



SEARCHING

A RAGING WAR HAS DRIVEN NEARLY 5 MILLION SYRIANS FROM THEIR COUNTRY. WHILE THEY WAIT FOR PEACE, TEAM MISSIONARIES ARE SHOWING THEM CHRIST'S LOVE.



FOR HOME

*Written by Bethany DuVal
Photographs by TEAM*



As their country is torn apart, scores of Syrian men, like Sami, are fleeing to surrounding countries and searching for safe places where they can find work and bring their families to live.

All names have been changed and locations withheld to keep missionaries and those they serve safe.

“We were bombarded by planes,” Sami says in the sweltering, June heat of his tent. “The children couldn’t sleep. The children couldn’t sleep because of the shelling. It became unfeasible for us to live there. ... Even bread became hard to find.”

It has been months since Sami’s children last went to bed to the sound of their city being bombed. Yet, even after leaving their home in Syria, the effects of war fill their lives.

Just off the highway, in a field of rocky, hard-packed dirt, Sami and his wife, children and parents live in a metal frame with tarps and fabric fastened over the top and carpets to cushion the ground. Over 40 similar shelters surround them. Work is scarce, there are no schools for the children and healthcare is largely unavailable.

All day, cars speed by, their drivers regularly shouting at the refugees to leave. All day, Sami wishes he could.

11 Million Affected

TEAM missionaries Ruth and Patrick Allen have helped people pass through or settle in their host country since the 1990s. But over the last two years, the number of refugees seeking aid has rapidly increased.

Civil war broke out in Syria in 2011. Three years later, the Islamic State took control of the Syrian city of Raqqa. In the resulting violence, more than 11 million Syrian people have been killed or forced to flee their homes. Combined with conflicts in places such as Somalia and Afghanistan, surrounding countries have seen an unending flood of refugees.

“The need is so huge. ... [The children] need education, training, hygiene. How do you begin to do that?” Ruth said.

Although TEAM has never adopted refugee outreach as an official ministry initiative, missionaries throughout the Middle East and Europe have added it to their church planting responsibilities — providing food, teaching English, navigating paperwork and more.

The Allens knew they needed a plan to meet the increasing refugee needs, but a side assignment took them out of the country in 2015, leaving the task to their partners Garrett and Natalie Bennett.

“We just started going out to areas that we knew the refugees were and trying to meet them, trying to provide some basic aid,” Natalie said.

AS SHE THOUGHT ABOUT WHO ELSE MIGHT VOLUNTEER THEIR TIME, HER MIND WENT TO THE CHURCH.

The Bennetts started visiting two communities where refugees lived in rundown apartments and houses, with little to no furniture or heat for the winter. Soon, a local Christian group offered to take over the project, and the Bennetts, believing the group was better suited for the job, agreed. But it wasn't long before a far direr situation arrived at their door.

Upholding the Testimony

In November 2015, a taxi driver lost his way, and the foreign dignitary in the back seat was startled to see a small community of refugees living in tents. Back at his hotel, the foreigner told a local woman, Leyla, who then started gathering young professionals to help. As she thought about who else might volunteer their time, her mind went to the church.

“Her exact words were, ‘Well, I figured that the church would be a good place to go to find people who are willing to help,’” Natalie said, recalling her first meeting with Leyla. “And when she said that, we really felt not only a desire to help, but an obligation to help, to uphold the testimony [of the church].”

Natalie and Garrett still remember the first times they helped distribute food at the camps that winter — children playing in the mud without shoes, tent homes with no flooring and no way to keep out water, families huddled around fires with only blankets to keep them warm.

“I felt like I was in a dream. I could not believe that this was [our host country],” Natalie said.

Broken Promises

Although the Bennetts' host country has tried to provide quality tent camps, there aren't nearly enough for the mass of people seeking refuge. Those who have spent time in the official camps compare them to prison, saying they have no right to leave and no ability to work.

“There are no work opportunities there, and the situation is not good,” Sami said of the city where he first brought his family.

With 14 family members to feed, Sami moved to the Bennetts' city, where refugees aren't legally allowed to settle, but jobs were said to be plentiful. But moving to a closed city meant giving up the family's rights as registered refugees and any official aid the government might offer.

