



CREATING A SEWING MINISTRY BUSINESS

WITH REFUGEES

The Refugee Sewing Society's Strategy for Refugees

The Amani Women's Center is a nonprofit organization in Clarkston, Georgia, that "educates and empowers refugee and immigrant women with culturally sensitive tools that contribute to their overall well-being."¹

Doris Makangu, its founder, discovered the untapped potential of refugees after spending years working with them. Doris expanded the organization's program to begin beadwork groups, and later, sewing groups. As the women took their projects to festivals in Atlanta, Doris found that people were captivated by the women's stories and drawn to the quality of their work. Doris created The Refugee Sewing Society, a 501(c)(3) non-profit business from these experiences and offers opportunities for unemployed female refugees to have a source of income.

Currently, the Refugee Sewing Society has the equipment to work with 15 women, and there's a long waiting list of others who are ready for the opportunity. Products from the organization include jewelry skirts, shirts, dresses and purses, and are created from all recycled materials. The money from each sale is divided between the center, to help keep the program going, and the refugee who made the piece.

¹ Brent Barron, "Clarkston nonprofit helping refugee women turn skills to profit," *DeKalb Neighbor*, June 1, 2017; available at https://www.mdjonline.com/neighbor_newspapers/dekalb/clarkston-nonprofit-helping-refugee-women-turn-skills-to-profit/article_9bcf281e-46fb-11e7-a6c2-932b1bb1e229.html.





Refugees in America

According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), more than 70.8 million people worldwide have been forced out of their homes. More than 25 million of these are refugees, and half of the refugees are under the age of 18. The goal of UNHCR is to help refugees resettle into a new country. That process is called *resettlement*, which is “the careful selection of governments for purposes of lawful admission of the most vulnerable refugees who can neither return to their home country nor live in safety in neighboring host countries.”¹

Refugees face a long process for resettlement. Those seeking refugee status apply through the United Nations (UN), which determines if refugee status will be given, and to which country the refugee will be recommended.

Refugees have no input into which country they will be placed. Once refugees have been placed on a country’s resettlement list, they still have to go through a long vetting process that can take up to two years. For resettlement in the U.S., refugees are screened by eight federal agencies (including Homeland Security and the FBI), six security checks, medical screening and three in-person interviews with Homeland Security agencies.²

Since the 1970s, the United States has been the global leader in resettling refugees internally. Those who are given resettlement are the most vulnerable — women and children at risk, women who are the head of their households, the elderly, those with acute medical needs, and those who are survivors of violence and torture. Since 1980, when the federal Refugee Resettlement Program was started, “around 3 million refugees have been resettled in the U.S. — more than any other country.”³ In 2018 alone, 22,900 refugees were resettled into the United States.⁴

Anne-Marie Grey, the executive director and CEO of USA for the UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, explains, “Refugees are vulnerable people, but due to the generosity of the American people we are able to provide refugees with help and hope as they flee devastating circumstances and prepare them for independence in a new and permanent home.”⁵

1 “Resettlement . . . ”

2 “Resettlement . . . ”

3 “Key findings . . . ,” p. 6.

4 “Refugees in America,” <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/usa/>.

5 “Refugees in America,” <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/usa/>.

Immigrants

It can be helpful to understand the differences between refugees and immigrants. Immigrants are defined as those who move to settle permanently in a foreign country. The United States has the largest number of immigrants of any country in the world. More than 44 million people who reside in the U.S. were born in another country and make up 13.6% of the nation's population. Over 77% of immigrants are in the United States legally, and 45% of those have become naturalized citizens.¹

Each year, more than one million immigrants come into the U.S. from all over the world. In 2017, the one million immigrants who entered the U.S. were from: India (126,000), Mexico (124,000), China (121,000) and Cuba (41,000). Historically, the number of Hispanic immigrants is decreasing, while the number of those from Asian countries is increasing. Pew Research Center suggests that Asians will become the largest immigrant group by 2055.²

1 "Key findings about U.S. immigrants," p. 2; Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/17/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/>.

2 "Key findings . . .," p. 5.



Creating a Business to Minister through Sewing and Bible Studies

For many female refugees, finding work that is acceptable to the family culture is difficult at best and impossible for many. And, refugees have a desperate need for community in America. Providing a sewing class/Bible study ministry is based on this foundational need for community that we all share. The atmosphere created with women working together toward a common cause can also lead to healing, provide opportunities for creativity, build self-esteem and earn income.





