

Journeying together



in prayer, action and advocacy

**Prepared for World Day of Migrants and Refugees
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Introduction

Picture a large, old tree with years of roots growing deep; planted in one place for many years.

Now, picture that same tree hit suddenly by a strong, unexpected storm, winds blowing and with such force that it is completely knocked over. Unexpectedly uprooted, exposed and vulnerable, it is impossible for it to be replanted in that same place.



When Pope Francis speaks of refugees and migrants being “Forced like Jesus Christ to flee”, it is just like the tree in the storm. There is no choice to continue living in the place that it has loved, where it has stood tall providing shelter for all that’s grown under it and where the deep roots that hold many years of history have stretched. The storms of war, famine and many forms of persecution mean displacement for millions of people in our world.

This is the experience of each refugee and migrant, who are forced to uproot with the sole purpose of finding safety for themselves and their loved ones or to leave their homes to earn a living in order to send support back to their families from a land far away. Take a moment to consider that any of our lives could be turned upside down at any time. No matter how deep our roots are, they are always vulnerable to the ferocity of a strong storm. We must not ignore the needs of our brothers and sisters whose lives have been uprooted, to not leave them marginalized but to offer them hope, charity, compassion and love.

The Outreach Ministries of the Diocese of London have been mandated to offer those essential needs to these extremely vulnerable populations in our communities:

- **Refugee Ministries**
 - Overseas Protection for Refugees (Refugee Sponsorships)
 - Inland Protection of Refugees (Assistance for Refugee Claimants)
- **Migrant Worker Ministry**
 - Offering help to temporary foreign workers

COVID-19 has been a storm that has hit all of humanity across the globe. It is crucial that we realize that we are all in this together, but it is more important to recognize that, although this is true, there are some, like the old tree, who have been hit harder by the storm

Throughout this crisis, despite strict physical-distancing measures and lockdowns, it has remained important for the Refugee Ministries and Migrant Worker Ministry to remain active in finding new ways of providing compassion and tangible help to those we serve.

Nobody ever wants to be forced from their homeland, to be uprooted from the place they have loved, or be forced to leave to seek economic opportunities far away. When any of our brothers or sisters are uprooted, it is our responsibility to support them and to assist them as they replant themselves. When

any of our brothers and sisters comes seeking work to support their families. it is our responsibility to ensure they have a safe, just, and healthy place to work here in Canada.

Refugee Ministry (Overseas Protection) amidst Covid-19

“Some refugees live in threatening conditions where each day is uncertain. Every start of the day is fear and every start of the night is fear. One of our sponsored refugees that lived such a life was in the airport on 16 March 2020 ready to board the plane to Canada. One of the saddest voices I have ever heard is that refugee’s voice telling me that the flight was cancelled and then the sounds of sobbing. Another had departed from the country of refuge and was in transit when he was turned back due to the lack of connecting flights and Canada’s closure of its borders. I then started to wonder if someone who is coming to Canada to study, to do business or some important work has really greater grounds to claim to be an essential traveler than someone whose life is threatened.” - Gilbert Iyamuremye, Director, Diocese London Refugee Ministries

Over the past five years, we have sponsored a total of 1,674 refugees from all corners of the world. This is an average of 335 refugees per year within the Diocese of London.

Since March 2020, Refugee Ministry personnel have had to work hard to ensure the need and lives of those seeking refuge are not forgotten. Anxiety and special needs have increased. Advocacy work all levels has been ramped up. We faced and are still facing the challenge of adapting our Ministry to deliver some services in a physically-distanced way for everyone’s safety.

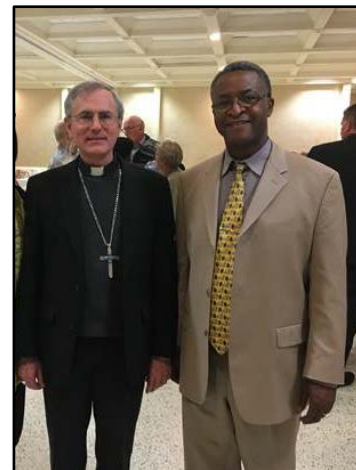
Refugee Sponsorship Applications Continued During the Pandemic

While operations at our Canadian embassies were drastically reduced due to the repatriation of immigration staff to Canada, the Resettlement Operations Centre in Ottawa that processes sponsorship applications worked even harder from home. So did we.

