

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

John 1:9-11

Sometimes the strangers in our lands shed the greatest light on our own darkness.

And sometimes the stranger reflects the true light far better than we do.

That's been my experience this fall, when I did not visit a stranger in my land.

For fifty days Palestinian-Canadian emergency room doctor Tarek Loubani suffered in an Egyptian prison cell, incarcerated and abused for his ethical ideals and ethnic roots, and for being in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong friends, and possessing the wrong equipment and footage.

For my part, though friends back home encouraged me to visit or assist him in some way, and despite my close proximity to his place of detention, even when his situation took front and center on the media stage he barely got my attention.

That's pretty dark. I knew it. But I justified it. I told myself that if he was a stranger in the land, then so was I. I eased my conscience with ideas like, "Perhaps he actually did something wrong," and, "Perhaps by getting involved with him I'll experience something worse than guilt."

Eventually he was released, thanks to 150,000 signatures and the miraculous timing of God.

And really, it was God's timing, and miraculous.

The lesser-known turn of events preceding and following Tarek's release was incredible.

First his father spoke before Egypt's parliament, humanizing his beloved son before his persecutors. Next, when released, Tarek was promptly put onto a no-fly-list. Then, delaying his return to Canada a few days, God miraculously made him one of two doctors on the airplane carrying the father of my own Egyptian friend, Sameh. Sameh's father fainted three times in quick succession after takeoff.

The other doctor on the plane thought it could be routine.

Tarek insisted it was an emergency and wrote a special medical report qualifying the old man and himself for emergency visas into Germany. Tarek accompanied him to the hospital. His condition was confirmed serious. His pacemaker was replaced. Tarek stayed at the stranger's bedside, insistent on missing his own flight home, even after the torturous ordeal he had been through.

He saved my friend's father's life. God timed it. No thanks to me.

My goal is not to make a hero out of anyone, but to confess that such stories clarify for me how improbably we would have welcomed or defended the Son of Man when he was a stranger in our land, incarnated into poverty, persecuted, and being crucified.

Yet that same stranger, the Great Physician of our Souls, unfailingly reaches out to us—strangers that we've made ourselves to him—saving our lives with his own, selflessly showing us what true love is.

Such was the meaning of the first Advent, and the question he left behind for us is: will you go and do likewise? Is your faith evidenced in actions? These days I value grace most when I ponder: will the Son of Man find faith on the earth (in me), when he returns?

Prayer

Lord, forgive us. Help us see the stranger in our land. Help us to extend your hand of care. Help us to be instruments of love and readiness instead of apathy and alienation. Cause us to reflect the light of your supreme self-sacrifice, dawning in the darkness of this world. For the glory of your name, we pray, Amen.

Rev. Najj Umran is a Syrian Canadian pastor in the CRCNA, working in the Middle East as a Leadership Developer for Transformational Networks.

Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.

1 Peter 4: 8-10

The stranger is always potentially the friend not yet discovered, the brother or sister not yet recognized, the presence of Jesus not yet discerned. . . . The ability of the Christian community to welcome persons with disabilities, and the ability of persons with disabilities to live joyfully in the midst of the church, will be an important measure of the church's ability to live fearlessly and joyfully in the midst of a broken world. - ["Spirituality and Hospitality: What the Church Can Learn by Welcoming Persons with Disabilities"](#)

When I dream, I picture a church that fully engages people with disabilities in its life and ministry. Unfortunately, because the experience of disability is foreign to church members who are temporarily able-bodied, people with disabilities can feel like strangers in their own congregations. Even people who grew up in the church who were born with a disability, or acquired it later in life, can feel ignored, pitied, and even rejected because they live with a disability—strangers in a community of which they are a part.

In contrast, Chelwood Christian Reformed Church in Albuquerque has done exceptionally well at including people with intellectual disabilities. A typical congregation has one member who has an intellectual disability out of every hundred, but at Chelwood the ratio is one to eight! A member at Chelwood, Sherry Ten Clay, told me the following story which she gave me permission to share.

Mark and Phillip, who both have intellectual disabilities, take offering each Sunday. One Sunday morning as I was waiting at the front to receive the offering, Phillip suddenly stopped and put his offering plate on the pew. He reached for a plastic bag in his back pocket and concentrated on opening it carefully. He then proceeded to pour the coins from the bag to the plate. The sound of the coins hitting the wood made wonderful music and attracted everyone's attention. Phillip then stood up, grasped the plate, turned around and continued walking toward the front, his smile filling up his face. I was in tears, experiencing his joyful giving. One thing I love about our congregation is that we had all the time we needed to give Phillip the opportunity to give his gift. No sighs, no secret glancing at the clock, just contentment and love in that room. I can bring up that image of Phillip's face at a moment's notice. It blesses my day.

