

West Michigan Faith and Community Leaders Express Support for Refugees

November 18, 2020- West Michigan has a long history of supporting refugee resettlement, a lifesaving program for people who have been forced from their homes due to violence and persecution. Together, we have safely resettled and supported refugees throughout West Michigan for decades.

Resettled refugees are the most vetted traveler to the United States. This includes screenings by eight federal agencies, six different security databases, two inter-agency security checks, as well as multiple medical screenings in accordance with guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) all before they land on U.S. soil.

People who came to the U.S. as refugees, like [Mahamud](#) and [Ebrahim](#), are working on the frontlines of the pandemic, including 176,000 who are serving in the healthcare field and another 175,000 working as part of the food supply chain.

Refugees have become an important part of the fabric of our community. They share their customs, music, food, traditions, and their hospitality with us. And studies show that the entrepreneurial spirit of refugees strengthens the [West Michigan economy](#). Through the bipartisan U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, more than three million people fleeing for their lives found safety in the U.S. We are proud to continue this legacy in West Michigan.

We can – and should – continue the safe resettlement of refugees in the United States. We are joining together to urge President-elect Joe Biden to rebuild and restore the refugee program.

Bethany Christian Services
Church World Service

Fridah Kanini	A Glimpse of Africa
Sara Finton	Advanced Cardiac and Vascular Centers
Rev. Dr. Barbara Edema	AFAR
John Minito Mondri	African Community Fellowship Church
Lawrence Davids	AGOA
Rev. Colleen Squires	All Souls Community Church of West Michigan
Mamie Hai	Association of Sierra Leoneans in Michigan
Melanie Strobel	Begin With One
Robert L Burgess	Berrien Immigrant Solidarity Network
Rev. Tara Foreman	Bethany Christian Reformed Church
Chris Palusky	Bethany Christian Services
Rev. Elizabeth VanderHaagen	Boston Square Christian Reformed Church
Kathy Miedema	Brookside Christian Reformed Church
Rev. David Morton	Chapel Hill United Methodist Church
Rev. Dan Buchin	Christ Episcopal Church
Christopher Van Wingerden	Christopher J Van Wingerden Company
Rev. Darlene M Kuhn	Church of the Mediator
Stacey Clack	Church World Service
Scott Bowman	Clareo

Rev Jean Lemmenes	Community Church of Douglas
Prof. David B. Kennedy	Cornerstone University
Mark Stephenson	CRC Office of Social Justice
Deanna Rolffs-Elzinga	Design Group International
Kristin Stroble	Eastminster Presbyterian Church
Christopher Hall	Elevation Church
Karen Joy Kelly	Episcopal Church
Michael Kozubek	Episcopal Church of the Mediator, Harbert
Mary Swanton	Episcopal Church of the Mediator, Harbert
Ellen M Schoepf	Faith Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Craig Van Hill	First Christian Reformed Church
Julia Cosgrove	First Reformed Church of Holland
Meridell Gracias	Freedom Flight Committee
Rev. Christin Fawcett	Grace Lutheran Church
Heather Dood	Grace Reformed Church
Ann DeVries	Grand Rapids Christian High School
Melita Powell	Grand Rapids Nehemiah Project
Maodush-Pitzer, PhD	Grand Valley State University
Rev. Bryan Berghoef	Holland United Church of Christ
Ryan VerWys	ICCF
Karynn Sikkema	International Berea Ministry
Catherine Blake	Kent County Health Department
Jackie Hubbard	Kent ISD Adult Education
Sanela Sprecic	Kentwood Public Schools
Sarah Wiedyk	Kentwood Public Schools
Melissa Selvig-Mantilla	Key Realty
Rev. Craig Allen	Keystone Community Church
Matt Cook	Lake Michigan Credit Union
Pastor Doug Ogden	Lebanon Lutheran
Grace N Lusamba	Les Clay
Jodi Cole Meyer	Love In the Name of Christ
Deborah L Borst	Madison Square Church
Carol Gates	Magnify Church
Matthew J. Stob	Maranatha Christian Reformed Church
Abdirahman Haji	Masjid Alnoor
Beth Hendrick	Maternal Infant Support Services
Debbie McFalone	McFalone Consulting LLC
Ryan Prondzinski	Michigan Refugee Hope Project
Satterlee, Ph.D., Bishop	North/West Lower Michigan Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Ron and Mindy Denning	Osgood Brewing
Lynn Justusson	Peace Lutheran Church
Kristian Williams	Project Solidarity
Mike Bartlett	Redemption City Church
Brooke Aernouts	Refugee Education Center
Amanda Rycenga	Refugee Education Center
Banza Mukalay	Restoration Community Church
Erica C Walsh	SAHM
Margaret Lammers	Saint Augustine Church of Canterbury Episcopal Church
Leonard Brinkmoeller	Saint Mark's Episcopal Church, Paw Paw, Michigan
Chris Cavanaugh	Samaritas
Ruth Stenfors	Senior Neighbors
Mark Veldt	Servant's Community Church

