

WOMEN'S MINISTRIES AT RIVEROAKS CHURCH

1665 GERMANTOWN ROAD SOUTH, GERMANTOWN, TN 38138 Phone: 755 7772



Christmas for Refugees

When Cathy Short and Vita Swindell called to say they would like to coordinate a Christmas dinner, worship, singing, and gift distribution for about 20 families on Christmas Day, who could say no?! Their enthusiasm is catching and the service opportunity is a wonderful way to celebrate this special time. The two families have collected names and needs information to cover 20 refugee families. These are listed on gift tags placed on a display Christmas tree in the hallway.

Please take one or more gift tags and then bring wrapped and tagged gifts to the church before Christmas (a box will be located & labeled in the Coat Room near the office). Your gifts will be distributed during a Christmas dinner hosted in the Fellowship Hall from 2:30–5:30.

In addition to help with gifts, we need volunteers to help serve and fellowship with the guests, and

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to prepare desserts or potato casseroles (sweet potatoes and white potatoes). Deliver these items to the church kitchen on Christmas Eve before the Christmas Eve service.

Learn more about these people in the other articles of this newsletter. Then pray about how you might be called to help with the Christmas dinner and gift sharing.

Questions: Cathy Short cshort@ecseagles.com or 752-0132 or Vita Swindell swindelltva@aol.com 757-9867

Starting Anew: Political Refugees Rebuild their Lives

In a recent newspaper article, writer Don Wade described how two of the refugees that will be Riveroaks guests at Christmas. Sedekia Imanairakiza and Said Momond are learning English and making their way after fleeing Afghanistan and Burundi by packaging coffee at the Ugly Mug. The company hired the political refugees so they could support their families and learn English.

"Our first thought was, provide them a job, have

them take English lessons on company time taught by another employee, and then we'd launch them out of here after six months to get a better job," explained sales rep John Martinez, "But they didn't want to leave here and the English has gone slower."

So the first plan, which in retrospect was highly caffeinated, has been replaced by a second plan -- a take it day by day, sip by sip, plan.

(Please see Refugees Start Anew, page 3)

Our Refugee Guests: Who Are They?

Burundians:

The Burundian families have been in the US for a year and a half. They generally are two-parent households with an average of about six children. The majority are employed in low wage, low skills jobs making slightly over minimum wage. Fleeing ethnic genocide in 1972, many have lived in Tanzanian refugee camps for over 35 years. Most of the children never have seen Burundi. The Burundians were resettled in the US because Tanzanians closed the camps and there was little arable land left. The process of ending up in Memphis is somewhat complicated, but essentially they are resettled here because they were assigned to Catholic Charities who placed them here. Virtually all of the Burundians are Christian, many Pentecostal. The Burundians continue to better their lives here by working to support their families and learning English.

Somalis:

Somali refugees have been coming to the US since the onset of the Somali civil war in 1991. Most of the Somali refugees served by Refugee Empowerment Program REP have arrived within the last two years. The average family size is six. Since the early 1990s Somali has been a failed state with no central government. Many Somalis fled to Kenya and lived there for upwards of 10 years before being resettled in other countries such as the US. Virtually all of the Somalis are Sunni Muslims. Many are employed in Memphis, although it is common for Somalis to move out of Memphis to cities with larger concentrations of Somali refugees. They tend to be very community-oriented, and often help other families in need even when they are struggling.

Sudanese:

Memphis' Sudanese refugees mostly come from southern Sudan. The Sudanese civil war began with the move toward independence in 1955, and

continued through the 1980's. During this time, many Sudanese fled to refugee camps in Uganda and Kenya. A tenuous peace treaty is in effect today. Most of the Sudanese refugees served by REP have been in the US between 4 – 8 years. The majority of southern Sudanese refugees are Christian, and a small percentage are Muslim. Virtually all Sudanese refugees from northern Sudan are Sunni Muslims. The majority of Sudanese refugees are employed, and many are fluent in English. The average number of children per family is about four.

Vietnamese:

Vietnamese refugees arrived in the US between the mid-1970's and mid-1980's. Displaced by the fall of Saigon and the Vietnam war, Vietnamese were finally granted refugee status in 1975. Almost 1 million people of Vietnamese descent currently reside in the US, and some Vietnamese with close relatives in America are still granted an opportunity to come to America under "family reunification" status. REP's Vietnamese participants fall into both of these categories. The majority of Vietnamese are Buddhist/Confucian, while a large minority is Roman Catholic. They typically have prospered in the US and have built strong community support. Some adults, however, are only now gaining literacy/fluency in English.

Bhutanese:

Bhutanese refugees are now being resettled in America after five years of efforts by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. 60,000 individuals are expected in the coming four years, with the first arriving in late September 2008. Bhutanese refugees are predominantly from southern Bhutan and are of Nepali descent. In the late 1980's,

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Refugees Start Anew (cont)

Sedekia Imanairakiza, 42, came to Memphis last year with his wife and eight daughters; they have since added a son.

Originally from Burundi, Imanairakiza is the son of farmers -- a Tutsi father and Hutu mother. He and his wife and children were living in a refugee camp in Tanzania when United Nations officials determined they were eligible for relocation to the United States.

Said Rahman Momand, 42, was for 10 years a professor at the University of Kabul. In 1996, he says, the Taliban put him and many other educators in prison. The Allied Forces liberated the prison in 2002, but it took Momand a while to find his wife and children, who had fled to Pakistan.

In fact, his family didn't even know he was alive. His family's fear well could have been proven right. For Momand says he saw the Taliban execute many prisoners. Or as he describes it, "talk, talk, talk, 'come here, outside' ... you finished."

Catholic Charities sponsored the men's relocation to Memphis and Momand and Imanairakiza interviewed and began working at Ugly Mug on the same day. They knew no English and their first assignment, to affix labels to bags of coffee, resulted in many of the labels being put on upside down. They've made a lot of progress since then and their work, which pays them a modest hourly wage, has expanded to include grinding coffee, filling and sealing bags and loading cases.

Their adaptation includes taking on a more Americanized look. They come to work in official Ugly Mug T-shirts, Imanairakiza wearing a New York Yankees stocking cap and Momand sporting a ball cap turned backwards.

Their English is still halting, and the little coffee company, and Memphis, are their comfort zones.

Office manager Chalise Bondurant, 25, whose husband, Ben, is production manager at Ugly Mug, is teaching them English. Imanairakiza, who speaks Swahili and Kirundi, is better at reading and writing English than he is at speaking it. Momand, who speaks six other languages, including Russian and Pashto, is better at speaking English than reading and writing the language. Chalise says she senses the history professor that Momand once was.

(Note that ECS students will be selling Ugly Mug coffee to help raise funds prior to Christmas)



Our Refugee Guests: Who Are They? (continued)

after decades of these individuals becoming prosperous and economically benefitting greater Bhutan, the Bhutanese government began to discriminate and eventually persecute Bhutanese of Nepali descent. Thousands fled to neighboring Nepal where the UNHCR eventually opened refugee camps. Negotiations for repatriation have been futile because of the strict and somewhat arbitrary qualifications of proving to the Bhutanese government a sufficient degree of Bhutanese ancestry. Infighting continues between those who want to be resettled in a third country and those who want unconditional repatriation. REP's most recent refugee population, many Bhutanese are well-positioned to prosper in America as many are fluent/literate in English. The majority of Bhutanese refugees are Hindu with a large majority practicing Buddhism.