Refugees in closed cities cannot be admitted to see local doctors when they catch colds from spending the winter in tents or suffer skin infections from their camps' unhygienic conditions.

When mothers are able to find work, they often leave their nursing infants with an older sibling who will feed them watered down formula. The older children are always available to babysit because they aren't allowed to attend school.

Meanwhile, many parents discover that the promise of work was only half true. In a closed city, they have to be paid under the table, allowing employers to cut wages in half or never pay them at all.

In such desperate circumstances, fights quickly broke out over perceived unfairness when Leyla's volunteers started holding food distributions. And because the volunteer group spoke a local language, rather than the Syrians' Arabic, they couldn't explain who they were. Many refugees assumed the group was from the government and wondered why they weren't providing more.

“The emotional energy that's necessary is quite hard,” Garrett said. “Some weeks, I have to admit very openly that we don't feel like going out there. But we are trying to be consistent.”



“Some of the biggest medical needs that we’ve seen have been ... a lot of skin problems related to lack of cleanliness,” Natalie said. In unregistered camps, refugees live among garbage and dirt with no way to take a proper bath.

(Left) A handful of bicycles are among the few toys seen at the camps the Bennetts serve. (Right) The Bennetts and their partners load their vehicles with groceries for distribution at the camps every Friday.





The original group of local volunteers quickly gave up on providing aid, but Garrett and Natalie felt compelled to push forward, even if they had to do so alone.

Love Without the Gospel

Each week's outreach effort began with a trip to the grocery store that carried the best prices on diapers and formula. At a second grocery store, the Bennetts would set up an assembly line of carts and bags, putting together food packets as they checked out. The next day, they drove their loaded van 40 minutes to the camps.

The couple found Syrian university students to act as interpreters and explain that they came on behalf of Jesus, not a government organization. Still, speaking through non-Christian interpreters took overt evangelism off the table, and bringing food with no greater hope sometimes felt futile.

"We're supposed to be a [church planting] organization," Natalie reflected, "and we can't even share the gospel with these people. ... But we really felt like the Lord was just saying, 'You have to keep on loving these people.'"

Although they were limited in speaking the gospel, God gave them opportunities to demonstrate it. As a registered nurse, Natalie provided some healthcare, and she encouraged other people with medical experience to get involved.

One of these friends, Ray, stopped by the camp one day and was approached by Sami's children. They told Ray their baby sister was sick, and Ray quickly realized the little girl was dying.

He took the girl and her grandfather into town and called the Bennetts so Natalie could meet him at the hospital. The Bennetts called a local Christian doctor who used his pull to get the baby admitted to the intensive care unit.

A few days later, the girl was transferred to a government hospital, where the Bennetts and their friends again pushed for her admittance. As bills showed up, the group helped pay them. When the girl eventually came home, she had long-term neurological damage, but — to her parents' relief — she came home alive.

"I think when the other families started seeing what we did, the interest we showed them," Garrett said, "we started seeing a lot more thankfulness."

AMIRA FLED TO A NEW COUNTRY WITH HER IN-LAWS, BUT THE FAMILY ABANDONED HER AFTER THEY ARRIVED.



One day, as the Bennetts were leaving the camp, some refugees brought out six or seven bags of oranges, eggplants and tomatoes. As agriculture workers, the leftover produce was one of the few things they had to offer.

Garrett said, “I think it was their way of saying thank you.”

A Hug and a Kiss

In another unregistered camp, refugee women immediately showed the Bennetts where they could build a consistent, deliberate relationship with a young widow and her uncle.

For Amira, the camps are the culmination of more than a decade of loss. Her father died when she was a young teenager, and her mother remarried. Amira’s step-father didn’t want responsibility for someone

else’s child, so the girl was raised by her paternal grandmother, who eventually died, too.

By her early twenties, Amira was married and pregnant with a little girl, but then war broke out.

“They bombarded our houses,” Amira said, “and [my husband] was burned by a bomb dropped by the plane. ... Many people died, and he died with them.”

