

# Refugee Sunday

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 18 June 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Mr Sameh Dakhllah

Pentecost 2A

**Genesis 18: 1-15; 21: 1-7; Matthew 9:35 - 10:8; Contemporary Reading:  
“Where I come from” by Syrian poet Dawish Amir.**

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Reflections” tab

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Good morning everyone.

My name is Sameh Dakhllah. I am a refugee from Damascus in Syria where I worked as an electrical engineer in the central bank - but originally I came from the port city of Latakia.

Now I live in Sydney and I am a case manager with Settlement Services International, a community-based not-for-profit organisation that provides services for refugees and asylum seekers, as well as housing, multicultural foster care, disability support and employment services.

Syria was a happy place and a safe place to live. When I was growing up, no fighting. People used to live with each other in harmony. I went to University. I got a good job and my life was great.

When the war started, everything changed. Then we tried to carry on our lives. But it became too dangerous. It's my duty to describe how dreadful it was. Damage to the buildings. Bodies in the streets.

Syria is now not a safe place. For people there everything is very difficult. Electrical and water supplies are restricted. Water can be cut off for more than a month. But water is necessary so people have to fetch it in heavy containers over long distances.

Daily living is hell. It's a disaster. But people have no other choice. Medical and cleaning services are very expensive. This is not usual for the Syrian people. Food and services in Syria were once very cheap. But not now.

Children in many places can't attend school because their schools have been destroyed, or their families have been transferred to safer areas to survive – or their school transferred to shelter for people who lost their home and migrated from other destroyed areas.

People are affected not just physically but also mentally. Syria is not a safe place.

I have a friend whose brother was killed when a bomb fell on him in front of his house. And his father was killed while working as a taxi driver. If you lost your cat or lost your property you would be very sad, but imagine if you lost those human beings so very close to you.

People want to run from Syria. But they like their country very much. Even in these circumstances they would like to stay.

In Syria you can find all kinds of climate: desert, rain, snow. Every city in Syria has its special character, in its traditional clothing, in its food and environment.

Damascus is a beautiful city. The people are nice. You can find what you want. It was very safe. In Damascus, in the old city inside the new city, if you walk around the ruins you can feel the ancient civilisation talk to you. It lives with you. Aleppo was a very beautiful city too.

I was living in Harista, a suburb of Damascus. I used to travel every day by van to work and return back - about 20 kilometres. One day we were caught in the fighting between the regime forces and the opposition forces. Bullets penetrated the van but miraculously we survived.

I continued to go to work after this incident to get money for living. Then a bomb fell on my apartment in Harista. Everything was broken. My father, with diabetes and high blood pressure, was scared. His situation was very bad. I took him to hospital and then we moved to a safer place.

Terrorists took over my apartment. I tried to return back to get important things. I could hardly enter Harista at my apartment. They threatened me to not return back. I noticed that they put their flag's statements on my walls. They destroyed my crosses, paintings and symbols. I could notice that they stole everything.

My family, after this incident, insisted that I leave Syria because at any time I could die - from bombs or shooting, from criminals in the streets. It was the hardest decision I have taken in my life - to leave everything. I left late at night by taxi to Beirut in Lebanon. It was very dangerous. Then I travelled by plane from Beirut to Jordan.

My father couldn't travel with me. He stayed to care for my elderly sick aunt. I told him I would arrange to bring him to Jordan - and from there plan what to do next. But after a few months I heard that my father had died of a heart attack because of the worse circumstances.

I realised I had no future in Jordan and no hope to return to Syria. After a year in Jordan I, by chance, passed the Australian embassy and asked about opportunities for immigration. They told me I could apply for a humanitarian visa. After a few days they invited me for an interview and after four months they granted me a visa.

In Australia at the beginning I suffered. My qualifications as an electrical engineer were not recognised. So to get a job, to contribute to the community, I took a short course in community services at TAFE. I studied and gained a Diploma.

I volunteered at SSI and got a position as a bilingual guide and then as a case manager. Dealing with newly-arrived refugees is not easy. It is hard. But you get experience in solving issues. You learn how to deal with all kinds of people. It is a positive thing. I like to help people. And here I am - a refugee working with refugees.

I think SSI is doing a great job because the people who come to us are like children born again here. You have to educate them about everything. And you have to provide them with everything. And then let them depend on themselves.

It is SSI's goal to escort people, to take their hand, to walk with them until they reach their goal.

Dealing with people who have come from a war zone is very hard. But to help them to stand up again is wonderful. When I see my clients working full time I become very happy. I have helped them gain their dignity. They can respect themselves. It is a great job.

Finding work is important not just for earning an income but for finding a support network and filling your day in a useful way.

When I first came to Sydney I didn't have a support network. Not like in Syria, where even without work, you can fill your time with friends, relatives and neighbours. If you are by yourself all day you will feel bored. It is not good for your body and you are affected mentally too.

I thank God I got a job. I still suffer from things. That is normal. Many people suffer. But at the end of day I am satisfied. I am working. I fill my time. I help other people and I help myself.

Not everyone has my experience. Sometimes even highly educated people have no motivation. They think it is too late for them to take up study. Their English may not be good.

Settlement Services International works with refugees to break through these barriers, to ensure their meaningful social and economic participation in Australian society. Sometimes we work with other agencies to provide clients with all the services they need to be safe and satisfied and to achieve their goals.

And there are SSI programs that help clients find work, to get a drivers licence, activities that will engage clients with the Australian community.

SSI's fundraising program supports SSI Ignite Small Business Start-ups, which facilitates business creation for people from refugee backgrounds. It helps vulnerable people gain access to relevant resources and programs for their health, education and social participation.

That includes scholarships for primary, secondary and tertiary students and SSI's community engagement program - a broad array of events and activities that give our clients opportunities to link with others and avoid social isolation.

There are sports activities, programs for mothers and children, and a Community Kitchen.

Finally, I am very thankful for the Australian government for bringing me here. And I would thank Margaret for giving me this chance to share my experience with you and I thank you so much.

God bless you.