I was sitting at a table across from a father with his 6 or 7 year old son. His boy had the most beautiful big eyes and long eyelashes. His eyes were filled with curiosity, a little apprehension, and a whole lot of energy, as you would expect from a boy that age. I was at a “parent cafe” organized by my son’s school for the first graders. As we were sitting there one of the teachers got up and wanted to show us pictures drawn by the children. I was very curious what that little boy had drawn. I anticipated some technical things, maybe a robot or something along that line, as my son loved to draw these things. The teacher got up and got one big folder with all the drawings. She opened it, turned it around so I was able to see it. On this picture, drawn by the boy, were two houses one on each side, in between the houses on the street were children playing while an airplane could be seen overhead. While the children were playing that airplane was dropping a bomb. No, this scene was not from a movie, nor is it something out of a book he read. This was his reality, his life. Mohammed, a refugee, a boy out of Syria—a Muslim. His story is only one of many, whose childhood is stained with the reality of war, violence, and death. His is a childhood filled with fear and trauma.

As I tried to catch my breath I looked to the father and tried to put myself in his shoes. What does it feel like for a parent to raise children in such a context? As a parent you want the very best for your child. But how does it feel when you cannot even offer security for the very next moment, when you cannot promise that you will be there to shelter him because any minute his life could be taken, when any moment he could end up being an orphan? What does it feel like to get the impression that the world is silent and does not care about the war? I felt a deep heaviness on my heart, but as I looked over to the boy—he was playing, finally able to play.
My son’s school organized the parent cafes in order to help immigrant refugees adjust to the school environment in Germany, which saw an increase in refugee numbers starting toward the end of 2015. In 2015 from January to December 476,649 refugees entered Germany, in 2016 an additional 745,545 came, and in 2017 by the end of December, 222,683 refugees had applied for asylum (Zahlen zu Asyl in Deutschland 2018).

With the war in the Middle East the number of refugees has significantly increased worldwide. But before going any further it is important to define what a refugee is. According to Dictionary.com a refugee is “a person who has been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster.” A refugee is anyone who has been forced to leave their home, their family, and their familiar environment because of a threat. Becoming a refugee is not something a person chooses but rather something a person is forced to become.

The Bible also has something to say about refugees. The most prominent story about refugees is about Jesus and his family. They had to flee Bethlehem because of a threat and were forced to live in Egypt (Matt 2:13-15). The Bible does not provide much information about how they lived or how they were treated. Yet, the Old Testament provides instructions that were given to Israel concerning how foreigners (immigrants) should be treated. “The stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God” (Lev 19:34). God desired that the strangers in Israel should be treated with equality, should be included in the activities of the country, and should feel welcomed. You should “love them as you love yourself” (Lev 19:34 NLT). The following quotation offers more insight concerning the instructions God gave Israel:

God sets the standard for the Israelites that the immigrants who come to dwell among them should be treated “as the native among you” (Lev. 19:34), and as he gives the Law to his people, he repeatedly states that its protections—including the right to fair treatment as laborers (Deut. 24:14), to a Sabbath rest (Ex. 20:10), and to prompt payment for labor (Deut. 24:15)—and most of its requirements (but not all: note Deut. 14:21) are meant for the immigrant as well as the native-born (Ex. 12:49). Throughout the Old Testament, the immigrant is repeatedly referenced with two other groups—the fatherless and the widow—as uniquely vulnerable and thus worthy of special care and provisions (Ps. 146:9, Zech. 7:10, Ezek. 22:7, Mal. 3:5, Jer. 7:6, Deut. 24:21). God commands his people to love immigrants both because he loves them (Deut. 10:18) and because, given their unique history in Egypt, they ought to know better than to mistreat foreigners living in their midst (Deut. 10:19, Ex. 23:9, Lev. 19:34). (Soerens and Darling 2012)
God knew how hard it would be for people to leave their homeland, their family, and everything people are familiar with behind. He calls his people to embrace the foreigners, welcome them, love them, and treat them equally.

As I was reflecting upon this I wondered why it is sometimes so hard for Christians to accept an immigrant or a refugee. What hinders us personally and as a church? After reflecting on this I came up with a couple of possible points which might be hindering us from responding to immigrants and refugees in biblical ways.

First, I believe that many people have a fear that is based on two possible sources: (1) fear about the amount of work involved with refugee work and (2) fear of the unfamiliar.

Life can be overwhelming at times with everything it brings and its responsibilities to the point that many feel they just do not have the time or energy to work with refugees or immigrants. However, if churches and communities would join together the workload does not have to be unbearable. Often refugee work involves only a few people, but if there was a larger team effort there would be benefits at several levels. First, it would reduce the workload on a few individuals, and second, in working together church and community would draw closer to each other—a process that has far-reaching benefits allowing the church to minister not only to immigrants but also understanding individual needs of community members.

A second common fear is based largely on the unfamiliar. Fear of strangers, refugees, and more precisely, Muslims keep many from engaging. The constant barrage of gristly beheadings, suicide attacks, terrorist killings, and the brutality of ISIS have impacted all of us; however, it is important to remember that Muslim refugees fled because of these same reasons and that far more Muslims have died and been threatened by ISIS than anybody else.

