“God is our refuge†: Salvationist reflections on a global crisis

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James E. Read, Ph.D.

That there is a global refugee crisis is not news. Millions of people have fled their homes in the last decade, and additional masses are forced to be on the move every day. In many cases, life for refugees is horrific in ways others cannot imagine. But the impact is, or should be, felt by everyone—including us Salvationists and The Salvation Army—and it is this impact that I want to be our focus today. Who are we to be? and What are we to do? and Why?, are the questions.

Facts, figures and definitions

Let’s begin, however, with some facts and figures.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which is the UN agency created specifically for the protection of refugees, there are presently about 71 million “forcibly displaced” people in the world. That’s almost double the entire population of my homeland, Canada; about 20% of the population of the USA; and about 1% of all the people in the world. Of that 71 million, about 26 million are designated “refugees,” and another 3.5 million “asylum seekers.”

I find striking is that about 80% of refugees are living (or “camping out”) in neighboring countries. Syria’s civil war has been raging for a decade. About 3 million (or about half the total number of Syrians who have fled) are presently living in Turkey. The war in Afghanistan has persisted longer than in Syria, and over half the Afghan refugees (about 1.4 million) are biding their time in Pakistan.

Last year, 92,000 refugees were permanently resettled in countries other than their homeland. Canada relocated and permanently resettled about 30,000 of them. Many Canadian take pride in the fact that this is more than Germany or Britain or Australia or the USA. Even so, 30,000 out of a total of 26 million refugees is a drop in the bucket.

So much for sampling the numbers. How about the definitions? What is the difference between a “refugee” and an “asylum seeker” or an “internally displaced person”? The existential reality of families on the run is as old as humanity, but in the terminology of international law there have been “refugees” only since 1951.

The experience of WWII generated a global moral awakening on certain fronts. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which was adopted within a couple of years after military victory was declared by the Allies, is a moral declaration before it is a legal declaration. Its first article says “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” Its fourteenth article says, “Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.”
But the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is more a statement of aspirations and ethical convictions than enforceable law. The UDHR’s declaration of moral duty was codified in 1951 in the first Refugee Convention, which gave legal definition to “refugee” and “asylum seeker.”

According to the 1951 Convention, a “refugee” is “outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” because of a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.” "The Convention further stipulates that, subject to specific exceptions, refugees should not be penalized for their illegal entry or stay [in a country where they are seeking protection]. This recognizes that the seeking of asylum can require refugees to breach immigration rules.” In other words, an “asylum seeker” is someone who has not yet been recognized as having a well-founded fear of persecution, and “refugee” is someone whose fear has been officially recognized.

Originally these definitions applied only to Europeans who had fled persecution before 1951. In 1967 the Refugee Convention was revisited and the definition expanded to apply universally.

One underlying assumption in 1951, in 1967 and today is that the first choice of most refugees and asylum seekers is to go back home. The reality is that many are consigned to life away from that home, making do in tenuous circumstances for an indefinite period of time; and doing so in a host country that is itself economically poor. For instance, the whole country of Lebanon has fewer people than New York City, but is presently hosting over a million Syrian refugees. They simply can’t afford to provide food, shelter, education, and other things promised under the international refugee laws. Acknowledging this general fact, the 2016 New York Convention on Refugees committed the nations of the world to do more in sharing the responsibility for caring for refugees even though those refugees may not be residing within their particular borders.

One point to notice from this quick overview is that the moral responsibility remains constant but the circumstances that cause people to be on the run change. Nations, as well as individuals and communities within those nations, have recognized their duty to care. Although this is cause to rejoice from a Christian standpoint, nations need to be pressed to adapt to changing circumstances. In the mid-20th century people had fled anti-Semitic persecution in Europe. In the early 21st century people are fleeing from civil war and oppressive governments. Soon masses will be forced from home because global climate change will have made their home uninhabitable. The question is who will come alongside and advocate for and with them.

The Salvation Army and refugees

Advocacy has not been a strong suit for The Salvation Army. Stories from the early days of The Salvation Army, like the campaign to raise the age of consent in Victorian England, are recited with pride. In the places I know best, however, the public today does not recognize The Salvation Army for political activism and it does not school Salvationists in methods of public policy advocacy. On the refugee policy
front, despite the fact that the 2016 International Positional Statement on Refugees and Asylum Seekers is strong on advocacy⁷, I know of only a few rare individual Salvationists like Dr Russell Rook who are actually pressuring government on this front.⁸,⁹

More typically, The Salvation Army works as an agent of government policy or as an international NGO service delivery organization rather than as a disturbing prophet. In this capacity, when it comes to refugees, The Salvation Army is active in a variety of ways in many countries. I will mention a sampling, but let me emphasize that this is only a sampling. I encourage you to acquaint yourselves with other Salvation Army refugee ministry activities, and also creatively imagine interventions not yet being taken.

