

WOMEN'S

PERSPECTIVES

Uprooted People—Refugees

Editorial

By Rev. Glynis Williams, Guest Editor

The Bible has been called the ultimate immigration handbook, with its numerous accounts of people on the move who are fleeing war, searching for food, and seeking religious freedom. Today we would add to the list, the freedom to express political opinions, and to seek safety when people are persecuted for their gender or deprived of other basic human rights.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) counts 10 million people as refugees who are outside their country of origin, as well as another 10 million who are internally displaced, stateless or refugees who have just returned home. This staggering number of uprooted men, women and children, young and old, is overwhelming for most of us to imagine. And of course, numbers alone do not tell the story. For each person, there is a tale of suffering and loss. It may not show on their face or body, but the scars on the heart are real nonetheless.

As so often happens, it is the most vulnerable who are most affected. Seventy-five percent of the world's refugees are women and children. Most of them live in appalling circumstances in refugee camps or in the slum areas of large cities in the developing world. How often have you heard that we in the developed world cannot do

any more; we have so many needs within our own population? Strangely, that is not a comment heard often in Malawi or Syria, countries which have in the past and today cared for millions of refugees who streamed across their borders in a matter of months. And this is another biblical theme: it is

the poor who best understand hospitality. *God executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.* Deuteronomy 10:19–20

For the past 19 years, I have been privileged to be engaged in an ecumenical Presbyterian-Anglican ministry with refugees in Montreal, Quebec. During that time, I have met people from many corners of our planet who have been forced to flee their homes. From Guatemala, El Salvador, Colombia, Burundi, Rwanda, Somalia, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Ethiopia and now Iraq, they are the living witnesses to the sinful consequences of war and greed. This edition of WP is the third in a series that has previously examined globalization and migrant issues. It is hoped that the reader will identify the inevitable links between these subjects.

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Rev. Glynis Williams

Imagine being hated and despised, just for being a member of a particular group.

Imagine having your loved ones, friends, neighbours, beaten, raped, murdered before your eyes.
Imagine not knowing whether you will live or die.

Imagine selling everything you own, leaving everyone you know, fleeing your homeland.

Imagine having to procure false documents to facilitate your escape.
Imagine traveling to a place that promises you refuge.
Imagine finally feeling safe enough to reveal who you are and why you fear for your life.
Imagine being told that you may not be who you say you are.

Now imagine being handcuffed and carted off in a van with other men, women, and sometimes children.

Imagine entering a world of barbed wire and uniformed guards.
Imagine not knowing what you must do to earn your release.
Imagine trying to prove who you are to strangers in a strange land.
Imagine having to call upon people from the very country from which you have fled.
Imagine watching the days turn into nights and still not know when you will be freed.

Imagine fear, despair, and helplessness.

Imagine frustration and anger.

Imagine a refugee claimant in detention.

To be detained is to be imprisoned. Confronted with locked doors, chain link fences topped with barbed wire and guards constantly present day and night, this can be a traumatizing experience. This is especially true if one has already lived through imprisonment or torture.

The arbitrary detention of asylum seekers, including children, is on the increase worldwide according to the UN High Commission for Refugees senior protection official, Erika Feller. In her October 2007 address to the UNHCR Executive Committee, she spoke of the creation of an economic lobby in favor of detention including the privatization of detention, which in some countries has turned it into an industry.

Canada's revised immigration act concerning refugees (June 2002) made it easier for immigration authorities to detain solely on the basis of identity. The new law also allowed a claimant to be detained at any point in the processing of their claim; previously the law only permitted detention at the port of entry. The result is that a refugee claimant can be

allowed to enter Canada only to find themselves arrested at the next step in their refugee claim, their 'eligibility' hearing. In other words, a refugee claimant who, in good faith, presents himself to an immigration agent is often rewarded with the loss of his freedom.

When detaining for identity, immigration authorities sometimes cite the need to verify the authenticity of identity documents provided by the refugee claimant. In other cases, they demand supplementary documents to those provided. The absence of guidelines as to the number or type of identity document required; the fact that detention is at the discretion of the Canadian Border Services Agency; and the lack of independent review of the decision, make it impossible for a refugee claimant to know if he will be detained.

Once detained, it is impossible to say how long it will take for the authorities to verify the documents, and sometimes no reasons are given for the delay. The documents may be considered inconclusive due

to lack of “biometrics data” or because the Canadian Border Services Agency does not have similar documents against which to compare them. In some situations, the individual detained feels obliged to agree to requests to contact their embassy to seek confirmation of their identity, even though they may fear the representatives of their country. In others, a person simply cannot furnish the demanded documents and may face an extended period in detention.

