

because mercy first loved us

by Will Watson, Pastor,
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I distinctly remember sitting with our church missions team last fall and sharing the story of Welcome House Winston (more specifically, the precious mothers and babies we were serving in Jesus' name), and the question arose, "How did you come upon this ministry in the first place?" After a few moments trying to piece together how the request for assistance with asylum seekers was first shared with me, I stammered, "All I can say is that somehow, somehow, God has us involved and is at work."

That's truly what has happened with Welcome House Winston—his people have been called, God has involved His people in ministry, and His work is blessing the lives of four precious Congolese gifts sent to our city. It is fitting, I think, how the Spirit brought these precious folks to live in Winston-Salem; after all, the second word after the hyphen, Salem, means "shalom; peace and wholeness." God is bringing himself to us at Welcome House Winston; God is bringing his "shalom" to our city, and his name is Mercy.

Late last summer, CBFNC Missions Coordinator Linda Jones e-mailed a handful of ministers asking whether God was leading any of us to help out a couple families seeking asylum here in NC. Because God had nudged me over the last couple of years about the plight of refugees, it seemed natural to meet with my church's lay leaders to determine how God would lead us. After all, hospitality is inherent in God's personality, and the Bible is filled with stories of how to treat brothers/sisters from foreign lands:

We welcome them graciously ... no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

Our first meeting took place nearly six months ago (at the time of this writing), and several of us met to hear the story of our Congolese friends who, at the time, were receiving love and compassion from Winterpark, Wilmington. As Marc Wyatt shared the opportunity for our local churches to create a welcome house ministry for these families, God began opening doors in our conversations: "Yes, I believe our church can assist with that." "It would be great to see how our meetings would strengthen the bond between our sister churches." "What are the housing options for our new friends?" "Who will be in charge of leading this Welcome House Winston team going forward?" After this meeting and then another in October, Steve Loftis answered the call to lead us and has since proved to be a superb example of humility, open-mindedness, and leadership.

As various team members assumed their roles and giftedness in the group, an apartment was finally secured and the joy of furnishing our new friends' abode began. Everything our new residents would need was donated by our friends and/or fellow churches, and by the time Thanksgiving arrived our Congolese families were welcomed to Winston-Salem with open arms. We celebrated their arrival with a party at Peacehaven, Winston-Salem, and, with the help of a French interpreter, we were able to ask God's blessing on their new lives here in our city (emphasis on "our!").

Today, the ladies and their babies are working to understand their new lives here in the Triad, and they are appreciative of our assistance and love. While we have served them in various ways, they are stepping out independently to become self-sufficient, which is a major goal of these Welcome House ministries. One of the most beautiful things to see and hear is their desire to worship with us in our congregations. They want to be with *us*! They see the genuine article of Jesus Christ displayed in our worship, our prayers, and our communities of faith. "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you" (James 4:8). God is doing this in our new friends' lives, and He is doing that in all of us as we serve one another ... by loving mercy.

"Loving Mercy" is the mandate issued by God through the prophet Micah, imploring his people to live out mercy, justice, and humility. The team members I serve alongside through Welcome House Winston were loving mercy way before we even knew about our Congolese friends. But you see, Mercy traveled from Wilmington to Winston-Salem and found *us*. Through our own experiences of Christ's loving-kindness, we now have the opportunity to love these families with that same mercy. This is the biggest blessing: *We love mercy because Mercy first loved us.*

Welcome House Winston, as well as all the CBFNC Welcome Houses across our beautiful state, are an act of mercy through our merciful God. By loving asylum seekers and refugees, God is demonstrating his mercy to us, teaching us compassion, and showing us how he truly loves us:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. (Ephesians 2:4-5, NIV)

Welcome House Winston is humbled to show mercy to our new neighbors only because Mercy first showed up on the doorsteps of our hearts, loved us ... and welcomed us home. Amen.