Discover the Needs in your Community

Before you begin any new ministry, it is important to first take time to discover and understand the unique needs within your community. Explore the physical community, listen to and learn from people living and working in the area and seek God's guidance by prayer-driving and prayer-walking the neighborhood.

If preparing your church to develop a ministry to build relationships with refugees is a need in your community and a desire within your congregation, keep reading! We have practical steps to help you get started.

To learn more about how to identify needs in your community, download [*How Can You Serve? An In-Depth Guide to Discovering Community Needs*](#).

If not, [check out some of our other ministry guides](#) for opportunities that fit for your church's gifting and community's needs.

Strategically Consider Ministry Opportunities with Refugees

Take the next step by enlisting a small group of people within the congregation to assess ministry opportunities by working through the following questions with you:

- **What partnerships in your community could you contact for help to meet this need?** These could include government officials, school officials and teachers, other community churches and leaders, local shelters and other preestablished programs providing help and support to refugees.
- **What ministries in your community could you partner with to meet this need?** These could include other community churches, community leaders, local civic clubs and ESL classes.
- **Who in your church is passionate and equipped to lead or participate in this ministry?** Consider children's workers, parents, Sunday school classes, senior adults — anyone with a desire to help provide resources or serve as volunteers. Members who are multi-lingual are valuable resources as translators and teachers.
- **What resources and relationships has God given your church to support this ministry?** Consider missions offerings, other financial resources, church members who are connected to community groups, members who are bi-lingual, Send Relief's ebook [The Church's guide to ministering to Refugees](#), and Sunday school class members. One untapped resource could be those who have the gift of couponing and saving money on necessary supplies.
- **What resources have you identified that could work collaboratively with your church build meaningful relationships with refugees?** These questions can lead this small group of members to determine whether or not:
 1. There is desire within the congregation to meet this need.
 2. There are resources of people, space and money to meet this need.
 3. This ministry is sustainable over time.
 4. You feel God leading your congregation in this direction.

If you do not have any immediate outlets, please connect with a national resettlement agency.

How to Pray for Refugees

The first step of this and any new ministry is to develop a prayer team to undergird the ministry in prayer. However, every believer can be involved in praying for refugees, praying both globally and locally. Consider creating a prayer emphasis that leads the church in united prayer for refugees globally and for the developing ministries in America. Prayer needs include:

- Prayer for the needs of refugees living in camps and temporary shelters, including shelter, food, water and safety.
- Prayer for the safety of refugees who are traveling from their homelands.
- Prayer for the United Nations workers who will make decisions that impact refugees for the rest of their lives.
- Prayer for the government workers who are involved in the resettlement of refugees.
- Prayer for refugees as they resettle in unfamiliar and challenging places.
- Prayer for healing for refugees who have experienced horrors we can only imagine.
- Prayer for refugees to be open to God's saving grace.
- Prayer for churches and workers who are at work helping refugees resettle into the United States and throughout the world.
- Prayer for an outpouring of love and concern for all those who are forced to leave their homelands out of fear.





Starting a Sewing Ministry for Refugees

The success of any ministry is dependent upon the preparation and organization that takes place before the ministry begins. Begin with the steps outlined above in “Strategically Consider Ministry Opportunities with Refugees.” After that process is complete, develop specific details as follows:

Planning for the ministry:

- Enlist a director and/or co-director to lead the program as follows:
 - a. Work with the church staff to:
 - i. Determine whether your sewing ministry needs to set up a separate 501c3 organization.
Note: If your ministry involves helping others generate income, you will likely need a non-profit or for-profit platform for tax purposes. See detailed business planning instructions provided below.
 - ii. Determine your budget for the ministry, using these questions as a guide:
 - How much money will you need for start-up costs? Provide a three-month cushion for the ministry’s business-operating expenses in your start-up costs. Note: See below for possible start-up costs and on-going expenses.

