

## Demystifying a Women's Refuge

**REFUGE:** a shelter from pursuit or danger or trouble (*city of refuge Josh 20; take refuge in, have recourse to, as a way out of a difficulty*), person or thing or course that provides refuge.

The oxford dictionary draws its meaning of the word refuge from the cities of refuge of the Old Testament. To understand the need or use of such a facility in our present society we may refer back to the original system to understand the need, purpose and plan of a refuge system.

These refuges were of Divine appointment. The Lord said, "Appoint out for you cities of refuge." (Josh 20:1) This indicates they were sanctified, or set apart for this purpose, and so were *God's appointed shelter*.

They had respect, especially to the escapee, by making provision for his/her safety, by providing mercy, help, justice, protection. All of which met the person's immediate needs. (*Num 35:9-34*)

Originally there were six in the chain of safe places.

### Location:

1. Kedesh in Galilee in the hill country of Naphtali (Josh 20:7)
2. Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim (Josh 20:7)
3. Hebron in the hill country of Judah (Josh 20:7)
4. Bezer on the plateau in the tribe of Reuben (Josh 20:8)
5. Ramoth in Gilead in the tribe of Gad (Josh 20:8)
6. Golan in Bashan in the tribe of Manasseh. (Josh 20:8)

**Accessibility:** No person would have to travel more than thirty miles to reach a city of refuge, usually the distance was considerably less.

The cities were assigned to the Levites, who supervised the administration of justice. (*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*)

**Purpose:** To provide refuge for a person in danger of recrimination for a life taken accidentally and un-intentionally.

### Criteria for Admission:

In a comparatively primitive society where the law of an "eye for an eye", tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe" (Ex 21:24, 25) prevailed, where the machinery of justice had not been fully developed and made accessible everywhere, men who had unwittingly or accidentally taken human life would be at the mercy of the slain man's relatives who, in the heat of passion, might not distinguish between intentional and unintentional murder. The so-called law of the avenger required the eldest male relative of the slain man to avenge the death. (*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary p213*)

**Entrance:** He is to stand in the entrance of the city gate and state his case before the elders of that city. Then they would admit him into their city and give him a place to live with them.

**Responsibility:** The cities were appointed to the Levites: Altogether the Levites were appointed 48 cities, six of these were set apart for refugees.

The overseers of these cities or the residents must not surrender the accused on to the avenger.

**Length of stay:** He was welcome in the city until he stood trial before the assembly, and until the death of the high priest who is serving at that time. A fugitive claiming the protection of one of the cities of refuge received a fair trial, and if found innocent was to remain there until the death of the high priest. Apparently, the accession of a new high priest inaugurated a new era that was considered to erase any possible legal claims of the preceding era (Num 35:28, 32) a wise provision that would prevent family feuds going on from generation to generation. (*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary* p213)

**Interesting also, is the significance of the meaning attributed to the name of each city.**

1. KEDESH or *holy place*, provided a refuge for the unclean.
2. SHECHEM or *shoulder* was a refuge for the weary. Interesting that a place known for murder, should become a refuge for one who has been a culprit to that felony.
3. HEBRON or *fellowship*, was a refuge for the homeless. Here they would find love and community, which is the delight of a person living at home in family communion.
4. BEZER or *stronghold* a refuge for the helpless. The man-slayer had no way of self protection. He desperately needed the protection afforded him in that city.
5. RAMOTH or *exalted* was a refuge for the hopeless. Outside the gates of the refuge, the refugee was without hope.
6. GOLAN or *separated* was a refuge for the tempted. The person being tempted was separated from the environment of his temptation, so allowing time to strengthen and heal.

SMITH, James *Handfuls on Purpose*, Series 4, Pickering & Inglis, London

If we have a look at this ancient custom of refuges, it shows very clearly that times have not changed over the previous centuries. Refuges are still needed for the murderer, abused, tempted, homeless, hopeless, lonely, helpless and desperate.

Because of this fact, Southlakes Refuge began in 1994. The average number of people turned away each year is 500. The average number of people given refuge each year is 165.

This refuge is funded by the community, churches, various charities and two op-shops. There are a total of 70 volunteers who work their hearts out to work as Carers as well as bring in enough revenue to pay for all Household Expenses, such as:

- Electricity
- Telephone
- Insurance
- Food/cleaning products
- Repairs and Maintenance
- White goods
- Linen
- Furniture
- Underwear
- Any other household expense that may arise!