Clearly, Phillip and Mark are not strangers at Chelwood. May God help every church be communities in which no one is a stranger, where everybody is understood, everybody belongs, and everybody serves.

Prayer

Jesus, just as you welcome us into your kingdom, help us to love each other deeply, offer hospitality to one another without grumbling, and encourage each to use the gifts we have received to serve others, so that everyone one of us is a faithful steward of God's grace in its various forms. Amen.

Mark Stephenson is the director of Disability Concerns for the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

Friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, abstain from sinful desires that war against your soul. Live an exemplary life among the natives so that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

I Peter 2: 11-12

Can one be a stranger in a place that is also home? There are different kinds of estrangement, some of which occur in familiar contexts. When I worked on Parliament Hill my barometer for right and wrong was so different from the political calculus all around me that I felt like a stranger. I was an ethical stranger in that context.

The notion of being an ethical stranger can help to understand the reality of being part of a society in many ways and yet feeling deeply alienated from it. Pressured to fit in with a dominant ethos, the choices for an ethical stranger are to find some acceptable compromise, sacrifice one's ethical identity, or live out one's ethic and be rejected with consequences.

In December the pressure to be part of our consumption-driven society becomes oppressive. Resisting is not only socially isolating; it is downright disloyal because our economy depends on high end-of-year retail sales. The concept of being an ethical stranger can be comforting at this time of year, when one recalls biblical passages that recognize estrangement as part of God's story and our story.

The stories of Esther and the men who were thrown into a fiery furnace in Daniel's time inspire courage. Jesus lived as an ethical stranger and modelled coping skills. His responses to the ethical dilemmas posed by his opponents to trap him far surpass the lame excuses for ethical leadership we find in Canada and the U.S. today. And the angel's advice, "Do not fear," helps to calm the fears of not fitting in with its hopeful promise that God is with us and has a better future in store.

Prayer

Lord, you say we are to be live in this world, but not to be of it. Help us to follow your example of being an ethical stranger, especially during this Christmas season, so we may bring glory to you.

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Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels unaware.

Hebrews 13:2

I don't think this passage is about angels disguised as people roaming among the general population like in the old *Touched by an Angel* TV series. That sounds too much like science fiction to me.

Strangers and aliens (not the science fiction kind) are the biblical terms for the people we refer to today as undocumented immigrants. Scripture instructs that we are to treat such people with utmost respect and offer them the same rights as citizens (Exod. 22:21; 23:9; Deut. 27:19). We are to "show hospitality to them," which means to be welcoming.

If we don't, we may be missing out on something special.

If we do, we may be welcoming "angels." The Greek word for "angel" doesn't have to mean a shining, singing being with wings from outer space. The word simply means "messenger," as, for example, when referring to preachers, God's messengers (Rev. 1:20; Gal. 4:14).

If this is the case, we are called to welcome strangers because God has something special to teach us through them.

Have you noticed in life how much you learn from those who are different from you, those who at first may seem strange to you? In Scripture, Jews learn from Gentiles, the free learn from slaves, men learn from women and, yes, citizens learn from undocumented immigrants.

So those who are different from us are as angels to the church and society, though likely without their even being aware of it, as the Greek text entails (cf. KJV). Without God's message through them, we are remaining in the dark in dangerous ways.

It is ok to insist on the traditional interpretation—that strangers like undocumented immigrants are sometimes angels in disguise. There is some biblical precedent for that (Gen. 18:1–8; 19:13). The message, however, is the same. God prizes diversity for the valuable lessons it offers.

As we celebrate the coming of Christ, let's celebrate the coming of his messengers into our life, including undocumented immigrants. After all, Jesus is the messenger of God who came to us from another place.

Prayer

Lord, spread your light in our dark world this season so we might see what we have to learn from all your children. Give us wisdom in dealing with a complicated societal issue. Give us a church and nation with a welcoming heart that treats all people with the dignity and respect you have given them as those created in your image. Thank you for welcoming us into your kingdom. Amen.

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Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us).

Matthew 1:2

On the 7th of December the entire capital of Colombia, Bogotá, stops to light a candle. We shine the way for the arrival of Maria and her unborn baby son. Kids run free and adults chat while drinking steaming cups of chocolate and eating roasted corn. We are waiting for the coming of a baby and of peace, yet Jesus arrives as a stranger to Bogota everyday: in an overloaded bus, by foot, or on the back of a motorcycle.

Colombia contains the highest number of internationally displaced people in the world. Over 5 million people have been forcibly removed from their homes during the last 50 years due to continuing armed conflict. They are refugees and strangers in their own country, journeying from the country to the city. Life is converted from the comforts of the familiar to the confusion of culture shock and non-belong.

