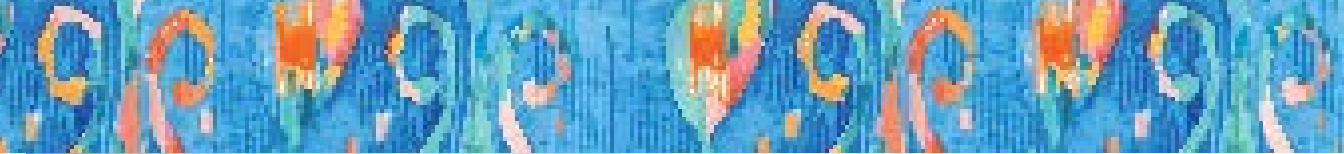


A PLACE TO CALL HOME

A SYRIAN WOMAN IN A HIJAB carries bags of groceries from the Halal market to her apartment complex. Along the way, she walks past a Nepali restaurant where Bollywood movies play on a small TV next to a Hindu shrine. Around the corner, an energetic Ethiopian woman runs a small shawarma shop all by herself. “You work too much,” her customers tell her. “I know, I know,” she responds, waving her thin arm. When the weather is warm, every playground in the area is filled with children who call out to each other in different languages while the mothers stand chatting off to the side, babies on their hips.

by Stefani McDade | Photography by Audra Melton

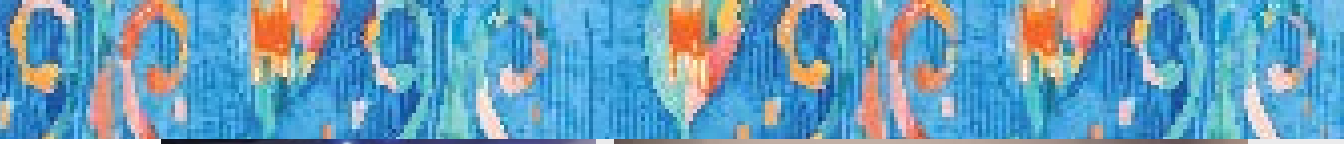


A REFUGEE’S GREATEST NEEDS ARE RELATIONAL AND SPIRITUAL, WHICH TAKE TIME TO FULFILL.

These are the sights, sounds, and smells of Clarkston, Georgia. Said to be the most diverse square mile in North America, this “small-town” city is home to over 40 different nationalities. Many non-profit organizations are invested in helping these refugees get on their feet—and most do within three months. But a refugee’s greatest needs are relational and spiritual, which take time to fulfill. Many of Clarkston’s residents grew up in countries without Christianity, and some have never heard the name of Jesus.

Now considered part of metro Atlanta, Clarkston was founded back in the 1800s when the railroad came through—and right in the center of town was Clarkston Baptist Church. After building a new sanctuary in the ‘50s, the church experienced three decades of high attendance and expansion of its facilities. That is, until the city was designated for resettlement and refugees began pouring into the neighborhood. “I wish for all the world I could say that Clarkston Baptist Church lifted their eyes and said, ‘Praise be to God, the nations have come,’” the congregation’s current pastor, Trent Deloach, says. “[But] that is not what happened.”

In the 90s, members began to disappear from the pews, and the congregation dwindled from 500 to 50. The church, which had been a fixture in the community for a century, was left with three choices: Shut down altogether, sell the property and move elsewhere, or merge with another church. To their eternal credit, the few but faithful remaining members took a step of faith in 2004 when, after much prayer, they asked a local Filipino congregation and a recent African church



HAVE YOU EVER EARNESTLY PRAYED for divine intervention only to have your hopes go unfulfilled? Jesus can relate. In Gethsemane, the Son of God pleaded with His Father to divert His path away from the cross. But God didn't answer in a way any of us would have wanted—not if we were the one kneeling in that garden, and not in our everyday lives.

When God doesn't save us from heartbreak, what then? Human nature pushes us to fix, fix, fix, but some things can't be repaired—they must simply be lamented. And God commands us to do this as a community: "Weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15). We're not meant to carry the heavy burden of grief by ourselves. Remember: Not even Jesus could bear His cross without the help of the man who carried it on His behalf. What could it look like for our communities to help shoulder the weight of unanswered prayer in such a way that it leads us to trust in God for His redemption?



plant to consider merging with them. Within a year, the three became one body—they changed their name to "Clarkston International Bible Church" (CIBC), modified their constitution and bylaws, and appointed a group of elders.

Today, families from a dozen different nationalities gather for worship every Sunday morning in the sanctuary of CIBC—and after each service, they sit down together in the fellowship hall to share a meal. Yet CIBC's greatest impact on the community is not their growing and diverse membership but the other congregations that have been spawned from their ministry. In the last decade, CIBC has been an "incubator" for 12 new church plants, most of which have since grown large enough to move into their own building.

In fact, CIBC runs a training program to equip pastors of future church plants—and continues to support them long after they graduate. Four other congregations currently use their facilities: a Sudanese fellowship, a congregation of Congolese and Burundians who worship in Swahili, a Pakistani church with services in Arabic, plus a large Nepali church. Each month, all five of the

campus pastors meet to pray and encourage one another in their passion for the Clarkston community. "Our responsibility is to reach those groups and different nationalities who live around the church," says Pastor Gangi of the Sudanese Christian Mission. "We want people who have never met the Lord to come and fill our chairs in this church—this would be my prayer."

Each year, CIBC hosts joint services to which every church that shares its space is invited. These Sundays are a foretaste of heaven as 500 to 700 believers of over 30 different nationalities gather to worship God, singing together from the same hymnal. When CIBC was founded in 1883, no one could have guessed how many nations, tribes, cultures, and languages would someday gather under its steeple. Only the Lord knows how many more families will flee their home countries to establish a new life in Clarkston. But one thing is certain: When they walk down Main Street and into the door of Clarkston International Bible Church, they will find an invitation to join a new family—one that calls God "our Father."