

SAYING THANK YOU

I just finished recording my latest Fireside Chat thanks to Judy Zarubick's able technical skills – and patience. Quickly I closed up my laptop and got ready. I wanted to make sure I had everything I thought I would need: a sleeping bag, four pillows, my old winter coat, my portable GPS, antiseptic wipes, my mask with a couple extras and the documents required. I was excited to pick up the last member of our Kincardine Refugee Committee newcomer family, Mohammad Almerai.

I went to the newcomer family home where the donated van was parked in the driveway. Using a spray bottle of antiseptic cleaner, cleaning the entire vehicle, making sure to get all the crooks and crannies, ensuring I was following the quarantine plan our committee had written and was approved by Canada Immigration. With the fresh lemony smell filling my nostrils, I made a sort of nest with the pillows and sleeping bag in the back seat. After all, since Mohammad had flown from Algeria to Frankfurt, Germany the day before, staying in a hotel arranged by Canadian Immigration, followed by today's nine-plus hour flight to Pearson Airport, he would likely be exhausted.



Once the gas tank was full, off I went, eager to meet this tall man despite our language barrier. Besides, I knew that I could use the Google Translate app on my phone to help bridge Arabic to English. I knew how much his wife and four children



longed for his arrival and their much-anticipated reunion. Their survival after fleeing the Syrian civil war seven years ago, after their six-year stay in a Lebanese refugee camp, after Mohammad's separation from them for four years in Algeria so he could work and send money back to his beloved family, after the excitement of getting permission to come to Canada as refugees was quickly dashed by the delay caused by the pandemic – this journey of survival in the face of these obstacles was remarkable. They deserved that chapter of their lives to be completed so a new one could begin.

Hours later, once I was parked in the Terminal One parking garage, I awaited a text telling me that Mohammad was ready. You see, because of the pandemic, people like me picking up international travellers are not allowed inside the terminal. Instead, once he was through immigration, he would be assigned a staff person who spoke Arabic and who would ensure the right person (me) picked him up and signed the

paperwork so he could finally enter Canada. I had a picture of Mohammad with me. Standing outside under the watchful gaze of a relaxed security guard, I peered through the window, craning to see him.

Then I noticed a tall, balding man speaking animatedly to a much shorter man in uniform. I was sure that was them. I jumped up and down, knocking firmly on the window of the terminal, but to no avail.

The sound didn't travel far enough. I must have looked like some sort of old, demented circus clown high on caffeine, because the ever-watchful security guard came over and asked if I needed some help. Grinning, he opened the terminal door and beckoned to the two of them. I think the grin on my face went from ear to ear, because this was, finally, Mohammad. All of us were fully masked and distant, but Mohammad and I bumped elbows in greeting. The grin on my face was matched by the grin on his face.



By the time all the paperwork was completed, dusk had descended. As I unlocked the van, I noticed that Mohammad was shivering. He looked at me and, in broken English, said, "Cold. Algeria 50 degrees." That's when I pulled my old winter coat from the back of the van and offered it to him to wear. Still shivering, he took off his light jacket and put it on, finding the "nest" in the back of the van and settling in for the long drive to his new home in Kincardine.

I used Google Translate to tell him the drive would be two and a half to three hours, depending on traffic. He replied that he hadn't slept in two full days, too keyed up and too excited for dreaming. Then he laughed and promised that he would sleep for seven days once in quarantine at the Knox Presbyterian Church manse on Princes Street. Before we were even off the 410, he was sound asleep.



He awoke about 30 minutes from Kincardine, but pretty groggy. He hunkered down to play a few games on his phone while we completed the journey. I pulled into the driveway and, while there were lights on inside the manse, it was very quiet. We went to the front door, knocked, but there was no answer. I opened the door and shouted, "Anyone home?" I looked back at Mohammad and he had a patient but puzzled look on his face, almost as if to say, "What? No welcoming party?" I grinned in reassurance.

Quickly I stepped back from the door. The rest of the Almerai family rushed out of the manse onto the front lawn, followed by Ayman and Cindy Faddah, two members of our Refugee Steering Committee. I am certain that if Ayman, Cindy and I hadn't been there, Mohammad would have been swamped with hugs and kisses from his wife and four children, the oldest of whom, at 17 and around 6' 2", already has a respectable beard. Instead, we gathered, physically distanced, on the front lawn. Google Translate was no longer necessary because Ayman, born in Lebanon and a fluent Arabic speaker, provided immediate translation. Reserved though they all were, exhausted though Mohammad was, flowed freely.



I tell you all of this as a way of saying “Thank you.” While Jackie Clements, David Mullenix, the late Bill Ritchie and I have been the public face of Kincardine United Church on the Refugee Steering Committee, many, many more of you have given gifts of time, talent and treasure. Because of you, the following has been donated to date:

- the van I used to pick up Mohammad was donated to for Almerai family;
- equipping, repairing, maintaining, insuring and licensing the van was funded by contributions from our congregation;
- a number of items furnishing the house we are renting for the Almerais have been provided, including two Chromebooks, one computer printer and many new soft goods to make the house a more comfortable home;
- over \$11,000.00 worth of cash and in-kind donations have been contributed since 2019 to welcome the Almerais to Kincardine.



Not only the above, but our family of faith continues to support the day-to-day operating expenses of Kincardine United Church. Wow! What a faithful witness to caring for ALL people instead of only those we know. What a witness to the faith we proclaim!



I think of the story of the ten lepers who were healed by Jesus.¹ Only one of them came back to say, “Thank you.” None of what I related above would have happened without the generous gifts from so many of you. **THANK YOU!** I am inspired by how Kincardine United Church looks beyond our own backyard, how we live fully into Jesus statement that “whenever you do it for the least of these, my children,

¹ Luke 17:11-19.

you do it for me.”² **Thank you** for making a difference in the world and in our community. **Thank you** for leaning into our congregation’s mission statement by experiencing God’s abundant love and grace through hospitality, service, fellowship and community.³

My thanksgiving for all of the generosity of the people of our community of faith flows in advance to each of you as we continue with our stewardship programme this fall. You will be receiving a package in the mail or by e-mail before the end of this month, inviting you to consider how God is calling you to give to the ministry and to the mission we share. I hope you are inspired by this part of Mohammad’s story, collectively making a difference in our community, in our country and in our world. May the Spirit whisper to your soul as you prayerfully ponder what to do with all you have been given. That divine whisper includes the words, “**Thank you**, my good and faithful servant.”



² Matthew 25:40.

³ The congregation of Kincardine United Church seeks to foster a journey of **SPIRITUAL GROWTH** through: **HOSPITALITY, SERVICE, FELLOWSHIP**, and **STUDY** and, in **COMMUNITY**, to build up the ministry of every person and together experience God’s abundant love and grace.