.

Reality Check:

Many people were excited when the Canadian government announced a promise to resettle 10,000 Syrians and 3,000 Iraqis in Canada within the next three years. This tangible target provides Canadians with a concrete humanitarian response to a brutal war and refugee crisis. It is important, however, to know some more about this announcement and the challenges we will face in implementing it:

- **The resettlement targets for Iraqi and Syrian refugees announced by Canada are not new commitments:** they are within current resettlement levels set by the government. In other words, Canada did not increase the number of refugees that it intends to resettle in the coming years. Instead, the commitment to help Syrian and Iraqi refugees is at the expense of other refugees who are very much in need of resettlement. For example, there are thousands of refugees in Africa who have already been waiting upwards of five years to come to Canada. With this announcement they will be waiting longer. Given the gravity of human suffering in Iraq, Syria and many places around the world, the Christian Reformed Church believes that the commitments to Syrian and Iraqi refugees should be over and above Canada's planned resettlement targets. We also believe that there is need for greater attention to fairness in the resettlement system.
- **The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) asked resettlement countries to assist in the resettlement of 100,000 Syrian refugees in the period 2014 to 2016.** Canada offered to resettle 10% of these totals over three years and committed its Sponsorship Agreement Holders (or SAHs -such as World Renew's Refugee Sponsorship Office) to meeting 60% (or 7,200 people) of that government commitment. The Minister made this announcement without any formal dialogue with SAHs. In the past, the private sponsorship program carried out by SAHs has always been **in addition** to the Government's

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commitments for resettlement. We believe that the government should meet its commitment regarding the UNHCR target and that private sponsorships should be in addition to these commitments.

- **In the recent past, SAHs and communities involved in resettlement have struggled with complicated application procedures, long processing times, and unexplained delays.** These complications have been dangerous for refugees waiting to be resettled, disempowering for community groups committed to sponsorship, and frustrating for SAHs. We believe that these administrative complications need to be addressed if SAHs and their community partners are to rise to the challenge of meeting these important commitments.
- **One deeply significant issue for refugees and sponsors has been the cancellation of the Interim Federal Health Program.** Canada formerly carried drug, vision, dental and prosthetic benefits for privately sponsored refugees but removed these benefits as a cost cutting measure. This puts the health of refugees at risk and raises the spectre of high cost health care liabilities for sponsoring communities.

The ambitious but achievable targets of bringing 13,000 Iraqi and Syrian refugees to Canada in the next three years will only be met if there is an atmosphere of open communication and collaboration between the Government, SAHs and sponsoring communities. For this reason we encourage church members to discuss the points in this reality check with their elected representatives.

Response to Date:

The Christian Reformed Church has a long tradition of assisting refugees around the world. We also have a history of speaking up and advocating with the Canadian government on behalf of this vulnerable population. As a result, it is our hope to communicate broadly to the churches through the collaboration of several partners. Using both their individual websites and a new web portal, www.crcna.org/Canada, we are going to assist congregations in a fuller orb view of refugee sponsorship issues ranging from advocacy to sponsorship as well as local church resources available for education. The partners working together are:

- The Canadian Ministries Office
- Christian Reformed Centre for Public Dialogue
- Diaconal Ministries Canada
- World Renew

The breadth of their work is described below:

In the past several years, **World Renew and the Centre for Public Dialogue** have collaborated on refugee advocacy. Recent letters to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration have focused on the need for greater constructive policy dialogue with SAHs and of the importance of the resettlement of Syrian refugees without discrimination based on religion.

The **Christian Reformed Church** has worked to create resources for its congregations to help keep refugee issues in people's minds and hearts. A Refugee Justice Task Force was initiated in 2012 and includes representatives from several CRC ministries in Canada (Centre for Public Dialogue, Race Relations, World Renew, Diaconal Ministries, Lighthouse). This Task force recently developed a 90-minute workshop resource entitled *Journey with Me: Refugee Stories that Change Lives*. At the heart of this interactive workshop are the stories of refugees that describe their struggles to live in Canada. *Journey with Me* draws participants into these stories; into reflection on the Biblical command to love refugees; and invites participants to stand for justice with their refugee neighbours. (visit http://www2.crcna.org/pages/publicdialogue_toolkit.cfm for more information)

Diaconal Ministries Canada continues to equip and mobilize churches to “love mercy” and “act justly” in respect to their neighbours. Refugees have been identified as one of many vulnerable, marginalized people groups. Facts are shared and ways to be engaged with and on behalf of this people group is an ongoing activity. Avenues of compassion have been identified as well as just-filled activities.

World Renew has been active both responding to the needs of displaced people internationally and in resettling those that come to Canada when they can no longer return home. As part of the Canadian Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program, World Renew has responded over the past couple of years to government programs aimed at specifically sponsoring Syrian and Iraqi refugees. The first government announcement was in 2013 and then later in 2015. Even though the targets for both announcements were not made in consultation with SAHs, the sponsoring community has responded.

It is expected that new Syrian and Iraqi cases will be referred to SAHs through the Blended Visa Office Referred Program. World Renew has promoted this opportunity to churches. To date, however, there has not been a great demand by CRCs across Canada to sponsor Iraqi or Syrian refugees. To learn more about sponsoring refugees through World Renew, [visit worldrenew.net/refugeesponsorship](http://worldrenew.net/refugeesponsorship).

