

Questions regarding former refugees (the moment they enter NZ, refugees are known as 'former refugees'...they have permanent residency status in NZ)

We are all migrants from somewhere?

What is your story of arriving in New Zealand? Where did your ancestors come from?

What do we have in common with former refugees?

Who loves to play football? Who was the class clown in school, who loves to dance, who has felt lonely? Who has overcome incredible difficulties? Who loves to laugh? Who acknowledges the courage of others?

What if they don't speak very good English?

It is surprising how much you can 'muddle along' when neither of you speaks the other's language well. Making sure you speak slowly and clearly, trying not to use many colloquialisms and using hand gestures or images on your phone all help. Google Translate can be useful so long as you use it for just one or two words and not whole sentences.

It can feel a little stilted having a conversation...there is so much you can't talk about when you don't understand each other's language. One good idea is to take photos with you when you visit so that you can talk about your family members, your house, something you've been working on or a place you've visited recently...

Learning a new language is a huge challenge for former refugees and it is very frustrating for them not to be able to be understood easily. Patience and good humour on both sides is needed and you will probably find that there are lots of misunderstandings and things that are 'lost in translation'. The family you are in contact with might want to teach you some words from their language and it's a nice idea to learn a greeting and a farewell in their language before you visit.

It is of immense value for former refugees to be able to have conversation with English-speaking kiwis, rather than just with people from their own ethnic community. The more they are able to practise their English the more readily they will pick it up, which is a real bonus in the task of settling into life in their new country.

Why would I want to have contact with former refugees if they aren't Christians like me?

An important thing to remember when you are supporting a former refugee family is that it is not about you.

Your task is simply to get alongside, to be supportive of fellow human beings who have had their lives torn apart, are often suffering trauma, are deeply grieving and anguished for those family and friends they have had to leave behind and are strangers in a new land where everything is different and disorientating.

When you approach the relationship with this perspective you might be surprised by the discovery of God's presence in these people who seem so very different from you...the stranger in whom Christ is revealed.

How can I go about meeting and/or supporting a former refugee family?

A great way of getting involved in supporting former refugees is through Red Cross who have the government contract for settling families into their new home. You can train as a Refugee Support Volunteer and support a family in the task of settling into their new home and city. The commitment asked for is six months and a comprehensive training programme is provided, ending with your team (usually 3-5 volunteers) being assigned a family to support. <https://www.redcross.org.nz/what-we-do/in-new-zealand/refugee-programmes/volunteer-help-former-refugees/>

Red Cross also asks for volunteers to set up the houses which former refugees move into after their six weeks orientation at the Mangere Resettlement Centre. The large furniture eg beds, sofas, table and chairs is provided by the government. You are asked to find and stock the house with everything else that is needed. An excellent project for a congregation or home group to be involved in. Unfortunately you don't get to meet the family, but it is enormously appreciated by them.

You could assist with English language classes. You can train to become a home language tutor through organisations like English Language Partners. Informal English conversation groups are run by ELP and they are always looking for volunteers to help with those. Have a look online to see what is happening in your area. <http://www.englishlanguage.org.nz/>

Changemakers Refugee Forum in Wellington works to support former refugees integrating into NZ life. Their support programmes includes giving free driving lessons to former women refugees. They have been advertising recently for volunteer driving instructors. <http://crf.org.nz/driver%20licencing>

Those are just a few ideas to get you started...

What if I don't like the food they eat?

Former refugees have very little by way of money or material possessions when they first arrive in NZ. What they do have to offer as a sign of their friendship and gratitude is their food.

That can be challenging if don't like certain types of food or you're a small eater...because you may be given a lot of food to eat!

It's all part of the adventure of it and if you continue with the friendship, you will be able to be a little more assertive about what and how much you can eat or drink. Asking to take food home is another way of managing the volume!