



# The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization

The Whole Church taking the Whole Gospel to the Whole World

## Lausanne Occasional Paper 5 Christian Witness to Refugees

The Lausanne Occasional Papers (LOPs) are historically important documents that have emerged from global consultations involving widely recognized evangelical leaders. The LOPs have been placed in the Lausanne Website to make more accessible and understandable the historical context and development of the various aspects of world evangelization.

*Report of the Consultation on World Evangelization*

*Mini-Consultation on Reaching Refugees*

*Held in Pattaya, Thailand from 16-27 June 1980*

### Prefatory Note

This report, *Christian Witness to Refugees*, is one of a series of Lausanne Occasional Papers emerging from the historic [Consultation on World Evangelization \(COWE\)](#) held in Pattaya, Thailand, in June 1980. The report was drafted by members of the "Mini-Consultation on Reaching Refugees," under the chairmanship of John F. Robinson, who also served as International Coordinator of the pre-COWE study groups on refugees.

The major part of this report went through a draft and a revised draft, which involved all members of the mini-consultation. It was also submitted to a wider "sub-plenary" group for comment, but the responsibility for the final text rests with the mini-consultation and its chairman.

The report is released with the prayer and hope that it will stimulate the church and individual members in reaching this large segment of the population.

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### 1. Introduction

The plight of the refugees around the world has provoked our Consultation to reflect upon our responsibility, as Christians, to them. The following paper represents the fruit of that study and is intended to serve the church of Jesus Christ in the following ways: to inform the Christian world of the current refugee situation and its causes; to challenge Christians on the basis of Scripture to respond to the needs of refugees; to offer practical guidelines for responsible Christian ministry in the face of the growing refugee population.

### 2. Current Situation of Refugees

The refugee population today far exceeds that of past years, affecting most nations in the world.

Who is a refugee? The United Nations restricts the definition of refugees to include only those people who leave their home country. The definition embraces any person, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or membership in a particular social group or political opinion, who has emigrated from the country of his nationality or original habitation. By definition, the refugee lacks the ability or, because of fear of persecution, refuses to submit himself again to the protection or habitation of that country. (United Nations 1951 Convention)

This definition excludes the many people displaced by natural or civil calamity within their countries or those who cross national borders for reasons other than a well-founded fear of persecution. But if the church is to identify all the people enduring critical need from being uprooted, we must accept a more inclusive definition of "refugee." In many countries, displaced people who lack refugee classification and, therefore, protection from the United Nations suffer greater need than classified refugees.

Causes for displacement include military conflict, oppression related to religion, nationality, racial or political identity, or natural disaster. People may also become refugees within their own country through persecution, land seizures, imprisonment and economic deprivation.

Conflict, due to ideological or doctrinal intolerance, is a major producer of refugees. Oppression commonly increases with political or religious fanaticism, economic injustice or ethnic rivalries. Disasters may have either natural or human causes. Yet surprisingly, only five percent of the world's refugees are fleeing from natural disasters.

Estimates of the total world refugee population vary. The most recent statistics number the refugees and displaced persons at 16 million (1980 World Refugee Survey). By region of origin they are as follows:

Asia	7.3 million
Africa	4.0 million
Middle East	3.3 million
Latin America and Caribbean	1.1 million
Europe	0.3 million
Total:	16.0 million

However, these figures constitute minimum estimates; those refugees according to the broader definition are excluded. Awaiting opportunity for repatriation, many refugees linger in temporary accommodations such as refugee camps in asylum countries scattered around the world. As a serious study of [Appendix I](#) will reveal, serious conditions exist in these settlements, which have been ignored by the world press, but should not be ignored by the Christian Church.

Generally, one may describe the needs of the refugee as total. Food, shelter and medical needs are most immediate. Concerns about the future and the heartaches of the past constitute emotional trauma for the refugee. Need for intellectual stimulation becomes increasingly manifest as physical problems diminish. Workers who have helped the refugees cope with their various needs have found this an appropriate time for evangelism. Accompanying a demonstration of Christian concern for the well-being of the refugee, the gospel proves credible.

