



The Vital Role of Faith Communities in the Lives of Urban Refugees: A Case Study of Christian Response to Refugee Populations in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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Abstract

The majority of the world's refugees do not live in refugee camps, but rather in cities around the world. Realities for urban refugees are vastly different from the conditions of a refugee camp. Urban refugees lack the institutional support of official refugee camps and often have minimal legal covering in their host cities. Without government support with and the limited capacity of UNHCR to provide adequate help, it is left to citizens of the host cities to provide help. Kuala Lumpur is home to more than 150,000 refugees and even more asylum seekers. These population numbers could be overwhelming to a city without help from its citizenry. This paper will examine ways in which Christian churches have welcomed and helped this large refugee population when few others would help. Guided by a biblical command to "welcome the stranger," churches have sacrificed greatly to impact the lives of refugees in several key areas: education, employment, health care, and spiritual vitality. Because faith communities operate outside of governmental and non-governmental bureaucratic structures, their work often goes unnoticed. The work of these faith communities in KL is not an isolated event but serves as one case study of similar work happening in cities all over the world.

Keywords: urban refugees, Christian response to refugees, religion

Introduction: Refugees Stranded in Cities

"the annihilation of distance has caught us unprepared." [1]

One Sunday morning a distraught-looking woman was sitting in the back of a church service. The

moment the service ended, the woman came rushing down to the front, holding out her cell phone with a message translated into English, explaining her circumstances. She was from a war-torn nation in the Middle East and did not speak any English. The note on her cell phone explained that she was trying to escape her violent husband and had

no one to help her. Although this woman did not speak their language and was not even a Christian, the church immediately went into action to help. This woman is one of many thousands who come to Kuala Lumpur to get out of threatening situations in their countries of origin.

The number of those who are forcibly displaced from their homes has reached an all-time high of 68.5 million. [2] 25.9 million are refugees, defined according to the UN as “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence.”[3] Of this number, more than sixty percent of the world’s refugees are based in cities rather than the camps so often depicted in the movies. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 80 percent of the global caseload of combined refugees and internally displaced people find refuge in cities.[4] Of the millions of refugees worldwide, most end up in locations that are not permanent and which are often legally tenuous. [5] Many nations have tightened their borders and become less hospitable to refugees.[6] Governments of the host countries often offer minimal support for these refugees; therefore, it is left to the non-profit sector to offer help.

Most global migration takes place as south-south migration.[7] Although a high percentage (80%) of the world’s refugees have sought temporary sanctuary in the Majority World. [8] most seek a nation with a higher level of development than their country of

origin.[9] However, in most cases, these refugees and asylum seekers are not provided with a path toward permanent settlement. In fact, merely one percent are ever offered permanent resettlement. [10] This means the vast majority of refugees are left to seek wellbeing in these nations where they first arrive and often live under tenuous (at best) legal status.

Malaysia is among the nations that have received an increase in refugees and asylum seekers in recent years. The legal and social issues refugees face in Malaysia are similar to the global trends. Because legal and political issues often constrain government response, it is left to non-governmental groups to intervene with help. Religious communities are often among those who offer help when help cannot be found elsewhere. Research has shown the supportive role of religious communities in the lives of refugees.[11] In a study on refugees in Delhi, Tiwari, Field, and Mookherjee rightly note that the role of faith-based organizations should not be homogenized.[12] This study will highlight one particular faith response in one city. Although, similar papers could be written about Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and Sikh responses to refugees in the city, here the focus will be on the Christian response. My purpose in this paper is to describe ways Christian faith communities (churches and nonprofit organizations) are serving refugees who come to Kuala Lumpur.

Refugee Realities in Kuala Lumpur

Omar * and his wife and three teenage children fled from Syria after close family members were killed in the conflict. They arrived with only a few possessions and an empty bank account. Omar was desperate to provide for his family and found a job working at a small kiosk in a shopping mall. One day, the owner of a competing kiosk called the police to inform them that Omar was working illegally as a refugee. They took him to a detainment site that was so deplorable that he was traumatized for many months after his release. Omar's story is representative of the plight of so many refugees coming to Kuala Lumpur in hope of a better life.

