



Meeting Needs with Faith-Based Benevolence: Regional Churches Helping Migrants Acclimate By Joy Brown

When Linda Laux looks back on her life, she's most proud of teaching English to Vietnamese-born residents who migrated to Findlay, Ohio, in the 1980s. Having taught English as a Second Language (ESL), German and Spanish for 35 years, mostly within the Findlay City School District, Laux also provided English language instruction and otherwise helped newly migrated families such as the Trans, who became locally renowned for their B Tran Egg Roll business; the line at their Hancock County Fair food trailer is usually the longest.

Laux said that multiple Findlay churches stepped up to sponsor Vietnamese families during that era. Many Vietnamese feared persecution under the new communist government when the Vietnam War ended in 1975. Seeking protection, nearly 1 million migrated to the U.S. by the end of the 1990s, according to an October 2023 article by the Migration Policy Institute.

Today's international newcomers to Hancock County include fewer Vietnamese-born individuals and more from countries such as Venezuela and Haiti, but they face similar challenges. Their presence and her Methodist devotion (she has been a member of St. Andrews United Methodist Church for 50 years) prompted Laux to evaluate how she could best help. "It's time to step up again," she decided.

Laux is one of many U.S.-born residents drawing upon their faith-based values to help the international population acquire needed basics and a solid proverbial launching pad to succeed here. Many have migrated here for jobs and safety— "Our gangs are in the government," one immigrant told Laux—but are arriving with next to nothing. As newcomers contend with barriers to language, culture, and customs, along with limited social services, churches are filling the gaps like they always have, and not just to gain parishioners.

Ask Laux why that is, and she has a quick answer: Mathew 25. In this Bible verse, Jesus states, "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'"

“That’s the basis of our outreach,” Laux says.

At St. Andrew’s, the outreach is robust, strategic, and empathy-based. Assistance has included offering sweaters, coats, and flannel sheets for those who are used to living in tropical climates their whole lives and are now facing their first Midwest winter; and supplying cookware such as pots and pans for those who have none.

In April 2024, St. Andrew’s opened a free laundry facility to help the financially underprivileged and under-resourced. Available on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., two loads per family are allowed and laundry supplies are provided in this space. Laundry detergent is provided for those who can’t afford it.

St. Andrew’s has also partnered with West Independence Church, located in the eastern part of the county, to supply its Garage of Hope, which offers household goods ranging from kitchen appliances to bedroom furniture for immigrants lucky enough to find almost non-existent rental housing. Parishioners, particularly those who are downsizing, are asked to consider donating items to this cause.

Understanding how essential effective communication is when it comes to living in a different country, Laux and four others at St. Andrew’s also teach weekly ESL classes using training and materials from Findlay-Hancock County Public Library’s Read for Life program.

Funding has come from the United Methodist Committee on Relief to pay for items such as children’s shoes, warm children’s clothing, and baby clothing to give to newcomers.

Prayer circles, conducted in multiple languages, encourage divine intervention to help struggling migrants.

Laux keeps detailed paper records of gifts and recipients so that needs can best be met and thank-you notes are sent.

As she did decades ago, Laux has gotten to know some of the immigrants she is now assisting. She said she and her husband served as witnesses for a couple from Venezuela who were legally married in their home country but wanted to reinforce their faith at Findlay-based Saint Michael the Archangel Catholic Parish.

Likewise, John Livingston, a member of St. Paul’s Church in Findlay, has befriended fellow parishioners from Colombia who fled gang warfare.

Like St. Andrew’s, St. Paul’s also has an established outreach effort. In recent years it has supported the immigrant population with community meals, Chopin Hall food drives, clothing, and conversation.

Associate Pastor Matt Burden at St. Paul's, who began ministering there a year ago, is bilingual. His Spanish skills have come in handy with migrants from Mexico, Central America, and South America, such as the family from Colombia. Not long after he arrived in Findlay, he and some parishioners began visiting international newcomers residing at hotels near Trenton Avenue on the west side of town; many are living there because rental housing is scarce.

"They were experiencing their first winter here, so we were providing clothing, winter coats, and delivering meals. Soon we were delivering up to 740 meals out there. Through those visits, we made some connections. Some have become an integral part of our congregation," said Livingston.

Along with helping some migrants acclimate to America, Livingston has been learning from them, too.

"We think that to become an American citizen, all they must do is live here a couple of years, take a test and an oath. But there are quite a lot of legal fees involved," he said. "Most of these people are living paycheck to paycheck. They all have different stories."

Livingston noted the lack of ethnic and racial diversity throughout Hancock County. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, almost 93 percent of county residents are white.

"I used to teach diversity training..., how to be accepting and inclusive of other races, and cultures. Working with them (international newcomers) has given me a whole new perspective. They are human beings who just want a life here," Livingston said.

Numerous other Findlay churches have been serving immigrants in various ways. Literacy classes are common. Less so are church services in languages other than English, although some are being offered in Spanish and French.

Statista, a data and business intelligence platform, reported in 2020 that 70% of migrants living in the U.S. were Christian. That put them in good company that year (the most recent data available) with Hancock County residents in general, about 41% of whom were religiously affiliated in some way, according to the Association of Religious Data Archives. Catholics and Methodists comprised the majority.

Along with locally based initiatives, there are national and international efforts undertaken by religious institutions when it comes to helping international newcomers. Representatives from St. Michael the Archangel Parish chose not to provide information for this story, but Catholic Charities USA's (CC) website states that it "works to welcome and integrate immigrants, refugees and asylees, offering critical services to vulnerable populations." It notes that 119 of its agencies have provided services to nearly 628,000 migrants. The closest CC agency is the Catholic Charities Diocese of Toledo.

“Every two years, after a new Congress is seated, CCUSA’s Social Policy Team crafts legislative priorities and recommendations based on the ongoing efforts of the Catholic Charities network of agencies and the needs of the vulnerable populations Catholic Charities serves,” it explains.

On the 109th Day of Migrants and Refugees in 2023, Pope Francis was quoted as saying, “In whatever place we decide to build our future, in the country of our birth or elsewhere, the important thing is that there will always be a community ready to welcome, protect, promote and integrate everyone, without distinctions and without excluding anyone.”