Christian organizations, in cooperation with international and national agencies are seeking to provide refugees with shelter, food, clothing, vocational training and education. In addition to addressing such problems, Christians are also attending spiritual needs. Under conditions of extreme stress, refugees tend to seek God more intensely, and the urgency of meeting their concern is becoming increasingly apparent.

The future of refugees remains uncertain. Although some hope to go back to their homeland, most know of little possibility of returning. Those in camps less than one year after their exodus tend to be insecure, feeling a religious void. Often characterized by resignation, emotional wounds, hatred and aggressiveness, refugees have proven receptive to the gospel at this stage.

Refugees in organized camps for more than one year tend to have a more hardened outlook and are aggravated that their country of asylum, for various political, social and economic reasons, has failed to allow them to assimilate into the general population. In contrast, their receptivity to the gospel is low. They exhibit bitterness and general resistance.

Refugees in a country of resettlement tend to cluster. Many are educated but still feel a deep culture shock, experiencing rejection and a sense of rootlessness. Establishing and maintaining family life has proven difficult. Among this segment, receptivity to the gospel is usually high at the beginning. However, those untouched by the gospel tend to move towards materialism and secularism.

### 3. Biblical Mandate

The biblical basis for our concern comes from Scriptures such as "Blessed is the person who considers the poor" (Ps. 41:1). The predicament of refugees and the ministry we are required to have resembles the biblically depicted relationship between the Christian and widows and orphans. Scripture abounds with sensitivity to those in need.

#### *Biblical concern for the poor and oppressed, the uprooted*

A whole body of evidence in the Scripture demands that the children of God have a special preoccupation with the poor, oppressed, the sojourners, and the uprooted.

"The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself..." (Lev. 19:34; cf. Ex. 12:49; Dt. 1:16, 27:19; Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5; Ezek. 47:22; Lev. 23:22; Dt. 26:19-21; Dt. 26:12-13).

#### *Required acts of love and justice*

"With what shall I come before the Lord? ... Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams? He has showed you ... what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:6-8). God spoke clearly, especially through his prophets, to declare all religion scandalous, all sacrifices abominable without prevalence of justice and love (Ezek. 47:22, Amos 4:1).

Jesus himself castigated the Pharisees for their diligence in the law, their appearing so religious, while ignoring the essence of the message of the law of love (Mt. 23:14-23). Christ will one day reveal those who have a true servant's heart: "Come you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance ... For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat ... I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me ... I was in prison and you came to visit me ... I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these ... you did for me" (Mt. 25:34-40).

#### *The message of hope for the refugees*

The Bible offers hope to the uprooted and needy in this life (Rom. 15:13). Jesus, teaching about his Kingdom and its constitution (Mt. 5-7), deals with the poor in this present life. And beyond all the tribulation there remains also the steady and certain hope that "he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd ... and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Rev. 7:14-17).

#### *God's people as refugees*

"But our citizenship is in heaven..." (Phil. 3:20). Often the children of God are reminded of their own origin as strangers (and sometimes refugees) and that God repeatedly delivered them (Lev. 19:34, Ex. 22:21, Ex. 23:9, Dt. 10:19, Dt. 5:15). Abraham (Gen. 23, Heb. 11:9), Joseph (Gen. 37, ff), Jacob and his descendants in Egypt (Ex. 46, ff) and Israel in exile are cases in point.

The refugee theme also recurs in the New Testament. Not only was Jesus, in his flight to Egypt, himself a refugee, but Peter reminds the believers that followers of Christ are "foreigners and strangers" on earth since their real home is in heaven (Phil. 3:20; 2 Pet. 2:11).