Although the statistics bounce up and down, there are an estimated 175,000 refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia from more than fifty different nations.[13] Malaysia "is among the top 10 countries that facilitate third-country refugee resettlement".[14] Those working closely with refugees in Malaysia claim there are at least another 175,000 who are not registered but fit the definition of a refugee. These refugees and asylum seekers are almost entirely based in the cities of Malaysia, most residing in Kuala Lumpur. Omar and his family arrived during Syrian conflict with over three thousand other Syrians. They came to Malaysia because they could arrive on a tourist visa, and because it is a Muslim country.[15]

Due to the location of Malaysia, the land has long been a convergence

point for people from many different places, many fleeing conflict in their homelands. Malaysia first became officially involved in receiving refugees on a temporary basis in 1975 when Vietnamese were fleeing their country of origin. At that time, refugees were placed in camps and their movements were restricted and most were resettled in a western nation. In recent years, however, most refugees from many different countries have not entered officially as refugees. Instead, they entered on tourist visas or covertly crossed a border. An unfortunate reality is that some refugees are moved across borders by smugglers, which has led to terrible tragedies in a number of cases. There have been reports of boats arriving on Malaysian shores with everyone dead as well as mass graves on the border with Thailand.[16] Whether refugees and asylum seekers enter Malaysia come by land, sea, and air, they face a long and difficult path to survival.

Refugees who enter by other means later report to the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) office in Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention to protect refugees and, therefore, offers no official legal recognition or protection of refugees.[17] The Malaysian government has the challenge of continuing strong diplomatic and commercial ties with neighboring countries,

* Omar's name is changed to secure his identity. Interview with Omar and his wife in June, 2014

particularly in ASEAN, while allowing refugees a place to land. If they openly acknowledge refugees from a neighboring country, they risk shaming the neighboring country, thus potentially disrupting the nation-to-nation relationship. Despite this legal reality, Malaysia does allow UNHCR to operate in the country. Refugees in Malaysia receive no help from the government and only very minimal aid from UNHCR. In Malaysia, refugees are not permitted to work and their children are not given access to public education. However, the refugee registration and resettlement process takes years, even when everything goes well. One asylum seeker told the author that when he went to UNHCR to make an appointment for his first interview, the first available time slot was over a year in the future. Refugees facing years in limbo cannot sustain themselves without an ability to earn an income.

The many thousands of refugees in Kuala Lumpur are left with few options for survival and are dependent on the kindness and generosity of voluntary organizations to provide help.[18] To be clear, these refugees are not simply waiting on handouts; they are working hard when they can find work, even with measly wages. Nevertheless, their earnings are seldom enough to take care of basic needs. It is also not uncommon for refugees to be exploited by police and employers, further reducing any potential for earning

enough to sustain themselves and their families. One study summarizes the impact: “such exploitation becomes rampant and unconquerable.”[19] To make matters worse, refugees are often the scapegoats for any problems that arise. When the public rhetoric remains aimed at refugees (and other transient foreigners), legal covering for refugees remains on the periphery.[20] Refugees are left with few actors who will advocate for more just policies and treatment.

Communities of faith operate with an ethical orientation external to that of personal gain or government welfare and are key actors in providing help to those left with few alternatives. Although Malaysia is majority Muslim, Kuala Lumpur is a highly diverse city with many different religious expressions. Although Christians are a small minority of the city’s population, they have served the refugee population in a significant way.

The Christian Mandate to “Welcome the Stranger”

Religious faith communities are called to respond out of the resources of their faith. More work needs to be done to give voice from the perspectives of different faith backgrounds.[21] Robert Muggah and Adriana Erthal Abdenur give the big picture: “The involvement of cities in welcoming refugees and providing sanctuary has deep roots dating back thousands of years. The

practice is universal, evident in early Christian, Islamic, Judaic, Buddhist, Sikh and Hindu societies.”[22] These resources typically fall into two categories: revelation or spiritual method. Christians hold strongly to the Bible as sacred text revealed from God. Only a summary of Christian teaching on the topic of welcoming refugees can be offered here in four key points, going from general treatment of all humanity to commands specific to the treatment of refugees.