- Can the ministry be run completely by volunteers?
 - Can you find free space to operate the ministry? You'll need dedicated space within the church facility or another dedicated space to house sewing machines, fabric and provide general workspace. If you cannot use space within the church, include costs of purchase and rental of a facility for the ministry which includes furniture, equipment and supplies, as well as utilities and maintenance.
 - Do you need to budget for marketing, supplies and other business expenses?
- iii. Determine your business model for the ministry, using these questions as a guide:
- Will the sewers/employees get paid per item, per hour or through another compensation strategy?
 - What percentage of each sale will go to the workers and what will be needed to fund the ministry?
- iv. Determine how you will advertise the ministry. Note: Word-of-mouth is by far the best. However, in the early days, you may want to create flyers, bulletin announcements or social media posts to help spread the word concerning the ministry's needs.
- v. Determine how you will market your products, using these questions as a guide:
- Will you sell on-line through sites like Etsy?
 - Will you do home shows or craft festivals?
 - Will you be able to set up a store?
- vi. Determine how you will share the gospel through this ministry, using these questions as a guide:
- Will you provide Bibles and/or evangelistic literature to families?
 - How will you invite families to join your church for worship?
- vii. Provide prayer support for the ministry.
- vii. Set up possible use of church facility for the ministry or another dedicated space that houses sewing machines, fabric and general work space.
- ix. Regularly spotlight the ministry to people in church so they are aware of the joys and needs
- b. Develop a leadership team that includes the director, a finance manager to keep track of expenses, income and payroll and a volunteer coordinator.
- c. Enlist volunteers who can help with the sewing classes, provide childcare, provide transportation, keep supplies in order, provide maintenance on the sewing machines and teach Bible studies. Those who are multi-lingual are extremely helpful.
- d. Work with the finance manager to manage budgets, finances and donations, including:
- i. Funds for sewing supplies and marking expenses
 - ii. Hourly pay for child-care workers if needed
 - iii. Gas cards for those providing transportation
- e. Arrange for vans or buses as needed for transportation.

- f. Lead the planning process and to train volunteers.
- g. Provide a yearly kickoff training to introduce new volunteers and refresh returning volunteers.
- h. Develop an email list of prayer team members and provide regular updates to volunteers and prayer team.
- i. Communicate last-minute changes or volunteer gaps to team.
- Enlist a planning team to create the detailed operating plan:
 - a. Determine if the sewing ministry will work with one language group (the best option if participants speak little English) or a diverse group of internationals with good English skills.
 - b. Set up a schedule for classes, including times and location for sewing sessions. Most programs have groups meeting to sew a couple times a week. Note: Your maximum size of participants will be limited by the number of sewing machines you have available.
- Enlist volunteers, including: those who will teach sewing, provide support during work sessions, help with clean up, provide childcare, act as translators and provide transportation as needed. Look for a time commitment of four hours per session.
 - a. Meet with volunteers for training and prayer. Make assignments for volunteers.
 - b. It is common to need childcare, and some mothers will have small children. Plan for volunteers and activities that will provide good care for the children so the women can focus on what on sewing.
 - c. If you need drivers who can pick up attendees, allow extra time for this in getting to the class on time. International time isn't always the same as American time.
 - d. Choose a Bible study curriculum or plan. See potential resources below.
 - e. Remember, the desire for this time is to build relationships and share the gospel. People will share their own beliefs, so be ready to graciously listen, clearly proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and affirm your continued friendship.
- Plan an open house to kick off the class to allow the refugees to meet the host team and for potential volunteers and donors to learn about the ministry.

How to Start a Sewing Ministry/Business¹:

- **Business Design:** Sewing businesses can take on several identities and purposes, such as: alterations, making new clothes and accessories and customizing items with embroidery and other decorations. Determine what your organization will create to sell.
- **Making Money:** Sewing businesses make money either by charging fees for alterations and custom-made clothing or by selling unique accessories to individuals through a store, a pop-up boutique or craft fairs.

¹ This information has been adapted and compiled from "How to Start a Sewing Business" (<https://howtostartanllc.com/business-ideas/sewing>) and "5 Steps to Starting a New Ministry" (<https://www.brotherhoodmutual.com/resources/safety-library/risk-management-articles/risk-management-basics/5-steps-to-starting-a-new-ministry/>).

