The Role of the Protestant Church in the
US Refugee Resettlement Program during
the Early Cold War Era

The Methodist Case

Hiromi Chiba

1 Introduction

In Europe, at the end of World War II, there were approximately eleven million
refugees, known collectively as displaced persons (DPS), living outside their
nations’ boundaries. About one million of these were resettled overseas during
the next several years. Specifically, under the Displaced Persons Acts of
1948 and 1950, the United States accepted over 400,000, more than 70 percent
of who were refugees from the USSR and Eastern Europe. The Refugee Relief
Act of 1953 and amendments to it also authorized the admission to the US of
another 200,000 refugees from war-torn Europe and escapees from Communist-
dominated countries (Daniels 2004: 98, 109–112, 125–127; US Displaced
Persons Commission (DPC) 1952: 243; Dinnerstein and Reimers 2009: 118–119;
Holman 1996: 5). Thus, by the early 1950s, the groundwork had been laid for the
granting of asylum to millions of additional refugees from various parts of the
world in the years to follow.

The early postwar years were also a time when the active involvement of
religious agencies, especially Christian churches, in the resettlement program
originated and evolved in America. Indeed, refugee relief and resettlement, as
part of foreign aid, was an instrument of America’s Cold War strategy, since
escapees from the ‘oppressed’ Eastern bloc to the ‘free’ world were perceived by
the West as political and ideological ‘assets’ which had propaganda value both
this role, recent scholarship has highlighted the integration of religious agen-
cies into Cold War diplomacy, where the superiority of the American Way of
Life was promoted (Schäfer 2006: 175–193). At the same time, the humani-
tarian and missionary impulses of American churches, which were at work
independent of the diplomatic cause, provided the driving force for their
relief activities. While the state’s role was imperative in creating a legislative
framework, church groups played a leading part in arranging and implement-
ing resettlement, frequently lobbying and negotiating with government. This
crucial role of churches in refugee resettlement deserves closer academic attention.

This contribution will first explore how the US refugee resettlement program developed, focusing on non-governmental initiatives, and how the Protestant church became involved (Robert 1997: 382).¹ I will secondly examine the visions and missiology behind the churches’ participation in the program, through a focus on the case of the Methodist Church, one of the leading denominations affiliated with the Church World Service (CWS), the Protestant interdenominational body responsible for refugee resettlement. In so doing I will attempt to assess the churches’ relationship to issues of ethnic tolerance and cultural diversity, and its contribution to this internationalist endeavor. As Dana L. Robert pointed out, Christian missions have frequently been analyzed in relation to American nationalism and imperialism (Robert 1997: 382).² Such critical analyses, while they have strengths, should not hinder us from studying American missions in their own right and from seeking balanced evaluation of the roles they have played in internationalism. This is an area of research that awaits further historical scholarship.

2 The Early Development of the US Refugee Resettlement Program and the Involvement of Churches in It

2.1 The Displaced Persons Acts of 1948 and 1950

The great majority of DPs in Europe were repatriated to their own countries soon after the war. Many, however, were unable or unwilling to return to their homelands due to such reasons as the reshuffling of national boundaries, opposition to Communism, or fear of standing trial for collaboration with the Nazis, while other refugees continued to arrive from the east (Daniels 2004: 98; Dinnerstein and Reimers 2009: 118; Genizi 1993: 20). DPs were forced to endure deplorable living conditions in hundreds of DP camps

---

¹ This contribution, while focusing on the Methodist case, employs the term ‘the Protestant church,’ since it discusses the general attitudes and policies of the Protestant church in the US at large, as expressed in the statements and the actions of the Church World Service as well as the National Council of the Churches of Christ in America, which coordinated the Protestant refugee relief efforts there.

² Robert (1997: 383) went on to note, ‘Unexamined but equally important is the contribution made by missions to internationalism.’