All of Humanity is Created in the Image of God

Christians believe in a personal Creator God who made the universe and all that is in it (Gen 1:1). The apex of the creation account in Genesis 1 is the creation of humanity. At this point the language is unique. Earlier in the passage it describes other animals being created by God as good, but nothing more. When it comes to the creation of humanity, Gen 1:27 says this:

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.[23]

This remarkable verse clearly indicates that humanity is created uniquely to bear God’s image. For our purposes today, it is important to note that the language here is universal, referring to all humans. There is not distinction of tribe, class, or gender. All humans bear God’s image and are therefore to be treated with honor and

dignity. For Christians who believe these words to be divinely inspired, it means we are to be concerned for the welfare of all, including—perhaps especially—refugees. Jansen says this: “Crucial for any Christian mission is the creation of safe space, that is, of terror-free zones, where people can meet and share food, stories, complaints, and prayers.”[24]

Loving One’s Neighbor is Tied to One’s Love of God

It is well known that Christians are given what is called the “great commandment”. The commandment appears in the three synoptic gospels (Matt 22:37-38; Mark 12:29-30; Luke 10:27). Luke’s version says this: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” In this same passage, Jesus tells a parable explaining who our neighbors are. The parable describes a man without any other description being attacked and left for dead. It is the Samaritan (considered unclean by Jews of that time) who cares for this man. The message is clear, a Christian is to love indiscriminately.

The Biblical Narrative is One of Refugee History

In Frederick Norwood’s two-volume work on religious refugees, he opens with this observation: “Almost the entire history of the migration of the

Hebrew-Jewish people falls into three grand chapters: the Exodus, the Exile, the Dispersion. All three are chapters in refugee history.”[25] We see this theme of exile continue in the New Testament from the time of Jesus’ birth. Jesus’ family heed an angelic warning and fled to Egypt to escape the violence wrought by King Herod (cf. Matt 2:13-18). When persecution broke out against Christians after Jesus’ death and resurrection, they fled to other regions. Christianity is at home with a refugee mentality.

The Bible Calls on Believers to Welcome the Alien/Stranger

There are a number of passages that include treatment of the alien/foreigner (Heb. ger) among the nation of Israel. [26] The people of God are called to treat the alien just as they would one of their own, with love, and the aliens are to be given the same security under the same laws that watch over the nation of Israel (cf. Lev 19:33-34). The alien was to be included in “all the rights and privileges of Israelite society.”[27] In essence, the devout are called to a heightened sense of hospitality that treats strangers like family (Heb 13:12). Kenneth Matthews and Sydney Park explain

Hospitality was meant for the unknown person who seeks refuge. Essentially, hospitality in ancient Israel was a practice indicating a change in the status of a stranger to become a part of the host’s community.[28]

This is predicated on the fact that God’s people consider themselves sojourners awaiting a world put to rights (Eph 2:12). In this sense, the refugee life symbolizes the Christian spiritual journey. It is a picture of Christian salvation, of humanity utterly reliant on refuge provided by God through Christ.

Unfortunately, Israel did not always heed the mandate to treat the alien as equals. Injustice and exploitation were far too common (cf. 1 Kings 9:15-22). The prophets consistently decried the injustices that were pervasive in the city of Jerusalem.

The Role of Christian Faith Communities in Serving Refugees in Kuala Lumpur

One Sunday morning, Allan was asked to help with two men sitting in the back of their Chinese language church. The two men were from Nepal and did not speak any Chinese, but they knew the reputation of Christians as people who care for others and they sought help. For Allan this was a cathartic moment. For the first time his eyes were opened to the number of foreigners in his city and their many needs. Allan sold his business and began to build a coalition of churches who would be willing to help the vast needs of refugees in their midst.

Many are those who have sought to bring aid to refugees in Kuala Lumpur. Those offering aid to refugees operate in a legal gray area, therefore, their

aid involves risk. To render help to refugees can be seen as “hospitality as resistance”[29] The choice of a faith community to help refugees is a public statement against the status quo. The Malaysian Bar Association tells Christians wanting to help refugees that they have no legal covering to do so.[30] Space does not permit the telling of all of the great work being done. Here I recount only a summary of the work being done by churches in Kuala Lumpur. For the sake of brevity, I have summarized this work in four categories: education, employment, health care, and spiritual vitality. The primary methodology used to collect the data and stories used here comes from the author’s participant observation and personal interviews with practitioners in Kuala Lumpur.

