

Refugee Working Group of R.E. Lee Memorial Church Christian Outreach Committee

9 AM, Thursday, October 8, 2015

Parish Hall

Jim Hershberger, Director of the Harrisonburg Immigration & Refugee Program of Church World Service, 250 E. Elizabeth St., Harrisonburg, VA 22802; 540-433-7942, jhershberger@cwsglobal.org, was our featured speaker.

Tom Crittenden opened with prayer.

Jerry Nay, chaired today's meeting. As a member of RE Lee's Christian Outreach Committee, Jerry originally contacted Allison Duvall, Director of the National Episcopal Church Migrant Ministry office to inquire how we might get involved in helping families affected by the Syrian Refugee crisis. Because Episcopal Migrant Ministry has no offices in VA, Allison suggested that we contact either Church World Service in Harrisonburg or International Rescue Committee in Charlottesville. The Refugee Working Group followed up by contacting Church World Service in Harrisonburg.

Twenty-four people representing six churches (RE Lee, Lexington Presbyterian, Good Shepherd Lutheran, Manley Memorial Baptist, Trinity United Methodist, and Maury River Friends) attended today's meeting. Others in the community expressed interest; however, they were unable to attend due to work schedules.

Refugee resettlement: Mr. Hershberger made the following points in an informative PowerPoint presentation. Harrisonburg generally resettles 150-175 refugees per year. No Syrians have been resettled thus far from the Harrisonburg office due in large part to the very stringent background checks required by the CIA, FBI, Homeland Security/Immigration and Naturalization Service, and State Department which were put in place post 9/11. Consequently it can take 3-4 years for refugees from Syria to be approved. The Harrisonburg office was notified 3-4 weeks ago that they most likely would be receiving some Syrian refugees within the next 3-6 months. The Harrisonburg office has assisted with the placement of Christians from northern Rwanda. These Christians originally fled the Congo about 25 years ago. CWS Harrisonburg has been resettling many Iraqis, Eritreans, small numbers of refugees from Iran, Afghanistan, Burma and the Congo. We believe the numbers of Syrians and Congolese refugees will increase slowly in the next 6 months or so. International Rescue Committee in Charlottesville has been involved with the resettlement of refugees from Southeast Asia.

All refugees are immigrants; however, not all immigrants are refugees. Per the 1951 UN Conventions, refugees must: 1) demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution (race, nationality, religion, social/political), 2) have fled their own country to a second country, and 3) have no reason to return to their own country. Refugees who have fled to a second country register with the UN to apply for admission to a third country.

Those refugees who have relatives in the U.S. are likely to be placed in the same community.

The International Organization for Migration provides money to refugees to get them from their second country to their third country destination. A refugee signs a document pledging to repay this loan.

Suitability of Lexington to take refugees: Church World Services places refugees in communities that can assist the refugee with employment that leads to self-sufficiency, acquisition of English language, integrating into the community, and registering children for school.

NGO (Non-Governmental Organization): There are nine NGOs in the U.S. involved in resettlement efforts. Church World Service is one such organization that receives funding from the U.S. government to assist with resettlement. Each refugee receives a maximum, one-time sum of financial support of up to \$1125 (maximum) for housing, food, clothing, etc.

Questions for further consideration: health, work, school, housing, money, religion, publicity, Visas, cell phone, language, community, transportation, security, liability, helpers, grants, fundraising, groceries, mail, culture, Social Security Administration, most are referenced in a handout that was distributed to attendees by Mr. Hershberger.

Information for next steps: The CWS Harrisonburg Refugee office staff is able to meet with churches who want to sponsor refugees. They will provide orientation; support and staff time to help with the resettlement process. The most significant issues will be to find an apartment to rent, ELT opportunities and then entry level employment when they have their SS cards. CWS will provide a one-time sum of up to \$1125 per refugee to be used toward deposits, rent and furnishings. Any food, furniture and clothes drives the church does will go of course directly to the refugee family. Any extra money the church raises will is also expected to be used for basic expenses such as rent and utility bills. Churches can support the refugees by providing transportation to the Health department, assist with registration of children into the schools, application for SS cards, help them find entry level employment, friendship and social activities.

Closing: Marcy Orr closed the meeting with prayer.

Further: Mr. Hershberger generously remained in the Parish Hall, answering individual questions. He has stated that he will be happy to work with us in the future, providing information on Syrian culture.