

Case Study

Cedar Springs

Outreach to Refugees and

International Students



ALMAZ GEMECHU

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Almaz Gemechu is originally from Ethiopia. She came to the United States in August 2001 as a political asylee and has lived here for the past 12 years. She serves as the Director of Refugee/International Ministry at Cedar Springs Presbyterian Church, in Knoxville, Tennessee, and has coordinated the refugee ministry for the last seven years.

How did God awaken you to this need or opportunity?

I believe that the Lord has used some visionary leaders like our late Missions Director Mac Sells. He died from Leukemia back in 2006 but he had been the Missions Director for Cedar Springs in this area for about two decades. During his ministry here, he had a big heart for internationals. He traveled most of the world and he got a vision for international students that were coming from China and other parts of the world and were going to the University of Tennessee. Their spouses would stay home without any connection; needing to learn English and have a community around them. He talked to the international class on Sundays by partnering with a missionary couple that was heading the Navigators International and were being supported by the church. When I joined the church in 2003, he invited me to the international class and made me a hostess in the bus that was taking them from the apartment to the church, just to meet and greet them and to establish connection and friendship.

The International class has been very instrumental in getting to know the internationals. Several of the students who come from an atheist or Muslim background came to know the Lord and got baptized and it's been a joy to witness how God is at work through this ministry. Besides the International Sunday school class. The church also started English as a Second Language classes on Thursday morning and evening—on a weekly basis that served 200 people on average. Many international students and their spouses, immigrants and refugees in the community started to come to these classes and that's been another place of connection and of ministry in the church.

In 2007 we added a refugee ministry unit under our global mission. This ministry had begun two decades ago when some members just welcomed refugees and invited them into their home. In mid 1990s some families in the church had offered to welcome some of the Sudanese refugees that were being brought to Knoxville through a local resettlement agency and were making a real difference in their lives. The Christian Sudanese later started a weekly fellowship on Saturday afternoons at Cedar Springs Church and Bakri Apiat became their leader and has been faithfully ministering to his fellow Sudanese refugees ever since. That's one of the inspiring stories of what God can do when we are willing to step out of our comfort zones and welcome the strangers as the Lord continues to bring the nations to our doorstep.



IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

CHURCH-BASED IMMIGRANT MINISTRY COALITION





What is the scope of need or opportunity?

Overall between 250-300 refugees are getting resettled in Knoxville area every year, and around 200 international students enroll at the University of Tennessee. We meet the students through the International House at the University and we try to match them with American families from the church so that they will experience American homes and be ministered to. We also have around 400 refugees, immigrants and international students that are attending our Thursday morning and evening English as a Second Language (ESL) program. There are 50 internationals that are attending International Sunday school class on Sundays.

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

One of our biggest strategies is collaboration. We collaborate with other churches and appropriate community organizations in welcoming and ministering to the physical and spiritual needs of refugees and other internationals that the Lord is bringing to our city. Bridge Refugee Services, Tennessee Immigrant Empowerment Solutions (TIES), Catholic Charities Immigrant Legal Services, Knoxville Internationals Network and Compassion Coalition are among the agencies we partner with in order to offer holistic ministry to our immigrant community. We try to post useful information about our programs and services on our church website as well as the church bulletin from time to time which also helps us recruit volunteers in order to carry on the mission. Our week long Global Missions Conference during the first week of March every year has been very instrumental in inspiring our congregation by inviting foreign and home missionaries and setting up display tables to provide sufficient information.

We also have mission moments every Sunday in the sanctuary by sharing some of the powerful stories from the mission field by using a three-minute video clip with a list of volunteer opportunities. Information also spreads by word of mouth among the refugee/international community in our city and by God's grace we're one of the most sought after churches by many internationals since we were willing to open up services that minister to their specific needs.

Our vision: empower refugees and help

them progress from being strangers to becoming productive, successful citizens of the USA and of Christ's Kingdom.

Mission Statement: In obedience to the Scriptures, we seek to represent Christ to refugees by:

- Providing support and relief in partnership with other organizations and churches.
- Providing guidance and encouragement and advocacy aimed at enabling self-sufficiency and giving back to the community.

Above all, we practice the ministry of presence, active listening and prayer. We stick around as friends and continue to walk alongside of them until they come to know Christ as their Lord and Savior.

- Encouraging friendship and mentoring relationships with church members
- Exposing refugees to the love of God through our service
- Strengthening the body of Christ in their service to refugees.

