



BACKPACK MINISTRY

PROVIDING BACKPACKS FOR REFUGEES



Refugees come to the United States because they have no other choice. They’ve fled the violence in their homeland, desperate to find a place of peace where they and their families can begin fresh. Sadly, they’ve had to leave almost everything behind—their country, their culture, their language, their homes, their possessions, their livelihoods, their sense of safety and security, even family members and friends. After a harrowing journey to freedom, they arrive in America with practically nothing—except for their belief that there’s a better life waiting for them here.

Refugee Fatmata Bayoh was only eight-years-old when she and her family arrived. They left Sierra Leone too afraid to even say goodbye to friends and neighbors. Fatmata was enrolled in an American school, but she struggled to catch up with the other students, to grasp English and to be accepted by the other children. Fatmata just felt different than the other children.

Through an after-school program in her community, Fatmata received help with homework and took violin lessons. The music lessons led her to Christ: “I come from a Muslim background. I grew up Muslim. I remember hearing worship music back home; I remember it inside a church, but we were not allowed inside. When I came to the United States, I knew I could come inside church.” For Fatmata, coming to church was the first step in becoming who she was meant to be. She says, “I wanted to become a Christian. I love it. I love that it is who I am now—not a refugee, not some ‘poor thing’ people pity but a person. His.”

Refugees have been through a lot just to make it to the United States. They need a hand to help them begin again, to learn to resettle in a “far and distant land,” and to be able to succeed in this new land. The church is uniquely qualified and called to help refugees through this process.

Refugees In America

- In 2015, more than 65.3 million people (one in 113) in the world had been displaced from their homes by conflict or persecution.¹
- According to Global Trends, on average, 24 people were forced to flee every minute in 2015, four times as many as 10 years earlier when six people fled every 60 seconds.²
- Children made up 51% of the world's refugees in 2015; many of them traveled alone or without their parents.³
- The United States accepted approximately 85,000 refugees during 2016, with the largest numbers coming from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burma and Syria.⁴
- In 2016, 46% of refugees to the U.S. were Muslim, while 44% were Christian.⁵

The bottom line is this: Thousands of refugees and internationals arrive in the United States every year. You, and your church, can make a difference to the refugees and internationals in your community.

1 <http://www.unher.org/en-us/news/latest/2016/6/5763b65a4/global-forced-displacement-hits-record-high.html>.

2 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

5 Ibid.



Discover the Needs in your Community

Before you begin any new ministry, it is important to first take time to discover and understand the unique needs within your community. Explore the physical community, listen to and learn from people living and working in the area and seek God's guidance by prayer-driving and prayer-walking the neighborhood.

If you find that providing backpacks for refugees is a need in the community, keep reading! We have practical steps to help you get started.

To learn more about how to identify needs in your community, download [*How Can We Serve? An In-Depth Guide to Discovering Community Needs.*](#)

If not, [check out some of our other ministry guides](#) for opportunities that fit for your church's gifting and community's needs.



Strategically Considering Ministry Opportunities

Take the next step by enlisting a small group of people within the congregation to assess ministry opportunities by working through the following questions with you:

- **What partnerships in your community have you considered to meet this need and use this resource?** These could include government officials, school officials and teachers, other community churches and leaders, local shelters or other preestablished programs addressing refugees.
- **Who in your church is passionate and equipped to lead or participate in this ministry?** Consider children's workers, parents and/or families, teenagers or youth groups, Sunday School classes, senior adults—anyone with a desire to help provide resources to help those who have been displaced.
- **What resources and relationships has God given your church to support this ministry?** Consider missions offerings, other financial resources, church members who are connected to ministries, those with the gift of couponing and Sunday School classes as places to start.
- **What space can be used for collecting and stockpiling donations and for filling backpacks?** Consider unused classrooms, closets or members' home that can provide secure, dry storage.

These questions can lead this small group of local missionaries to determine whether or not:

1. There is a desire within the congregation to meet this need.
2. There are resources of people, space and money to meet this need.
3. This ministry is sustainable over time.
4. You feel God leading you as a congregation in this direction.