Moreover, the Great Commission suggests that God's people become refugees. Our Lord expects his followers to scatter over the face of the earth, discipling, baptizing and teaching the nations (Mt. 28:19,20). In this process they can expect to be like "sheep among wolves" (Mt. 10:16-20). But in their vulnerable position, God, the Holy Spirit, will provide authority and power. The refugees of Acts 8:1, 4 scattered from Jerusalem by persecution, carried the gospel everywhere they went. Refugees Aquila and Priscilla became Paul's trusted and valuable co-workers in Corinth, Ephesus and Rome (Acts 18:1, 2, 18, 19; Romans 16:3-5). The unprecedented expansion of the Christian Church in the first centuries came about through unnamed followers of Christ dispersed, and often fleeing, throughout the Roman Empire.

#### *A holistic ministry*

"Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says...'Go, I wish you well, keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?" (James 2:15,16). Our ministry embraces the whole person—physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. God calls us to "share his concern for justice and ... the liberation of people from every kind of oppression" (Lausanne Covenant). The refugee is my sister or brother in need, regardless of race, nation or creed (Mt. 25:40,45). Ministry to refugees illustrates the whole missionary enterprise in microcosm.

For example, refugee work is holistic as all ministry should be, including a call to those who have not known Christ as Saviour and Lord to repent and believe in the gospel. It underlines the need for one's own repentance for involvement in systems of injustice. Such a ministry compels us on the one hand to minister to the total needs of the refugees, and on the other to struggle against those systems of oppression which cause people to become refugees.

### 4. Role of the Local Church

Christians must clarify their responsibility to the refugees in the world. The local church also needs to realize the key role it can play in all areas of refugee ministry worldwide. Every group of Christian believers in the world should examine itself before Christ in response to this visible and tragic situation, to define its responsibilities and obligations. God will provide necessary resources for such ministry as Christians trust and obey him (2 Cor. 9:11).

The church will find refugees in varying situations:

- (i) Still within the borders of their country of origin;
- (ii) In another country, in transit, or in an encampment of refugees in the country of asylum;
- (iii) Returned to the country of origin as repatriates;
- (iv) Resettled in a new country.

All these situations present refugees with problems. Therefore, refugee ministry encompasses more than what can be done in a resettlement community or within the borders of a refugee camp. The local church is the key in refugee ministry as it co-operates with the national church, voluntary Christian agencies, and other concerned organizations.

Four types of local churches exist in relation to refugees:

- (i) The local church located within the refugee's country of origin;
- (ii) The transient local church existing among refugees in flight or in camp;
- (iii) The local church of the country of asylum, often of a different culture and nationality;
- (iv) The local church throughout the remaining world: in countries of refugee resettlement or removed from any refugee activity.

This breakdown enables the church to identify its position in relation to possible refugee ministries. All Christian believers fit one of these categories and may serve the refugee in one or more of them. There is much the local church can do both close to home and in more distant refugee areas of the world. In focusing on reachable goals, the church will avoid discouragement and ineffective ministry in the face of such a mammoth task. In true reflection of Christ's body and in sensitivity to the guidance of his Spirit, Christians will seek to practically evaluate and fully utilize all the resources God has made available. This can be attained by cooperation with other churches, agencies and organizations that are working for the same purpose—reaching out to refugees in love with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Experience shows that local churches becoming involved in ministry to refugees have found themselves ministered to by the Lord and by those whom they serve. Many churches have experienced a deeper unity, a clearer sense of purpose, and genuine spiritual revival. Generously helping the poor and needy serves to enrich the church in every way (2 Cor. 9:12-14).

### 5. Guidelines for Responsible Christian Action

Christians have sometimes been criticized for taking advantage of and even exploiting refugees for evangelistic purposes. The idea of neglecting the physical and social needs of refugees, or of using them as leverage, for religious ends is deplorable. On the other hand, refugees have spiritual needs during each phase of their traumatic pilgrimage, and insensitivity to those needs would be equally irresponsible for concerned Christians. Sensitive, timely sharing of the gospel alone can meet the deepest needs of refugees.

As refugees come to Christ, they need help to grow in their faith and to reach out to others (2 Tim. 2:2). From the beginning, they should be given spiritual leadership responsibilities, thus becoming bridges for reaching their own group. In learning to obey those things commanded and modeled by Christ, they also learn their privilege and responsibility to pray and work for the evangelization of all peoples (Matt. 28:18-20).

