

# Exodus World Service Provides Opportunities to Serve Refugee Immigrant Families

By *Ralph Keiser*

I began volunteering as a tutor for refugee immigrants over five years ago when a former member of the Staff at Grace Church was involved with Exodus World Service and wrote up an article about opportunities for serving immigrant families. Over that time, I have helped 12 refugee immigrants become US citizens. Exodus World Service is a non-profit, non-denominational organization located in Bloomingdale, IL, which works with World Relief in Wheaton to obtain the names of new refugee immigrants and works to assist them in their transition to life in the US. They offer volunteers opportunities to bring “*Welcome to America*” Packs which provide supplies to refugee families shortly after arrival in the US. The “*New Neighbor Program*” builds bridges of understanding by meeting with the new refugee family every week for three months. The “*Expanding Your Table Program*” mobilizes volunteers to host refugees for the holidays. “*Stand With Refugees*” asks volunteers to use their voices to speak up on behalf of refugees. “*Learn about Refugees*” provides presentations and training workshops, refugee simulations, Bible Studies, and resource materials to encourage persons to work as volunteers for refugees. And the “*Tutor Refugees Program*” for which I volunteer, provides volunteers with an opportunity to tutor refugee immigrants who are now applying for US citizenship. Refugee immigrants are from all over the world, but right now, there is an influx of refugee immigrants from Bhutan, Iraq, and Myanmar (formerly Burma). I personally have worked with refugee immigrants from Afghanistan, Iraq, Mexico, Nigeria, and Sudan. All of the Sudanese refugee immigrant families I have tutored have come as references from the first few Sudanese families I tutored. Many of those Christian and moderate Muslim southern Sudanese families were persecuted for religious reasons and immigrated to the US for the same reason our Pilgrim forefathers immigrated to America.

While their school aged children are the first to perfect English, attending school five days a week, and being exposed to English all day at school, adult family members usually learn English more slowly. They do have exposure to English at work, on television, and they are also motivated to enroll in an “English as a Second Language” (ESL) class but the volunteer tutoring Exodus provides is very necessary to their success. We study from books written by the US Immigration Service and supplied by Exodus World Service at no charge to each refugee immigrant family. I am a volunteer, so there is no charge for my tutoring services. US citizenship candidates always find that amazing, and that I am willing to come to their home and work with them on a weekly basis to help them learn English, basic US history and basic US government in order to pass the US citizenship test.

Legal immigrants receive a green card upon arrival in this country. After they have held their green card for five years they are eligible for US citizenship. They must submit their application for US citizenship along with a check for \$600 to the US Immigration Services Office and await their letter asking them to come in. I assure you that saving \$600 is very difficult for most refugee immigrants, and it is often the reason they have not previously applied for US citizenship. Once a candidate for US citizenship applies for citizenship, I receive a call from Exodus World Service, giving me the name of the family, their address and phone number. I meet with the immigrant family for the first time just to introduce myself and to find out a little about them, where they are from, what kind of job they held in their former country, and what are they doing for work now? I am seldom in the home of a refugee immigrant family more than a few minutes, when I am offered a cup of tea to drink and often something to eat. Refugee immigrants are very hospitable people, and I have come to love them dearly. As we are talking over tea, I want to know how long they have been in the US and how many children they have and what are their ages. I usually make friends with the young children quickly, and they come to expect a big hug from me before I leave. This helps to break the ice of the first visit, and lets this new immigrant family know that I am truly harmless and want to help them in any way that I can.

