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Media Review: *A Church Leader's Tool Kit to the Syrian Refugee Crisis*

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MEDIA REVIEW

A CHURCH LEADER'S TOOL KIT TO THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS

2016. World Relief. Baltimore: www.worldrelief.org

Reviewed by Judy O'Fallon

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In January 2016, the non-profit organization World Relief, published *A Church Leader's Tool Kit to the Syrian Refugee Crisis* online at (http://refugeecrisis.worldrelief.org/s/Church_Tool_Kit_Final-copy_merged.pdf). The Tool Kit contains a wealth of practical suggestions and information for designing a process to lead church leaders, staff, and congregants to consider the Syrian refugee crisis from new perspectives.

World Relief was “founded when churches connected through the National Association of Evangelicals in 1944 to help rebuild and respond to the refugee crisis left in the war’s wake. ... In 1979 World Relief began empowering local churches to resettle refugees into the U.S. as the only evangelical organization authorized by the U.S. State Department to assist with refugee resettlement” (www.worldrelief.org). The organization maintains its international headquarters in Baltimore, Maryland.

World Relief’s motivation for developing this Tool Kit was to address the many questions that Christians around the world are posing about resettling Syrian refugees.

Particularly given the horrific terrorist attacks in Paris and California, many Christians have new questions [about] resettlement [of] refugees in the U.S.:

(1) Is it prudent to admit refugees from countries plagued by terrorism?

- (2) Is there a risk of terrorists “infiltrating” the U.S. refugee resettlement program? (3) How do we balance our commitment to Biblical commands to care for the vulnerable with a natural desire to safeguard our own security? (4) How do churches and leaders respond as questions become politicized with government leaders calling for new restrictions on—or even a complete halt to—refugee resettlement?

In the Tool Kit, World Relief responds to each of these questions.

We believe it’s a false choice to suggest that we must choose between safety and compassion. ... It’s also our conviction that our commitment to the Scriptures compels us to continue with this vital ministry. ... Our faith also compels us to continue to welcome those of other religious traditions. ... We pray that this tool kit will serve you well as you lead your leaders, staff, and congregants to think and act uniquely as Christians.

The Tool Kit is 48 pages long and comprises textual and graphical materials augmented with links to videos, news articles, and academic papers relevant to the current Syrian refugee crisis. Sections 1 and 2, titled *Discerning How to Address the Syrian Refugee Crisis at Your Church* and *Recommendations for Engaging a Syrian Refugee Crisis Conversation with Elders, Staff, Leaders, or Small Groups in Your Church*, discuss various strategies for dealing with existing fears and perspectives among church members. Links to 7 short videos in which refugees tell about their experiences help viewers to connect the refugees’ stories to their own lives.

Sections 3 and 4, titled *Syrian Refugee Crisis FAQs* and *Myths and Facts*, provide solid information addressing 13 frequently asked questions and 11 myths pertaining to Syrian refugees. Section 5 contains the outline for a sermon based on the Biblical account of the flight of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus to Egypt in Chapter 2 of Matthew’s Gospel. Section 6, titled *Infographics*, contains relevant maps, photos, text, and a flow chart that diagrams the U.S. refugee screening process.

The Tool Kit contains a comprehensive collection of questions and answers about resettling Syrian refugees in the U.S. and current information pertaining to refugee resettlement procedures. This information could be helpful in addressing the concerns of a wide variety of religious and secular groups throughout the U.S.

Because the members and leaders of evangelical churches in the U.S. comprise the target audience, their fears and consciences are addressed primarily through Biblical references. For example,

The Bible has a lot to say about how God's people should respond to refugees and other migrants. In fact the Hebrew word *ger*—translated into English variously as foreigner, sojourner, stranger, or immigrant—appears 92 times just in the Old Testament, often in the context of God commanding his people to love and welcome those who came as foreigners into their land. The New Testament repeatedly commands us to “practice hospitality” (Rom. 12:13), which literally means to practice loving strangers. Welcoming refugees is a tangible way to love our neighbors, part of Jesus' Great Commandment (Luke 10:27), and to practice the Golden Rule (Luke 6:31), even as we stand with our persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ who come as refugees.

Since the key religious/ethical concepts of practicing hospitality, loving one's neighbor, and practicing the Golden Rule are valued by many religious and secular groups throughout the U.S and around the world, these concepts could also be easily translated into secular language or terminology more familiar to other religions, cultures, and community-based organizations. As a Catholic who is intensely interested in Catholic social justice issues and a Rotarian active in Rotary International, I can see ways to adapt these materials for presentation to other churches or secular service groups. Nearly all of the materials can be used “as is,” and those that need to be adapted can be “translated” into terminology more familiar to the other groups. Religious statements can be omitted altogether, if desired.

I feel strongly that this Tool Kit should be disseminated widely to all persons, all around the world, who are interested in responding to the Syrian refugee crisis. The Tool Kit will be very helpful to a wide variety of churches and secular groups, not only in addressing fears and concerns regarding refugee resettlement generally, but also in offering useful information and concrete steps to respond to the Syrian refugee crisis effectively and swiftly.

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