

Parishes help refugees find community and connection

When civil war broke out in Syria, Maslam Mansour and his family were forced to leave everything behind – their home, their relatives, and their community – as they fled to Canada for freedom.

Since then, they have found a new, welcoming community at St. Theresa Catholic Parish in Edmonton.

“Our house burned down, furniture stolen or destroyed, the trees by our home – all gone,” Mansour said. “We lost everything in Syria. We have very much been grateful to be living here.”

Mansour, his sister Salama, his wife Theresa Alawad and their four children are among the 660 refugee families sponsored by Catholic parishes in Edmonton and surrounding area in the past five years.



Paulette Johnson

Last summer, Catholic Social Services and the Archdiocese of Edmonton hosted a roundtable discussion to reflect on these parish sponsorships.

A new report summarizing those discussions details the successes and challenges of resettling 1,572 refugees from 2015-2019.

“One big takeaway is that the parish gives these families a way to make connections in ways that a government sponsorship doesn’t,” said Paulette

Johnson, coordinator for refugee sponsorships with Catholic Social Services.

“They have a resource that can link them with so many things in the community. A lot of our parish- sponsored refugees tend to be better with finding employment. If they come to Canada without any English, then the parish has not only helped teach them English, but the church provides them a place where they can really work at their English and practise it.”

Pope Francis called on all Catholic parishes to make a commitment to sponsor at least one refugee family after videos and photo of refugees drowning and desperately fleeing war dominated the news in September 2015.

It was a call that 38 parishes answered, including St. Thomas More, St. John Bosco, Our Lady of Good Help Maronite Catholic parish, and Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples.

For St. Theresa parish, resettling five refugee families has brought both trials and hardships – as well as lasting friendships and a stronger faith all around.

“The experience has really has opened my eyes to see God’s love in everybody,” said Fern Hardie, a member of the parish refugee sponsorship committee. “To see how willing people are to welcome strangers from such different backgrounds, and to see the happiness of these families despite all they’ve suffered through is really amazing.”

“It’s a lot of work, but I just pray every night that God will open my heart to receive His love and open my mind to guide me, because I know He has a path for us.”

St. Theresa’s welcomed four Syrian families in rapid succession from 2015 to 2016. Most recently, an Eritrean family has found a new home in Edmonton thanks to the south Edmonton parish.



Parishioners from St. Theresa's welcome a refugee family from Eritrea. Courtesy of Dan Hardie

"It quickly snowballed after we sponsored our first family. Within an eight-month period we welcomed four Syrian families into our parish," said Hardie. "Our committee had to get organized real quick and the parish had to come together over so many things."

"It definitely taught us that it takes a village to raise a family."

It was a parish-wide effort at St. Theresa's. Members of St. Vincent de Paul Society collected furniture and both the Knights of Columbus and Catholic Women's League raised much of the funds to support the refugee families.

On a city-wide scale, bringing in so many hundreds of families came with its share of challenges. One immediate obstacle was finding English classes which were in high demand everywhere. Canada accepted 40,615 refugees from 2015-2016.



Fern Hardie

“The government-sponsored refugees had first priority with language classes,” said Hardie.

“We only sponsored the families for one year financially, so we had to ensure they were independent enough to survive on their own. We couldn’t have them sitting at home waiting, so that’s when members of our committee stepped up and volunteered to give them English lessons twice a week.”

English lessons, led by volunteers, was one of many unique benefits of parish sponsorship. When families struggled to find work, the parish would provide volunteer work to keep them active and involved in the community.

The roundtable report recommends parishes co-sponsor refugee families to ease the financial pressure, look for more support from the federal government, and that retreats or other forms of spiritual formation are there to help parishes that sponsor families.

The Maslam family arrived in Canada in February 2016. They were the third family to be sponsored by St. Theresa’s parish. During that first year, the parish helped the family find a home, enrol their children in school, complete government forms so they could receive health care, and learn English.



Maslam Mansour, his sister Salama, his wife Theresa Alawad and Edmonton-born grandson John were brought from Daraa, Syria to Edmonton in February of 2016, thanks to St. Theresa parish. Kyle Greenham, Grandin Media

Most of the refugee families sponsored by Edmonton parishes were Christians, so faith also played a pivotal role in helping them adjust to life in Canada.

“It must be difficult coming to this tight-knit place where you don’t know anyone, you don’t speak the language, you don’t really know the culture, especially when they are sponsored by a small community parish,” said Johnson. “But if you share that same faith background – that’s a great starting point for establishing some common ground and making them feel at home.”

Faith is a foundational part of life for Mansour Maslam and he’s grateful that St. Theresa’s parish was there to welcome his family. Since their arrival in Canada, Mansour’s youngest grandchild, John, was born in Edmonton and baptized at St. Theresa’s.

“Faith has always helped me; it is a permanent piece of my family,” Mansour said. “People have asked me time and again to try other churches, but there’s nothing that could change our religion. My father, grandfather, great-grandfather, my whole family is Catholic and we always will be.”

Even after four years, the Maslam family’s traumatic memories of the Syrian war remain. Their home city of Daraa was completely levelled, and Mansour’s two

brothers were both killed.

Hardie said the refugee families sponsored by St. Theresa's have shared tragic stories. One boy witnessed his uncle's killing, yet another family had photos of priests executed in Aleppo, Syria.

Nevertheless, the families have worked hard to make their home in Alberta. The first family sponsored by St. Theresa's has purchased their own home, the second family has moved to Calgary, and Hardie herself has been invited to two baptisms and a wedding.

Hardie said sponsorship is a big commitment for a parish. This March, St. Theresa's parish will pause its efforts once the Eritrean family they are currently sponsoring is settled. But the parish is looking forward to resuming sponsorship in the future.



Parishoners from St. Theresa Catholic Parish in Edmonton welcome the Sulieman and Radi family from Eritrea. They are the fifth refugee family the parish has sponsored in the past five years. Dan Hardie, St. Theresa Parish

Whatever lies ahead for St. Theresa's, the friendships they've made will remain.

"Now that it's coming to a close a part of me will miss it. But I think after five years we are all pretty burnt out as a committee," said Hardie. "We will always continue to visit our families. The financial support, going through the

paperwork with them – that will come to a close. But our relationships won't end.

“We still drive down to Calgary to visit with our second family as often as we can. It's exciting to see them grow into their own lives and settle into Canadian life.”

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