

Inshallah

When one of the young Syrian women lit a memorial candle during worship, it represented a great deal of loss.

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I recently watched a video called “Welcome to Canada,” produced by [The Atlantic](#). It is a fascinating window into the lives of Syrians who have fled their country and found a refuge in our nation. This particular story takes place in the Vancouver area and follows a young Syrian man who came to Canada in 2014 as a refugee, and is now doing what he can to help the most recent wave of refugees who have arrived in 2016. The outlines of the story will be familiar to anyone who has been following the news over the past few years, but is no less poignant for being familiar. Obviously.

Watching this short film provided an obvious opportunity for me to reflect on our own story here in southern Alberta. Incredibly, it’s been nearly a year since the group that I am a part of welcomed our new Syrian friends to Lethbridge. I still remember vividly the day that nine people walked off an airplane in our tiny local airport on a frigid and foggy January day. I can remember clearly the exhaustion and confusion on their faces, just as I can remember the warmth and the welcome of that first meal that we shared together in their new home. A few weeks ago, four more members of the family arrived. We are still waiting for four more to complete the unification of this family group. Hopefully before Christmas, we say. Hopefully.

As I reflect on the past year that we have walked with our Syrian friends, I suspect that our story would be similar to many other private sponsorship groups across Canada. It has been delightful to get to know our new friends. It has been wonderful to open our hearts and our homes to them and to be welcomed into their lives in

return. It has been enormously gratifying to play a small role in providing a new start for these families, to see the joy on their children's faces, to see the adults laughing around the table, to watch them take steps toward independence. It has been incredible to see the way in which an entire community has surrounded them, many not even part of our original sponsorship group. Whether it's people from the neighborhood dropping by to say hello or members of the Roman Catholic parish where they worship on Saturdays inviting them for meals and teaching them how to drive, or other Syrians in our city reaching out to form connections, the way they have been welcomed to our community has been an inspiring thing to behold.

It's interesting to observe the daily features of life through the eyes of a stranger. Or at least to try. You see things differently, of course. You see things that you ordinarily just take for granted. To take just one small example, it's remarkable how dependent upon driving we are in Canada, particularly in a relatively small city on the prairies. We think nothing of just hopping in a car and driving 15 minutes here, there, everywhere. I do it multiple times a day. But for Syrians who don't have licenses, and who must wait a minimum of one year after obtaining a learners permit here in Canada, driving is not an option. Our city's public transit system is, well, not great, and so they must either walk, wait half an hour for buses that run very limited routes, or try to find a ride. It's a logistical challenge to get nine-plus people anywhere, and requires a lot of volunteers and coordination. Just one example.

I think our new Syrian friends also find our relatively isolated and autonomous existences here in Canada bewildering. We don't tend to just go out and mill about city squares (particularly in winter) like they do in their culture. Social gatherings are often planned and programmed rather than emerging spontaneously out of shared life together. I think they find it strange how little we are with one another. Every time I go over to their home to take care of anything, I can count on being invited in for coffee and not being allowed to leave for a *long* time. They value time together in a way that many of us in Canada don't. Or seem not to, at any rate.

By far the biggest obstacle in the first year for most Syrians (and probably many refugees in Canada) is language. English is an extraordinarily difficult language to learn for Arabic speakers, particularly if they had little formal education in their homeland. The kids have picked it up quickly, of course, and are already almost serving as translators for their parents and grandparents. And the women have tended to pick it up faster than the men, at least in our experience. But even after

nearly a year of English classes, it can be a struggle to communicate. A lot of patience and good humor is required to communicate well. Thankfully, both have been evidenced in abundance.

It's been wonderful for the church that I serve to see our Syrian friends at Sunday worship semi-regularly. Our families are a mixture of Orthodox and Catholic so they attend mass most Saturdays. But they are "Sunday Mennonites," they tell me. I know that our low-church worship must be incredibly strange to them, but they come for the welcome of community and the embrace of their children. Last Sunday during our children's story all the kids at the front except one were Syrian. It was an incredible thing to behold. We put up the scripture readings in Arabic each week so that those who struggle with English can at least get that much out of the service. Last week, the person who usually takes care of this was away, so I did a quick English to Arabic translation on Bible Gateway and threw it up on the screen. After the service, one of my Syrian friends asked me who did the Arabic this week. It was weird and didn't make much sense. Apparently, I had done something wrong or used the wrong website or something. We had a good chuckle about this.

There are incredibly moving moments during worship with our Syrian friends. A few Sundays ago, we celebrated communion as a church. This is always a highlight of worship for me as I get to stand at the front and watch this wonderful assemblage of humanity come to the table to be fed by Christ. Watching our Syrian friends make their way to the front with their new Canadian community was a powerful moment on so many levels. The Sunday before that, we had our annual Memorial Sunday, where we give people an opportunity to come to front, light a candle and say the name of someone they have lost recently. Toward the end, one of our young Syrian women came forward with a shy smile, lit a candle, and spoke the name of a family member who had died. I looked to the back of the sanctuary at the 10-12 Syrians who were watching her. I knew that each of them had lost not only loved ones but so much more in the last years. I knew that this one candle that she had lit represented a great deal of loss.

As we continue to walk with our Syrian friends toward the end of their first year in Canada, I am regularly struck by how their lives are in many ways dominated by decisions made somewhere else. This was evident in the video above, too. Everyone is waiting for a phone call, an e-mail, a document, an interview, an application form. Somewhere, someone holds the key to their future and all they can do is wait for the right lever to be pressed, the right bureaucratic hinge to swing open to allow a

family member to come to Canada or to provide a doorway to a new opportunity somewhere. These people who were once independent and strong and resourceful are often forced to wait for their fate and the fate of those they love to be determined elsewhere.

Every time our Syrian families come to worship, the grandmother gives me a big hug and asks me the same question. “Any news about my daughter?” Her family—the last family we are waiting for—got held up by a technicality of some sort, and are waiting in Lebanon. This is a common experience for all refugees. One missed phone call, one form filled out improperly, one space left blank, one *anything* can lead to weeks, months, even years worth of delays. It’s crazy. And it’s incredibly difficult to get information about where things are at. I always tell her the same thing. “All I can do is wait for word from the government. I’ve spoken to our member of parliament. I’ve tried to push it along. I don’t have any control. I’ll let you know as *soon* as I hear any word.” I close my eyes and try to will the e-mail bearing the address “cicpsrarrivalcorrespondence” to appear in my inbox. If only it were that easy.

She always smiles at me, throws her hands up in the air and says the same thing. *Inshallah*. Arabic for “God willing” or “if God wills.” Sometimes I beat her to the punch and say it first. *Inshallah*. She laughs. It’s a word that seems to contain all the hope and resignation and confusion and chaos and powerlessness and halting opportunity that has defined their lives since 2011. They know that their willingness and our willingness isn’t enough. For order to be wrested out of the chaos of their homeland, for families to be reunited, for crises to be averted, for dreams not to be crushed, for hope to be birthed and futures to be charted, God must be willing. *Inshallah*.

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