Yet wherever the Christ-child appears, miracles take place if we are open to participate. Hands are extended and join together, in welcome, in aid and in movements for change, even in the midst of violence. Small communities are formed between the strangers who arrive. Refugees plant urban gardens on rooftops and starts soup kitchens and day cares for children. Mothers demand the return of their disappeared children. We greet and care for each other as if each of us was a reflection of a newborn baby: fragile, strange to the world, and needing the strength of all. Hope lives in the city, if only in the choice to continue to live everyday as if peace were a reality.

I light a candle on the 7th of December for the unborn Christ and his young mother. I also light a candle for the journeying Jesus, the displaced Messiah who enters the city as a stranger with no place to lay his head.

Prayer

God with us, we light candles as a sign of our hope and of remembrance, as a sign of our faith that cycles of violence can be broken, that strangers can be welcomed, and that the promise of birth and accompanying new life is already alive in Bogota and around the world. Give us the grace to participate.

Anna Vogt is a service worker with Mennonite Central Committee in Bogota, Colombia where she works with a local partner, Justapaz.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.

Matthew 6: 9-10

Every time we pray these words, we acknowledge that we are strangers in this broken world and proclaim our citizenship in God's kingdom.

What will this kingdom look like? We don't know completely, but this inspiring passage from Zechariah hints at what's to come: *Once again old men and women, so old that they use canes when they walk, will be sitting in the city squares. And the streets will again be full of boys and girls playing.* (Zechariah 8: 4-5)

This vision of peace is one we long for in Honduras, where violence has crippled a beautiful nation.

But this vision is also a challenge to us. Praying for God's kingdom to come and for his will to be done on earth obligates us to *act* in accordance with the vision. What should our actions look like? The answer to this question can be found in Zechariah too:

These are the things you should do: *Speak the truth to one another. In the courts give real justice—the kind that brings peace. Do not plan ways of harming one another. Do not give false testimony under oath. I hate lying, injustice, and violence.* (Zechariah 8: 16-17)

We at the Association for a More Just Society are acting—through constant prayer and hard work—to make God's kingdom a reality in Honduras. At an individual level, we are accompanying survivors of violent crime to achieve justice in their cases. At a governmental level, we are working to purge a corrupt and inept police force. These are our humble efforts towards such a big prayer.

How are you challenged to work towards God's kingdom today?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you for giving us a glimpse of your kingdom to come. Give us courage to live in accordance with it now, even as strangers in this world. Amen.

The Association for a More Just Society (AJS) is a CRC-endorsed Christian organization dedicated to supporting justice efforts in Honduras.

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." So Abram went...

Genesis 12: 1-4a

It is quite something to feel one's smallness. Last year I accepted the challenge of beginning a campus chaplaincy at the University of Ottawa. I remember walking the densely populated hallways and walkways during first week in 2012 and wondering what I had gotten myself into. I was raised in a devout Christian family where the Bible was read at every meal. I had been Christian schooled and trained under those steeped in Abraham Kuyper's "every square inch" theology. On then to a Christian university, then on to work in that same Christian university, then on to seminary before taking a call to pastor a church for six years. All this before moving to Ottawa. Walking in the sea of diversity, a diversity of ethnicity, convictions, and intellectual pursuits, I found myself meaningfully experiencing what it is to be the stranger in the land.

I felt small. I felt scared. I felt out of control. Thank God.

As easy as it is for us to cloister ourselves among people who think, act, and believe the same as we do, the Biblical message is one of going. The book of Genesis isn't centred on the creation narrative; it's centred on the call of Abram. In Genesis 11 the post-flood people said "Come, let US build OURSELVES a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let US make a name for OURSELVES." It represented a self-centered desire to be autonomous, uniform, and self-inflated. God hated it. God interrupted it. God scattered them. And their desires and words are contrasted with God's words in chapter 12 to Abram when God says, "I will show you, I will bless you, I will curse those needing cursing. You won't make a name for yourselves; I will be the one to make your name great. And ALL peoples will be blessed through you."

And Abram went...to be a stranger...to go to the place God would show him.

The subsequent "going" as it is played out among Abram's descendants, the nation of Israel, is filled with twists, turns, challenges, and repeated returns to Babel status. But God never gives up and he continuously pushes his people to go and take on a stranger status. And it's in the Gospel that God himself re-enacts the ultimate call to go and to be a stranger in the land. The journey to a manger in Bethlehem is God's way of leading his people in a way of "going" and of being "small" and being out of "control"... Thank God.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for leading us. For making us feel small. For making us go. We know you are in control as we become strangers in the land. Help us to put our trust in you, so we may be blessed.

Sid Ypma is a Campus Chaplain at the University of Ottawa.

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in.

