

In rural Canada, churches connect by welcoming Syrian refugees

by [Bobby Ross Jr.](#) in the [May 10, 2017](#) issue



Hussein and Roqayah Alassaf test out donated bicycles at their home in Dauphin, Manitoba, where their family and other Syrian refugees were resettled. Photo courtesy of Ron Marlin.

Ken Yakielashek, a Roman Catholic semiretired farmer in the Canadian Prairies, remembers when Christians of varying denominations “wouldn’t talk to one another.”

To Yakielashek, that makes what’s happened in Dauphin, Manitoba—a rural community 200 miles northwest of the provincial capital of Winnipeg—all the more remarkable.

A year and a half ago, three churches put aside theological differences and came together to sponsor the resettlement of three Syrian refugee families to this town of 8,500.

“We have three different theological outlooks on things, but they’ve been pushed to the background,” said Ron Marlin, a lay leader for Dauphin First United Church, a mainline Protestant congregation.

“The focus was very much on helping our neighbors in need,” agreed Cordell Lind, whose wife, Loralyn Lind, serves as pastor for the evangelical Dauphin First Baptist Church.

In the United States, President Trump’s effort to bar refugees from Muslim-majority nations deemed terrorism threats—including Syria—has dominated headlines. But in Canada, the government has welcomed more than 40,000 men, women, and children fleeing Syria’s civil war since Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s election in October 2015.

Yakielashek, a parish council member at St. Viator’s Catholic Church, said he felt a personal connection to the Syrian refugees because his Polish grandfather “escaped from situations similar to that in Eastern Europe.”

Dauphin First United Church had decided that it couldn’t “just write a check and send it somewhere else,” said Marlin, a retired Royal Canadian Mounted Police district supervisor.

Meanwhile, First Baptist Church already had contacts in the Middle East and was moving forward with plans to help, Cordell Lind said.

When the three churches learned of one another’s efforts, they committed to pool resources and share ideas where they could. The churches formed the Dauphin Interchurch Refugee Team. While working together, each church maintained its individual sponsorship of a Syrian family. The refugees—15 men, women, and children in all, plus a baby born after their arrival—began new lives in Dauphin a year ago.

Months later, the Arabic-speaking immigrants, still learning English, told Canadian media that their sponsors and other friends had become like family.

“It feels like home,” Asya Alassaf, one of the Syrian mothers, told the *Winnipeg Free Press*.

Soon after news broke that the families were coming, a man made threatening telephone calls saying he hoped Dauphin First United Church members “would burn in hell,” according to local media reports.

Still, most area residents—like the majority of Canadians—have responded positively, said the sponsoring churches’ representatives.

“It still gives me goose bumps when I think about it,” Lind said. After picking up one Syrian family at the Winnipeg airport, he said, “we stopped in a little town called Neepawa for a cup of coffee on the way home, and everyone in the McDonald’s had to come over to welcome them to Canada.”

Ukrainian immigrants first settled in Dauphin more than a century ago, but the community has become much more multicultural in the last 15 years, Yakielashek said.

“For the most part, the reaction has been welcoming from all walks of life, from doctors to lawyers to dentists to farmers to accountants to ordinary laborers and teachers,” he said. “We’ve got lots of land here. We have lots of opportunities for the country to grow. Why can’t we bring people in here to contribute? I don’t expect them to have any more or less than we do, but just a chance at life.”

The Dauphin Interchurch Refugee Team is making plans to bring more Syrian refugees to town.

To be sure, the days of Christians refusing to communicate across confessional lines began to fade before the refugees’ arrival. And the cooperation didn’t remove differences that remain. For example, Marlin said his church sees no need to proselytize the refugees, who are Muslims.

“It’s not our job to convert them from their lifelong religion to another,” Marlin said. “It’s our job to support them in the celebration of their religion and the celebration of their humanity.”

Cordell Lind, on the other hand, said he and other members of his church “would love for Mahmoud and Hala to meet Jesus” and for the couple to become Christians. “If they don’t, they will still be our lifelong friends and part of our family.” —Religion News Service