**Detention Centers**

I begin with work in refugee camps or detention centers. For some years, the government of Australia had a controversial policy of not permitting asylum seekers to land on its shores, transporting them instead to camps (officially “processing centres”) on the tiny South Pacific island nation of Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island, where they were registered and their cases vetted. Despite saying publicly that it did not agree with this policy, The Salvation Army for several years entered into a contract with the government of Australia to provide educational, recreational and pastoral counselling services to these off-shore asylum seekers.¹⁰

While that work has now ended, The Salvation Army continues to be present in the Rohingya refugee camp in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, with the permission of the local government and one of the UN agencies that coordinates relief. The Salvation Army’s contribution? Solar kits that power LED lights and enable the recharging of cell phones. A report in *All the World* magazine of April-June 2019 says “The Rohingya refugees are stuck. They can’t leave the camp and are forcibly confined there. They do not have the correct papers to integrate into Bangladesh and are not welcome back in…Myanmar….There is nowhere for them to go.”¹¹ In personal correspondence, my friend Lt Richard Bradbury, whom I met when I visited the Kibera slum in Nairobi, and who wrote this report, added “The thing that struck me most about the Rohingya people was not their physical conditions (the slums of Nairobi in many sense were much worse than the camps) but the sheer sense and scale of hopelessness.” Bradbury’s report in *All the World* continues, “Like many other people, Nasreen is resigned to living in the camp for the foreseeable future. She told me that the light given by The Salvation Army makes life more manageable and—consequently—more hopeful. She is able to cook at night and eat together with her family. She feels much safer being in her home and the light brings protection and comfort.”¹²

**Resettlement**

Some refugees seek to make a new home rather than wait until they can return to the home from which they fled, and a number of countries make provision for this. Canada, for instance, for 2019 has set a total immigration target of about 300,000; of that, 30,000 spots are reserved for the resettlement of refugees. Most governments handle the resettlement process all themselves, but Canada introduced a
second track when the Vietnamese “boat people” arrived in the 1970s, and as a result, The Salvation Army is now credentialed in Canada as a private non-governmental sponsoring agency. Of the 30,000 refugees relocating to Canada in 2019, about 20,000 will be resettled through private rather than government sponsorships, and Salvation Army corps will be among the private sponsors. They will undertake to help with housing and education and health care and jobs and guaranteeing that costs of living are covered. This year my own corps is in the process of sponsoring our second refugee family. Over in the UK, Raynes Park Community Church is the corps that has championed the resettling of Syrian refugees in England. I don’t know that this option exists under present US law.

Asylum seekers in the community

The claims of the families that our corps and Raynes Park have resettled had already been vetted by the authorities and consequently they were “legal refugees” before they entered our countries. In other instances, including the cases that make headlines in the USA, people enter the new country and after crossing the border, ask for their cases to be heard. These asylum seekers are sometimes referred to as among the “illegal immigrants.”

In February 2017, despite the risk of frostbite caused by travelling by foot in the dead of winter, several Somali men crossed the border from the USA into Canada near where I live. The police intercepted them, but once the men made a refugee claim, the police called on The Salvation Army to provide shelter. Responding quickly, Booth Centre in Winnipeg eventually found itself housing over a hundred as-yet legally unprocessed asylum seekers.

These numbers are dwarfed by the number of people who, having landed in Greece and Italy after making their way perilously across the Mediterranean to escape threats back home, have found the helping hand of The Salvation Army. Often that helping hand has been the spontaneously extended hand of ordinary (i.e., not specialists in refugee response) Salvationists.13,14

Deportees

When my wife and I visited the Ellis Island immigration museum some years ago, we were surprised and pleased to see depictions of a Salvation Army presence there. What were they doing? Mostly, they were working among those who were waiting to be deported from the United States. After a change in US immigration law in 1924, Ellis Island became the site for examining “only those whose eligibility to enter the country was doubtful.”15 According to a 1951 War Cry article, “The government, concerned primarily with examining the alien and sending him on his way as rapidly as possible, has largely limited its responsibility, during the time the alien is detained, to the provision of food, shelter and, when necessary, medical care.”16 Providing clothing, recreation, education, religious services and pastoral counselling fell to private agencies like The Salvation Army. An interesting factoid the War Cry article slipped in is that The Salvation Army ran the Ellis Island library. It had 20,000 books in the collection, in
23 languages. Not letting language be a larger barrier than it needed to be, the War Cry reporter wrote that “an attempt is made to incorporate each Sunday the languages represented by those who worship....Salvationists are suitably equipped to handle such linguistical matters and have people available for such purposes.”