Being detained is stressful for a human being and is only made worse by not knowing what to do to be liberated, or for how long it will last. An asylum-seeker in this situation often suffers great anguish and fear at being locked up. In spite of this, they must try to prepare their claim for asylum. They are also confronted with the difficulty of finding a lawyer and overcoming possible linguistic barriers.

This is quite an unwelcoming reception for someone who is informed on his or her journey that our great white country in the north believes in human rights: “Go there, they will treat you well”, they are told. In addition, when they look around the detention centre, they are overwhelmingly surrounded by the black and brown faces of other detained claimants, many of whom are from developing countries. It leads some to conclude that Canada only incarcerates those who are not white.

Debbie Ferguson is the Interim Detention Coordinator of Action Réfugiés Montréal, a ministry supported by the PCC. Debbie is a graduate of McGill University’s Faculty of Social Work (MSW) and Law (B.C.L.\LL.B).

The Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program

By Glynis Williams

In the language of international refugee protection, resettlement in a country like Canada is considered one of the three durable solutions. The other two are local integration in a neighbouring country of first asylum (such as Syria for Iraqi’s or Thailand for Burmese), and voluntary repatriation when conditions improve and it is safe to return home. In reality, this means that many, many refugees live for years in camps or in misery in urban centres. The UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) is limited in the number of people referred for resettlement by the number of places offered by resettlement countries. Canada accepts about 7,500 people per year. UNHCR counts almost 10 million people under its care.

Canada has a private sponsorship program which allows faith and ethnic communities who sign an

agreement with the Quebec or Canadian governments, to sponsor refugees who might never be selected for UNHCR resettlement. Under this agreement, the organization is responsible for all the financial costs for the first year in Canada as well as assistance with the other settlement needs. An additional 3,000 people arrived in 2006 under this program.

Presbyterian congregations across Canada have been engaged in this program for more than 20 years. While the numbers sponsored by the PCC may be small compared to 10 million refugees worldwide; for the people concerned, it is the chance to live in safety and peace. We thank God for the opportunities to bless and be blessed by these newcomers.

For congregations interested in private sponsorship, please contact the interim refugee coordinator of Presbyterian World Service & Development, Glynis William at [gwilliams@presbyterian .ca](mailto:gwilliams@presbyterian.ca)

A View from the ground in Syria

By Glynis Williams

Sadly, the entire international community has been largely silent to the pleas...Desperately poor countries are bearing the brunt of hosting the enormous numbers of Iraqis with very little bilateral or multilateral aid.

The Iraq refugee exodus is the largest emergency crisis in the history of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and also the largest urban refugee population. Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, more than 2.2 million refugees have fled to neighbouring countries with another two million internally displaced. Syria alone hosts 1.4 million of the refugees.

While these numbers are staggering, they tell nothing of the fear, suffering and destruction that has forced this flight. Refugees describe the death threats, kidnappings, murder, and destruction of property that has affected them directly. Their stories are chilling and heart-breaking, and the violence has touched all the religious and ethnic communities.

Minority Communities

Especially critical is the plight of Iraq's minority religious communities, including Christians and Mandeans. These groups, in Iraq for many centuries, are being obliterated, victimized by Islamic extremists and criminal gangs. Of the

1.5 million Christians pre-war, approximately 600,000 currently remain. Mandeans numbered 60,000 in the early 1990s and today only 5,000 remain in Iraq with only five priests. The disappearance of these ancient communities from Iraq and the region is a tragedy for them and does not bode well for prospects of diverse, tolerant societies in the Middle East.

Palestinians in Iraq have been brutally targeted by the extremists, perceived to have been favoured in the past by Saddam Hussein. Only 5,000 remain of the 30,000 population, fleeing to the borders of Syria and Jordan, who have refused them entry. They are stuck in horrendous conditions in camps in the border region. So far, seven people have died there, including three young children.

The only thing worse than being a refugee is being a refugee with medical needs

UNHCR has identified a disturbingly high incidence of cancer in the Iraqi refugee population, approximately 10%



photo: www.unhcr.org

Al Tanf camp is for Palestinians and is situated in the desert on the Iraq/Syria border.

in Syria. This situation in addition to other forms of trauma is placing an enormous burden on the health systems of the poor countries of asylum and adds further to the suffering of the refugees.

One 32 year-old man had 30 bullets lodged in his body following an attack in his shop which left his brother and a customer dead. He was in constant pain and had an infection in the bones of one leg. The UNHCR physician said he would lose his leg if not treated surgically. The surgery was not available in Syria and no country was prepared to resettle him quickly.

