



Let's Talk Immigration: Joshua Samuels

[00:00:02] CHRISTY: Hi, everyone. I am Christy Staats with the Bibles, Badges and Business project of the National Immigration Forum, and I am here with Joshua Samuels. Joshua is actually coming to us from the UK. Would you share a little bit about yourself with us today?

[00:00:19] JOSHUA: Hey, Christy, good to be here. Yeah, I'm in the UK right now. I'm doing a one year master's degree and M.A. in migration studies with a particular focus on refugee issues. So, before this for the five years, right before I came to the UK, I was in Dallas, Texas, working with refugee support organizations.

[00:00:44] CHRISTY: Brilliant And so let's dial back a few years. I would love to hear a little bit about where your interest in refugees began. Can you tell us a little bit about your story?

[00:00:55] JOSHUA: Yeah, for sure. So, I was born in the island of Bermuda. That's home for me. That's where I was born and grew up. I came to base in Bermuda and lived there for most of my life. Worked as a pastor at a church there and enjoyed that, but really had a heart for missions and for interacting with people from other cultures and countries and so moved to Dallas maybe six years ago now with the goal of preparing to step into the world of global missions. Well, once I got to Dallas, I started volunteering for an organization that supported refugees with English classes and just help adjusting to a new culture. And so that volunteer position then turned into a full-time position and that became my full-time job. So, for five years, I did stuff like that and then helped other organizations in Dallas that support refugees that were arriving into the city.

[00:01:51] CHRISTY: So was there anything unexpected that you began to learn about refugees as you began to know them and work with them closely?

[00:02:03] JOSHUA: Yes, I think I always enjoyed meeting people from other countries and learning about other cultures, but I recognize that I didn't have quite a lot of friends that were very different from me, especially in terms of religious beliefs. And so being able to meet with refugees from different religious backgrounds. So, the first family I worked with, this was a family from Afghanistan. And the husband was a translator for the U.S. military. And so my role in welcoming his family was to drive him his kids and his wife back and forth. And so on the drives we got to talking a lot. And it was great because he was a translator. And that was my first Muslim friend that I had. And it opened my eyes to, I think, some of the just the humanity that I had missed and just seeing people as a religious group rather than as people. And so now I have a bunch of Muslim friends and really enjoy the friends from different religious backgrounds. But that wasn't something that I had cultivated in the past.

[00:03:18] CHRISTY: That's really significant. And I have to agree with you. I personally have a deep love of people from Afghanistan. It's a wonderful, wonderful set of cultures

over there. So, you're in Dallas and now I have to say, it's kind of funny. A man from Bermuda is now in the U.K., the place with constant cloud cover. But what made you think I want to go live under English skies? How did you decide to do this study and why and...

[00:03:47] JOSHUA: So it definitely wasn't the British weather, although now it's going. It's spring, summertime now. And the weather has been great actually, since we've been locked down.

[00:03:59] CHRISTY: I've heard you've had an unusually sunny spring. It's raining.

[00:04:06] JOSHUA: Yeah, it's been really gorgeous. So, I'm happy for that. But I came to the U.K. because during my time in Dallas, I worked a lot at a grassroots level with refugees like directly and developing relationships and loved that. And then also a big part of what I did was help to educate and mobilize Christians to be able to serve their neighbors who were refugees. But then I saw a lot of just issues from a higher level that needed to be changed. And just systemic issues of injustice that refugees face. And so, I wanted to be able to be equipped to be able to speak into these issues at a higher level...That would lead to better lives for refugees and migrants.

[00:05:01] CHRISTY: It's huge. Could you give us...not everyone knows what some of those systemic issues are. Could you give us one or two that stood out to you as issues that you wanted to be more educated about?

[00:05:14] JOSHUA: So, a lot of it was learning myself as I went along. So just the whole U.S. refugee resettlement system and how that works and how it worked. And I think so I came into this position so, yeah, six years ago it was before President Trump was president. And I think what I learned was that refugees were not a political issue for most of the resettlement...the U.S. resettlement program. Like under Republican and Democratic presidents, like refugee resettlement was just something that America did. And so then to have this new administration, where refugees became so political. And then to see the power that the administration used in order to decimate the refugee resettlement program, I think that was really upsetting and angering to me, and especially because of the support of many evangelical Christians politically for this current administration who was making these changes that affected refugees around the world and families then that couldn't come and join the relatives who already arrived in the U.S. because of policies that were being put in place.

[00:06:36] CHRISTY: It's really sobering. It's really hard for those who do...go ahead...

[00:06:43] JOSHUA: And like the political implications behind it and how those political decisions affect real people in real life and how like us as believers and the things that we do or say or advocate for or vote for or against, like those things affect real people's lives. And wanted to be a part of the changes in movement systems that bring life and joy to people around the world.