Amira fled to a new country with her in-laws, but the family abandoned her after they arrived. After Amira found an uncle to live with and gave birth to her baby, her in-laws returned with threats to take the child if Amira couldn’t care for her.

As a nursing mother, Amira couldn’t leave her child to work, and no one wanted to hire her elderly uncle. When the Bennetts asked how they could help, virtually every woman said they needed someone to take special care of Amira.

The Bennetts had always treated food distribution as a supplement to what refugees already had, but for Amira, they started bringing most of her daily necessities: food, clothes and supplies for the baby.

“She was pretty reserved and cautious around us at first,” Natalie said, “but now, she’s started to open up and really greets us with a hug and a kiss.”

‘You are Different’

Over the last nine months, the Bennetts have heard a common refrain: “You are the first people to show you care about us. Other groups might come once or twice and then stop, but you are different. You show that you really care about us.”

But now, it isn’t just refugees noticing the Bennetts’ consistent efforts. One week, a grocery store cashier told Natalie, “Muslims, they’ll help one time, ... and then they’re gone. But you guys, for six months now, you’ve been coming every month to help these people.”

Natalie took the opportunity to share how Christ’s love motivates them, and the women’s religious conversations have continued since.

Seeing them come in and buy supplies week after week, a grocery store manager offered to let the Bennetts start calling in an order for food packets on Wednesday nights. The next day, employees make packets throughout their shifts and help load the Bennetts’ van when they arrive.

People from the Bennetts’ local church started participating in distributions, hosting a children’s program during camp visits and helping with side projects, such as sorting through donated clothing.

Two of these church members, Elias and Fatma, happen to speak Arabic. Unlike the Syrian university students, Elias, 80, and Fatma, in her late 50s, are native to the refugees’ host country. And because Middle Eastern culture holds deep respect for elders, many Syrians are open to hearing what they have to say.

Where the Bennetts are limited by language, Elias and Fatma are received as surrogate grandparents, able to welcome visitors to their own country, to clearly share about their Savior and to boldly pray for the refugees’ needs.

“It’s just been so neat to see how God used us to meet the physical needs of the people to start building that relationship and open the door,” Natalie said. “And then, God, in his timing, brought people along who could start to share why we’re doing this.”



(Left) Amira left Syria as a pregnant widow. (Above) Diapers are distributed according to how many children each family has, whereas all families receive identical bags of groceries.





The transitory lifestyle of a refugee makes it hard to build long-term relationships, but missionaries like the Bennetts are doing as much as they can with the time they are given.

As summer arrived, so did short-term volunteers, including an Arabic-speaking doctor. And when missionary Ruth Allen returned from her out-of-country assignment, she organized volunteers to lead an English activity program for the children.

Still, the Bennetts and the Allens know the refugees have a long road ahead — and how to help them long-term is far from clear.

Their Deepest Time of Need

Both missionary couples dream of job creation, of keeping kids from falling behind in school and of Arabic speakers who can minister to refugees full-time. But in a region where refugees are not legally allowed, these types of projects must be approached with caution.

"DEEP IN MY HEART, I WISH I COULD GO BACK TO SYRIA. ... HERE, WE HAVE NO DIGNITY"

"We can't do this big brand project and build a school or ... a medical clinic," Ruth said. "We can't do that for these people because, really, they're not even supposed to be here. So it has to be all very small."

Even when those small efforts produce meaningful relationships, they can be hard to maintain as refugees come and go, searching for more livable situations.

"Deep in my heart, I wish I could go back to Syria. That would be the best thing to happen. Here, we have no dignity," Sami said in June. By the end of the summer, his family and several others had moved to another city with more promising opportunities.

Despite their limitations, the Bennetts and the Allens trust that God will continue to work through whatever they can offer and that their efforts, however fleeting, will not be in vain.

"They might never go back [to Syria]," Natalie said. "But even if they go back a year from now, and none of them come to faith in Christ during this time, they'll go back with that seed planted. ... And the whole families would have seen that when they were in their deepest time of need, even in a Muslim country, it was the Christian community who was there to help them and who showed consistent, faithful love in whatever little ways they could." ■