Daily life in exile

Refugees are forbidden from working in the countries of asylum and must live on savings, which are quickly being exhausted. Large numbers of people share small dingy apartments. Some people survive on remittances from family remaining in Iraq or living in the west. Even if work existed for adult men, most worry about being detained and deported if they are discovered.

Child labour and prostitution are being reported as desperate families attempt to survive. Women alone with children, whose husbands have been killed or disappeared, are especially vulnerable.

War is inevitably a terrifying experience. In Iraq, kidnapping of children and adults is a common tactic of both criminal gangs and extremists. Ransoms demanded range from \$5000 to \$100,000. The kidnapped persons may or may not be

released following payment of the ransom. Families search the hospitals in order to see if their loved ones are dead.

Canada's response to the crisis

In 2007, Canada promised to increase its resettlement quota for Iraqi refugees. However by November 21, a total of only 661 persons had arrived, processed by the Damascus visa post. Refugee advocates have repeatedly been told that no additional visa officers will be deployed to expedite the processing. This means that small numbers will arrive and churches and other groups that will sponsor these refugees will wait years until the people arrive. Private sponsorship cases from early 2006 have just started being considered in late 2007.

Sadly, the entire international community has been largely silent to the pleas of the UNHCR and others concerned for the enormous human suffering of this refugee exodus. Desperately poor countries are bearing the brunt of hosting the enormous numbers of Iraqis with very little bilateral or multilateral aid.

Canada is well placed to respond to this crisis. So much more must be done to alleviate the enormous human suffering that threatens to become the newest protracted refugee situation.

The Rev. Glynis Williams is the Director of Action Réfugiés Montréal, a ministry of the Anglican and Presbyterian churches, supported by Canada Ministries. Glynis has worked with refugees for 19 years and attends the Presbyterian Church of St Columba by-the-Lake. Glynis Williams worked with the resettlement division of UNHCR in Damascus from March to July 2007.



Refugee Resources:

<http://www.unhcr.org>

This is the web-page for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). There is good information here on both refugee protection and information on different refugee populations.

<http://www.ccrweb.ca/>

This is the web-page for the Canadian Council for Refugees, a non-profit umbrella organization committed to the rights and protection of refugees in Canada and around the world and to the settlement of refugees and immigrants in Canada.

Children have been most affected by the war in Iraq. Here a girl waits for the UNHCR registration interview in Douma, outside Damascus.

A Theological Perspective

By Glynis Williams

*It is not individual gestures alone, that matter.
It is also the courage to name what is wrong,
and proclaim the God of love.*

A Biblical response to refugees

The Bible has been called the ultimate migration handbook, as it is a history of people on the move. The Israelites lived the refugee experience of exile themselves, and God and the prophets reminded them of this repeatedly. God brought them out of Egypt, through the desert and into the Promised Land: a process that produced many new widows, orphans and refugees in the occupation of Canaan. God challenged the Israelites to treat others, especially the most powerless, as they would wish to be treated themselves.

*God executes justice for the orphan and the widow,
and loves the strangers, providing them food and
clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you
were strangers in the land of Egypt.*

Deuteronomy 10:18–19

Jesus later emphasized this challenge in his summary of the two great laws (Matthew 22:34–40), in parables like the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 29–37) and in statements like this one:

*In everything do to others as you would have them
do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.*

Matthew 7:12

The Bible rarely speaks with one voice and so there are times when our biblical ancestors yielded to the temptation to blame the outsider for their troubles, in much the same way that some Canadians do today. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are examples of the fear and racism that underlies a negative response to the outsider. According to some scholars, the Book of Ruth was written as a response to the scapegoating found in Ezra and Nehemiah. (Nehemiah 13: 23, 25,26)

The Word of Hope

What does our faith say in the face of the horror of the wars raging in Iraq, Darfur, and Colombia? War breaks down human community, dividing the world into the weak and the strong; the righteous and the unbeliever. Wars are fought by those who believe their cause is just and noble, against foes that are evil or sub-human. Wars are also fought for reasons of greed.

Wars incite religious fundamentalism, often manipulated by criminal forces. In Iraq, people who had previously been close neighbours and whose children played together were now called enemies. Happily married couples of mixed faith were threatened with death if they did not convert or divorce. Religion was reduced to correct belief and right behaviour.