[00:07:18] CHRISTY: That's fantastic. And it's an important job right now, and I guess for those who aren't aware, the US has had an average of about 90000 refugees resettled every year since 1980. The high point was two under 205,000 under President Reagan. And in the last three years, every year, the new total refugee number has been set by the president. It's been axed in half. So, it's been axed and half three times. So as of October of this year, the resettlement number was 18,000. But still, with a travel ban in place that hits about 10 countries now, mostly Muslim majority, including North Korea and Venezuela. And now Nigeria is on that list, which has been puzzling to everyone because they are actually

probably one of the most successful groups of immigrants in the U.S. if you compare education levels and the level of income. And so, yeah. So, there's many people from some of the most vulnerable places in the world where there are wars or persecution that currently cannot access even our 18,000. So, yeah, Josh, I'm really grateful that you're in a space where you're learning how to affect change in the policy level. That's really, really important. Let's talk a little bit about you know, you mentioned the church. What would you like the church after being a pastor, working with churches in Dallas, and then seeing the decimation of the refugee resettlement program. What would be some things you'd want to communicate to other pastors, to Christian leaders, to Christians in the pews about refugees or what would be really important for them to think about?

[00:09:10] JOSHUA: I think it's always healthy for us to...to try and understand and to reflect the heart of God in everything that we do. And when I and I look at scripture and I look at the Bible and the image that it gives us who God is, his heart is like this theme that goes throughout scripture, that God seems to have this special place in his heart for vulnerable people, and specifically, they're mentioned as like widows and orphans and then those who are aliens or like strangers in a different country, and then that for sure includes refugees and forced migrants. And the reason I think that God shares his heart is because these groups are vulnerable. And so God shows this care and this special care for groups that for some reason in societal structures have a more difficult time finding for themselves or establishing their own rights. And so He at that time...you know, a testament quote on Israel to show kindness to these categories of people. And I think we get to reflect the heart of God when we engage with our neighbors who are in vulnerable situations. And oftentimes that includes refugees and those who come to a brand new country, into a brand new system and the refugees, because they are fleeing violence. So, I think it's a huge opportunity for the church to show the heart of God. But then the other thing that I've learned in my time in Dallas working with refugees, that I think part of the reason why God has allowed refugee populations to come to the US is to teach the American church some things that maybe we've missed along the way. So some of the things that I've learned from my refugee friend have been just about the spiritual gift of hospitality and the gift that it can be and how it can be given so freely and how it can transform people's lives. So, I've been invited over numerous times to homes of refugees that have shown just immeasurable kindness to me. And I think another lesson we can learn is just perseverance of faith in times of difficulty and a difficult situation. So a number of refugees that comes to the US are coming from Christian backgrounds and been persecuted because of their religious faith. And so, there's a family that's become really close to me that is from Pakistan, who were persecuted because of their faith and experienced torture because of that. But being able to sit down and listen and hear those stories and hear how their faith is being challenged, but it is still growing and growing. It challenges my faith and the things that I believe. And so, I think embracing our refugee neighbors is more than just helping them. But I think it's also God's way to help us, to teach us as well. So...so something I would encourage every pastor in the U.S. has an opportunity to reach out, to encourage our churches to be places of welcome.

[00:12:30] CHRISTY: That's huge. That's really significant. And I guess just also the...you know, I appreciate, you know, giving some guidance for the spiritual lives on how people can connect the dots there and what they can learn. And this morning, I was reading the UNHCR has released their latest statistic on refugees in the world, and it's increased again very significantly. Right now, there's 79.5 million refugees, which I think the last time I looked at the statistic, it was under 70 million. So, another nearly 10 million people have been displaced and over 32 million of those are children. So, you know, when you think about what you have seen with learning from refugees, with the hospitality, with the perseverance of believers, with the opportunities, I mean, you look at the global numbers,

like there's so much work for the church to be a part of, so much work for those who aren't Christians to be a part of. I guess one of my hopes is that people wouldn't miss this window that is so urgent for those who are fleeing and so important for us as a response of our faith to not ignore it. So, yeah, that's...that's good advice. Let's do a little pivot.

As we were emailing to set this up, you were talking about this paper you had just written related to the U.S. Mexican border. And I would love you to just spend some time. Joshua, just sharing a little bit about that. And I think it's something that our audience could really listen to a little bit.

