

Being Faced

Ministry at the intersection of hospitality and justice

BY RENÉE JAMES

WELCOMING REFUGEES runs in Danielle Steenwyk-Rowaan's DNA. Her family, home church and denomination have a long history of welcoming refugees and sponsorship. So in 2016, when the climate around refugee welcome began to shift in Canada and the US, something in Danielle also shifted. "I saw refugees – people fearing and fleeing for their lives – being feared as terrorists. I've volunteered at Micah House in Hamilton and I count refugees among my friends. It broke my heart to how refugees were now being treated."

She remembers when writing one more reply to scathing Facebook commentary on refugees coming to Canada became too much. "I didn't want to fight church people on Facebook anymore," she remembers. "I didn't want to spend time with people having to argue that refugees are human." Instead, she left her communications job, began raising support and worked with friends to launch Open Homes, Hamilton – a home-based ministry of hospitality to refugee claimants in the Hamilton area. The ministry, now a program of IAFR Canada, invites refugees – guests – to live in the homes of Canadian hosts for up to four months while they get settled. "I needed to live the example of welcoming refugees and hope that people would join. I just decided I'd put up signposts to the gospel."

In her seminal work *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, scholar Christine Pohl makes the case that hospitality is not optional for Christians. It is a necessary practice, closely connected to love and it is oriented toward strangers. Hospitality embodies God's heart for justice and as such requires us to reflect on priorities, possessions and power. Danielle agrees.

"It is in the shelter of each other that people live." — Irish proverb



LEVERAGE PRIVILEGE

For her, the work of welcoming refugee claimants became a call to spiritual transformation first. "Justice isn't out there," she reflects. "It starts with my heart, especially as someone who is privileged. I am white, young, middle-class, addiction-free with strong supports around me. I have had to become aware that I can contribute to the injustice of white supremacy by not recognizing the power dynamics at play in welcoming refugee claimants, almost all of whom are people of colour and some of whom may not speak English fluently."

She readily admits that Open Homes leadership, hosts and the majority of volunteers will not experience discrimination the way their guests will. "We don't live in their bodies. We won't see society nor will we experience discrimination the way they do."

LEARN THE THEOLOGICAL IMPORTANCE OF BECOMING A GUEST

Hospitality also means the re-learning of what makes a successful ministry focused on refugee claimants. "People sometimes need a defined role or task to feel comfortable," Danielle shares, "when what is really needed is simply to



Interested in creating a Christ-space in your home? Is your church open to launching a home-based hospitality ministry to refugee claimants?

- 1 **Seek connection.** At Open Homes, Danielle and her team love connecting people to other churches and other resources beyond what they offer.
- 2 **Be open.** Where can you be stretched? Where can you be learning? Could Christ be showing up in the face of your guest? It's in those spaces that you'll be seeing Christ.
- 3 **Communicate.** Don't try to do everything yourself. Be part of a team. Communicate well with the other people who are supporting the guests. You cannot do this all on your own.

show up, sit on the couch and have a cup of tea." She and her team train Open Homes volunteers or Companions on the importance of that one simple act. "We help them shift from 'Let me help you with a task,' to 'Show me something.' They learn to become guests themselves, like Jesus so often did. That's when the real magic happens."

Part of that shift though means volunteers learn to be comfortable with the awkwardness of navigating language and culture. "When you're willing to enter that awkwardness then that reduces the power dynamics," Danielle believes. "Being willing to be uncomfortable can be a delightful place. There's only so much performing you can do and facades you can put on when you have to build relationship with a refugee across language and cultural barriers."

BE FACED

It's in the stripping away of those pretensions that refugees help us – the Church – remember who we are. When a refugee claimant faces you and asks for your help, that encounter can be the beginning of a discipleship journey that will take you from the tyranny of internal strife, fights

and one too many Facebook posts for example, to a focus on what matters – *doing* the work. Mary Jo Leddy, the founder of Romero House calls this *being faced*.

Refugees need us to be who Christ calls us to be, regardless of how fatigued or unholy or stretched we feel.

Refugees call all of us to remember that they are not just people in need. "It's easier to forget that they have lived full and rich lives before arriving to Canada," says Danielle. They come to us with histories, lives populated with accomplishments, joys and sor-

rows. Like our histories.

Christine Pohl writes that the contemporary Church hungers for models of more authentic Christian life in which glimpses of the Kingdom can be seen and the promise of the Kingdom embodied. "More than words and ideas – the world needs living pictures of what the gospel looks like." Three years after launching Open Homes, Danielle and her husband have just moved out of their one-bedroom basement apartment into a larger living space. They're getting ready to welcome their first guest. ❶

Learn more at iafr.ca/open-homes-hamilton
Danielle presented a workshop at our April Conference.
Find her presentation at baptistwomen.com/resources

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