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

One of the drawbacks has been to know how to balance the physical and the spiritual side of ministry and know the right timing of things. At times we tend to do so much to minister to people's physical needs but miss opportunities to share the gospel with them.

At times we let the cart go before the horse, which can be counter-productive.

There are also times when we fail to apply compassion with wisdom and hurt the very people we're seeking to help. This happens when we're enabling people to become our dependants instead of empowering them to stand on their own feet from the get go. This also carries the potential to be highly divisive within the church and among the churches based on the members' political views. As a result we can end up hurting the very people we're seeking to help by throwing stuff at them instead of helping them stand on their own feet. This goes with that popular saying: "if you give a person a fish it lasts just a day but teach him how to catch a fish and that will last him a lifetime." That is the principle we are going by. People who are hurting and are new to the culture need the gift of our presence to mentor and encourage them, to listen and help them figure things out besides their material needs.

In order to help us overcome these negative outcomes the Cedar Springs Refugee Ministry Team has developed various guidelines and layers of accountability, which are also helping us to be good stewards of the resources that

250+

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the Lord has entrusted to us. Overall, we have seen a life-giving ministry taking place whenever we are willing to listen and follow God in His mission and apply compassion with wisdom more consistently and for the long haul.

Moreover, in order to help us coordinate our efforts better we prayerfully came up with the idea of creating the Knoxville Internationals Network about 3 years ago which has been very strategic in nature and is becoming equipping and connecting center for the cross cultural mission work among



the internationals in our city. At the local church level, we're also focusing on active discipleship process to equip our members and lay leaders for the work of the ministry. Even though we are far from being perfect, we see God at work using our little efforts.

What are the most transferable principles that you have identified?

First of all, we strongly believe that we can't go wrong if we seek to follow God who is on His redemptive mission and His leading to the right person at the right time. We also want to listen and remain open to all possibilities that He lays on our hearts. We also seek to incarnate Christ in the ways we conduct ourselves and relate to others so that they will have a reason to believe that the Gospel is true. We are to show hospitality to strangers and offer our friendships including to those who are different from us and to not be intimidated by the cultural difference.

Recent statistics has shown that many internationals would love the opportunity to connect with American families, but unfortunately very few of them have succeeded in forging that connection and relationship. In fact hundreds of thousands of international students and visiting scholars go back to their countries every year without having any encounter with Americans who are true believers and are bold enough to share their faith with them.

400 

We also have around 400 refugees, immigrants and international students that are attending our Thursday morning and evening ESL program.

On the other hand, many well-meaning people in the church are nervous to connect with internationals since they have the concern that they might offend them since they don't understand their culture. But the truth is that internationals would love to connect with Americans and have no expectations whatsoever for Americans to know the cultural norms that are foreign to them and deal with them accordingly.

So we need to encourage the church to overcome this fear factor and be willing to step out of their comfort zone and befriend internationals. And God will do what is humanly impossible in softening and changing hearts through these connections and loving and trusting relationships that could come out of that.

We must also be willing to serve with and through others cross denominationally in order to allow God to multiply our efforts as members of the body of Christ. We also need to pray together and show love and unity to one another as we seek to reach out to the world around us. When misunderstandings and conflicts arise we are to approach it with the spirit of humility and patience. We're also to show charity in the non fundamental matters of our faith for the sake of maintaining unity among the body instead of insisting on our own ways. We cannot compromise on the foundational things of our faith, but allow freedom in non-foundational matters.

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

I would start out with lot of prayer to discern God's will and where He is leading. I would bring together passionate people who feel the call for the ministry and continue to share resources with them in order to equip them for the work of the ministry. I'd also create a better understanding of the ministry environment, the ministry activities, possible issues and challenges and the importance of trying to tackle these from God's perspective. And I would certainly facilitate a strong discipleship process for the lay leaders and encourage the formation of accountability partners for mutual support and encouragement on the journey. I would also facilitate a learning environment where we can continue to learn together to catch up with the fast changing world and what God is doing through it all.

How can a church learn about immigrant communities around them?

We've been very intentional in forging partnerships with a local nonprofit organization called Bridge Refugee Services that brings refugees to our area, the International House at the University of Tennessee that gets to meet all the international students that come to the University. Moreover, we offer ESL and International Sunday School Classes on

weekly basis as well as International Women's Club once a month and many internationals come to the church to attend these classes.

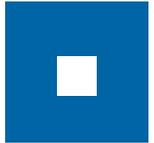
They learn about these services from our website and information also spreads by word of mouth and they want to come since God has granted us favor in their eyes and we've been very reputable in the community. You'd be amazed how a newly arrived

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refugee contacts us right away because information is already there. People had told them, "This is a good church ... you need to go there ... they are willing to help." God is opening doors for us to minister to people that way.