Rini Templeton

Jesus speaks to this religious world view in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Samaritans were considered religious heretics, and yet it is the Samaritan who sees the hurting human being on the ground, while the Priest and the Levite cross the road. Their religion will not permit them to stop. The man of the wrong faith does the right thing, while the men of the right faith walk on by.

Jesus' message here is incredibly simple and unbelievably beautiful. The apostle Paul captures the simplicity, the beauty and the difficulty of Jesus' message in 1 Corinthians 13. "And now abide faith, hope and love..., and the greatest of these is love. The next chapter begins: "make love your aim". Not biblical inerrancy, not purity, nor obedience to holiness codes—love.

What a radical statement of ethics: if we fail in love, we fail in all things.

This kind of love, this understanding of compassion, frequently requires confrontation. For it is not individual gestures alone, that matter. It is also the courage to name what is wrong, and proclaim the God of love.

Refugee ministry requires compassion and confrontation. Jesus' message is as difficult to put into action as anything we will have to do. But the blessings of God await those who walk with refugees.

The search for practical solutionsⁱ

By Dr. James Milner

Since the early 1990s, the international community has focused largely on refugee emergencies in high-profile regions such as the Balkans, the African Great Lakes or recently Darfur and Chad. More than two-thirds of refugees in the world today, however, are trapped in so-called ‘protracted refugee situations’. Such situations—often characterized by long periods of exile, stretching to decades for some groups—are concentrated in some of the world’s poorest and most unstable regions, and now account for the vast majority of the world’s refugees.

The challenge of protracted refugee situations has increased significantly over the past 15 years. In the early 1990s, new conflicts emerged in places such as Somalia, Sudan, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Iraq, the Balkans, the Caucuses and elsewhere, and the global refugee population consequently mushroomed. More than a decade later, many of these conflicts and refugee situations remained unresolved, and more than 6 million refugees are now trapped in protracted refugee situations. But this total jumps to more than 10 million when we include the Palestinian refugees who have been in exile for decades. The scale of the problem is clearly staggering.

Perhaps more troubling is the fact that refugee situations are lasting longer, and proving more difficult to resolve. UNHCR estimates that “the average of major refugee situations, protracted or not, has increased from nine years in 1993 to 17 years at the end of 2003.”ⁱⁱ As a result, the world’s refugee situations are becoming more protracted every day.

Most refugees trapped in protracted refugee situations are forced to live in isolated and insecure refugee camps, generally in remote border areas, and consequently face a number of protection and human rights challenges. Levels of sexual and physical violence in refugee camps are typically very high, and refugee women and children are at particular risk. The prolonged encampment of refugee populations has also led to the violation of a number of refugee rights, including freedom of movement and the right to work. Faced with these restrictions, refugees become dependent on subsistence-level assistance, or less, and lead lives of poverty, frustration and unrealized potential.

Protracted refugee situations are also a critical element in continuing conflict and instability, and have obstructed peace processes and undermined attempts at peacebuilding and economic development. At a local level, tensions between refugees and the local population often arise as refugees are initially perceived to receive preferential treatment. As donor support for camp-based refugee populations decreases over time, however, competition between refugees and the local population becomes an increasing source of insecurity.

In the past, chronic refugee populations in Europe, Indochina and Central America have been resolved through comprehensive plans of action, involving not only humanitarian actors, like UNHCR, but also a range of political, security and development actors. Such an integrated approach is also needed to effectively resolve the protracted refugee situations of today, but protracted refugee situations have yet to feature prominently on the international political agenda.

But there are some early signs of hope. The Government of Canada has established an Interdepartmental Working Group to address the issue, and is taking a leadership role within the UN to highlight the scale of the problem. Other countries are slowly starting to follow. Host countries in Africa and Asia are also starting to demonstrate a willingness to revisit their policies. For its part, UNHCR has repeatedly emphasised its desire to see these situations resolved, and is reaching out to other agencies to help find solutions to some of the world’s most protracted refugee situations.

The success of such an approach will, however, depend entirely on the commitment of the international community to see it succeed, and we have a long way to go. Protracted refugee situations are often forgotten refugee situations, and rarely make the evening news. But behind the statistics are some 10 million human beings who have lived in limbo for decades. The first step towards ending the plight of these refugees is to remember that they exist, and that these situations will not be resolved without our help.

