

# Hands full of bread

## Seeing God in my refugee neighbors

Doug Schulz

On a rare sunny day in February 1997, I walked up Robson Street in Vancouver toward my new Afghani friend Mahmoud's hotdog stand for the first time. From a block away, I sniffed onions fried in butter and spices and saw a stream of customers hooked by the nose. As I drew near, a rough-clothed man—homeless, I figured—shuffled up to the cart. Mah's hand reached out with a fresh foot-long hotdog. The street guy bowed, took a big bite, and walked away. Without paying.

"You do that often?" I asked Mah.


"Allah always provides," he replied.

Mahmoud and I met that year while I pastored a Mennonite church near Vancouver. He had been an Afghani refugee who fled his nation after escaping a torture camp during the last year of Soviet occupation (1989). Mah called my church, which was close to his apartment, because he had heard Mennonites help refugees. He had just received a package from the Taliban containing a two-hour videotape of the execution of his father-in-law by flaying. In desperation, he begged me to help him bring family members to Canada from refugee camps where they lived in subsistence in Pakistan.

Over the next few years, my wife and I and friends signed our names to sponsor a dozen family members to Canada, but Mahmoud insisted he would pay their way. When his first brother arrived, Mah sold his hotdog business after saving \$120,000, which he had kept in the lining of his deep freeze. ("I don't trust governments or banks," he said.) With the savings, he bought a transport truck, dumping a duffle bag of cash onto the sales desk. After three years hauling all over North America with his brother as co-driver, Mah sold the truck and bought a grocery store and then a restaurant. All of his family now have meaningful work, some in their own businesses.

Mahmoud made trips to Afghanistan over the years, donning a fake beard and—with the help of a cousin—delivering by night 40-kilo sacks of flour at doors of the poor in and around Kabul. On each sack he would

write *Allah provides*. He told me once that it is a mistake for people to look for God in a mosque or church because God cares for people of all faiths



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or no faith the same; and wherever religion hurts people, God is not present. But he came to a baptism service at my church one time. Afterward, he went to the tank to touch the water. “I have seen baptisms of blood,” he said. “Here is a baptism of peace.”

Mahmoud lives today in a comfortable but simple home, driving old cars he maintains. He generously gives to causes of various kinds, especially sensitive to needs of people from his former land. A few years ago I asked Mah—after he had heard dreadful news about losses “back home”—how he keeps hopeful. He

replied, “When I was being tortured by the Russians, taped down to the table, my world held nothing but pain and the sound of my own screams. But when they removed the instruments, and I could think widely once more, I looked at my hand. I told myself, if that hand is ever free again, I will always fill it with bread for my brother.”

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### **About the author**

Doug Schulz serves in a half-time ministry role at Grace Mennonite Church in St. Catharines, Ontario, focusing on pastoral care and outreach. He enjoys daily journaling, reading and writing poetry, and engaging with seven grandchildren.