Matthew 25:35

I will never forget the day I made my first visit to a rural community in Africa. I was 25 years old, single and the only white person in a sub-county of Aciisa, Uganda. Stepping out of the vehicle, I was surrounded by a sea of eager, black faces radiating brilliant white teeth. Women danced and clapped and sang. A few men, who could afford it, donned their best suits or ties. They came forward, vigorously shaking my hand with words of welcome. Children jumped up and down in jubilation. I was confused. Was this all for me?

Deborah, the director of World Renew's Ugandan partner at the time, motioned for me to sit at a special table she referred to as the high table. She informed me that the best food was for me, the best cup was for me to drink from, and the best gifts were for me to take home. I felt like I was treated beyond the status of a celebrity, more like a queen; but I hadn't even started my work as a development advisor yet. Without doing anything and without any evidence that I could do anything about poverty, I was celebrated and appreciated just for who I was.

After this experience, I regularly wonder what our world would be like if every country and culture would welcome strangers this way, like royalty. How would this impact the way we treat refugees or how we develop the immigration laws affecting them? How would that affect the way Muslims and Christians treat one another? Would ethnic conflicts disappear with such an approach of valuing the other? Surely, that would be radical grace!

The hospitality of rural village people in Uganda taught me a lot about who God is and His radical, extravagant love. The text of Matthew 25:35 talks about how Jesus identifies himself as the Stranger to be welcomed: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in." How are we welcoming the "Stranger-is-Savior" this Christmas season and every day as we live out our faith in him? To welcome him is to welcome the neighbors we have with his radical grace. In the same way that Christ welcomes us and changes us from aliens to citizens of the kingdom of God, we too need to treat others as part of God's family.

With World Renew, you and I have many opportunities to welcome refugees and immigrants, support peace-building efforts of leaders trying to overcome ethnic conflicts, and support village savings groups that overcome disparities of wealth. Let us then commit to mutual love and to not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it (Hebrews 13:1-2). By doing so, we receive the best Christmas gift ever: an encounter with Jesus who is our Stranger, King, and Savior.

Prayer

Lord, thank you for your radical grace, and for welcoming us as citizens and members of your kingdom. Help us to be living examples of hospitality, equality, mercy and justice to our communities, for we are all "strangers and foreigners on the earth"(Heb 11:13).

Ida Kaastra-Mutoigo is co-director of World Renew.

Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation: Instruction will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations.

Isaiah 51:4

The setting of Amy's baby shower was celebrative, with streamers and balloons. There was to be a new baby soon...a few more weeks to go! Hesitancy to share about this upcoming new life had filled this dear mom. It had been 12 years since she welcomed her only other child. Was it dread for the care of a newborn, embarrassment for her pregnant posture, perhaps shock and surprise of this conception? She may have been a blessed companion for Mary as she awaited the birth of her son!

A delightful feature of the baby shower was that the "nations" had gathered to celebrate the upcoming birth of this precious one. Zimbabwe, Haiti, Yemen, Philippines, Colombia and Canada were some of the countries of origin represented throughout the room. Hugs and hesitant smiles permeated this motley, precious group of refugee women whose lives had intersected through Micah House, a settlement home in Hamilton, Ontario.

Most of the guests represented unjust circumstances, bearing the title of "refugee claimant": seeking security and protection from threats to their lives. This influenced the topics of conversation for me with these very recent arrivals in our country. For Amy, the second floor apartment was not a safe place for her and her family. The police seemed to be present regularly at the downstairs dwelling. The smells coming through the vents were also not going to be healthy for her newborn - a safe place to live is her urgent concern! Sheila, along with her husband, is struggling to find a job. Negative responses are leading to periods of depression. For every possible job, she has to also weigh the transportation costs. Does she have Canadian work experience? (Please employers, she just got here!) For Nhla, the challenge is a neighbor who shows no acceptance or respect for her family. Is it the hijab or the dresses from Yemen which invokes such contempt from a stranger?

As I walk alongside my diverse neighbours, what am I able to offer? My screams and my tirades that "it is all unfair!" would serve them so very little... My certainty, that I have really nothing helpful to offer, is as useless to them as any confidence that I have all the answers.

How are your neighbours - you know the tall man who quietly wrestles with his bipolar illness, the senior woman who labors with her long-term disability, the Aboriginal who seeks a learning opportunity within the city, the weary sole parent of children with special needs, the new immigrant with a wrecked marriage?

There is an opportunity that each of us can take during Advent to be a companion to someone. Through God's grace and strength we can show compassion and justice for our neighbors. According to Matthew 25:40, "whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me." In these places, he will recognize us!

Prayer

Father, we thank you for your light that shines through your just ways! In the same way, help us, dear Father to give, in our companionship with others, a foretaste of your grace-filled light. In the name of Jesus we ask, Amen.