#### A. Responsibilities of the Church Worldwide in Acute Refugee Situations

With ever-increasing frequency, the world is faced with unexpected disasters and wars that suddenly cause thousands of people to become refugees from their homeland. When this happens, the country of asylum naturally bears the largest burden in caring for these people. However, the world should realize that it must rally to help the refugees if they are going to survive.

The following are some practical recommendations for the church as it seeks to minister to refugees:

- (i) To keep informed about those agencies which meet the needs of disturbed victims;
- (ii) To contact them when emergencies arise, and to channel sacrificial gifts through them;
- (iii) To look within its own community for professionals who can meet short-term situations and then support financially and spiritually those people in their efforts;
- (iv) To pray specifically for suffering refugees as well as for those who have gone to help them;
- (v) To keep informed about the current refugee situation and, where possible, to register with political officials a concern that government do its part in responding actively to the plight of refugees.

#### B. Church Responsibilities in Prolonged Refugee Situations

Often the world is faced with prolonged refugee problems which require that the church make more studied and sustained responses to their needs. It is easy to ignore the refugees whether they are in some other part of the world or resettled in one's own community. But our obligations to justice and Christ's evangelistic commission demand that we participate actively in meeting their needs regardless of their location.

At this point the church must be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Nehemiah presents us with a good biblical model. After receiving messages from the Jerusalem repatriates, he went on a fact-finding mission to plan carefully the ministry that God was impressing on him.

#### C. General Recommendations to the Church in Both Countries of Asylum and Countries of Resettlement

(i) *Information gathering.* The church should be informed about the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual needs of refugee groups they plan to help. The more specific the information available, the better able the church will be to determine what it needs to do. While it is true that refugees are frequently more open to change than at any previous time in their lives, their culture has not been left behind. This implies the importance of understanding the original life-style of the refugees, not just observing their present condition.

(ii) *The message for refugees.* The value of *listening* to refugees is of vital importance before attempting to verbalize the gospel. In listening to their experiences and questions some people have found several themes that are of special help to refugees in talking about the Good News. The *love* of Christ contrasts sharply with the rejection they have felt (John 15:9-13).

The *constancy* of Christ strongly beckons refugees who have experienced the breakdown of past cultural, religious and national values (Heb. 13:8). The *hope* that God offers presents a powerful alternative to their former despair (Rom. 15:13). Like oil on troubled waters, the *peace* of God calms the hearts of those traumatized by dislocation, war, insecurity, and fear (John 14:27). The *justice* of God who will triumph over evil shines out in vivid contrast to the injustices they have endured (Ps. 72:1-4). Biblical accounts of refugees and how God dealt with them may also usefully be shared. Refugees often ask about the salvation of their nation, and this question needs reflection by those who work with them. It is in attentively listening to where the refugees are in their thoughts, and especially their feelings, that the Holy Spirit is able to guide the Christian friend to a sensitive, appropriate communication of the gospel.

(iii) *Co-operation.* One should not overlook the fact that other Christians may be interested or already involved in reaching a particular group of refugees. Because of the extensive needs of refugees, co-operation and coordination with other agencies is imperative. Evangelistic efforts should include Christians who are themselves members of the refugee group, the local church in the country of refuge or resettlement, and Christian agencies that have an interest in ministry

to the refugee group. Experience has demonstrated that the refugees are more open to the message of God's love when presented by one who has demonstrated love concretely through meeting various felt needs in their midst.

#### D. Specific Recommendations

(i) *Preparations for ministry in the country of asylum.* In order to prepare oneself responsibly, the Christian worker needs to understand as much as possible about the people and situation to which he/she is going. Specific information is needed in the following areas:

- (a) The culture, customs, history and geography of the country from which the refugees have fled;
- (b) The Christian history of the people to whom the refugees are related;
- (c) The physical, social, emotional and spiritual condition of the refugees;
- (d) The other agencies working among the refugees, their particular contributions, and their underlying philosophies;
- (e) The role the host government plays in the refugee situation;
- (f) The local refugee church and its priorities;
- (g) The major aspects of the person's assignment, recognizing the need for flexibility in the actual situation.