I remind you that this brief survey is not intended to be exhaustive. It illustrates, however, that Salvationists and The Salvation Army have been and are involved with refugees in many places in the world, from the point at which asylum is first sought to the point at which, asylum being denied, the would-be refugee is deported.

Exploring the theological “why”

The question Why? arises. Why is The Salvation Army there? Earlier I described The Salvation Army as service organization delivering government policy, and that could explain why. But that is probably not the only, or even the best, explanation.

As an ethics professor—someone whose passion is Christian moral theology—I long for us to go deep on the normative questions, and so I want to ask, why—from the standpoint of Christian ethics and Salvation Army mission—should there be an engagement with refugee issues?

So far I have found a lot of the what, but not a lot of the why in the literature. Well, that may be an exaggeration. Two guiding values are pretty easy to discern.

The first is deep in the Salvationist DNA—it is a moral commitment expressed in various catch phrases, one of which is that “the need is the call.” The mission statement is less catchy but says The Salvation Army exists to meet human need without discrimination. The story of William and Bramwell Booth and the men sleeping under the London bridges has become the Salvationist’s iconic narrative expression of this. “Did you know there were men sleeping under the bridges?” William is to have asked his son. When Bramwell answered yes, William thundered back, “Then go and do something!”

“Where there is a need, there you find The Salvation Army” in some ways serves as sufficient rationale for work with refugees. Who could be needier—physically, socially, spiritually—than people fleeing their homeland in fear of persecution?

I discern a second guiding value, however, in what I read and hear about the refugee and immigration work, and that is the potential for personal relationship. I encourage everyone to watch the recorded sessions of the interactive global summit on migration and refugees that the International Social Justice Commission convened in January 2018. Over two days there were eight meaty, informative, thoughtful sessions. In every one of them, you could sense the change when a story was told. Expressing what is a universal reality among Salvationists, I think, Commissioner Christine MacMillan once said to me, “Jim, every social problem has a face!” To be gripped by a face rather than an abstract idea or issue may or
may not be universally human, but to think that it ought to be that way is most certainly powerful in Salvation Army values. “Doing the most good” sounds too abstract and too utilitarian for Salvationists who want to be able to bring hope and a future and salvation to identifiable individuals. As my friend and colleague Salvationist Dr Ian Campbell, put it in recent correspondence:

Issues of HIV, people trafficking, addictions, local ethnic conflict, political threats, economic exploitation, poverty, and commercial sex work, all associate with refugee upsurge, and all point toward facilitation of reconciliation with family, neighbours, good friends, wider national society, and God…. [Reconciliation is] the grace based convictional motivation underpinning all that we try to do [in The Salvation Army]. …Relational health is the necessary foundation for long term sustained response by refugees and all others affected, in my experience. Program interventions can only be effective long term when adapted in synergy with local face to face engagement.

While Dr Campbell’s language may be abstract, those of us privileged to know him know he lives and breathes “relational health.” And so, I think, do most Salvationists.

But let me suggest that these two important guiding moral values do not give us a sufficient answer when a critic says, as some really have, “But there are lots of needy, unsaved people. We should start with our own. I don’t want my donations to go to helping foreigners while plenty of our own people need food and clothes and a place to call home.”

What more can the word of Scripture say in the face of such criticisms? I want to conclude by inviting you to reflect on three things.

1. Jesus was a “refugee.” He was not a refugee in the definition of the 1951 Refugee Convention, but he was definitely a refugee in the less legalistic sense of a man forced to be on the move. When I say Jesus was a refugee, the story that might first come to mind is of the toddler Jesus being taken to Egypt by his parents in order to evade the murderous King Herod. According to Luke’s gospel, however, Jesus was forced to be on the move earlier than that. Luke says Jesus was born in Bethlehem because Caesar had compelled Joseph to take Mary and the unborn Jesus to leave Nazareth. And after their stay as aliens in Egypt, the family feared returning to Bethlehem because Herod’s son Archelaus ruled Bethlehem and all Judea by that time, and Archelaus was more murderous than his father. The adult Jesus was always on the move too, often we are told because his life is being threatened by enemies, and at one time Jesus himself says (with what inflection we do not know, perhaps matter-of-factly, perhaps commandingly, but also perhaps with a tone of sadness and anger), “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” The evangelist John sees these incidents as emblematic of Jesus’ entire life on earth: “He came into the very world he created,” John says, “but the world didn’t recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him.”
In other words, in some important sense, the Lord Jesus was perpetually a refugee in this world, looking for people to take him in. That being the case, today if we engage with those who are refugees, we may be enabled to understand Jesus better.