Katie Karsten is a Justice Mobilizer for Diaconal Ministries in Canada and a regular volunteer at the Micah House.

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Deuteronomy 10: 17-19

"Whatever you do, don't go to District 8, especially after dark—unless you want to get robbed. That's where the gypsies live." The well-meaning advice jarred me, even well after the conversation had moved on to restaurants to patron and events to attend. I was a few weeks into a 4 month stint living and studying in Budapest, Hungary, and was receiving advice from some local college students about the do's and don'ts of living in the "Paris of the East". I'm sure I learned a lot more that night, but I don't remember it. My mind was frozen on the throw-away caution against the 8th District, especially on the way the word "gypsy" was thrown from her lips—like a bug that had flown into her mouth that she spit out in annoyance. I didn't know it yet, but this wouldn't be the last time in the next 4 months that I would receive this little piece of advice.

No one knows for sure, but most historians believe the Romani people migrated from southern India into the European subcontinent around the 11th century. It is hard to know how they were treated in those early centuries of their migration, but it is indisputable that in recent history, it is hard to find another group so singularly and universally despised as the Romani. Without a homeland and at the mercy of the political whims of the majority, the Romani have proven to be one of history's favorite scapegoats and one of its least-defended minorities. Excluded from the mainstream economy, shoved into ghettos, and socially ostracized, the Romani people have become a permanent underclass wherever they find themselves. In most cases, the Romani are not strangers in a strange land; they are strangers in their own land.

A couple months into my time in Budapest, I was presented with the opportunity to enter District 8, and not only that—to enter the home of a Romani man and his family. Upon our arrival, and after much offering of cookies and refreshment, we convinced him to play his violin for us. The pleasing lilt of the concerto filled the corners of the eclectic living room, flooding it with life and warmth. When the man had finished his performance, our group broke into applause. His sheepish smile of gratitude has stuck in my memory ever since. In that moment, I wanted desperately to bring every person who had offered me that ignorant piece of advice into the home of this gypsy musician—to meet his family, to be offered a cookie, and to listen to his story. I wanted to show everyone that smile—that gesture of humility, graciousness, and respect. I didn't know that a man who has endured unimaginable hardship and oppression (which I would learn about over the course of the evening) could smile like that; that a stranger could offer that kind of grace. I'm thankful for that night in that cramped apartment in the heart of District 8, because it proved the advice wrong. The stranger had welcomed *me*, and I was forever changed because of it.

Prayer

Compassionate God, give us eyes to see the strangers in our midst. We confess that often, instead of loving people that are different than us, we separate ourselves from them. Give us the courage to strive for unity in your church, and for love and compassion in your world.

Kyle Meyaard-Schaap is a recent Calvin College graduate and a staff member at the Office of Social Justice. He is currently a student at Calvin Theological Seminary.

Welcome the stranger, for you were once strangers in the land of Egypt.

Leviticus 19:34

My husband is a middle school teacher, which is by far the worst job in the world. I have no idea why someone would choose, of their own volition, to re-enter those worst-of-one's-life years. I think everyone between the ages of 12 and 14 has a mild form of emotional whiplash. One minute a student is dutifully arranging her triangles to prove the Pythagorean Theorem, and the next she's screaming in protest of spitting out her chewing gum. It takes a special kind of person to deal with the mania of middle school.

It takes someone who has, himself, experienced those years of turmoil. Someone who can say, "I remember feeling that way" – feeling like the whole world was watching you, feeling like your emotions took over your whole person, feeling so important and so invisible at the same time.

We are people hard-wired to make connections to our own lives. Perhaps this is why one of the most repeated commands in the Old Testament – "Welcome the stranger" – doesn't find its justification in the obvious arguments. God doesn't say "Welcome the stranger, for all people are created in the image of God." God doesn't say, "Welcome the stranger, for it's the right thing to do." God tells us to welcome the stranger because our own story is one of stranger-ness: "Welcome the stranger, for you were once strangers in the land of Egypt."

I've come to believe that this is for two reasons. First, "you were once strangers" reminds us who we are. We are no better, smarter, more deserving, or harder working than the "stranger" we see before us. And it is God's will that we make a connection with that person – remember what it was like to be vulnerable, to be a victim, to be seen only as a net-plus or net-minus to the economy. Second, "you were once strangers" reminds us of who God is. God is the one who hears the cries of the oppressed. God is the one who liberates. God is the one who longs for, and brings about, justice.

One of my husband's middle schoolers was late for class last week. He found that student in the hallway, sobbing. His dad had been picked up by ICE and was being transferred to a detention facility, with deportation a certain next step. Through tears, the student explained that he had gotten his brothers and sisters ready for school that morning – which his dad usually did. That he should probably be out looking for a job instead of sitting in math class. That he was going to have to be the new "man of the house." He is 13.