With figures in marriage break-downs reaching approximately 1 in 2/3, the escalating incidence in crimes against children, added to domestic violence occurring in increasing numbers, one ponders just what do the victims of all this horror do, where can they go, who might assume responsibility for their suffering. Recently one of our Carers who was in a police station on legitimate business of support for a disadvantaged person, noted that while she was in the station, the office phone was consistently ringing, and from the conversations she realised that most of them were related to domestic violence, so she enquired of the officer, "How much of your work is related to domestic violence?" The answer, "Most of it?"

#### **How might we as a church, respond to the ethical instruction of Isaiah 58:6-8?**

- Loose the bands of wickedness
- Undo the heavy burdens
- Let the oppressed go free
- Break every yoke
- Deal thy bread to the hungry
- Bring the poor that are cast out to thy house
- Cover the naked

Each community, family and church has its, hurting, lonely, suffering, members. With this break-down in society there are an ever increasing number of those enduring the results of wickedness, carrying heavy burdens of loneliness, fear, anger, frustration, abuse, worthlessness, deprivation of many kinds. They are oppressed by their seemingly hopeless situation, the bondages of their past life, deprivation of self respect, and indeed the respect of their family, so called.

They come bound under the yoke of drink and drugs, used to desensitise their pain. We can't possibly judge them for this, simply understand!

Hungry for physical, emotional mental food, starving for love and a draught of the 'milk of human kindness', they have no idea what Christian love is, or that it even exists.

The homeless come for shelter from the cold of night, heat and glare of the day, and many who find refuge in our house, lack the courage to even go outside the gate, or the ability to approach a supermarket, lacking knowledge of food selection.

More often than we would like, they come in what they stand in, barefoot, nothing more.

What then does the refuge supply for these folk? What happens when they arrive, where do they come from, how do they get here, what are they expecting, how do they react or respond?

These people come to the refuges almost daily, in greater numbers than we are able to accommodate.

**Location:** There are four refuges for women in the South Pacific Division and one for men. (For this exercise I am focussing on women.) Some are at unidentified addresses as a safety precaution for residents, while others are openly displayed, accessible to one who might walk in off the street.

**Accessibility:** They are open to women and children, who have fled from a violent or abusive situation. Generally referred by Lifeline, Domestic Violence Hotline, Police, Churches, or having been to our refuge, and needing the services again, they may phone in and seek admission.

**The purpose of the refuge is to provide:**

1. Physical shelter
2. Time and privacy to rest as they move from the shock of their circumstance, begin to rise from depression, protected from possible suicide attempt, allow the bruises to heal, the emotions to stabilise, trauma to reside
3. Medical help where needed
4. Counselling services
5. Food vouchers
6. Clothing
7. Personal care needs given on arrival (Demonstrate Personal Pack)
8. Christian love, patience, and understanding afforded them by the Carers
9. Budgeting advice and counsel
10. Programs to develop life skills, parenting skill
11. Support groups are attended by residents and conducted by competent persons
12. Assistance with housing, and items of furniture, white goods, linen, kitchen items, and all the things that go toward functioning in their new environment, as they leave
13. Follow up support
14. A safe house when necessary
15. Spiritual understanding
16. Prayer when requested
17. Bible Studies when requested
18. Community living, where they can relate in a healthy way

As the Cities of Refuge in ancient times provided Holiness, Rest, Fellowship, Safety, Exaltation, and Separation, so the modern day refuge, conducted by our Adventist Church, provides all of the same essential healing support to our residents.

**Admission Criteria:**

To maintain the safety of residents, staff, and property there are criteria to be met by would be residents. This may include:

- No alcohol or drug dependency
- No boys over 13 years of age
- No pets
- No uncontrolled mental illness

**Entry:**

Having made initial contact with the refuge, at which time pick up arrangements were made, a representative from the refuge meets them at the appointed place, generally the local railway station. This criteria also applies with a person having their own vehicle.

Residential preference is given to the victim of Domestic Violence.

**Length of Stay:**

Generally the length of stay at the refuge is six weeks. This allows time for them to heal from the initial abuse and allowed the victim safety to begin making the major decisions that need to be made.

**Service Providers:**

- Lifeline
- Domestic Violence hot line
- Police department
- Church Pastors
- Hospitals
- Department of Community Services
- Centrelink

**Funding:**

Being a privately owned and operated institution, there is no Government funding available. With annual running costs of \$1200 weekly, we depend on the income from our Op-shop. Local charities run fund-raisers and benefit programs. Local businesses give donations, monies are beginning to come from our new initiative of "Friends of the Refuge". Some people take tins and fill these with loose change.