2. For Christians the refugee life did not stop with Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. Scripture tells us that Aquila and Priscilla were in Corinth because Caesar Claudius had forced them and all other Jews out of their home in Rome. Providentially God turned their refugee condition to great good effect, because being in Corinth meant they met the Apostle Paul, were introduced to Jesus and became Christian.\(^{26}\) Earlier than that, Christians themselves had been forced to flee Jerusalem. Recall that Paul was converted while he was chasing down Christians who had fled to Damascus after the murder of Stephen. Acts 8:1 says Stephen’s strong witness caused “a severe persecution ...against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.” Note also that the first letter of Peter is addressed to “the exiles of the Dispersion”\(^{27}\) and what Peter says in this letter is largely about how to live as exiles (i.e., people forced into alien living conditions).

Perhaps the fact that Christians were often in peril because of their faith helps explain why hospitality became such an important Christian practice. “Make room” is a repeated command. Romans 12:13 says, “Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.” 1 Peter 4:9 says, “Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.” And 3 John 1:8 says, “We ought therefore to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth.”

For our present context, however, Hebrews 13:2 is the most pertinent expression of this expectation. “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,” it says. This comes immediately on the heels of a verse that says “Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters.” The comparison and contrast is unfortunately not as evident in English as it is in the Greek original. In Greek, Hebrews 13:1 says, “Continue to practice ‘philadephia’.” “Philadephia” comes from the root words “philos,” meaning “love,” and “adelphos,” meaning “your close kin—brothers and sisters and the like.” So the verse instructs listeners to love and care for people similar to themselves, people with whom the listeners have an established history. When we come to Hebrews 13:2, the Greek word is “philoxenia,” whose first root is, as in verse 1, “philos,” i.e., “love,” but whose second root this time is “xenos,” that is, “stranger” or “foreigner” or “alien” or “outsider” or “Other.” So, verse 1 enjoins Christians to love and go on loving other Christians who are known them and share common history and values and aspirations; and then, verse 2 enjoins those same Christians to love those who cannot be assumed to have the same history or values or aspirations.

Now in many ways, the refugee is almost a textbook “xenos” “stranger.” Refugees are running from what has been familiar towards what is different. The language, the customs, the cultural norms, the clothes, the food that has defined home for them is left behind, and our language, customs, norms, clothes and food may not be at all what they expect.
When complete strangers meet what happens? Contemporary English contains very few words that derive from the Greek “xenos,” but by far the best known is “xenophobia”--the fear of strangers. As I read current events, I think xenophobia describes a lot of what refugees can expect if they come through the borders of another country. The fear of home has made them flee, and what meets them on the other side is not a welcome, but another’s fear.

I do not want to minimize the real challenges people experience when strangers show up—this is something we should talk about—but the overarching attitude to which Hebrews 13:2 calls Christians is love of strangers, not fear.

That verse goes on. Having instructed us to receive strangers warmly, it goes on to say “for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.” “Angels” in the original Greek is “aggelos,” and “aggelos” can mean non-human beings, but it is also used of people. In the New Testament, it is applied to John the Baptist and John the Baptist’s disciples; it is the word used to describe the advance team Jesus sent to prepare things for him as he set out for his last journey to Jerusalem. The Apostle Paul applies it to himself in a reference that seems almost an echo of Hebrews 13:2—in Galatians 4:14 Paul writes that the Galatians “did not treat me with contempt of scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself.”

In short, it is not a question of whether the visitor is a heavenly being like Gabriel or an earthly being like John the Baptist, “aggelos” denotes someone who comes with a message, especially someone who comes with a message that God wants heard.

When a stranger arrives at our door or our border we may, if we don’t react with fear, almost without thinking about it, picture ourselves as on the giving end, and if they are welcomed, the stranger as on the receiving end of the hospitality we give. But applying what has just been said about “aggelos”, I think we should understand Hebrews 13:2 to be telling us that strangers sometimes arrive with something to give, not only receive; and that something may be a message from God. Those who have ears to hear, let them listen.