We are hard-wired to make connections to our own lives. But as a white, native-born, male, middle-class American, nothing in my husband's story parallels the kind of fear and helplessness that is now his student's reality. My husband has to reach back further in his story – to the bigger story that began thousands of years ago. A story that transcends political borders and global economies. A story of a people beloved by God, oppressed and redeemed, fallen and forgiven, estranged and welcomed.

"Welcome the stranger, for you were once strangers in the land of Egypt." May we recover our larger story – and may that story remind us that we are people called to radically welcome those most vulnerable among us.

Prayer

We pray for undocumented immigrants who live among us, and for the fear that looms in their lives because of their status. We pray that you protect those living in the shadows, and comfort those whose lives have been torn apart by deportation. We pray for members of Congress to act soon to reform our broken immigration system. We pray that we might be people who welcome the stranger. Amen.

Rev. Kate Kooyman worships at Grace Christian Reformed Church, and is an organizer for immigration reform in West Michigan with the Evangelical Immigration Table.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves.

Philippians 2:3

It was April in Attawapiskat, Ontario and I was dreaming of green grass again after a long 6 months of snow and -40 degree weather when I was awoken at 6 AM by a phone call. It was my nursing colleague. But this call was not an urgent request to come to the hospital for a patient; instead, she told me to move everything upstairs quickly as basements were being flooded with sewage. While following her directions, I had to wonder: where are all the nurses going to live? Later in the day, one of my friends from the community asked me the same question and when I had no answer, she suggested that I stay at her place. It may seem like an obvious suggestion from a friend but this is the Attawapiskat First Nation. The community is in the middle of a housing crisis and many families live in a one-room shed. That's how my friend lives too—in a shed with one window and a wood stove. She uses her parents' bathroom. But she invited me in. It's at times like these that I feel like the stranger who was invited in and cared for.

People will often tell me that they think it is admirable to live in foreign countries where there isn't running water or clean water, proper heating, or all the amenities that we have. These shortages can be inconvenient, but I find I learn so much more by being a stranger. Often, I hear about how we need to go into other cultures, where we are a stranger, to identify their problems and tell them what the solutions are. But I find great importance in recognizing my place as a humble stranger, taking my place as a listener and as a learner.

Jesus is the stranger that I want to be more like. When Jesus came to earth, he did not tell people what their problems were and how to fix them. He cared for their needs, he loved people, he listened to people, and he shared stories, parables. We are all strangers, just passing through, and it is vital that we find our place as a humble stranger. I believe it is the attitude of humility that says, "I don't have much but whatever I have is yours." It makes me wonder if our Western culture can really act in humility because we are always acting in way that says, "I feel bad that you have nothing because I have so much."

Prayer

Jesus, help us to be a humble stranger, following your example. May we find our place as a listener and as a learner, so that our attitude becomes one of humility. Amen.

Heather Kooiman works as a nurse in Attawapiskat First Nation and has served as a camp director in Mishkeegogamang First Nation for the past six summers. The stories above come from her experiences living and serving in these places.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May those who love you be secure."

Psalm 122:6

Mother Teresa was a woman who spoke many wise words. She once said, "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other." She may have not been referring to the conflict in Israel/Palestine, but it sure rings true. Now, let me preface this with the fact that I am no expert on the issue of Israel/Palestine. I have many friends who are very passionate about advocating for peace and justice within the Holy Land, so I have heard many things throughout the years - but I would say my first encounter with the issue happened just the other week in Philadelphia. I attended the Impact: Holy Land Conference, and I couldn't imagine a better place to dive in, especially during this advent season. We are in a season of hope, expectantly waiting for the things to come, waiting for strangers to become friends.

While at the conference I was blessed with the words of a Palestinian-Arab-Christian-Israeli. A lot to take in? I thought so too. His name is Elias Chacour and is the Archbishop of Akko, Haifa, Nazareth and all Galilee of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church. With his eloquent arabic accent, beautiful black robe attire, and short stature, you would think he would quietly speak words of grace. No. That is not Elias Chacour.

With microphone set and hands raised he shouts, "I BEG YOU, BE MY FRIENDS!"

The Christians living in the birthplace of Jesus, of the early church, are all too often forgotten - hidden by the bombs and years of conflict. We forget about our brothers and sisters, like Elias, in Palestine. They have become strangers to us. We must find ways to remember, to support, to advocate for peace. In this already-not-yet world we "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem" so that, "those who love you (may) be secure." So that our brothers, may feel peace.

"I am your forgotten brother, but I am your brother", says Elias. May we remember our forgotten brothers, strangers in the land where Christ was born.