STARTING A BACKPACK MINISTRY

God may be moving you to be the catalyst of starting a ministry to refugees in your community. If so, where do you start? We've provided eight steps that can lead you to successfully engaging in this much-needed ministry:



- 1. Learn about refugees in America and your community.** Research the needs and issues of refugees in America and the world online. Identify areas in which immigrants and refugees have settled in your city. Locate community-based and faith-based programs which already work with refugees in your city.
- 2. Schedule meetings with local organizations who are involved with refugees.** Find out what is being done and what help is needed. Discuss the details of backpacks for refugees, and find out what the needs of the organization are. Carefully determine which organization meets the ministry needs your congregation has identified. If there are no local groups already involved in assisting refugees, move outward geographically by looking for possible ministry partners in your state or your region, or prayerfully consider beginning a program through your congregation.
- 3. Create a budget, including all the resources and materials you will need and a schedule for operating.** Answer each of these questions:
 - Based on the information you've received from local organizations, how much aid and support can and will the church commit to do? Determine how often supplies and backpacks will be collected from the congregation and passed on to local ministries for refugees. Or, determine how many backpacks you want to be able to distribute to refugees in your area.
 - How will you pay for the supplies for refugees' backpacks? (Possibilities: church budget, donations, grants, church-wide love offerings, fundraising, corporate donations, grocery store donations.)
 - How will supplies be purchased or collected? (By volunteers, donations of supplies and/or filled backpacks)
 - How and where will you store and pack backpacks before delivery?
 - When should collection of supplies and/or cash begin? When is the target deadline for the delivery of backpacks?

4. **Find volunteers.** You'll need a strong, dependable group of volunteers to keep your program organized and successful.

The **volunteer leader's** responsibilities include: enlisting additional volunteers, coordinating the transportation and delivery to local ministries, fundraising, and collecting of materials. The leader communicates with the local ministries about the program, keeps track of how well the program is working and coordinates events to raise money. Finally, the leader organizes the collection of supplies for refugee backpacks.

Other volunteers pack the backpacks and deliver them local ministry partners.

5. **Collect Backpack Items.** Begin collecting two months before established delivery date by providing a list of needed items (see below). Two weeks before delivery date, inventory items received, and purchase needed items using monetary donations. Many churches have success by asking church members to donate needed items. Some members will prefer to supply the entire contents for a backpack. Backpacks and/or boxes can be packed to meet a myriad of needs for refugees. Refugees arrive with almost nothing. Here are some suggestions:

- Provide **food items** like pasta cooking oil and rice to feed their families.
- Provide **cooking utensils and dishes** so families can prepare their own meals and keep their own culture alive.
- Provide **hygiene items** (soap, toothpaste and brushes, razors, shampoo, deodorant) to help refugees stay clean and healthy.
- Provide **newborn supplies** (bottles, blankets, diapers, formula) when needed.
- Provide **clothing for children**, especially for quickly growing youngsters.
- Provide **school supplies**, such as pencils, rulers, notebooks and backpacks to help prepare refugee children to go to school.
- Provide **stuffed animals** for comfort to small children who have had to leave toys behind.
- Provide **children's books** for kids to read and practice their English.
- Provide **soccer balls and shoes** to children who play. Since soccer is an international sport, it helps many refugee children heal from trauma and feel a sense of normalcy.

6. **Deliver Backpacks to Ministry Partner(s).** Set up a time and deliver backpacks to ministry partner(s). Pray over backpacks before they leave your location, and pray for them as they are delivered. Pray for the refugees who will receive them. As you are able, pray for the workers within the ministry partners.

7. **Evaluate the program's success.** After the first collection and delivery of backpacks, closely review how successful the project has been with the following questions:

- Did the project run smoothly? If no, why not?
- What problems or issues have come up that you were unprepared for? How can these be handled?
- How good is the relationship with the church and the local ministry partner? What can you do to strengthen those relationships?
- Could you expand the project to include more backpacks or additional ministry partners? What would that take?

8. Consider other ways to help refugees.

- Provide Bibles in the refugees' home language. Bibles in most languages can be found at AmericanBibleSociety.com. Evangelistic Bibles for Spanish readers are available at Shop.IronStreamMedia.com.
- Start a [prayer ministry](#) dedicated to refugees and internationals.
- [Donate](#) to help provide ministry to refugees and internationals through Send Relief.

What Next?

This is your opportunity to start meeting a huge need in your community...one refugee and one backpack at a time.

Take your next step on mission with Send Relief by not only helping your immediate neighborhood with backpacks, but also traveling to communities around the world who need your help! Learn more about Send Relief mission trips and get started today at SendRelief.org/Trips.



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