

Case Study

Not Forgotten

International: Ministry to North African Refugees



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Not Forgotten International is a humanitarian aid organization that exists to serve refugees and other oppressed or suffering people around the world. The ministry's mission is to put an immediate end to the last illegally occupied country in Africa—Western Sahara. Not Forgotten International is unique because, central to its purpose, is the development of strong and ongoing relationships with the people groups being served.

How did God awaken you to this need or opportunity?

I actually stumbled upon it. A local humanitarian faith-based organization came across an opportunity to host children from the refugee camp for a summer camp. As a humanitarian relief group they didn't have a body of people to draw from, so they called us.

I took the call and they asked if our church could host 9 refugee kids for the summer. It seemed an incredible opportunity for our Body to experience. Having no idea who these people were or why they were refugees, we said yes.

What was your first response? It must have been quite a surprise.

It was a surprise, but there was something about it that grabbed my heart immediately. It really did not matter who they were and where they were from, I just thought what a great thing—a tangible way—to bring missions to our church.

What was the first thing you did?

First of all, I got the ok from our church leadership. Then we went about finding host families for the children who were coming in 2 weeks all the way from the refugee camp.

You were not picking them up from an airport? You had to go to a refugee camp?

Yes, in my utter panic about going to the desert, God made it clear many times a day that He was in it, and that I needed to do it. Once I was there, my heart was completely captured.

This was somewhere in North Africa you had to travel to? How many people are we talking about?

Right, they had 165,000 refugees in the Sahara desert that had been refugees since 1975. Their homeland was Western



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Sahara, which had been a colony of Spain for a hundred years. Morocco invaded as Spain ended its colonization.

In the ensuing violent military invasion, half of the Saharawi people fled into the desert across Algeria's border, and half remained in their homeland, never imagining that the separation of every family would last for decades. One people and one nation were now separated by a land-mined berm 1,000 miles long.

165,000

There are 165,000 refugees in the Sahara desert that have been refugees since 1975.

What strategy or methodology did you develop to seize this opportunity?

I wish I could say we were well-planned and equipped, but we were totally unprepared for this outreach. We didn't know the language.

There wasn't much we could do without a common language, so our primary goal became to simply love them well. We lived that love out in tangible ways, such as bringing the children to families. What we hadn't realized until much later was that there were governmental leadership children involved in the hosting program, being loved well by Christian families.

When the children returned to their refugee camp homes, they were telling their parents about these Christians that were not what they had thought, saying, "They love us!" This was a powerful thing going on, though we had no idea what was happening back at home. The experiences of the children catapulted us into the favor and hearts of the government-in-exile leaders.

After having kids come to us for a couple of years, 9/11 happened. Shortly after that, we were met with a lot of frustration and hostility. We were bombing Iraq at the time and that was tough.

There were 30,000 children in the camps who never had the opportunity to leave the camps. At the invitation of the National Youth Organization in the camps, we began to bring the church people there to do things for the children. So 25 people from the

church stepped out in July, knowing the temperatures would be 130 degrees. They simply loved on the children who were not able to have time away from the camps.

I was called for a meeting with the leaders after the third day, and I expected the worst. They said, "We see a lot of humanitarian aid workers. We have seen many westerners coming here, but we have never seen people like this. We see that God is the reason you come here and there is no other reason."

When I asked what showed them that they said, "We see how you love us and come here when nobody else wants to come. Your presence and love and the way you play with the kids shows that indeed God is the one who has sent you. You eat our refugee food and drink hot water when you wish it was cool and still say thank you. The other thing is the way we see you loving each other as you work together. You are united, not competitive. You are the same, whether our governors are watching or not. You get with the person who is sick and you are asking God to make them healthy. From now on anything you want to do we will help you do it. Do it all."

What are the biggest obstacles you have faced and how have you addressed them?

There was a lot of suspicion from the refugee side because we were Christians. It was the first exposure for most, and we needed to assure them that we had no ulterior motives. These are also people with great needs.

Another obstacle is that we do not have enough workers to meet the needs. We opened an English school in 2005, teaching young adults so that they can tell their own story to the world. This has become very popular, and each of the 5 camps is inviting us to come and do all we are doing for the other camps.

Invitations are coming even from the Saharawi still living in their homeland asking us to come and teach English, so we don't have enough workers. It's a tough situation with the weather and the very hostile environment; raising support for long-term service is becoming unsustainable. Finances are a big obstacle in many ways, but my heart is more broken for more workers. The workers would love to be there but we don't have the means.

What are the most transferable principles that you have identified?

I think the first is the priority of wanting

to love well. Love the people. Love one another. This is so basic and exactly what Jesus said we should do. I never realised the power of the dynamic of people watching the Body of Christ living that out before them. Another principle is that we go in as learners. This is their world and they know how it works. Over time we have taught them that we are not bringing them a religion, but bringing them Jesus.

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What have you learned that would enable you to take a different course of action if you were starting all over again?

I think one thing is to ensure that all our key leaders have the same vision and mission. Any inconsistency is seen by the refugees. They identify anyone of our team leaders who are "doing something different." It matters to them that especially team leaders are tracking with the same heart as those through whom the work was birthed and continues to be led.

How can a church learn about immigrant communities around them?

There are people within every church, I believe, who have a heart for the world and are personally connected within the local community. Connect them with the church's outreach leaders. Be an organization that puts people in touch with the world.

What is your most compelling success story?

It is a powerful story. Because these people have developed a network in the world for their very survival, God is using that network to prepare people in their sphere of relationships for His Kingdom purposes as well.

Last year while I was in the camps, I was informed that the top religious leader of their hosting country wanted me to come to his office in the capital city. As you can well imagine, I was very nervous.



He had several leaders in the room, and his first statement was that they have known what our church has been doing to help the Sahrawi people from the beginning. It was news to me that we had been on the radar for so long. He said they had allowed us to have open dialogues about our faith because of how well we loved the refugees. He then asked if we had the version of the Bible we followed in their language, having interest to have one to study.

Others echoed that as well. They also expressed interest in having access to “our version” for others in the country. The relationships continue to be built, including

being given a tour of a city in their country that is rich in Christian history.

The local church has a powerful role to play in the world. The Great Commission includes each one of us.

How has the Lord used this outreach to change you, your church?

Fifteen years of this ministry has changed me tremendously. God has shown me redemption in a very personal way. The simplicity of the gospel that Jesus presented—to love God and love each other, and the power of living that out in the world—has changed all of my concepts of mission, unreached people groups and the role of the Body of Christ through a local church in that mission. The local church has a powerful role to play in the world. The Great Commission includes each one of us.

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