I share my own story with my immigrant family, and I help them get to know me by telling them about my family, what I did before I retired, and why I have chosen to serve as a tutor. I remind them that we are a nation of immigrants, and that my family emigrated here from Germany just prior to the US Civil War. I share with them that my Grandma Keiser (Leona Scheller) immigrated to the US around 1900 as an indentured servant, to work on the farm of my Great Grandfather, Harm Keiser. He had sent for her, paying for her trip to the US, for the expressed intention that she and my Grandfather would eventually marry. She worked off her trip expenses by cooking, cleaning, and working around the farm for my Great Grandfather, and sure enough, she and my Grandfather fell in

love, and were married, raising five children, including my father, Oliver Keiser, who was their oldest child. The immigrant families always find it interesting that I too am a descendent of immigrants. Once we have met and arranged for our next meeting, I give them the "US Citizenship Study Manual", and tell them to begin reading the study manual and that I will see them next week at the same time. The next week our tutoring begins in earnest, having them practice reading out loud from the study manual, and answering the questions at the end of each unit as well as their own questions if they do not understand something.

A candidate for US citizenship's first contact with the US Immigration Service is when they receive their letter to come in for fingerprinting. Their fingerprints are then submitted to the FBI and to their country of origin in order to check for any record of criminal activity. This process may go as quickly as a few months, or it may take a year or more depending on the backlog with the US Immigration Service, and depending on whether or not another person by the same name exists who has committed a crime. Once they have passed that portion of the entrance test, they are given a date to come to the Dirksen Federal Building in Chicago to be examined verbally for US citizenship. Once they have a firm date for testing, I offer them additional tutoring time, if they feel that they need it or if I feel that they need it. I come twice or even three times a week as needed. The biggest problem for us in meeting is finding the time to do it, because usually both the husband and wife work, and usually at staggered times so one spouse will always be home with their children. Typically one spouse applies first and after they pass the test and become a US citizen, then the other spouse applies for citizenship. Saturdays work out best, but sometimes one of them will have to work on Saturday too. If we have to meet more than once a week, we try to find a time during the week after they have finished work. Tutoring varies in length of time, depending on the previous education the immigrant received in his or her country of origin. Typically, tutoring runs from two to six months before the candidate is ready to pass the citizenship test. However, some refugees have had little or no formal education because of constant war in their country of origin. So it takes them longer to pass the US citizenship test, but I am a patient man, and I will work with them, no matter how long it takes. The longest I have worked with one immigrant was just over a year, and the immigrant was the mother of two very young children and worked full time. I still don't know how she managed it, but I remember sitting at the kitchen table with one child on one of my knees and the other child on the other knee so that she could concentrate on writing out the sentences I was reading to her in English. We usually met in the morning, and I would find her sweeping the kitchen floor of the mess her family of eight children had made the night before. She had just gotten up, after working from 3pm to 11 pm, coming home, and falling into bed, only to get up to do it again the next day. I am truly proud of her for having overcome all the obstacles in her life to become a US citizen. She was so happy she didn't know what to say, except "Thank you!" That was all I needed.

When the time for the test arrives, I take the train with them downtown and ride a taxi with my immigrant family to the Dirksen Federal Building where the testing takes place. I have found that my being with them helps to calm their nerves, and I try to give them some simple suggestions to help them through the testing. I tell them that when the Immigration Services testing agent asks them why they have come, they should smile their biggest smile at the agent, and tell them, "I want to become a citizen of the United States!" And I tell them that if the agent speaks too fast or asks a question in a way that they do not understand, they must ask the agent to please repeat the question or to please speak more slowly. I remind them that the testing agent is not trying to fail them, but wants them to pass the test, and that they have to help themselves by asking for help when they need it. The testing agent begins with simple questions such as "What country are you from?", "Where are you currently living?", "Are you married?", "How many children do you have?" These questions help the candidates to relax. It also helps to give the testing agent an ideal of how well this candidate can speak English.

The first part of the test is a list of ten questions taken from the study manual covering basic US history and US government. If they can answer six of ten questions correctly, they pass this portion of the test. Questions included could be: "Who is the President of the United States?", "Who was George Washington?", "What are the three branches of the US government?", "When did the US fight the Civil War?", "How many US Senators represent each State in the Senate?", "Which countries fought with the US during WWII?", or "What does the legislative branch of the US government do?" Having passed this portion of the test, the testing agent will ask the candidate to write out several sentences as they are read to them, and then to read several sentences to them from a list of sentences taken from the study manual. If they pass this portion of the test, they have qualified for US citizenship. It doesn't seem that hard, but reading and writing English is usually considered the hardest part of the test by most applicants. Having passed the test, the Immigrations Services Agent congratulates them on passing the test and they

are free to go. They come out of the testing room with wonderful smiles on their faces, happy and proud to have qualified for US citizenship and can't stop shaking my hand and thanking me for the help I have given them.