World Renew has also been active in the Middle East through several humanitarian projects:

- Jordan: Assisted 500 Syrian refugee families with food packages from 2013 to 2015.
- Lebanon: Providing food assistance and food vouchers to 1,825 Syrian families since 2012, but now have to reduce this to 1,225 families and only until August 2015. Urgent additional funds are needed to continue providing this vital assistance to refugee families.
- Syria: Providing food assistance, rental assistance, heaters, emergency supplies, blankets and sleeping mats to 2,000 internally displaced families in four cities since 2012. The food component of this program will continue until September 2015.
- Iraq: Providing food assistance to 300 Iraqi families who have fled persecution by ISIS, and providing Canadian-government funded medical and health support to 5,000 Iraqi displaced families in Shariya refugee camp of Duhok, from May 2015 to February 2016.

World Renew has developed communications materials to raise awareness of the relief and humanitarian needs in this region and shared these materials through social media, World Renew's e-news and through the website worldrenew.net/syriaconflict.

Opportunities for Engagement:

There are currently opportunities in many of our communities for members to become engaged with refugees who have been resettled to Canada either through government programs and/or through the private sponsorship of refugees program or who have found their way to Canada on their own and made a refugee claim.

Essential to the resettlement of refugees in their navigation of a new culture and community are the many losses experienced by those who have to make these significant life changes. A caring, loving relationship offered by a faithful follower of Jesus will diminish the losses of the transition time and will contribute to the dignity of those so disempowered, vulnerable and isolated in a new setting.

- **Operation Lifeline** is a Toronto based project being developed by a group of academics, politicians and business people seeking to mobilize the public to sponsor Syrian refugees. They are developing an implementation plan. This is a project that Toronto and GTA churches could get engaged with to sponsor Syrian refugees.
- **Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC)** members have been in dialogue with the Minister's office and have stated that churches will come forward to sponsor Syrians and Iraqis. Further discussion with the Minister's office is planned to determine how best this can be achieved. This is another initiative with which CRCs could get engaged.
- **Citizenship and Immigration Canada** has announced that there will be no restrictions for 2015 sponsorships of Syrian and Iraqi sponsorships. SAHs can submit as many Syrian and Iraqi applications as they have capacity to manage.

Factors to consider:

There are opportunities for churches to become engaged on this issue, however, there are also challenges and factors to consider in ramping up CRC sponsorship of Syrian and Iraqi refugees.

1. **We will need to learn the level of church interest and assess church capacity** to sponsor Syrian and Iraqi refugees. Various communication avenues will be accessed to gather expressions of interest i.e. weekly bulletin announcements, letters to Deacon Chairs etc.

In terms of capacity churches must have the resources not only financially but also the interest, passion and time available to assist with the settlement of refugees. Learning of the interest will assist in determining next steps and the needed resources

- 2. Communication materials will need to be developed** for such things as promoting the sponsorship program, assisting with advocacy, educating about the conflict and populations and to establish guidelines/information package for sponsorship.

It will be important to communicate to churches that although there is a crisis in the Middle East **there are other refugee populations in need of resettlement** in the world and that there are opportunities to sponsor Syrian, Iraqi as well as people from other countries. Promoting fairness in the sponsorship system should be part of communications to churches.

As well, given the magnitude of the Middle East crisis, **churches should be reminded and encouraged to continue supporting humanitarian initiatives** in the region. It is important that there is a balanced response and one that factors in the many competing needs of the region.

- 3. It may be difficult to identify Syrian and Iraqi refugees to sponsor.** To date, most CRCs across Canada are not being approached by Syrian Canadians to sponsor their family members. As well, CIC has posted very few Syrian and Iraqi cases on the BVOR list. Therefore, we will need to explore options to identify and refer Syrian and Iraqi refugees to CRCs to sponsor.

Operation Lifeline and EFC are two options that might be able to assist with this challenge. Another option to refer cases is through matching sponsorship inquires made to the Refugee office to churches. However, this will likely be churches in the Greater Toronto Area as most calls are coming from Canadian Syrians in the GTA.

Refugees must be resettled in the same community as their sponsor. In order to match cases well it will be important to know the level of interest of churches in these specific regions to sponsor these populations. Resources will need to be allocated to manage the identification and referral of refugees.

- 4. Given the challenges with the Syrian and Iraqi announcement, more work will be done to assist churches with talking points to approach their MPs.** The Canadian Christian Reformed church, World Renew and the Centre for Public Dialogue will draft a letter to Minister Alexander in follow up to earlier correspondence and will address the policy items listed above.

CIC will have to put a number of measures in place to ensure that the increase in Syrian and Iraqi sponsorships can take place. For example, CIC will need to:

- Provide Syrian and Iraqi BVOR cases
- Ensure sufficient resettlement resources i.e. IFH as many Syrian and Iraqi cases are high needs

- Ensure processing capacity at CPOW and the visa posts to process cases in a timely manner and not at the expense of other refugee populations.

Conclusion:

Thank you for your expressed concern for and commitment to helping refugees from Syria and Iraq. God has called us in many references in His Word, such as Deuteronomy 10:18, to care for those who are vulnerable such as the orphan, the widow and the stranger (alien) in our local community and world. As World Renew, Diaconal Ministries and the Centre for Public Dialogue, we are responding to this call and continue to encourage congregations to do the same by sponsoring refugees and to work with their refugee neighbours for justice and hospitality as refugees are settled in Canada. We would appreciate your ongoing prayers and support.

Your partners in ministry,



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