[00:14:19] JOSHUA: So the title of the paper, "White nationalism, asylum and violence; How racist attack on the US asylum system ignores rights and subjects Central American migrants to violence". So heavy and it was heavy writing it as well. Heavy. I cried multiple times writing this because a lot of what I did was in reading some of the research I was reading stories of real people and real families that are affected by policies that get put in place. And so, yeah, the paper just examines some of the current U.S. asylum policies and law that have been put in place under the current administration and how those affect Central American migrants coming up to the US-Mexico border. And some of what I argue in the paper is that these policies have...well, this has been clear that they've...they've caused migrants to be sent back to Mexico. And in parts of Mexico that the US government considers very dangerous and issues travel warnings for. But they have sent migrants back to those spaces. And there has been a recorded increase in violence that these migrants have suffered and have experienced because they've been sent back. So normally what would happen and what has happened previously in asylum cases is that when someone comes to a border, they get to make a claim to asylum and then enter the country until that claim is decided and they can receive enjoy a relative amount of safety. And then if the asylum claim is accepted, they can continue into the country. If not, then...then they're rejected. But what's happening now is they're just being sent back to Mexico and it's subjecting them to violence. And what I argue in the paper is that a lot of these policies are influenced by ideas of white supremacy and white nationalism that have been embraced in the US for a long time, not under just this administration, I would argue, that I think has become more over and apparent in this administration. And so the reason I write it is because I think it's really important to name the injustice and name what leads to some of these policies that cause death and violence until we expose those things.

[00:16:54] CHRISTY: That is huge. You know, so, I'm trying to empathize and put different minds on. And I know that there are a lot of folks in the States that as soon as you say the term white supremacy, they get this painful knee jerk reaction. That's not me or that's not my country. I'd say for a lot of white Americans are only image of what white supremacy looks like is people going around with hoods on with little eye holes cut out. Is there a way that we could, you know, help connect the dots a little bit to see that, you know, some of this is trickling into our policy? Like what? Can you give some examples that could be helpful for people who don't connect that very well?

[00:17:47] JOSHUA: Yeah, I'll start with this. So, so we're living in an age right now where this talk about race is in our face. And we know who we are. And I think that's a good thing that we're talking and that it's not something that we can avoid and ignore because it has been ignored for a lot of our history. So I think one of the differences that's important to point out is the difference between racism on the interpersonal level of just prejudice and...views or ideas or actions that we take toward an individual because of what they look like, because of their race. That can be one example of racism. But I think the type of racism that I referred to in this paper is a systemic racism. And so systemic racism is something that has been built into a system that now creates disadvantage, oppression for..for people based on their race. And so when I speak about white supremacy, what I

mean is ideology that has been put into a system that preferences and creates a hierarchy where one race enjoys privileges that other races do not in other races are oppressed under that system. And so it's important to recognize that you can live in a system that oppresses people, but yourself as a white person, not have ideas of anger or malice towards another race. But you can still be part of a system that does that. And so I think what's important to point out is that this this is a system. And then if we look back to what I do in the paper is go back and look at U.S. policy, migration policy and policy on immigrants and give examples of when policy has been very obviously racist and people have been excluded because of their race. So the Chinese have been excluded at one time and were not allowed to emigrate. Black people have. So all throughout U.S. history, that has been something that has been in place. And so now...and so now what happens is because we live in a system where it is systemic, we live in a nation where it is systemic then it becomes invisible and we don't see it. But I think what has been, particularly this administration, is President Trump has been very clear about a number of his views about people from other nations and specifically people of color, from other nations, people from countries like Haiti or Nigeria, been he say's from "shithole countries" or comments like people from Mexico or rapist. So, so comments like that. I think review the heart behind some of these policies.

[00:21:00] CHRISTY: I think that makes sense...language really is important. I remember one of the things that was really so disconcerting to me was the language around Central Americans coming being that came from Christian leaders as well as from the administration that they were invaders. And so you create the language of invader that is meant to scare people when it was caravan's full of moms carrying their children, trying to escape gangs

JOSHUA: And violence themselves.

CHRISTY: Yeah. And the other thing I remember hearing was I talked to an immigration lawyer in my area and we were talking about the racial disparity that, you know, people there's often among just colloquial Americans, the idea that, oh, if they're from a Latino background, they might be undocumented. And he said, I have loads of people I'm representing right now who are Irish and German, and nobody asks them for their papers. They're undocumented. They've been here. They overstayed visas. One, the German guy, I think, had been overstaying a visa in the US like nine years and had never once been asked for his documentation. But Americans who are born here, who are of Latino descent or immigrants who have come and might have a visa or might have asylum or might have a refugee status, are questioned about whether they belong here or not. And that really sticks out to me in that particular conversation.

[00:22:35] JOSHUA: Which is a manifestation of this idea of white nationalism, which can be connected to white supremacy. But the more the idea of America as a...as a white nation and so in order to belong, there's a sense of whiteness that you need to have. And so this is why a person of color might get asked and they say, "hey, I'm American" they ask. "But where are you from?" Whereas someone who is white but has ancestry from Ireland? Doesn't get asked the same question. And so it's why policies like this can continue...excluding people. Exactly. It's interesting to note that a lot of these migration policies that have been put in place have just been put in place by the Mexican U.S. border, not at the northern border with Canada.