Should the candidate fail the test or fail part of the test, they can take it over again in 6 weeks. If they fail a second time, they have to pay another \$600 to reapply for US citizenship. Naturally they are motivated to do well the first time. I have yet to encounter a refugee immigrant who was not totally motivated to learn English, US history, and government. Refugee immigrants always have a thirst for knowledge, so it is very satisfying to work with them. In addition, I have gained a new friend(s) and I have grown in my knowledge of their country, their culture, and their religion.

One of the most satisfying parts of the tutoring process is to attend their swearing-in ceremony. We take the train to Chicago again and ride a taxi to the Dirksen Federal Building. When we arrive outside the court room we are enveloped in a sea of humanity lining up to enter the court room. They are all colors and nationalities, dressed in their best western style clothing or their beautiful native costumes, all speaking excitedly. Once inside the court room, we are seated, we are told what is to happen, and then we all rise as the Federal Judge enters the room. We are asked to join in the Pledge of Allegiance to their new country, the United States of America. The Judge congratulates the new citizens, and each one is given his or her US citizenship papers. The Judge encourages the new citizens to continue their education as the best way to find success in their new country and to be sure to exercise their rights as a new citizen by voting at the next election. One federal judge briefly shared his own story of being an immigrant from Armenia, coming to this country, becoming a US citizen, studied to become a lawyer, and eventually being appointed to the Federal Court; truly a story of the American dream. The new immigrants were totally amazed and excited to hear his story, having high hopes and dreams of their own for themselves and their children. The court is adjourned, and the room is abuzz with everyone laughing, hugging each other, and taking pictures. The last time I attended a US citizenship swearing-in, 140 persons received US citizenship, from 40 different countries; Truly Amazing! I can not describe the satisfaction I feel when I have attended one of these swearing-in ceremonies. I feel that I too have become a small part of the dream that these new citizens hold for themselves and their future. I can assure you that this feeling is one of the high moments of accomplishment in my life.

Anyone who loves people and has an interest in learning about other countries and cultures is a candidate for tutoring for Exodus World Service. It is helpful if you are retired or if you are not currently working full time, because it is often difficult to find a good time to meet. But I encourage you to join me in this worthy cause. You will enjoy yourself, you will be doing a wonderful service for these new immigrants to the US, and you will be serving God by helping "one of the least of these, my brothers". For more information about Exodus World Service, please go to [www.e-w-s.org](http://www.e-w-s.org). Exodus World Service offers a range of opportunities to serve. If you would like to serve refugees in this way, please call me, Ralph Keiser at #630-961-0869. Or you can send an email Jessica Davis, Program Director, Exodus World Service at [www.e-w-s.org](http://www.e-w-s.org) or call #630-307-1400, Ext 108.

Exodus World Service just had their Annual Dinner, Celebration of Hope, on Friday, April 16<sup>th</sup>, celebrating over 20 years of service to refugee immigrants. They served a free meal to over 700 persons, asking for a donation in return. They brought several new immigrants to the stage to be recognized, and also recognized a number of persons who have provided outstanding service to Exodus World Service over the past year. One of the most amazing accomplishments of volunteers for Exodus this past year is the completion of a "First Steps Kit" which is a book written in Sgaw Karen and English for the immigrant families of Myanmar to help them learn a new culture. Future books are going to be made available in Arabic and other languages common to these immigrants. Grace United Methodist Church contributes to Exodus World Service through the Race and Religion Commission on which I currently serve as chairman. In this way, you are all helping serve refugee immigrants from around the world. You may also choose to give directly to Exodus World Service. Please mail your gift to Exodus World Service, PO Box 620, Itasca, IL, 60143.