By continuing to work virtually with co-sponsors (relatives and parishes within the Diocese of London), we have succeeded in completing application submissions via email and phone calls and to Immigration Canada for our annual allocation of 300 refugees. Preparations for our 2021 allocation will begin in October. [Information on how to do a private refugee sponsorship in 2021.](#)

Emotional Support

Some good things can come from bad. Throughout the pandemic, the Refugee Ministry was able to do more check-in calls and have more conversations with vulnerable families than in normal times.



Most Rev. Ronald P. Fabbro, Bishop of London (L) with Gilbert Iyamuremye, Director of the Diocese of London’s Refugee Office (R)

Our office receives many calls every day from people who are hoping to sponsor their loved ones overseas. They want to bring them to Canada, to save them from the difficult lives they've been forced to face and from various forms of persecution. Others who have finally been able to start the process and/or have already been able to submit an application also call. They express deep concerns about the progress of their application or ask if we have heard anything about travel arrangements being made.

When the devastating news hit that all travel had come to a halt, it became more essential than ever that we respond to our clients. We could not always provide answers or solutions but we were able to listen to their concerns and hear them cry over the delays being caused by these new obstacles. For those still within their first year of settlement, there have been issues with not being able to access settlement agencies, a step that is necessary to do things such as getting a driver's license, health cards or a job. These are the burdens that have been shared with us and we have listened and continue to journey with our clients who we care for deeply and pray for daily.

Resumption of Travel – Hope and Quarantines

Since March, Refugee Ministry personnel have worked hard to ensure that the lives of those seeking refuge are not forgotten. Anxiety and special needs have increased. Advocacy work all levels has been ramped up. We faced, and are still facing, the challenge of providing physically-distanced services for everyone's safety. We are grateful that travel operations are slowly resuming at the time of writing this report. We are learning to serve in new ways.



Resumption of travel by toward the resumption of travel of sponsored refugees and family reunifications are subject to strict protocols and quarantine plans. Ensuring each travelling refugee has and is aware of their quarantine plans takes many steps; phone calls/emails, signed declarations; organization of travel from the airport to a destined quarantine address, delivery of necessities/food within strict safety precautions have become necessary. And we are now forced to hold virtual orientations to begin our help with successful settlement in Canada.

It is of the utmost importance for our ministries to continue helping refugees and migrants so that they don't feel forgotten and know that someone cares about them, that there are many who believe in them.

Refugee Ministry (Inland Protection) – Our work more critical than ever

"During this pandemic, there were many refugees and migrants who just fell through the system's cracks. Our work was needed more than ever to ensure that their critical needs are met. We were able to reach out to our brothers and sisters in need while respecting health guidelines to ensure the safety of everyone. Not responding or delaying help was simply not an option for the Diocese of London Refugee Ministry." - **Claire Roque, Ministry Specialist for Inland Protection of Refugees**

Care Packages and Food Security Distribution

In partnership with the Community Refugee Fund (CRF), we distributed packages to over 120 individuals and families that included paper towels, disinfectant cleaners, face masks and hand sanitizers, as well as basic food essentials and grocery gift cards. All these were distributed to those directly impacted by COVID-19.

In addition to the material assistance, our physical presence, and assurance that we were praying for them during the difficult times, made them feel loved and not alone during extremely stressful times.

Laptop Distribution

The CRF also helped fund an initiative to distribute refurbished laptops to over 40 refugee claimants to help them remain connected and access online information. We are very proud to be a huge part of this much needed project.

Work Permit Fees

Over the past few years, through the Basilian Human Development Fund (BHDF), our ministry has been helping with the costs of work permits for many refugees and migrants who take pride in being self-sufficient. During these unprecedented times this project has been even more critical to alleviate this financial burden. We have continued to help those impacted by COVID-19 by giving them financial aid to help them pay the initial application fees or renewal fees for their work permits. This allows them to continue supporting themselves and their families.