Jennifer Holmes Curran	Sherman Street CRC
Rachel VerWys	Solutions to End Exploitation
Robin J McCants	Southeast Michigan Synod, ELCA
Jill Tallman	Spectrum Health
Jim Enelow	St Augustine's Episcopal Church
Vicki Schroeder	St. Augustine of Canterbury Episcopal Church
Rev. Jessica and Matt Shults	Standale Reformed Church
Tony Bonacci	Stitchtime Company
Deb VanDyke	Tabernacle Community Church
Kizombo Kalumbula	Tabernacle Community Church
Chris De Blaay	The Branch
Laura Hofman Watrous	The Law Office of Laura Hofman
Scott Bloem	The Other Way Ministries
Rev. Alice Fleming Townley	The Presbyterian Church of Okemos
Tarah Carnahan	Treetops Collective
Sara Freudenburg	Trinity Lutheran Church
Benjamin Bruins	Trinity Reformed Church
Suzanne Katerberg	Trinity Reformed Church
Susan Olthof	Trinity Reformed Church
Jack Eggleston	Unity Lutheran Church
Jessica Riley	Viva Fair Trade
Carlos E. Pava	Voices For Health, INC.
Erin Mitchell	We Love Refugees GR
Minnie Morey	West Michigan Asian American Association Inc.
Praveena Shatawi	West Michigan Community Relief
Jeanne Elders DeWaard	Westminster Presbyterian Church
Carol Bremer-Bennett	World Renew
Rev. Kim DeLong	Wyoming Park United Methodist Church
Greg Brower	Zion Reformed Church
Jeremy Zoet	Zion Reformed Church

Welcoming refugees is one way we live the good news of Jesus Christ. It's a way to participate in the fierce love God has for all of us.

Benjamin Bruins, *Trinity Reformed Church*

My experience with refugees has fundamentally changed my life. They have opened the world to me, shown me what true gratitude and hope look like, and given to me as much as I could ever give to them.

Chris De Blaay, *The Branch*

As a Vietnam era veteran with the United States Navy 7th Fleet in 1975, I was witness as our fleet helped evacuate refugees from Vietnam when the North overran Saigon in the spring that year. Thousands of Viet refugees were transferred to Guam and then many eventually made their way to West Michigan. We are a better state because of our compassion for those fleeing violence, natural disasters, or dire poverty. We are a better state because of the contributions that Viet and other refugees have made here.

Robert L Burgess, *Berrien Immigrant Solidarity Network*

It is the RIGHT action to take.

Rev. David Morton, *Chapel Hill United Methodist Church*

We have had the pleasure to be refugee foster parents to the most remarkable Somali young woman. After having no formal education up to the age of 15, she has now graduated high school and is pursuing

a college education with a health care major. Simultaneously, she also works in an area hospital. It has been a joy to welcome her into our home and family.

Sara Finton, *Advanced Cardiac and Vascular Centers*

I am so inspired by the refugees. They work so hard and overcome so many obstacles to become successful in their new environment. Taking care of them in my medical practice is a joy.

Jill Tallman, *Spectrum Health*

I was a refugee. My husband, my one-year-old daughter and I arrived to Kentwood in 1997. Reflecting on our experiences, we would not be able to accomplish everything that we have and who we are today without the support from our community and friends. Today, we are able contribute back to our new home country and its people. This is why welcoming refugees is important.

Sanela Sprecic, *Kentwood Public Schools*

Refugee students come to school with a refreshingly positive attitude. They are eager to learn, and they and their parents value education highly. We gain from hearing about their cultures and their life experiences. Spending time with refugee students broadens the perspective of other students and staff in the school and builds appreciation for and acceptance of other people and their cultures.

Sarah Wiedyk, *Kentwood Public Schools*

Our mission is to create a platform where African Community members can come together, share, showcase their culture, find opportunities to engage, give back and support each other. One of our main objectives is to increase diversity and inclusion in the city of Grand Rapids and Michigan as a whole. We could not have done this without the refugees and new Americans who are part of this vision. We are thrilled to have the ability to offer a platform and collaborate in activities that help refugees and new Americans feel welcome in our city.