Ideally, the sponsoring organization should provide this kind of information for new workers but when this does not occur, the following alternative sources of information may be consulted:

- (a) Books and audio visuals;
- (b) Refugees who have settled in the country of the prospective worker;
- (c) Workers and missionaries who have completed their assignment and returned home;
- (d) Reputable agencies that have personnel in the country of asylum; some knowledge of the language of the refugees will enhance the worker's effectiveness.

While the person should learn as much as possible before becoming engaged in the country of asylum, orientation is necessarily an ongoing process, and the workers need to be constantly learning throughout the term of their involvement.

(ii) *Recommendations for local churches in countries of resettlement.* The resettlement of refugees in a new country is often not the most desirable alternative for refugees because of the trauma of cultural changes. Where resettlement is to take place, local churches must be concerned with the totality of their needs. The following should be taken into account:

- (a) Level of knowledge of the church as to the country of origin, cultural and religious background, language, previous Christian contact, physical and emotional needs;
- (b) Contact or co-operation with other Christian groups or agencies who, through experience, may be able to give more specific guidelines and suggestions;
- (c) Assessment of the resources for meeting the needs of the family or individual in terms of housing, employment, education, etc.;
- (d) The location of other refugees of the same cultural group in other parts of the community or area, since this may help determine whether the refugees desire to be resettled in the locality of the church;
- (e) The presence of Christian refugees or Christian workers who speak the national language and could help with communication.

For many refugees, the first few months after arrival in a new country are crucial. Often churches meet physical needs more than adequately, but the refugees experience terrible loneliness and culture shock. The development of genuine friendship on a one-to-one basis is vital.

Interaction should include listening, helping with language learning, giving practical help in adjustment to the new culture. Refugees need to find their way about, know how to get medical assistance, and know how to use the postal system. Assistance should not create permanent dependencies, for refugees need and generally want to become self-sustaining members of this new society. Dignity and self-respect need to be preserved or restored.

They should not be treated as inferior but as equals, which they truly are in God's sight.

Other concerns need to be brought to the attention of the local churches:

- (a) In some localities, refugees resettle where there is little or no Christian witness. Christians should consider their responsibility for reaching refugees in these areas. Some Christians have actually moved their residence into the areas in order to establish a more credible witness to Christ.
- (b) Local churches are sometimes able to influence their own governments relating to resettlement problems, including sponsorship.
- (c) Local churches have an important long-term ministry to Christian refugees in training and discipleship.

The involvement of local churches with refugees means the sacrificial giving of the members. At times, there may be pain and hurt as a result of misunderstanding, but this is part of being servants of Christ. Yet the blessing of God and of the refugees themselves to the church very often outweigh the sacrifices.

#### E. Christian Response to Injustice

We are called to fulfill the prophetic ministry of the church, standing on the wall and crying for justice.

The Lausanne Covenant states that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. The message of salvation implies also a message of judgment upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination. We should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist (article 5).

Thus Christians should mobilize themselves to petition through all available channels-including legislation, the media, international church and humanitarian organizations-to redress the causes of the injustice which compel the refugees to flee. Letters can be written to political figures who control the decision-making process, articles can be submitted to the media. Under certain circumstances, demonstrations and marches may even be used to call the attention of those in power to the plight of the refugees.

Biblical narratives and the history of the Christian Church reveal that the evil intentionally brought by some human beings upon others has become, in the providence of God, the occasion for good to result. The sale of Joseph into slavery by his brothers, the betrayal of Jesus by one of his disciples, and even the persecution of peoples today by those of the same ethnic group have, in remarkable ways, been used by God to bring people to himself and life and healing to many others. One may rightly acknowledge the way in which God "makes the wrath of men to praise him." But, it is abundantly clear on the basis of the Scriptures that the evil acts themselves stand under God's condemnation, that those who perform them are guilty before him and that we are called by God to speak out against such violations of his law and to do everything in our power by ethical means to limit such evils (Acts 2:23).