Above: A thankful laptop recipient. Her identity is protected for privacy reasons

A Commitment to Advocacy

Advocacy: Awareness + Action = Change

While our Outreach Ministries are conscientiously helping individuals and families “on the ground” on a case-by-case basis, we are proud of another role that we actively pursue as a diocese to protect migrants’ and refugees’ rights: advocacy. This advocacy is done locally, regionally and internationally.

The Diocese of London has been an active member of the Canadian Council for Refugees ([CCR](#)) for almost two decades and our voice is becoming more influential.

The Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR) is a national non-profit umbrella organization committed to the rights and protection of refugees and other vulnerable migrants in Canada and around the world and to the settlement of refugees and immigrants in Canada. The membership is made up of organizations involved in the settlement, sponsorship, and protection of refugees and immigrants. The Council serves the networking, information-exchange, and advocacy needs of its membership.

Both of the Refugee Ministry's Specialists have undertaken leadership roles at CCR and the Diocese offered strong support of Claire Roque's election as the CCR's President in 2017. During her two-year term, we were able to amplify our voice towards systemic change, addressing:

- Slow processing of Private Sponsorship of Refugees, especially in Africa
- Restrictive rules limiting which refugees can be sponsored
- Fair and efficient refugee determination in Canada
- Open work permits for Temporary Foreign Workers to help minimize the opportunity for exploitation
- A fast and efficient family reunification process

Our participation at CCR over the years has allowed us to advocate on many other issues, including:

- Safe Third Country Agreement
- Human Trafficking
- Violence against Women
- Migrant worker living and working conditions
- Refugee Youth
- Alternative to detention
- Legal Aid for refugees

The need is continual, and our advocacy work remains a priority for the Refugee Ministry.

Our advocacy work goes beyond Canadian borders.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is a UN agency mandated to aid and protect refugees, forcibly displaced communities, and stateless people, and to assist in their voluntary repatriation, local integration, or resettlement to a third country.

Five out of the last twelve years, the Diocese has been chosen from CCR members to represent the organization as part of Canada's Delegation to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)) in Switzerland.

Each time we accepted the role as part of the Canadian delegation on the international stage, we acted as the representative of all Canadian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as a whole on diverse topics such as Internal and Forced Displacement; and, Prevention and Reduction of Statelessness and Protection of Stateless Persons. As representatives of the Diocese, we were proud to carry the Canadian flag and represent Canadian NGOs on these issues.

At UNHCR in 2019, Claire Roque, had the opportunity to meet directly with UNHCR High Commissioner, Filippo Grandi. Claire was instrumental in encouraging the UNHCR to promote the significant



Diocese of London's Refugee Ministry is recipient of the YMCA Peace Medal Award.

contributions refugees make in the countries they settle in. Refugees are too often presented negatively and viewed in terms of costs, rather than recognizing their positive contributions.

Why is our advocacy work important?

- We aim for change. Change can affect not one or two lives but can impact hundreds and even thousands of migrants and refugees
- Our help is needed beyond our communities and borders
- Many vulnerable populations need us
- As followers of Christ, we have a responsibility to be a voice for the voiceless

Advocacy comes from awareness. When we become aware of flaws in our government policies that lead to injustice, we must turn that awareness into action. Action taken through education, petitions, and dialogue can bring about meaningful and effective change. Jesus witnessed injustices and acted by speaking against exclusion and promoted inclusion; encouraged welcoming the stranger; feeding and clothing the lowly; and stood for the oppressed. When we act as Jesus taught us, to love our neighbour, we can bring positive and purposeful change in our world.

"Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; ensure justice for those being crushed. Yes, speak up for the poor and helpless and see they get justice." - Proverbs 31:8-9



"Men and women who migrate to Canada seeking work in order to provide a better life and financial support for their families back home. Often they work long hours without complaint to help their loved ones and their contributions are a great benefit to the Canadian economy. Because they are our brothers and sisters, we are guided by Christ's call to look after them and as a diocese, we are committed to getting them spiritual fulfillment, comfort, justice, and help in an emergency." - Joe Bezzina, Director of Pastoral Services

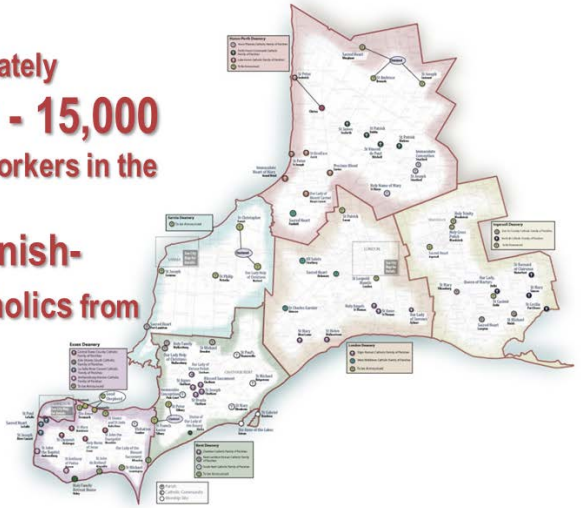
Migrant Workers Ministry/Ministerio de Trabajadores Migrantes

The COVID-19 Pandemic had a major impact on the operations of the Migrant Worker Ministry. Prior to the pandemic key activities included:

- Transportation: bussing to Mass in the Ingersoll and Kent deaneries
- Resources: Spanish catechetical resources such as missals, books on living a Catholic life, prayer cards, etc.

- Education: English as a Second Language(ESL), personal and workplace health and safety, and mental health sessions
- Hospitality: coffee socials and meals after Mass, special celebrations and cultural events
- Pastoral Care: expenses including transportation and payments or stipends to visiting priests
- Emergency assistance: see “Stories from the Front Lines” in Appendix 1 below

- **Approximately 10,000 - 15,000 migrant workers in the Diocese**
- **Majority are Spanish-speaking Catholics from Mexico and Central America**



In Canada, despite the best efforts of many producers, processors and health advisors, several outbreaks occurred among agricultural workers. Since much of our Ministry focuses on encounter and accompaniment the pandemic has required us to find new ways of reaching out.

During COVID-19, we made sure to identify the immediate needs, which allowed us to organize ourselves and come up with swift solutions while respecting physical distancing to protect staff and volunteers' health and safety.

- Delivery of food and grocery gift cards
- Distribution of health and safety items (masks, disinfectant spray, wipes, gloves hand sanitizers, paper towels and soap, etc.)
- Distribution of refurbished laptop computers
- Supplying quilts, pillowcases and blankets to migrant workers accommodations

Our networks of contacts remained in place and while we couldn't visit farms or workers at their places of employment, we are able to stay in touch and remain vigilant in finding opportunities to bring resources to the aid of those in need, as noted above.

Emergency assistance continues to be an area where the Diocese of London has been able to support our brothers and sisters. We have been able to offer financial and spiritual support to several workers and their families in cases where they contracted COVID-19.

We advocated for safe housing and additional inspectors to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 among those living and working in close quarters.

The Diocese of London has also focused on providing remote and online resources to this population. The Migrant Workers Ministry page (<https://dol.ca/migrant-workers>) has been expanded and completely translated so it is accessible in both English and Spanish. Resources have been added to make it a “one-stop shop” for ESL materials, links to online Masses and other resources for spiritual development.

While Spanish language Masses that serve a migrant workers have been able to resume at one parish location. Delivering services electronically and online remains a major focus of this Ministry.

In Recognition of Volunteers – Thank you for being Blessings

You, the parishioners and volunteers of our faith communities deserve recognition for all your efforts and signs of Jesus' compassion and love that you have shown. You have been true blessings to our brothers and sisters who have been uprooted and displaced and forced to flee their homelands and who come to Canada to work leaving their families behind for long periods of time.

"Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." (Matthew 25:40)

The litany shared here highlights some, but certainly not all, ways Refugees and Migrants have let us know how they have been welcomed, protected, promoted and integrated. Thank you!!!