What is your most compelling success story?

By God's grace, we have been able to minister to around 400 refugees over the last seven years. But this figure doesn't include those who are being served through the ESL Program, International Class or the monthly International Women's Club. Among the most compelling stories is a refugee family of 3 that had arrived from Zambia about a year ago. They are from Rwanda—a widow and her two adult children. She had to leave Rwanda during the genocide after her father got killed. Her husband was still alive at that time and they were forced to flee to the neighboring country of Congo. While there they had their second child. But while they were raising their family and trying to rebuild their life something terrible happened. The rebels came from Rwanda



and killed her husband. She lost her mind over that and she had to flee again to Zambia with her two young children. They lived in a nightmare scenario for 10 years in Zambia just thinking that somebody would come and kill them anytime.

Because she didn't feel safe even in another country, she was extremely traumatized, as were her children. They didn't have a means of livelihood and were being constantly chased around by the police. They didn't have a country; they didn't have protection. It is a very heartbreaking story. Ultimately the UN High Commission for Refugees found them, gave them a refugee status and they became candidates for permanent resettlement somewhere in the West.

Thankfully they arrived in Knoxville last year and my church had the privilege of welcoming them at the airport and setting up an apartment for them. We just came alongside them to comfort them and to minister to them in every possible way. So, one of the things that shows the power of collaboration and the power of holistic ministry to internationals is the fact that we worked with other organizations and volunteers who were gifted in so many different ways to get them to a trauma therapy. Within 3 or 4 months they became trauma free and were able to attend English classes, a job club, attend church and attend various activities.

Now they are feeling healthier and showing more desire to connect with people. Their life is drastically changing. We sent the oldest child to a training program because she completed high school in Africa. We were able to give her skill training in one of the local community colleges. She now works as a Certified Nurse Assistant in a local nursing home. Her younger brother was enrolled in the GED program and also is now working full time. The mother was also able to find a job because she feels more healthy right now. All of them are working

and we enrolled them in a homeownership program to help them become self-sufficient. They are growing spiritually and absolutely overwhelmed by the outpouring of love, care and encouragement by the body of Christ. This is one of the neat stories that I was able to witness on how God uses His people in turning people's lives around and how He makes the difference for His kingdom.

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

My spiritual walk with the Lord right now is like never before. As I am doing this ministry and as I am coordinating it, I am extremely humbled because it is way higher than me. The needs of people are absolutely overwhelming. People come with all kinds of problems and issues both physical and mental and I feel so helpless in the face of all these challenges that are causing me to seek God more diligently. And to believe on their behalf that it's only God who can change these circumstances, who can bring healing and restoration to people.

It's not me and there is nothing much I can do on my own to ease this pain and to transform peoples' lives. So the more I see this, the more I yield to God and the more I want to spend time in the Word and in prayer. We pray corporately on weekly and monthly basis with others who are involved in the ministry, but we also intercede on behalf of these people in our personal daily prayers. And as a political refugee myself, I am trying to look at this through the same light that it's God alone who is able to turn around our complex circumstances and can bring forth so much beauty even out of our ashes in making us a voice to the voiceless.

I also see the Lord challenging His church by causing them to step out and serve just by teaching their language to someone who ended up here without even being to read or write in their own language leave alone in English and build a life-giving relationships

with them that way. For me it's an absolute joy to be a part of God's mission and see how he redeems our circumstances and use them for His glory.

One of the most exciting things that the Lord had enabled me to start in 2009 was a summer ESL Camp for the refugee children and youth. These children don't have much happening for them during the summer months and they simply stay in their apartments speaking only in their native languages with their families. They have very little opportunities to practice their English or get involved in some fun and/or educational activities. As a result they tend to face new setback when school starts again in the fall.

By God's grace I have been able to access resources and find partnerships in order to run this project every summer ever since and be able to serve around 150 children and gearing up to put on another camp this summer. The program includes: English language instruction; social skills, enrichments, sports, peer mentoring, and field trips and home visits.

Overall, we thank God for giving us this wonderful privilege to be a part of His mission and for allowing us to impact the lives of many for Christ through our love and service. It is our prayer and sincere desire that the Lord would awaken his church at every corner to this reality that the ends of the earth has come to us and to be willing to rise up and make a lasting impact in the lives of the hundreds of thousands of internationals that the Lord is bringing to our shores every year.

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