- **Start-up Costs for Supplies, Materials and Equipment:** Minimally, you'll need:
 - a. Sewing machines that can do basic stitches and create buttonholes. Five machines recommended for beginners are the Brother CS6000i Sewing Machine, the Brother XL2600I Sewing Machine, the SINGER 1507WC Sewing Machine, the SINGER 4411 Sewing Machine, and the Janome 2212 Sewing Machine¹
 - b. Ironing boards and irons for removing wrinkles from fabric and opening seams
 - c. Fabric scissors and pinking shears for cutting patterns
 - d. Patterns (Free patterns to start with are available through: craftsy.com, so-sew-easy.com and thesprucecrafts.com)
 - e. Cutting wheels
 - f. Measuring tools
 - g. Garment racks for hanging clothing; storage bins for holding other items to be sold later
 - h. Depending on the number of participants, a table—or two or three—for cutting fabric, drawing and design
- **On-going Costs:** Make sure your budget includes these costs:
 - a. Sewing supplies, such as zippers, needles, pins, thread, buttons, fabric and trim. (See below for sources for discount fabrics and free patterns.)
 - b. Rental fees (if necessary)
 - c. Utilities (if necessary)
 - d. Equipment maintenance
 - e. Website updates
 - f. Marketing and advertising
 - g. Payroll and insurance costs
- **Build Your Business Plan:**
 - a. Determine initial costs and on-going costs (see above).
 - b. Determine your target market of those who are most likely to buy your products, such as age, gender, income level, marital and/or family status, geographic location, ethnic group and

¹ Recommended by: "The Best Sewing Machines for Beginners," last updated June 13, 2019; <http://www.sheliketosew.com/best-sewing-machines-beginners/>.

hobbies and interests.

- c. Determine how long it will take for the business to break even. This is based on your fixed operating costs, such as rent and utilities, and your variable costs, such as costs to increase production. The formula for this is:

$$\text{Break Even Point} = \frac{\text{Fixed Costs}}{\text{Total Sales Revenue} - \text{Cost to Make Product}}$$

- d. Create a name for the business. Check web domain openings as you create a name so you can set up your own on-line site.
- e. Determine whether your ministry business will be an LLC or a 501(c)(3). Both of these have specific requirements which can vary from state to state. If your ministry provides income to participants, you may have challenges to using a 501(c)(3) plan. **It is very important that you talk to your church's attorney or one who specializes in non-profit organizations** to discuss your particular situation.

- **Develop Your Ministry Statement and Bylaws:**

- a. Create a mission statement of your core principles, including charitable and biblical references. This will not only guide your organization but help with your 501(c)(3) application.
- b. Develop bylaws to describe the ministry's organizational structure and decision-making processes. Bylaws are the rules of the corporation, including hiring, firing, chain of command, the organizational structure, the powers and duties of the Board of Directors and how many board members are necessary at meetings for a quorum for voting.
- c. Enlist an attorney to review both documents before beginning to use them.

- **Recruit a Board of Directors:** Especially for a 501(c)(3) organization, recruit a Board of Directors, enlisting those who have knowledge that can help guide the organization, such as attorneys, bankers and small business owners. As overseer of the organization, the Board of Directors will approve your bylaws at its first meeting.

- **Set Up a Legal Business Entity:** Most business ministries structure themselves as 501(c)(3) corporations because:

- a. That helps them refine the ministry's purpose and procedures.
- b. That makes the ministry eligible to receive grants and special mailing rates.
- c. That gives the Board of Directors a way to protect those involved in the ministry from being held personally liable.

Do this by submitting the organization's legal name and articles of incorporation and required fees to the Secretary of State. Make sure you've searched through the internet to make sure your organization's name has not already been taken. It is best to have an attorney help with this process.

- **Apply for An EIN (Employer Identification Number) Through the IRS:** This is the next step after your company has been filed through the state. It can be done through IRS's website, via fax, or by mail. It's easy and free.
- **Investigate Obtaining Tax-Exempt Status:** If your sewing business is part of your church, you probably already have 501(c)(3) status. *Check with the church's attorney* to make sure. If your

sewing business is not part of a church, you'll have to apply for tax-exempt status as a non-profit business.