Our volunteers:

- You welcomed them when they first stepped foot on Canadian soil
- You listened to them when they needed a compassionate ear to hear their painful stories
- You delivered food to them to ensure they have food on their table
- You took them in your car and made sure they didn't miss medical appointments
- You collected sweaters and coats for Migrants who are not used to our cold climate
- You provided bikes, bought backpacks and reflective vests to provide safety for Migrants
- You helped to provide mass for Migrants to help meet their spiritual needs
- You had social gatherings and meals for Migrants to give them a break from their hard labour
- You cared for refugee claimant's children so they could attend critical appointments
- You met with newcomers to give them their orientation to Canada
- You talked to them so they could gain confidence in speaking and learning English
- You invested many hours in perfecting documentation to support their settlement in Canada
- You visited their homes/farms to make them feel they are not alone
- You invited them to your homes
- You shared many meals with them as a friend
- You advocated for them to government agencies when their voices were not being heard
- You celebrated their successes with them
- You helped them study to pass their exams
- You fundraised for required settlement plans and collected donations to furnish their homes
- You bought presents so their children could have a Merry Christmas
- You sewed quilts and masks to provide warmth and safety
- You formed a group so your community could sponsor a Refugee family come to Canada
- You shared their laughter and smiles and wiped their tears during their heartbreaks
- You encouraged them by the ways you showed welcome, compassion, acceptance and Love

For all you have done and continue to do, thank you for being blessings to those who wear the face and body of Jesus in His many forms as Refugees and Migrants. God Bless You!

"Volunteering with the Diocese of London allows us to participate in the amazing work they do to relieve the suffering of people in need, regardless of religion, ethnicity or nationality. The Jewish concept of "tikkun olam", which means "repair the world ", makes sense to us. Any act of kindness we offer to our refugees is our part of fixing a broken world. What a privilege! And the bonus is, we have met and made friends with some amazing people." - **Don and Elaine Damphouse, Volunteers**

Stories from the Frontlines

A Migrant Worker with a Medical Emergency and a Family in Need of Support from the Refugee Ministry - A personal story of Unwavering Hope, Faith and Miracles

A truly nightmarish scenario for one migrant worker who fell ill, left his wife and daughter, facing an uncertain struggle to stay by his side in Canada. The Refugee Office was able to provide support and help them stay in Canada on compassionate grounds. Read her story (pictured at right), and how the Catholic community in the area reached out to support her, in her own words at this [link](#). An excerpt: *"I am holding on to the promise that God gave to us. I can still recall so many times when I felt like I was at the end of the rope, and I just cried out Jesus' name, and a moment later, I felt His love and Spirit cover me. As is written in the Book of Jeremiah, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."*

St. Michael's Refugee Committee, Leamington

Formed in 2015, under the guidance of Gilbert Iyamuremye, the St. Michael's Parish Refugee Committee has been a shining example of a group of people opening their hearts and homes and answering Christ's call to help the poor and marginalized. They've successfully sponsored and helped resettle three families and a fourth, delayed by pandemic restrictions, will hopefully be here soon. Read their story and updates on the Abdul aal, Jamil, Byamungu and Shahroz families, written by Chairperson Frank Moauro, at this [link](#).

Ingersoll Refugee Sponsorship Committee

Also formed in 2015 in response to the horrifying images of conflict in Syria, Sacred Heart Church and the Christian Reformed Church took on the challenge to form the Ingersoll Refugee Sponsorship Committee. They rallied their community to help save the lives of strangers from far away by living the teaching in the Gospel of Luke regarding the question, 'Who is my neighbour?' Read about how the Afaf family has settled into a new life in Canada and the work that continues in the words of Michelle Caskey and Tanya Folkema at this [link](#).



Migrant Workers Ministry - Emergency Assistance for Luis

In the fall of 2019 Luis, who came from Mexico to work in Ontario, contracted an eye infection at work. His condition worsened and it became clear that his eye would have to be removed. With his visa only days from expiring, help for Luis was needed on all fronts. Read a summary about how the Migrant Worker Ministry was able to step in and help Luis stay safe and receive the care and compensation he needed at this [link](#).

Open Hearts: Small towns welcome Blended Visa Office Referred (BVOR Refugees)

Southwestern Ontario communities offer BVOR refugees support, networking and employment, and also benefit from the newcomers. [Watch Youtube Video here](#)