Prayer

We mourn the violence that is taking place in the land of your birth, help us to focus on your promise of peace. When our brothers and sisters call out, may they find friends in us, not strangers.

Erica VanEssendelft is the current policy analyst and advocacy fellow at the CRC Office of Social Justice.

*You who are the hope of Israel,
its Savior in times of distress,
why are you like a stranger in the land,
like a traveler who stays only a night?*

Jeremiah 14: 8

Those who are living with HIV/AIDS are often stigmatized, and feel they must live as strangers within their own family and communities. Nancy Njunji Kimani shares a story of a woman breaking these stigmas, encouraging people to no longer live as strangers.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6c9gA64fzaw>

Prayer

Lord, we look to you as our hope. During this advent season we expectantly wait for your kingdom to come, for AIDS to end. We thank you for the work being done in Malawi. Bless all those living with HIV/AIDS, may they not feel like strangers in the Land.

Nancy Njunji Kimani is a program consultant for World Renew in Malawi.

When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God. ~Leviticus 19:33-34

I am a stranger to almost everyone in Honduras, but with a kind introduction from Casper Geisterfer, CRC World Missions, one household welcomed me in for the better part of a day. United States immigration policy had a direct effect on their family and they were interested in sharing that story with me.

About 20 years ago the father, now back in Honduras telling me this story, traveled to the U.S. to do construction work in Atlanta. One of his relatives owns a large construction company in that region. He also spent time with the same company in Orlando for a total of 10 years working in the U.S. He said that a majority of the people he worked with were immigrants from Honduras. In his estimation, Hondurans built most of Orlando and Atlanta. He asked if I'd been to the any of the more recently developed parts of either city. My response, "No." His advice, "If you ever make it and see all of the newer looking houses, businesses, and commercial areas, keep in mind that Hondurans built most of them." He also made it clear that he wasn't speaking metaphorically. He meant Hondurans literally built a large portion of these developments.

He was thankful to God for providing the work, for providing the fellow Hondurans who welcomed him in, and for protecting him from even a single interaction with law enforcement during his entire journey to and time in the United States. His son-in-law and daughter had a story with drastically different outcomes. They were offered jobs in the U.S. as well. Since they were eager for the opportunity to work and save money and later start a family in their home town, they decided to accept. After making a dangerous journey through Mexico and across the U.S. border they were picked up by immigration officials outside of San Antonio and separated. He was sent back to Honduras a couple of days later. She was sent back about a month later, unable to communicate with her husband or other family for the duration of her detainment.

The entire family, together again, is active in a local CRC Honduras congregation. Casper is trying to talk the elder father into taking leadership with the Sunday School program. I was honored that they were willing to share these stories. Through Casper's great interpretation skills, they made it clear that from their perspective, and from the perspective of many in their town, immigrants are a huge benefit to the United States. At the same time, they expressed that acceptance is not always the best in the U.S. and that the immigration process, in comparison to friends who received jobs in Canada, is pretty inhumane.

If they wanted to follow a transparent legal immigration process to work in the U.S., they would have had to begin by waiting 80 or more years for a low skilled worker visa. For employers and Honduran immigrants it has become the custom to not follow this process. Hondurans aren't pleased to leave their families behind or break the law but they also are not pleased to turn down job opportunities while their families continue to live in poverty. This is an understandably difficult decision and those who make it receive a lot of grace from others in their hometown no matter what choice is made—they understand.

My country's immigration laws do not have to be this way. Who would ever want, or benefit from, such a broken system? Immigrants have been a critical part of the fabric of U.S. communities for hundreds of years. In light of the hospitality that I received from this CRC family in Honduras, my prayer is that in 2014 our laws will change to reflect a similar level of welcome.

Prayer

Lord our God, you call us to love everyone, to mistreat no one. Thank you for the example of hospitality you teach us through strangers. May we learn to treat everyone with your love, and welcome all with brotherly and sisterly kindness.

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And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.

Deuteronomy 10:19

He handed me the bag of apples, the plastic still knotted at the top like the food bank volunteers had left it. I silently reprimanded myself for giving them that pumpkin, but took the apples with a smile, hoping that it said everything I was feeling. Then they drove me back to my home across town, joking and building ramshackle bridges between us with their broken English and my halting Spanish.

Carolina and Andres* are refugees from Colombia. They've been here in Canada for about three months and during that time they've enrolled their children in school, started English classes themselves, and moved out of the refugee welcome house to their own apartment. When I invite them to my house for dinner, they're quick to reciprocate with an invitation the next week to their house. When I gave them a pumpkin for Halloween, they gave me a bag of apples in return. When I came to visit one of them in the hospital, they made me laugh until I cried, not wanting me to be sad about the situation. They're refugees, but they're not just refugees. They have dignity and gifts and they're eager for a chance to use them.