**Staffing:**

The refuge is entirely dependent on its 70 volunteer helpers to operate successfully. These volunteers group into carers who roster on 24/7, transport drivers who volunteer both self and vehicle to take residents to medical, legal, and other appointments and op-shop workers. Some people who have trained to be Court Support Workers, attend court on a regular basis. Board members, and other volunteers pick up goods and furniture. We have specialist child care workers, to work with the children, counsellors and secretaries are an integral part of the smooth operation of the refuge..

**Management:**

- 1 Board of management
- 2 Director
- 3 Deputy Director

### **Testimonial by a Resident**

When I first came to the refuge I was really miserable and mate I didn't know where I was, I knew I was here but mate I wasn't with it. Margaret picked me up from the station and drove me to the refuge, when I got here I was treated with such kindness and was given toiletries and food and shown to my room. The beds are so comfortable mate--I really appreciated the hot shower and the bed as I hadn't slept in a bed for quite a few nights.

I would probably be dead as my health was very bad. I was taken to all my doctors appointments and was taken shopping as I couldn't do it for myself. I have a very nice quiet room I can go and watch TV and no one bothers me, and the ladies will always talk to me, help me with my problems, since I have been here I haven't been lonely, I don't know what I will do when I have to leave here, I call this place home mate and I am always pleased to come back when I've been out.

I am being all fixed up, I am having dentures made and new glasses due to the kindness of Adele and generous people.

My own family have never been as kind as Adele, Vivien and all the carers, they always ask how I am and if I need anything, they are always bringing me in clothes, which are far better than I have had in many years, and they have given me little ornaments for my home for when I have to leave here.

The carer's have taken me out for drives, and a few weeks ago they even took me out to dinner which made me feel a million dollars as I haven't been out like that for years.

I will never be able to repay for all what has been done for me.

The refuge to me is one of the best places I've been in. I can't speak too highly of the place and made nice friends with other residents and have got close to their kids. I will have some nice memories mate when I leave here, and will come back to visit when I can.

Resident  
Name Withheld

### **Testimonial by a Ex-resident**

I would like to say that as an ex-resident of the Southlakes Refuge I feel that I have been in a safe place where the Carers have treated me well and with respect. The Carers try to understand our (the residents) feelings and what we are going through and give support wherever they possibly can.

The environment is a lovely one and has a happy, homely type atmosphere which is especially good for the children. The Carers treat them well and are always concerned for their welfare.

The management at the refuge are a 'gift from heaven'. They help us from the time that we arrive at the refuge to the moment that we leave. Their loving, caring, Christian attitude gives a sense of security and acceptance that we rarely receive.

Signed  
(Name Withheld)

## **Testimonial by a Carer**

I find that working at the refuge is a very satisfying and rewarding time. It is hard work coping with the diverse mentalities and capabilities of the incoming residents and their inability to manage their children, prepare meals and generally care for themselves on a day-to-day basis.

Experiencing their gratitude and growth while they are here is all the reward one needs.

Signed  
Name Withheld

## **Testimonial by a Counsellor**

The joy that I have experienced in working with the residents at the refuge is on the first meeting they enter the counselling room, probably in tears, shoulders bowed and heads down. They leave the room with a smile on their faces.

By the time they have left the refuge several weeks later, they express relief at the freedom from the bondage they have lived in for years and thought would never change.

Refuge Counsellor  
Name withheld

## **Case Study**

A woman and son come to the refuge with only the clothes on their backs. They had tried to hide in another state, but were found and the child had to be returned back to the father who had a court order, the following day. The solicitor in the other state was passing the information to this state and the mother had 10 days to prepare for her court hearing for custody of the child.

It was our job to:

- 1 supply food and clothing
- 2 find a solicitor who would handle her case
- 3 organise legal advice and take her to court to stop proceedings
- 4 provide a court support worker
- 5 arrange medical tests for mother and son because of the violence
- 6 phone police to come to the refuge to take statement for AVO
- 7 place all staff on high security alert, as her partner has numerous firearms
- 8 provide counselling for mother and child
- 9 arrange with Centrelink to provide financial assistance
- 10 work with sexual assault unit

Happy ending

There are times when women mature mentally and emotionally during their stay. For example one lady who came in following being bashed by her daughter, who also trashed the house, has returned to the refuge as a carer, now holding a Diploma in Welfare.

Another ex-resident has commenced studies for Welfare Certificate II .

We thrill at the success of these and others, and believe me it is a worthwhile ministry operating in the name of Jesus to give altruistically to each and every one whom the Lord sends to us.