Fridah Kanini, *A Glimpse of Africa*

Our nation is founded by immigrants, welcoming new immigrants is a duty on all of us.

Abdirahman Haji, *Masjid Alnoor*

It is God's mandate that we welcome the stranger.

John Minito Mondì, *African Community Fellowship Church*

I work with senior refugees in Kent county 60 years and older. They are amazing, gracious and resilient people that have so much to share and teach us. Despite all the horrific things that they have lived through they remain loving, trusting and positive.

Ruth Stenfors, *Senior Neighbors*

Engaging in relationships with refugees has put names and faces to real stories and grown compassion and empathy in our community rather than the negative emotions that stem from political rhetoric and miss information. It has helped us recognize God's heart and our required response.

Rev. Jessica Shults, *Standale Reformed Church*

It is core to a life of faith. We cannot pretend to follow Christ and not welcome those in our midst. In their face, we see the face of Christ.

Rev. Diane Maodush-Pitzer, PhD, *Grand Valley State University*

My father in law came to the US in the 90's as a refugee. Hearing his story, and the stories of so many others, has helped me grow as a human in my compassion, empathy, and understanding of the world outside of my own. I am a better human because they are in my life; my kids are better humans because of

our diverse familial culture; our community is stronger because of the hard work, commitment to a better life, and the innovation and ingenuity that has come with them. We need to do better at welcoming all human beings and stop being so divisive based on skin color, national origin, religion, sexual orientation. We are all humans with our own flair. Love trumps hate.

Melissa Selvig-Mantilla, *Key Realty*

We live God's love by welcoming refugees.

Deanna Rolffs-Elzinga, *Design Group International*

The refugees with whom we have worked have broadened our view of the world, expanded our understanding of the church, grown our compassion, and modeled the work ethic, generosity, and kindness we desire of all people.

Greg Brower, *Zion Reformed Church*

Refugees play an important part in educating our community on world issues. They bring culture and diversity to west Michigan. It is also important that we, as leaders, and as a community come together to support those in need. The trauma that refugees have experienced should not be compounded upon by hateful rhetoric. Meeting those who we have helped has transformed our lives for the better.

Kristian Williams, *Project Solidarity*

Refugees are people, made in God's image, who are in an incredibly difficult and vulnerable position. They are "the least of these" whom Jesus called us to love, care for, and welcome. They are also some of the most creative, gifted, and productive members of our communities. Let us move from a posture of fear to one of care and welcome, as Christ would have us do.

Rev. Bryan Berghoef, *Holland United Church of Christ*

We support refugees because that is what our faith requires of us. But it is through supporting refugees that our collective faith and love has grown. We host ESOL classes in our church building and provide volunteers for the classes. The relationships that have formed have been transformational. In sharing, learning together, and hearing one another's stories our congregation has deepened its commitment to advocating for a robust refugee program. We are stronger as a nation because of the gifts that refugees bring, and it is not a burden, but a joy to be a welcoming community.

Kristin Stroble, *Eastminster Presbyterian Church*

We are called to love and care for one another. We have been able to be the hands and feet of Jesus.

Heather Dood, *Grace Reformed Church*

The process of welcoming refugees into our country and communities has been a long tradition in our country. We need to continue and to increase our support of all refugees and asylum seekers who look to us for safety for themselves and their loved ones. This is our sacred duty.

Rev. Dan Buchin, *Christ Episcopal Church*

Refugees are an integral part of our community and help maintain our local labour force. These resilient people have endured unthinkable hardships, yet they move past their past horrors to make a new start in this land. Displaced people strive to thrive!

Praveena Shatawi, *West Michigan Community Relief*

Refugees are incredible people living through unthinkable circumstances.

Melanie Strobel, *Begin With One*

I am part of a congregation that has been blessed to welcome, get to know, and become friends with a family who came from Cuba. This family has been a source of delight within our congregation, neighborhood, and community. Each member of the family has expressed profound gratitude and

exercised profound generosity. It is my desire that our nation would continue to be a safe refuge for the vulnerable who are invited to share their many good gifts with their new neighbors.

Matthew J. Stob, *Maranatha Christian Reformed Church*

Because Jesus was a refugee, we must welcome them and support them.