Education

I was invited by one of my graduate students from Myanmar to visit a school that his church in Kuala Lumpur was supporting. The church is composed primarily of refugees and low-wage migrant workers from Myanmar. When visiting the school, I entered the humble two-story house and immediately heard the cacophony of multiple classes of children learning arithmetic and reading. Every square foot of the rented house was being used. There was even one class meeting on the stairs connecting the two floors. The teachers were also refugees, sometimes with only a little more education than the

children themselves.

Among refugees in Kuala Lumpur, more than 46,000 are children. Refugees spend many years in limbo in countries like Malaysia. Government schools are not open to non-Malaysians and private schools are prohibitively expensive. For these children to have no access to formal schooling, it leaves this population highly vulnerable. Churches and other grassroots organizations have started more than 120 schools to provide education for the refugees.[31]

These schools vary in quality. Most are very rudimentary like the one described above. Other schools are large operations, like the one Allan helped start. Allan’s organization, supported by a coalition of churches, has a refugee school with 1,400 students from twenty different countries from kindergarten to secondary school. Of those attending the school about 80% are from non-Christian backgrounds.[32] The school uses classroom space in five different churches and its principal is a college-educated housewife who volunteers her time. If one walks to the back of the property of one of the churches, they will find large hydroponics tanks with edible vegetables growing on the surface and fish in the water. Students learn how to maintain these tanks as part of their hands-on learning. Both the fish and the vegetables are used to help provide nutritious lunches for all of the students every day.

When Malaysia received an

influx of Rohingya refugees, Allan's school struggled to incorporate the Rohingya children into their schools. In consulting with Rohingya leaders they have worked out a way to provide supplemental education in their community-based madrassas. In this case, there is collaboration across religious lines.

In the prolonged time these refugee children are in Malaysia, many graduate from secondary education and wish to attend university. Through another network of Christian churches, university educators have developed a mentoring program intended to mentor aspiring students and help them apply to universities. They have also advocated to universities to offer scholarships specifically for refugees. Refugee children who are not welcomed to other nations as refugees have an opportunity to receive training that enables them to be employed in the global job market.

Employment

Before Fahd's family left their home country due to war, this high school graduate wanted to be an accountant. Now stranded in Malaysia, Fahd was unable to study accounting formally. A Christian accountant learned of Fahd's need for a job and desire to be an accountant and hired him as accountant apprentice. This was a risk for the accountant, but it gave Fahd important experience that would help him in the country of resettlement.

It was stated earlier that refugees

in Malaysia are not officially allowed to be employed. Yet, refugees must pay their rent, feed their families, and afford other essentials for life. Officially registered businesses, even those managed by benevolent leaders, are not able to hire refugees formally. It is left to the informal sector for refugees to find employment. For many refugees, language is a further impediment to finding jobs. Through church networks, Christians have taught refugees English and used their extended connections to find job opportunities in small businesses and provided other opportunities to earn incomes through services. Refugees have no legal backing, leaving them open to frequent exploitation. Christians are working to hold employers accountable to pay fair wages, as well as being ongoing advocates for employment opportunities.

Further employment is found through businesses that cater to the refugees themselves. Small vendors of goods particular to different refugee communities provide additional income and cater to the needs of each community, creating a micro-economy within the larger economy. The small refugee schools, supported by churches, also hire many from the refugee community. Organizations like Allan's also offer vocational training with the goal of increasing refugee employability.

Healthcare

Ali, a vibrant seventeen-year old refugee from Central Asia, was excelling in his studies and planned to take exams that might give him hope of university education. While he was studying, his tooth began to ache terribly. Dental care was long overdue, and he needed a root canal. Through a church contact a Christian dentist offered treatment at a deeply discounted rate. Ali went on to score highly on his IGCSE (International General Certificate of Secondary Education) exams.

Refugees often arrive with their health depleted from torrential journeys through wilderness and unsanitary vessels. Upon arrival they must work long hours with little rest and nutrition, always with the stress of exploitation or arrest hanging over them.[33] Many working in the informal economy must work seven days a week in poor work conditions. Those most vulnerable to sickness, injury and mental trauma have little access to healthcare. Hospitals and clinics require passports to render treatment and can be expensive. Even those refugees with passports are reticent to be exposed in any official capacity. Even though UNHCR-registered refugees are eligible for 50% discount at government hospitals, the majority do not seek medical treatment from these hospitals.[34]

In addition to the physical health challenges for refugees, mental

healthcare is even more pressing. One study of Dari- and Arabic-speaking refugees in Malaysia demonstrates the need for care that addresses the traumas of the refugee community:

On the RHS-15 scale, 98.8% of participants measured positive for emotional distress symptoms, with an average symptom score of 38.2 – surpassing three times the cut-off score of 12.[35]

Religious communities can be a significant source of help to those enduring these traumas.