Germany has a long history of accepting Muslim immigrants, yet this kind of fear seems to be creeping in (and maybe it was always there to some degree). I grew up with Muslims in Germany, went to school with them, and am a daughter of an immigrant family. My father is from Tunisia and is a Muslim. I did not grow up with him since my mother and father split when I was around 4 or 5 years of age. Yet, I was always drawn to the Middle Eastern cultures and many of my friends were Muslims. My best friend was a Muslim and we grew up like sisters. The first thing you notice about a Middle Eastern family is their hospitality. As you interact with and join them, you become like family, you feel welcomed. I have experienced that over and over. Another thing you notice about Muslims is that family is an important part of what life is all about. You also will
notice their spirituality, for their belief in Allah is also an important part of daily life. I never felt threatened by their faith, so feel that there is nothing to fear but maybe something to learn from them. I have been especially impressed with their commitment to Allah. I remember I was once asked why Christians don’t pray or don’t take God and religion seriously.

An important question is, what can we do about our fear of Muslims and other refugees? There is just one solution for such fear. We have to get involved, find out each other’s stories, and learn to see refugees as people as we get to know each other.

What would happen if we would sit with children like Mohammed, how would it change our perspective on refugees? What would happen if we would sit with fathers like Mohammed’s father and listen to his struggles? How would it change our perspective of refugees? What would happen if we would sit with mothers like Mohammed’s mother and listen to her fears? How would that change our perspective of refugees? I believe that getting to know Muslim refugees as people would go a long way toward removing fear of the unknown.

The second possible hindrance keeping many from interacting with refugees is that too many people in modern societies run on empty love tanks and when people run on empty there is little if anything to share with others. A natural consequence of running on empty is that many then isolate themselves even more. But what is the solution to this?

The one who can fill us is God. Therefore, it is important to make sure we spend quality time with God in order to make sure that in our emptiness and brokenness we sit with the One who accepts us, who loves us, and wants to heal us and fill us with his love. We will have more to share when we experience his amazing love for us despite of who we are.

Recently I interviewed a volunteer who was working for a group of refugees. It soon became apparent from the tone of her voice, from her excitement, and from the satisfaction and joy that her work had transformed her. As we were speaking she told me about the many relationships she was able to form with people she normally would have never met from other cultures. She felt deeply enriched by their friendship and the cultural exchange. She also mentioned how she had experienced their hospitality.

So what is the solution? There is a relational dynamic that takes place when we engage in helping others and it actually impacts both the recipients and the providers. While it is true that most people reach out to minister because they want to give and most are not involved because they want to receive some benefit, but it happens, it comes naturally as the providers are blessed and enriched. The solution for all the possible hindrances is to just do it, get involved, and go for it.
As I was researching what my town in Germany is providing for refugees and what is most needed I realized that food, shelter, and basic necessities are provided by the government but what is really needed is integration. One statement of a psychologist makes this very clear.

Refugees face a long journey to adjust and thrive in their new resettlement country. Many have been abused, betrayed, and mistreated prior to arrival, and some may have difficulty trusting others, as they expect to be hurt again. The deepest wounds that any individual carries are relational in nature, and refugees are no exception. As a psychotherapist, I (Isaam) believe that relational wounds can be healed only by relational remedies through developing healthy relationships with God and others. In my opinion, there is no better healing experience for a refugee family than getting to know an American family that chooses to come alongside them and guide them through their new journey. When refugees are treated with love, patience, respect, and honor instead of rejection, intolerance, shame, and disgrace, past wounds heal and refugees learn to expect to be treated with kindness and dignity again. (Bauman, Soerens, and Smeir 2016:149)

God calls us to embrace the stranger and create a space for connections where people can find healing—a place with hospitality. Dan Allender describes hospitality: “Hospitality is the core of what the community of God brings, inviting people to goodness, to a feast, to sustenance, to solace, to healing” (2015). What a beautiful picture for the community of God and what it has the potential to provide for others.

Timothy Keller always speaks about “word and deed ministry” going hand in hand and as I was researching about the different programs provided in my town I came across a project called Elijah21: Jesus 4Refugees. Elijah21 is a collaboration between most churches to not only care for refugees in some way but also to introduce them to Jesus. How is that done? The idea is that one evening the Jesus movie is shown in their language and before that a meal is provided along with time to socialize. The day before the movie a verbal invitation is given to those living in the refugee housing and they are picked up the next day for the movie. If there are some who show more interest afterwards the church has some programs ready to connect them to.

When I heard about that I was very skeptical. I put myself in their shoes. How would I feel if I would be in some Arabic country and a stranger invited me to a meal and a showing of the movie about Mohammad? I don’t know about you, but I would not be going. The Adventist Church decided it just wanted to observe so one of the church elders went to the event. Surprisingly, it was well received with 30-40 people present, a mixed group
from all over Africa, Syria, etc. They were socializing and watching the movie which was shown in different rooms as different languages were provided. There was one boy, around 10 years of age who came with his mother who was so moved by the movie, that with a sparkle in his eyes he said “Mama, I want to learn more about Jesus.”

As I have testified for years, if we were quick in discerning the opening providences of God, we should be able to see in the multiplying opportunities to reach many foreigners in America a divinely appointed means of rapidly extending the third angel’s message into all the nations of earth. God in His providence has brought men to our very doors and thrust them, as it were, into our arms, that they might learn the truth, and be qualified to do a work were could not do in getting the light before men of other tongues. (White 2010:570)

The refugee crisis is being used by God in his provision to bring millions of refugees into our communities, giving God’s people an opportunity to introduce them to the loving, caring God of the Bible. God wants to reach them as he wants to give them new hope and a new life, for now and eternity. In this God invites us to be his hand, his feet, and reflect his loving heart as we interact with these new arrivals in our cities and towns. Furthermore, in reaching out to them it just might be another way God seeks to save the church from a self-focused agenda and pushing the church back towards its biblical role—to be a light to the world.

Works Cited
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