Jack Eggleston, *Unity Lutheran Church*

Refugees are the reason this nation was created; for people from all over the world to begin a new life with opportunities and freedom they could not have elsewhere. “Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” If we are who we claim to be - a beacon of light and hope for all the world - we must welcome the refugees, as equals who are worthy of a life free from fear.

Ron and Mindy Denning, *Osgood Brewing*

In addition to being what I believe is our calling, both as a Christian and as a citizen of a first-world nation, to provide refuge and aid to those who suffer in other countries, I have also experienced that welcoming refugees into our communities adds a richness and beauty to our collective culture.

Scott Bloem, *The Other Way Ministries*

Very simply, Christ told us to welcome the stranger, and gave clear instructions to care and love the vulnerable and struggling members of our community. Our county has been enriched and made strong through the talents and characters of those who have joined us from across the world. We look forward to our historical commitment of care and welcoming immigrants continuing under President Biden.

Debbie McFalone, *McFalone Consulting LLC*

Welcoming refugees has helped our congregation gain insight to what others are experiencing throughout different parts of the world. We have grown in compassion and care, and many people have made life-long friendships. It has taught us how to welcome people different than us in a much better way and it was caused greater appreciation for diversity.

Jeremy Zoet, *Zion Reformed Church*

We are called to welcome the refugee. We are called to hospitality. It is important for those who have the benefit of citizenship to witness the passion of those who want to experience freedom and participate in the democratic process.

Suzanne Katerberg, *Trinity Reformed Church*

Refugees teach us a lot about being resilient and brave in the face of hard things. Our family — and our country — are better with them here.

Mike Bartlett, *Redemption City Church*

Welcoming refugees is a vital part of being a welcoming community. I have seen countless individuals come to West Michigan as refugees and make incredible impact in their work and our community. The stories and journey that many have experienced can be horrific. Yet they have succeeded and come to the US for hope and opportunity. Our community is better due to the refugee resettlement in the area and it will be better as more opportunity arrives with the next administration.

Matt Cook, *Lake Michigan Credit Union*

Jesus says in Matthew 25, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me”. I have seen the love and face of Christ in the unaccompanied refugees I have come to know and serve. What’s more transformative than encountering the risen Christ?

Ryan Prondzinski, *Michigan Refugee Hope Project*

Welcoming new Americans strengthens the fabric of our community with people and families who share their gifts, stories and lives with our family. Our kids’ school is enriched with students whose global

perspective contributes to the depth of knowledge in their learning environment and whose friendship blesses our lives. Our neighborhood is stronger because a grandma from Rwanda sits on her lawn greeting those who pass by. And our local economy is stronger as skilled and talented musicians, chefs, and entrepreneurs contribute to community. Refugees bring light and life to West Michigan.

Rachel VerWys, *Solutions to End Exploitation*

Working with the New American population has enriched my life in many ways including learning about new cultures and being inspired by their resilience and gratitude for the simplest things.

Catherine Blake, *Kent County Health Department*

We have been blessed by the presence of refugees in our community and in our church. Without them we would be less conscious of how God is working in the lives of people all over the world, and less aware of our need to share what we have with them. As it says in the Bible, “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers once in Egypt.”

Rev. Andrew Mead, *Church of the Servant*

A refugee’s life is in no way a lifestyle anyone would even imagine choosing. Refugees are the members of the global community, and they should not be isolated or segregated simply because of their nation of origin, religion, race, color, or creed. In fact, if proper avenues are provided, refugees have proven themselves to be the most diligent, hard-working, and self-dependent communities.

Dilli Gautam, *Bhutanese Community of Michigan*

Refugees add vibrancy and diversity to an already vibrant and diverse West Michigan. Refugees' fresh ideas and perspectives are most welcome in West Michigan. We love having and helping refugees in our communities.

Omar Tariq, *Islamic Center of West Michigan*

South Christian’s partnership with a refugee school invites our students to experience other cultures and nurtures their second language skills right here at home in West Michigan. Working with refugees empowers our students to show the love of Jesus while they learn and grow academically.

Jim Peterson, *South Christian High School*

We applaud the courage of these families, and we greatly value the skills, compassion, and creativity that they bring to our community.

Susan English, *Aquinas College School of Education*

Because I have been a refugee myself, and understand the importance of resettlement.

Shukurani Nsengiyumva, *Refugee Outreach Collective*

Refugees and immigrants are an essential, valued, and welcome part of our community. Some of my most meaningful moments in medicine have come from serving our refugee community as a family medicine physician. The diversity of experience, thought, and world view they bring enriches West Michigan.

Nirali Bora, MD, *Michigan State University*