

Why I Got Involved with Serving Refugees

Thank you Reverend Bynum for inviting me to talk with you all today.

My name is Frank Pierson. I am the president of Neighbors for Refugees, located here in Larchmont/Mamaroneck. Our mission, quoting from our website, is to “advocate for the rights of refugees everywhere and work directly with refugee families to provide them with the necessary services, resources, and community support to bolster their resilience, achieve self-sufficiency and thrive in their new homes.”

Many of you probably don't know that your church and Neighbors share a history, starting in late 2016, when LAC opened its doors to us for our initial meetings and then in 2017 became our financial sponsor until we got our own 501(c)(3) status later that year. I believe becoming our financial sponsor was a true leap of faith. At that time, we were a loose group of about 15-20 people who felt the need to do something to help refugees. I don't know if you remember, but back then the images of people fleeing Syria in rickety boats and sometimes washing up on beaches was in the news. We were determined to help. Ironically, in the five years since then, we have helped resettle very few Syrians, but we have helped refugees from more than a dozen other countries. So, on behalf of Neighbors for Refugees, I thank you.

Tomorrow is World Refugees Day, which was established in 2001 to mark the 50th anniversary of the International Convention covering refugees. That convention was in response to the millions of refugees created by WW2. Although it was ratified by nearly 150 countries, the U.S. did not ratify it. However, our country has passed numerous laws and executive orders covering refugees since then, most notably the Refugee Act of 1980, which allowed Congress and the President to set annual admission quotas. In addition to this Act, there have been many laws passed to deal with specific events – for example, Vietnam, Cuba, Haiti and more recently the Afghan Placement and Assistance Program and the United for Ukraine Program.

I am often asked why I got involved with Neighbors for Refugees. There are many answers to that question. I usually say it was an accident – I walked into a meeting I wasn't invited to right here in your library and walked out as a member of the finance committee. A word to the wise, be careful what meeting you attend.

That may be why I first got involved, but I wouldn't have walked into that meeting if I wasn't already interested in the plight of refugees. So, where did that interest stem from?

In the reading for today, Paul reminds the Ephesians that they were aliens to the lord but are now one in Christ. In another letter, Paul writes to the Galatians that “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” In the Old Testament we are called to “welcome the stranger.” So, partly this was Biblical.

But it was more than that. I have also travelled a lot, including many trips to Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic with Bridges to Community. Some of you may have gone on one of their trips. It's hard to come away unchanged and unmoved. Those trips gave me a real sense of the challenges people in other countries face every day and the knowledge that I would never have to face most of them. It hammered home the point that I (and all of us here) are blessed beyond measure and that we need to share our blessings with others.

And lastly, I know my ancestors back in the mid-1800s fled famine in Ireland to come here to start a new life and I am the beneficiary of an America that welcomed them. I think all of us owe the next generations of refugees (and other immigrants) their shot a new life here, safe from persecution, war, famine, and violence. I know I need to pay it forward.

I am also asked why should we help refugees when there is so much poverty and violence here in America. I think the premise of that question is wrong – it implies it's an either-or choice, that we can only do one or the other. I reject that premise. I believe that we can and should do both.

I must admit that there are days I am discouraged. There are around 100 million displaced persons around the world and, of that number, 30 – 40 million are refugees (including the 4- 6 million recently added from Ukraine). There are more refugees today than at any time in history. While we'll help 60-75 families this year, that seems like just a drop in the ocean. But, then realize that changing the world for the better usually happens one person, one family at a time. And with enough drops, we can move mountains.

So, as I stand before you on the eve of this year's World Refugee Day, I ask you all to consider the blessings in your life and the past journeys of your families that resulted in you being in the pews here today and then ask yourself how you can help.

The good news is that there are many ways you can help. First, we could use your treasure – our budget increased three-fold in the last couple of years in response to the need. But, we're still a long way from reaching our fundraising goal for this year. We can use your talent For example, treasurer, grant writer, volunteer coordinator and legal aid to help the latest round of refugees get all their paperwork in order. And, lastly, we can use your time. We hear about new families almost weekly and one of the biggest challenges is having a team to take care of the family – moving them in, helping find employment, tutoring the kids, driving them to appointments. And, we need a leader to manage that team. If a group of you wants to form such a team, we can provide our experience to show you how to do that.

In closing, I would like to once again thank LAC for all the support you all have given us already and look forward to working more with you in the future.

Jmel Wilson, our VP in charge of our resettlement efforts, Elaine Wanderer, a board member & secretary and a member of this congregation, and I will stay after the service today and answer any questions you may have. Thank you.