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## How local faith communities can aid asylum seekers

Kelly Barneche and 'Joe'

Local faith communities are able to offer assistance to asylum seekers in ways that faith-based organisations (FBOs), constrained by eligibility criteria, are not, and they play a critical role in the reception and resettlement of refugees and asylees in the United States. Refugees and immigrants who are granted asylum once in the US ('asylees') are eligible for a host of services offered by FBOs working on resettlement. Immigrants who seek asylum upon arrival in the US, however, discover that they do not have access to the assistance that refugees and asylees do. Because the asylum application process lasts for months or even years, the experience of asylum seekers is characterised by uncertainty and waiting. Any aid they require – financial, medical, psychological or social – must be sought through community networks. This leaves asylum seekers, who have escaped life-threatening situations, extremely vulnerable upon arrival in this 'safe' country. Those without social connections or financial means risk homelessness, exploitation and trafficking.

Synagogues, mosques and churches are perfectly placed to offer the critical assistance that asylum seekers need upon arrival. Whereas FBOs are restricted by their funders in what services they can offer to forced migrants without refugee or asylee status, local faith communities do not face such limitations. They are free to decide that asylum seekers, despite a lack of official legal status, are eligible to receive assistance from them. When they offer housing, clothing, food, companionship and spiritual care, they reach individuals who would otherwise be excluded from accessing care from local organisations and charities, including FBOs engaging in refugee resettlement.

The experience of Joe<sup>1</sup>, one East African asylum seeker who sought asylum in New York City after being persecuted, demonised, humiliated and threatened with death in his home country because he is gay, offers us an example of what this engagement with local faith communities can be like in practice.

**Shelter:** Says Joe of his first day in New York, "It was the coldest day of my life; I sneaked into a church and slept on the pews. I felt lost, alone and frightened." Some local faith communities find that their facilities can serve effectively as short-term

lodging for asylum seekers, while others are able to make arrangements with community members who are willing to offer space in their own homes.

**Food and clothing:** Coming from a warm climate, Joe had "never experienced seasons". Many local faith communities maintain stocks of food and clothing or regularly offer warm meals to asylum seekers who often do not qualify for the warm clothing or meals provided by organisations that require beneficiaries to provide identity documents.

**Transportation:** Joe found that access to transportation was essential to his ability to navigate the city: "If one has a metro card [a public transport pass], they are then able to go to the soup kitchen or doctor's appointments, see their lawyers, go to church, do volunteer work, etc. ... Transportation support in form of a metro card is a fantastic and crucial tool to help people like me."

**Companionship and spiritual support:** Although some asylum seekers are able to connect with other immigrants from their own cultures, others cannot. The experience of isolation can compound symptoms of trauma. Joe recommends that local faith communities "help [asylum seekers] find new friends. ...you are left alone in deep thoughts with no one to talk to... If [local faith communities] could find volunteers who are willing to become genuine friends to people like me that would be a great achievement." Joe says of this effect, "find[ing] a group of friends would help me and others in my situation to gain a sense of being loved, human, and they would help me appreciate life again."

The flexibility that local faith communities enjoy, in terms of what type of assistance to offer and who may receive it, allows them to discern how best to collaborate with and help the asylum seekers among them. Most significantly, they are able to transcend the typical client-provider dynamic found in most organisations (including faith-based ones), allowing friendship and spiritual support to develop in the context of a community.

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1. Not his real name.