

STORYTELLING

February 2025

Lord God,
you have called your servants
to ventures of which
we cannot see the ending,
by paths as yet untrodden,
through perils unknown.
Give us faith to go out
with good courage,
not knowing where we go,
but only that your hand
is leading us
and your love
supporting us,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
–The Prayer of Good Courage

“If you’re following the spirit, you don’t need to drum up a mission. It will find you. If you’re ministering faithfully; studying, working, and living the gospel, the Holy Spirit works and if you attend to it, the need finds you. If your eyes are open, you’ll see it, and soon you’re doing the work.” Pastor Jonette Blakely, Trinity Lutheran, Parkland.

Pastor Jonette's church office was filled with unexpected items. Pillows, blankets, pantry and kitchen essentials – the joyful markers of a new life about to begin. The stack taking up an entire couch and the area around it echoed a pile of gifts from a generous wedding shower, and maybe rightfully so: the refugee family who had been offered a short term shelter in a house owned by the congregation was about to embark on a relationship with a new country and a new home, shepherded by Lutheran Community Services Northwest and federal refugee resettlement.

But that was the day the wind shifted.

The refugee family's presence was already part of a fresh breeze of the Holy Spirit blowing through the Trinity congregation. An historic church with a legacy of a huge central property and other homes owned by the church beyond that, they had participated in a six month Land Stewardship Discernment which had opened their eyes, hearts, and doors to refugee assistance.

Housing people was nothing new to Trinity, and their core value of hospitality shined in the congregation. Their five bedroom house that had been home for several years to Habitat for Humanity volunteers was vacant, and during a forum at a Lutheran church in a nearby town, Trinity members discovered that it was the perfect place to help with refugee resettlement. Trinity already had a food pantry, an early learning center that children could be welcomed into, and was across the street from Pacific Lutheran University – international students already made the area diverse and could mean language help and further connections. Pastor Jonette and her congregation dreamed of being a transitional place where families could stay for months while adjusting to life in this country. They had visions of relationships and long term connections that could build deep understanding of the experiences refugees had endured and allow Trinity to extend long-term hospitality.

They contacted Lutheran Community Services. Long term hospitality wasn't needed, they were told. These families needed to become established as soon as possible in a place where they built a rental history and had a permanent address which allowed them to become employed. What was needed, truly, was a place to be for a few days while they waited for their social security numbers; the prerequisite for all of the above. There were too few short-term places, the representative from LCSNW said, and families were using up their precious resettlement dollars on hotel rooms.

People at Trinity were disappointed as their hopes for long-term relationships of hospitality evaporated – but they knew the Holy Spirit was working, and said yes. They had a family that very night – January first, 2025 – an appropriate date for a new and exciting chapter in the life of the church.

The realities of what these people had faced were immediately apparent. Hope, fear, and weariness were etched into their faces, along with immense loss of not only home, history, career, social networks but of loved ones that they suffered when they became enemies of their governments.

The third family arrived on January 9th in Trinity's new rhythm of whirlwind ministry. They had fled their home 16 years earlier and had spent all of that time in a refugee camp in Yemen, where two of their children were born. A week later, Pastor Jonette and others close to this ministry began to realize that something was wrong. Time passed, and the family's social security numbers still weren't processed. January 20th came and went, and with it a freeze on aid for refugees. Trinity was suddenly a part of a national funding crisis and this family had nowhere else to go.

Trinity is now saying "yes" again to the winds of the Holy Spirit and to long-term ministry with a family who has no resources and no ability to move forward into their promised new life. This week – five weeks after their arrival – their social security cards were finally processed, which allows them to move freely in the community without as much fear of immediate deportation – all cultural and language barriers disappeared when this news was understood and exuberant, spontaneous hugs were exchanged. This is an exciting and reassuring development, but additional support will not, at present, be forthcoming. Trinity and this family have been joined together by the Spirit for the foreseeable future.

The congregation at Trinity Parkland is grateful for their newly adopted family, but the larger reality is that their eyes have been opened to the scope, scale, and cruelty of the attacks on vulnerable people that are happening now across the country. Discipleship and service to the oppressed is no longer theoretical or a "feel good" proposition – it is real and risky and vital. Pastor Jonette and her congregation know not where they go, but know that Christ's hand is leading them and his love supporting them.

Their advice to others in this crucial time? Do whatever you can. Make calls, go and advocate where and when you can. Go outside of yourselves, as individuals and faith communities, and serve others. What is happening on the national stage is impacting us, here, now. Don't despair – go out with good courage, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

~ by Synod Storyteller Chavaleh Forgey