

DEFYING THE NAZIS

THE SHARP'S WAR

CONGREGATIONAL STORIES

FIRST UNITARIAN CONGREGATION OF TORONTO, ON

Type Action:
Refugee Sponsorship

Using a special Canadian government program that allows congregations to sponsor refugee families, a church in Toronto set a goal of raising money to bring one family to Canada – they ended up bringing five.

Tarek, Walaa, and their two children still lived in Syria when a bomb detonated near their house, and a sniper took up a position next door. Learning that Tarek was about to be drafted for the second time into the Syrian army, the family decided it was time to leave the country for Lebanon. Amidst a growing backlash against the refugee population, harsh government policies, and little support from the United Nations, the family again struggled to survive.



Photo of Tarek, Walaa and family, courtesy of Ainsley Kendrick at First Unitarian. Used with permission.

Through the efforts of the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, acting in partnership with the Muslim Association of Canada (MAC), the Masjid Toronto (a local mosque) and other multi-faith partners, the family now lives in Canada.

First Unitarian Toronto has a long history of providing refuge to people being persecuted. In the Vietnam era, the church gave sanctuary to Americans escaping the draft. In the 1980s, it sponsored¹ refugees fleeing state repression and civil war in Central America. Refusing to feel powerless in the face of so much suffering and anti-immigrant rhetoric in the news, the church voted unanimously to sponsor a Syrian family.

FINDING A FAMILY

The Canadian Unitarian Council is an official Sponsorship Agreement Holder (SAH) with the Canadian government, meaning that any Unitarian congregation in the country can apply to sponsor refugees. To do so, however, a community first has to identify a particular family to support.

The church established a partnership with the local Masjid to form the Save a Family from Syria project. The Masjid reached out to the Muslim commu-



Photo courtesy of Ainsley Kendrick at First Unitarian. Used with permission.

1 <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/12/canadian-christians-muslims-sponsor-syrian-refugees-151223084239005.html>

nity to ask for people who needed help bringing their Syrian family members to Canada.

In deciding to support Tarek, Walaa, and their children, the team took a number of factors into consideration, including the urgency of their situation and the likelihood of their admittance through the Canadian immigration system. When the Masjid brought Tarek and Walaa to the attention of the team, it was clear that they needed to get out of Lebanon soon for the family to survive. Recognizing Tarek and Walaa had two young children, the team decide to sponsor the family.



Photo courtesy of Ainsley Kendrick at First Unitarian. Used with permission.

FUNDRAISING

A sponsoring congregation needs to provide for the basic financial needs of a refugee family during the first twelve months. The Canadian government sets a minimum of these expenses at \$27,000 for a family of four, but First Unitarian set a goal of \$40,000 taking into account the high cost of living in Toronto.

The congregation hosted ² multiple fundraising events, including a Middle Eastern buffet, guest speakers on the Syrian crisis, and a face-painting day for children. The Save a Family from Syria project passed its fundraising goal

² <http://www.insidetoronto.com/news-story/5675233-toronto-church-and-mosque-come-together-to-bring-refugee-syrian-family-to-canada/>

within the campaign's first three months and decided to sponsor as many more families as possible.

**“Whoever saves one soul,
it is as if he had saved
mankind entirely.”**

The Qur'an (5:32)

EXPANDING CIRCLES

Months before the family arrived in Canada, members of First Unitarian and the Masjid sent children's books and welcome gifts. In December, a team of about fifteen volunteers set up the apartment where the family would stay.

The Save a Family from Syria team was able to sponsor more families than they had originally planned. Through a one-time special Canadian Government program, sponsors were not limited as to how many Syrian refugees they could sponsor. From September to December of 2015, the team submitted four more applications for Syrian families (in Lebanon and Turkey). All were accepted.

As of the spring of 2016, five refugee families have been resettled in Toronto, and the most recent arrived in April.

SPONSORING REFUGEES IN AMERICA

The process works differently in the United States than it does in Canada, since there is no direct sponsorship of refugees. Americans who want to support refugees can still help in many ways: by providing financial assistance, securing housing, offering English language training, and more. Get started by reaching out to your nearest resettlement agency. Please see the section on Sponsoring Refugees: Some Basics section of the Defying the Nazis UU Action Project's Congregational Action Guide, available at uua.org/sharpstory.

*This case study was written in collaboration with First Unitarian's refugee sponsorship project leader Annette Wilde and team member Ainsley Kendrick. Many thanks to them both for supplying key information about what made this sponsorship program such a success!

Find out more at the church's website:

<http://firstunitariantoronto.org/what-we-do-here/refugee-family-sponsorship>

Also, check out this media coverage of the congregation's efforts:

<http://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2672181582>

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/12/canadian-christians-muslims-sponsor-syrian-refugees-151223084239005.html>

<http://www.uuworld.org/articles/congregations-sponsor-syrian-refugees>

<http://www.insidetoronto.com/news-story/5675233-toronto-church-and-mosque-come-together-to-bring-refugee-syrian-family-to-canada/>