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ⁱ This article is based on Gil Loescher and James Milner, “Protracted Refugee Situations: The search for practical solutions”, in UNHCR, *The State of the World’s Refugees: Human displacement in the new millennium*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), available on-line at: <http://www.unhcr.org/publ/PUBL/4444afcb0.pdf>

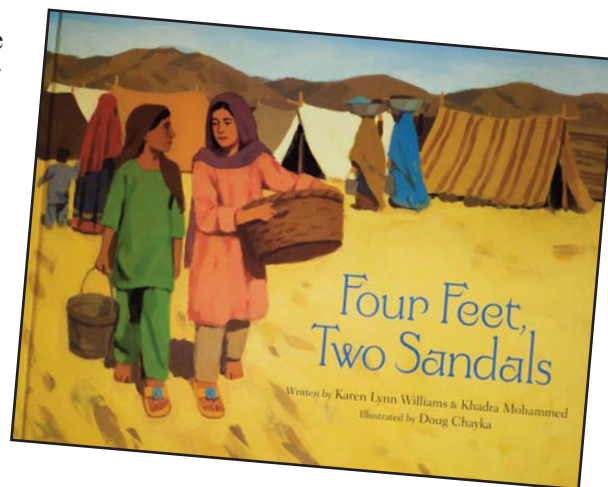
ⁱⁱ UNHCR, Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme, “Protracted Refugee Situations”, Standing Committee, 30th Meeting, UN Doc. EC/54/SC/CRP.14, 10 June 2004, p. 2, available on-line at <http://www.unhcr.org/excom/EXCOM/40c982172.pdf>

A Review of *Four Feet, Two Sandals*

By Amy Fonseca

According to the statistics on age and refugees that are available from the UNHCR, 45 per cent of refugees are children under the age of 18, 11 per cent are under the age of five. *Four Feet, Two Sandals* is a children's book which looks to tell the story of two such children.

The story is set in Peshawar, the refugee camp in Pakistan. Two girls meet when they both take one sandal of a pair from the clothing brought to the camp by relief workers. The girls become friends and decide to share the sandals by alternating days. In the blooming friendship we are shown some of what these children live in day to day life, we are given an indication of what these girls endured before arriving at the camp and we realize the losses they have suffered (mostly in terms of family members). In the end, other forces seek to interrupt the friendship and it is up to the girls to find ways to continue their friendship, to hope and to remember.



A topic such as refugees is perhaps, a touchy one at best, and when in the form of a children's book, many may find it inappropriate. Is it not our job as parents and community members to protect our children, to allow them to grow up happily and unaware of many of the trials and tribulations that plague our world? I don't think that many would argue that children need to have time to be children, to run and laugh and play, to enjoy story-time and hot chocolate after a day of tobogganing with their parents. If, however, this is all we give our children we have failed them.

As a teacher one of my roles is to help students become good world citizens. This includes being aware of and understanding issues such as refugees and refugee camps. *Four Feet, Two Sandals*, is a great resource for this purpose because it addresses these issues without being too intense. As it is written from a child's perspective it allows us to deal with an issue important in society, without being frightening for children. The issue of refugees is important for children for a few reasons. First, as 45 per cent of refugees are children, and Canada is a new home for many refugees, it is probable that Canadian children will know, and hopefully become friends with someone who was a refugee. In addition, children who have come to Canada as refugees must also feel that they have a place in our classrooms and society and that their past is not a stigma. Finally, all of these children are our future. These are the children who will make a difference in the world not only for future refugees but also in other related areas. Who are we to say that children cannot dream of helping others because the issue might be too risqué or carry too much weight for them? These are the dreams that combat our adult cynicism, and this is one book that can inspire such hopes and dreams.

The children in this book greet and take leave from each other saying "As-salaam alaykum" or "Peace be with you." Jesus greeted his disciples with those words indicating his love for them and us all. His love is for these children too, for these refugees who struggle to give their families a better life. It is our responsibility to teach our children to care and love as Jesus cares and loves us all.

Amy Fonseca is a primary school teacher. She was coordinator of the Sunday School at the Presbyterian Church of St Andrew & St Paul in Montreal, where she is a member. Amy is a Director on the Board of Action Réfugiés Montreal.

Women's Perspectives (WP) strives to keep women in touch with each other and share their theological perspectives, biblical insights, special interests, joys and concerns with the whole church. WP is published 6 times yearly. It is written by guest editors and overseen by WP Committee, in co-operation with the Women and Ministry Committee. These committees are connected to Ministry and Church Vocations, the Life and Mission Agency, The Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC). Views expressed in WP are not necessarily endorsed by the WP Committee or the PCC.

Readers comments and contributions are welcome at womensperspectives@presbyterian.ca

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Heart, Mind & Soul:

Love God, Love Yourself, Love Others

elders, clergy, christian educators, musicians, lay leaders, camp leadership, diaconal ministers, clergy spouses, youth leaders . . .

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