3. I suggest that refugees may be carrying a really important message for us. That message is that we too are refugees. As we have already noted, in the early years after Jesus’ ascension and for centuries afterwards, Christians were hated and hounded precisely because of their faith. They went out from Jerusalem, into Judea and Samaria and the uttermost parts of the world not only in fidelity to Jesus’ great commission but because they were forced to flee home or be killed. They were refugees in the most literal sense of the word.

Still today, in too many places in the world, Christians are at risk of their life and livelihood. This should definitely call out to us. But, let me suggest, that for many others like me and perhaps you, we are feeling quite at home where we are. We don’t feel real fear or dislocation or in any sense estranged from where we would like to be. Things could certainly be better, but actually judging from our actions, people would conclude that we are actually quite comfortable and settled just where we are. There is much to be genuinely thankful about this—I for one have
absolutely no desire to be confined as the Rohingya are in Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh or awaiting a refugee hearing while I sit in the Winnipeg Booth Centre. At the same time, however, should comfortably settled Christians not be asking whether God has an unsettling message for us? Are the real, fleeing-for-their-lives refugees on our doorstep carrying the message that refugee-ness is in an important sense the human condition?

For, if our primary identity is actually as a man or woman “in Christ” (as the Apostle Paul might put it), I believe we should not first think of ourselves as Canadians or Americans, and be comfortably at home with the present arrangements of this world. If that is happening, God needs to unsettle us. For, when Peter urges his readers to “live as foreigners and exiles,” he was not addressing only his first century readers. When the book of Hebrews exalts Abraham, who “made his home...like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents” it was because “he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” The book of Hebrews praises other heroes of the faith similarly “they were foreigners and strangers on earth...if they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one.” So it should be for us too. Until God’s reign pervades the world, until the New Jerusalem descends and we all enter it, Christianly-speaking, no one should really regard themselves as being able to be at home.

Concluding Remarks

I believe these things. Preparing this presentation has deepened my understanding of Scripture. But there are two dangers in finishing there.

The first is that it sounds as if the primary reason for a Salvationist to engage in refugee response is for what it can do for us. And that would be a gross insult to the millions whose lives are literally at stake today. To be a refugee in the UN sense of the word is horrible. Christians ought to lead the way, not greeting refugees and asylum seekers with fearful opposition, but showing them love—generous, self-forgetting, even sacrificial, love. Perhaps it is true that we ought to see refugees as God’s messengers who gift us with the message that we should never get too comfortable and too at home in this world; but getting that message should never be our motivation.

The second danger is that finishing with Scripture as I have makes everything sound too neat, too don’t-worry-it’ll-all-work-out-in-the-end. In truth, refugee work is anything but neat and tidy. It is fragile and fragmentary and frustrating, threatened by resources always being insufficient and refugees too awkward. Those who live face to face with the reality know refugee ministry needs Salvationists who are prepared to live with ambiguity and uncertainty, and the determination nonetheless to fight on to the very end.
Psalm 62:8

https://www.unhcr.org/1951-refugee-convention.html

An “internally displaced person” is someone who has fled or been forced from home, often for the same reasons as a “refugee,” but who has not left their country of origin. So, for instance, according to UHCR, there are 6.2 million Syrians still within Syria but not in the region that was their home before the war.


According to the CIA’s World Fact Book the 2017 per capita GDP (rendered in purchasing power parity) for Americans ($59,000) was three times that of Lebanese ($19,400). https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2004rank.html

https://s3.amazonaws.com/cache.salvationarmy.org/b098ace2-8430-4db0-b89f-87dbb8b5c58_English+Refugees+and+Asylum+Seekers+IPS.pdf

Dr Russell Rook, a soldier of Raynes Park Community Church, is chair of Reset: Communities and Refugees in the UK. To learn more, see especially session 3 of the 2018 ISJC global interactive summit on refugees and displaced peoples. https://salvationarmy.org/ihq/europerefugees

This story is told many places, but nowhere more effectively than in Bramwell Booth’s own Echoes and Memories (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1925), pp 1-2.

Matthew 2:13-15
22 Luke 2: 1-7
23 Matthew 2:19-23
24 Luke 9:58; Matthew 8: 20
25 John 1:10-11, NLT
26 Acts 18: 2-3
27 1 Peter 1: 1
28 Luke 7:27
29 Luke 7:24
30 Luke 9:52
31 Revelation 21