

## **REFUGEE PROJECT**

*On Sunday, January 14, 2018 at a Congregation Meeting, a motion was put forward and unanimously passed for Whitehorse United Church to sponsor a refugee family.*

*To provide the congregation with more information about the family and their circumstances, the sponsorship committee has prepared this summary:*

### **WHO IS BERIHU? AND WHY IS HE A REFUGEE?**

Berihu is the second son of an Orthodox Christian priest from a village on the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Eritrea is a small country on the Red Sea, sandwiched between the Sudan and Ethiopia.

Eritrea won its independence from Ethiopia in 1992 after a long war of cessation from Ethiopia. At the time, there were great hopes for its future and great pride among its people. In the intervening 25 years the original president has turned into a dictator supported by a powerful secret police force. All young people are required to enter the army as soon as they finish high school and are held there indefinitely. The army runs most of the economic activities in the country. The situation is similar to that in the better-known North Korea. The only difference is that the government isn't building nuclear weapons.

Hundreds of thousands of Eritreans, mostly young people, have fled the country faced with a future of veritable slavery. Many hundreds have drowned in the Mediterranean on their way to Europe.

Berihu was one of the early ones to leave the country in 2009, assisted by his older brother who was already in Israel. He was 'people smuggled' from Ethiopia (he had earlier crossed the border to a refugee camp in Ethiopia) to the Sinai Desert in Egypt. For many Eritreans this was the end of the road that ended in slavery, sexual abuse and extortion from their parents. For Berihu it was a short stop as his brother had arranged for him to cross into Israel although he had to do so at night dodging machine gun fire from the Egyptian border guards.

Berihu spent seven years in Israel as he tried to find a way to come to Canada (it had been his long time dream). Finally, after five years he received a list of Canadian sponsoring organizations from Amnesty International. He applied to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Vancouver which agreed to sponsor him although he had to provide all the financing and was told they couldn't assist him when he arrived. Through contact with an Israeli Canadian in Whitehorse he ended up coming here instead.

He waited two years in Israel while he waited for Canadian processing. During that time he met and married Azmera, a divorcee with a young daughter, Tmnit (pronounced Timnit). When it came time to come to Canada, the immigration officials said they could come with Berihu provided his sponsor would expand the sponsorship. They were unable to do so. The only alternative was for them to divorce so he could come to Canada alone and find a way to bring the wife, her daughter and an expected child later.

Despite efforts by Larry Bagnell's office to ease the family's immigration, arranging a sponsorship for the three still in Israel (the baby son was born recently) is the only option. That is the sponsorship we are undertaking at Whitehorse United Church. In many ways it is an easy sponsorship given that Berihu speaks English quite well and has been working steadily since he arrived.

**WANT TO HELP?**

For now, the most important thing is to get the sponsorship moving to provide some protection to Azmera and her children. For that we need to make 'a good start' on raising the \$18,900 to assist the family in their first year. This figure is specified by the government. Berihu wants to make a substantial contribution to this funding. Anyone at WUC can also help by leaving a contribution at the church office marked 'Refugee Assistance'. Several congregation members have already made generous contributions.

When the family arrives, likely not for 18 months, they will need help to find a place to live and for household furnishings. Azmera doesn't speak English so that will also be an early task, perhaps requiring some childcare. Robin Fairburn and Mike McBride are heading a committee to work on these arrangements as soon as their arrival is known.