#### 6. Conclusion

Refugee situations will always be with us. Until the end of time we are told to expect persecution, war, famine and disease. Growing world population and increasing pressure on the earth's resources confirm this trend. However, this situation must not discourage the Church, but rather be a challenge to reach out to refugees, to the uprooted and needy, following the teaching and example that Christ has given us. Christ's work and message of love are timeless. He calls his people to spread the Good News by word and deed to every corner of the globe. There is an urgency because of the magnitude of the situation to reach out with the whole gospel in love, in simplicity of life and selfless service to all people who are fleeing toward hope, freedom, and ultimate purpose.

#### Appendix I

*Originally Appendix I gave statistics for 1980; since these are now out of date, the reader can go to [UN RefWorld Homepage](#) for the most recent numbersâ€”Ed.*

#### Appendix II

In Attendance

International Coordinator: John F. ROBINSON, MAP International  
Secretary: Bert SINGLETON, World Vision International  
Recorder: Faith Annette SAND, American Society of Missiology

Participants:

ANDRE, Josiane, Switzerland  
BALLARD, Jerry, U.S.A.  
BIRECH, Ezekiel, Kenya  
CHINN, Leiton, U.S.A.  
COBB, Dan, Thailand  
CORMACK, Mr. & Mrs. Don, Thailand  
FITZSTEVENS, Mr. & Mrs. John, Hong Kong  
HILL, Ronald, Thailand  
HOWELL, Allison M., Australia  
KABAZZI, Richard B., Uganda  
KAETZEL, O. J., Thailand  
KERSHAW, Mrs. Max, U.S.A.  
KRITZINGER, Johan J., South Africa  
LE-CHAU, Loc, Vietnam  
MOONEYHAM, Mrs. Stanley, U.S.A.  
NEWELL, Mr. & Mrs. William J., Canada  
PERSONS, Mr. & Mrs. Wayne, Thailand  
PURDY, C. Robert, Hong Kong  
SUTHACHIVA, Suradej, Thailand  
THOMAS, Norman, U.S.A.  
WAKIDILO, Ngoy K.M., Zaire  
WARD, Larry, U.S.A.  
WILSON, J. Christy (Jr.), U.S.A.  
ZIMMERMAN, Stella, Switzerland

N.B.: Not all of the above were participants in a technical sense. A few were consultants, observers or guests with experience or special interest in refugee ministry.

#### Appendix III

##### COWE Statement on Problem of Refugees

We, 850 Christians from 88 countries, have met together in Thailand for ten days in order to study ways of assisting the "unreached" peoples of this world to become reconciled to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

We are aware that only a few kilometres away from us there are tens of thousands of men, women, and children who have fled in terror from their homes, endured the killing and starvation of family members, lost most of their possessions, and do not know what further deprivations may lie before them. Kampuchean, Lao, Hmong, and Vietnamese boat-peopleâ€”all have been forced to find refuge in this country to which we have come. We commend the Royal Thai Government for granting asylum to these needy people and for facilitating relief efforts.

We denounce as an offense to the God of justice the human cruelty and injustice which has caused the tragedy of the refugees. At the same time we acknowledge that we ourselves are sinful and selfish. But we confess our faith in the God of grace, whose forgiveness is offered to both oppressor and the oppressed who turn to him in penitence for their sins and acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord.

We publicly express our loving concern for the hundreds of thousands of refugees in Thailand and for the over 15 million refugees throughout the world. We pray for them. We are thankful that many of our Christian brothers and sisters are seeking to serve them. We call upon responsible people everywhere to make special provision for them. And we pledge ourselves to contribute more sacrificially by our gifts, our prayers, and our involvement wherever possible, to the relief of their suffering, both physical and spiritual.

(Presented and unanimously endorsed at COWE, Pattaya, June 23, 1980)