

## **Befriending Afghan Refugees: Experiences of Bethany United Methodist Church and First Baptist Church Madison, WI**

Congregations, resettlement agencies, among other organizations across Wisconsin, are actively doing the important work of helping hundreds of Afghan refugees establish new homes and establish supportive relationships with their communities. In Madison, Bethany United Methodist Church and First Baptist Church are partnering to help four households in an extended family of Afghan refugees. These households have eight adults and 15 children, including a newborn who is now their first US citizen! This ministry complements support provided by Jewish Social Services, the resettlement agency for the family, Open Doors for Refugees, among others.

We met the family serendipitously last fall. After hearing that there was an Afghan family in the neighborhood, Brigit Parlow, the Director of Youth Ministries at Bethany, popped over to their home after a Sunday worship service – and the connection was made. Fortunately, the one person in the family who spoke English was there to greet her. As she learned more about the size of the family and its needs, she saw that involvement of another congregation would be beneficial, so she invited First Baptist Church to partner in the ministry, a request to which First Baptist's new Refugee and Immigrant Ministry Task Force quickly agreed. Congregants from both churches now meet every two weeks via Zoom to discuss care of the households.



The four Afghan households have eight adults and 15 children. This picture includes a couple of other Afghan men from the community. The children range in ages from newborn to 7<sup>th</sup> grade.



Visits to a fabrics store are much appreciated experiences for the Afghan women. Gift cards are provided to enable purchases. Donated sewing machines are used for making clothes.

The relationship between the congregations and the families is best characterized as a friendship. Brigit Parlow and Michael Blauw, an FBC Task Force member, are in regular contact with the family, typically visiting them at least once per week. Through that friendship they have identified needs that we could address. Some needs are met with physical donations, such as sewing machines, rugs, toys, Chromebook computers, children's books, and art supplies. Some are met with financial support, such as gift cards for food, clothing, and sewing supplies, and help with monthly rent payments. Members of the two congregations have donated generously to enable this financial support.

Much assistance is provided by volunteers. Through regular communications, we have been able to provide advice on their many questions, such as payment of iPass charges and taxes. We have made phone calls to agencies and organizations on their behalf in part because of communications challenges and because the one working adult who speaks English often doesn't have the time to navigate complex phone answering systems. Michael rented a van and helped move one of the families so that all four households could be close to each other. Brigit and Michael have provided instruction in computer use. Brigit has driven Afghan women to shop at a fabrics store. And there is a major volunteer effort to provide in-person English as a Second Language (ESL) classes twice per week for adults and for children who are not in school. We celebrate the successful beginning of the ESL classes on March 14 at the Boys and Girls Club facility close to where they live! Finally, we also inquire about whether they are getting the support they need from others, such as dealing with citizenship issues and getting care for a child who has spina bifida.



Our volunteers spent time in the home interacting with the children in advance of the ESL classes. The children were delighted!

In working with the Afghan families, we have seen how very difficult resettlement is for them. We have learned of other Afghan families that are isolated and that have needs that aren't being met for various reasons, including language and cultural barriers. Helping them become self-sufficient is a multi-faceted effort requiring an on-going relationship that seeks to balance mentoring and support of their needs with letting them take responsibility for their own lives and the consequences of their actions. It has been a rewarding but challenging experience. We have learned much about their culture and have shared much about our culture. This friendship began by directly connecting with the Afghan families.

A final request: A current need is for a van for the households. They now only have a small 4-door car for all four households. If anyone has a suggestion, please email [danesanctuary@gmail.com](mailto:danesanctuary@gmail.com).

Prepared by Dennis Ray, member, First Baptist Church, on behalf of the entire Afghan friendship team