- **Register for Taxes:** Meet with an accountant about registering to pay necessary state and federal taxes or your tax-free status before you open for business. ALSO, find out what tax forms are necessary for those who will receive income through the ministry.
- **Open a Business Bank Account & Credit Card:** This is important for keeping accurate business expenses and income.
- **Set Up Business Accounting System:** Determine how complex your accounting will be and then use an on-line accounting program to help you keep accurate numbers.
- **Obtain Necessary Permits and Licenses:** These will differ based on state and local licensing requirements.
- **Establish Your Web Presence.**

Marketing/Sales Strategies

What your business produces will bring in funds only when the products are sold. Strategies for selling created products include:

- Pricing your items to sell, by:
 - a. Knowing the market and how much customers are willing to spend.
 - b. Determining what it costs to produce each item and then marking up the price to provide income for the sewers and funds to keep the ministry going.
- Online Sales: Look into setting up a shop through [Etsy](#), [ArtFire](#), [eCrater](#), [HandmadeArtists](#) and [ebay](#).
- Local craft fairs and art shows
- A pop-up shop that can be taken anywhere and set-up for short term sales. This can be used by request of individuals, churches, mission groups and home parties.
- A self-standing retail store, either in a room in the church or in a for-rent retail space.
- Marketing tips:
 - a. Clearly tell the story of your ministry.
 - b. Highlight life experiences some of the refugees have survived.
 - c. Point out what makes your ministry's products different than others: recycled materials, custom-designed patterns, use of indigenous patterns and skill sets.

Guiding Group Times and Outside Resources Available:

During sewing group time, provide time for Bible study. Resources to guide your gospel sharing time include:

- a. [Creation to Christ storying](#)
 - b. [Discovery Bible Story](#)
 - c. [God Our Provider: Guided Bible Stories to Connect Women Refugees with the Gospel](#)
 - d. [The Jesus Film](#)
 - e. [The Magdalena movie](#)
- As you facilitate the Bible storying session, take small portions of Scripture and guide discussions by asking questions, such as:
 - a. *What does this teach us?*
 - b. *How did people respond in the story?*
 - c. *Who do you relate to in this story?*
 - d. *Based on this story, what should we do?*
 - Be careful to guide dominant personalities in a gracious way. Address any misunderstandings in plain and simple terms. Jayson Georges and Mark D. Baker's book [Ministering in Honor Shame Cultures](#) is a helpful resource in understanding cross cultural relationships.
 - Look for opportunities to teach about American culture in the classes. There are also ways to bridge to Gospel conversations and Gospel themes utilizing American traditions such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Valentines' Day. For a simple way to explain holidays, see [List of American Holidays and Celebrations](#).
 - Many needs will be discovered through the classes. Be responsive but not reactive, and model a life of dependence on God's provision. A helpful resource is Steven Corbett and Brian Fikkert's book, [When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself](#)

There will be opportunities to begin new ministries from these sessions. Prayerfully watch for God's leading in ESL or citizenship classes, Bible studies with individuals and church planting. Other needs could include: helping children register for school; offering English tutoring for children; providing school supplies, medical exams and school immunizations; helping set up a budget and a checking account and providing language Bibles.

Conclusion

Refugees are often portrayed as dangerous people by the media who tell frightening stories about drug smuggling and human trafficking. While those do reside in the U.S., they are the minority. Instead, refugees should be viewed through the lens of Scripture. Refugees are made in God's image, and

He loves them dearly. Refugees can make our country richer and stronger through “contributions to the economy, culinary culture, arts, recreation, and education.”¹ And, many of them are already our brothers and sisters in Christ.

A sewing ministry for refugees provides the opportunity to build relationships with international women while teaching them practical skills that help them integrate into American life, earn income, learn and/or improve their English and hear the gospel. The church is uniquely positioned to minister to refugees as they relocate into America. Why?

Because the church is already planted throughout communities in which refugees have settled.

Because the church has been instructed to provide and protect foreigners (Deut. 10:18-19, Mal. 3:5, Job 31:32, Matt. 25:25-26, Gal. 5:14).

Because the church’s calling is to share the gospel with the entire world (Matt. 28:18-20, Gal. 5:14).

Because our God loves them (Jam. 2:15-17).

WHAT’S NEXT?

Is God calling you to take up the mission to those who haven’t heard of Christ — with ministry to refugees in your community?

¹ “3 Lessons Learned from Ministry to Immigrants,” Nov. 1, 2012; available at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/3-lessons-learned-from-ministry-to-immigrants/>.



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