[00:23:32] CHRISTY: There's a large amount of undocumented Canadians in the country, too.

JOSHUA: So this is telling.

CHRISTY: I think it is very telling. And I would just encourage people, if you're listening to this and you know, you want to react, you want to write something mean in the comments. You know, one, feel free to get in touch with me. I'd love to chat, but I'm not going to assume Joshua wants to chat, but...I would say pause for a moment and I would take a moment to look. And this conversation does not have to end in shame. I think this conversation is best ended if we can look honestly at ourselves and see how to fix these policies. So I think the temptation could be to react, maybe feel a sense of shame and then want to argue that this isn't true. And so I would just encourage people who are listening to this, just pause and and just take a look. Do some reading on U.S. immigration policies. Pay attention to what we've done related to Central America and Mexico policies. And just take a moment to sit on that, because I don't think the idea needs to be that we end up shaming people, but that we want to fix these policies so that they're not...being driven by a sense of this, this country needs me and my country. But that they'd be driven by the idea that we want to have about America, which is that it's a welcoming place to all, especially people who need to have access to us. And so I don't know if you have anything to comment on that. That's one thing I was just thinking.

[00:25:10] JOSHUA: Yeah, I agree. I don't think shame is helpful at all for moving us forward in any helpful direction. But the reason why it's important to point out some of the ideology behind policies and also to point out that the history of the... the racist history of a number of policies and decisions is so that we can change and move forward. Because I think sometimes where we can go in this discussion, and especially now in a time of ongoing discussions about race, is we can think specifically of majority culture that people that are just being nice is enough. And so I'm going to I'm going to combat racism and bad immigration policies and people who want to be mean to immigrants. That's not me. So I'm just going to be nice ,and be nice to people of color and I'm going to be nice to refugees and immigrants. And I think we're called to do that, and it's a gift to offer warm hospitality. But destructive policies are what hurt people. And policies don't change just because people are nice. Policies change when we understand what causes them and then advocate for something better. And I think that's what we can call ourselves to, to go beyond just being nice. And that involves really understanding some of the core issues.

[00:26:40] CHRISTY: That is fantastic. I couldn't agree more. That's a really good word. On that subject, do you have any more wisdom you'd like to give the church moving forward? Som we need to move from being nice to advocating. It sounds like people could do a little more education around asylum, U.S. border, learning about refugees. What other tokens of wisdom from your experience, life experience, working with the church, thinking about policy. Would you want to leave with people that you think this would be something I really want you to hear?

[00:27:24] JOSHUA: So we're at a unique time in history. We've all been observing protest around police brutality in the US and there's a spread around the world. I was just involved in a protest here in Brighton in the UK. So it's a global thing as well. And I've been so encouraged by the support of white people who have said this is an issue and this needs to change. This can't stay the same. So people who are just entering the conversation are saying, I don't want to be silent anymore. And so I think we're at a unique time in history, specifically for the church. We have an opportunity to lead into this and not pull back. And I think issues surrounding race and when we deal with some of our racist past and history it'll help us to do better in the future, particularly surrounding issues of immigration and refugees, because I think they're so interconnected and intertwined. And so I think the American church would really benefit from an honest exploration of...of often it's

complicity in issues of racial injustice, and that'll help us be better around this whole conversation among refugees and immigrants. A great book on that topic is *The Color of Compromise...* And it specifically is written to the church and about the church and the church's role in racial injustice in the U.S.. It's.. it's an honest look, and it helps us to be honest with where we have been and where we are now and then where we have to go.

[00:29:13] CHRISTY: That's fantastic. I just read that two months ago and could not agree more. All right. Last question. What gives you hope? These are hard times, but what gives you hope?

[00:29:48] JOSHUA: I think what... what is giving me hope lately? I think that the work...the work of fighting against injustice and of loving those who are marginalized and oppressed. It's work; like we call it work because that's where it takes hard work. And often it involves difficult conversations. It often involves making difficult decisions. Because it goes against power structures that are already in place. But I think what gives me hope is seeing people who are willing to give up something in order to fight to see the image of God just displayed and realized in people's lives more fully because of systems of oppression. That marginalized people are removed. And so Jesus said this, he said, great, greater love has no one in this..who lay down his life for his friend. And Jesus was a perfect example of that. So he talked about this great love, that we didn't have to give up on ourselves for someone else and to see people embracing you know, the mindset of Jesus in order to see life come to other people, I think gives me hope. And to know that this is what was done for us and this is what Jesus did for us in his life and in his death. So that his image could be more clearly reflected in us.

[00:31:40] CHRISTY: Joshua Samuels, fantastic talking to you. Thank you so much.

JOSHUA: Thanks for the opportunity.