Churches have responded to these needs in a variety of ways. As we saw in the case of Ali, Christian doctors and dentists offer their skills to provide healthcare at deeply discounted rates. Many of the refugee schools also draw from their church networks to provide basic medical check-ups and treatments. Church-based networks have actively offered mobile clinics in refugee communities using translators to go to the refugees. One group works specifically with pregnant women providing prenatal screenings, check-ups and health education. These healthcare professionals serve as vital advocates for those in such vulnerable situations.

Spiritual Vitality

Benjamin's family was killed by the military in his home country in Southeast Asia. He is from a minority tribe that was oppressed by the government. Benjamin and some

other teenagers managed to escape the slaughter and found their way to Malaysia through an overland route in the thick tropical jungles. It was a church of his own tribe that welcomed Benjamin in Kuala Lumpur and helped him enroll in a refugee school sponsored by a Malaysian church. In Benjamin's desperation, he saw God work through these churches. Now Benjamin is studying in a Malaysian Bible college so he can help others know God as he does.

One mistake we make when considering the needs of refugees is to only consider their physical needs. This is especially true in urban environments where material gain obfuscates humanity's need to attend to spiritual matters. "People needed something to attach themselves to from one moment to the next." [36] Refugees are pushed from their homelands for many reasons. Many flee from nations where free religious expression is not allowed. Christians—both from birth and new converts—seek asylum so they may worship freely and raise children in their chosen faith. Here churches offer something only churches can offer—Christian community.

Churches in Kuala Lumpur provide a source for needed spiritual community. For some refugees, they have never enjoyed spiritual community freely before. National and international churches provide space for corporate worship and community gatherings.

Having a deep connection to friends through a shared faith community can help fill in some of the emotional gaps that refugees so frequently struggle with. In addition, these churches provide holistic care for other issues that surface. For example, churches provide rudimentary rehabilitation facilities for addicts.[37] In this way, Christian faith communities become important hubs in community cohesion and individual flourishing for refugees.

Conclusion

A former student of mine, Steve, asked to meet with me out of the blue. Steve pastors a Burmese church in downtown Kuala Lumpur. The church of a thousand is composed of 80% refugees. One of those refugees was working at a high-end restaurant and bar owned by a European. The owner bought a new sports car and took a couple of refugees for a drive after closing late at night. The owner crashed the car, killing everyone in the vehicle. Steve was being asked to minister to the families of the deceased and perform the funerals, including for the owner. It was at this moment that this normally invisible faith community suddenly becomes visible and becomes an important part of the necessary healing in the midst of tragedy.

If it weren't for these churches and individual Christians, it is hard to imagine the dread that refugees in Kuala Lumpur would face. We

could calculate the costs involved in providing school for thousands of refugee children. We could also tabulate the costs of providing employment services and vocational training for refugee adults. We could add to this the costs of healthcare provision. It is more difficult to calculate value of spiritual community offered through churches. If we brought all these calculations together, the total cost in services provided would be considerable. To think about it another way, imagine the city of Kuala Lumpur devoid of any of these churches and their work with refugees. The damage wrought through lack of education, employment, healthcare, and spiritual community would be devastating to the lives of the refugees and would have repercussions on the whole city. Churches in Kuala Lumpur are far from perfect but, driven by their beliefs, have generously and sacrificially been a channel of blessing from God in the lives of thousands of refugees in Kuala Lumpur.

These accounts represent the refugee work of only a small number of the religious groups in Kuala Lumpur. It is noteworthy that the Christian community operates from a place of minority status (religiously and ethnically). It is beyond the scope of this article to draw any conclusions on the links between minority religious groups and willingness to serve marginalized populations. Nevertheless, Christian minority status may be a source of empathy for refugees, many of whom seek refuge because of their mistreatment as minorities in their home countries.

As refugee numbers continue to rise around the world and governmental support becomes increasingly unreliable, communities of faith can play an important role in serving this population. Moreover, faith communities as spiritual communities can render services that are not addressed by governments or development agencies.[]

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