Dignity. Reciprocity. When we open our countries to refugees, we are not letting in "queue jumpers" or "bogus refugees" as my government has recently liked to call them. They are ready to give. Give them an inch and they'll give a mile.

Prayer

Father, help us to keep loving, help us to show hospitality. May we treat every person, every stranger with dignity, not just giving an inch, but a mile.

Danielle Rowaan is the Justice Communications and Education Coordinator for the CRC Office of Social Justice and the Center for Public Dialogue.

*not their real names

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me..."

Matthew 25:34-35

After visiting a remote village in the Koinadugu district of Sierra Leone, our delegation of North American visitors travelled the road (if you can call it that) back to the "city" of Kabala. Our land cruiser was filled with so many people that taking a breath seemed to involve almost rudely sniffing the person beside you. As we travelled along we continually met people making their way to Kabala on foot. For many the journey was still more than a day away. As the sun was going down we met some travelers whom we knew from an earlier village visit. We didn't have the room to invite them along in our vehicle, but we also knew that they would not make it to Kabala by nightfall.

"Where will you stay tonight?" we asked.

"There is a village up ahead."

"Do you have friends in the village?"

"No, but we are strangers and someone will take us in."

For those of us who have grown up in a North American environment where we lock our doors at night, mutter under our breath when the bell rings unexpectedly after nightfall, and then peer suspiciously through peepholes at the oversized head on the other side, such a sentiment is almost unimaginable. Generally speaking, if someone were to knock on our door and ask for a place to sleep for the night our first thoughts would be about inconvenience, the second would be about safety, and the third about who or where we could unload this dilemma.

The easy response to this dilemma is to deflect the conversation and begin speaking about the state of our culture and how it isn't like "the good ol' days" when the front door was unlocked and we knew everyone in the neighbourhood. But such a deflection doesn't get at the heart of gospel moments like these.

During Advent we reflect upon the incarnation. God taking on flesh is the ultimate act of humility. And it's in humility that Jesus became the stranger in the midst, vulnerable to an extent that from the moment of conception he relied on the hospitality of humanity. When Jesus says in Matthew 25 that he was "a stranger and you welcomed [him] in," it is not just a metaphor or an idea that we banter about, it's about his personal experiences. It's a lived challenge that we might consider in a more literal way. "And the king will answer, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'"

Prayer

God of humility, help us to welcome every stranger with Christ-like compassion, so that one day you may find us worthy to inherit the kingdom.

Sid Ypma is a Campus Chaplain at the University of Ottawa.

I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.

John 16:33

I do a bit of traveling for my work—not so much that I am an expert in navigating airports and foreign lands, but just enough that I can stumble my way through international airports. I was in Mexico recently, and while there, God saw fit to teach me more about what it means to be a stranger.

While I studied Spanish for three years in university, that was nearly twenty years ago, and minimal speaking capabilities remain. On my most recent trip, almost all of our meetings were in Spanish. By the end of each day, my head would be aching from trying to follow the day's conversations. Being a stranger is by no means easy. It is jolting, uncomfortable, awkward, and messy. Frequently, it leaves me feeling incompetent, irrelevant, and out of place.

But God asks us to live as strangers, as those who don't quite fit in.

We see this reflected in the narratives of events surrounding Christ's incarnation. Anna and Simeon waited almost the entirety of their lives, with fasting and prayer, for Israel's redemption. Some may have called them crazy, but they waited, and hoped.

Mary was an unmarried, young woman, living under the oppression of occupying forces, when she discovered that she was pregnant with the Son of God. We can safely assume she did not feel prepared for the task of parenthood.

Joseph, a man who sought the Lord with all of his heart and mind and strength, learned that his fiancé was expecting a child before he had even touched her. This definitely was not part of his plans.

And Jesus Christ, in the thirty-some years that he lived on this earth, experienced ridicule, displacement, threats, and finally, murder. Life was never simple.

What makes us think that it should be easier for us?

Travelers have insight into what following Christ looks like. Because being a follower of Christ is in many ways about being vulnerable—about being displaced, about not knowing where you are supposed to go next, about being completely dependent on forces outside of your control to get anywhere, and about trying to understand a language that is faintly familiar, but not yet fully comprehensible.

In following Christ we will frequently feel out of place. We will often look stupid. But we can find comfort and joy in the fact that we have a God who lived through all of these things and more. And he not only lived through them, but he died as a result of them, and three days later, he defeated death, forever. That is what gives us peace. May we all know that peace and reflect it this Advent season.

Prayer

Lord, help us to live as strangers, following your example, knowing life is never simple or easy. As we celebrate the birth of your Son, may the peace which passes all understanding permeate our lives this Christmas day.

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