

# Refugee Ministry in the Global Seventh-day Adventist Church, an Overview

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William Wells currently serves as the Refugee Ministry coordinator at ASAP Ministries. Simultaneously he is working on a Doctor of Missiology with a research emphasis on refugees and diasporas. William's journey into the topic of refugees began about nine years ago as the Syrian refugee crisis became known. William is married to Rahel Wells, and together they enjoy theology, ministry, and the great outdoors.

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## Introduction

Refugees are a population sector in the world that has been growing steadily over the last decade. They are one subset of the global population that are considered immigrants, but unlike economic migrants they are forcibly displaced. The UNHCR defines a refugee as,

... Someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries.<sup>1</sup>

Every refugee begins as an asylum seeker after leaving their country of origin. To differentiate, an internally displaced person is categorized similarly as a refugee, but they do not leave their country of origin but stay within their national borders.<sup>2</sup>

Displaced persons because of war, violence, or persecution for the reasons listed above make their decisions to leave their home or country of origin out of extremity. Additionally, climate driven events also cause forced displacement of millions every year. Sometimes this can play a part in the overall refugee experience; yet, on its own, it does not provide grounds for refugee status determination. It is possible that one day climate driven displacement may be included in the official legal constructs of international law.

When refugees do leave, they begin to journey what is called the "refugee highway." The refugee highway is a descriptor for the process a person will go through in their displacement.<sup>3</sup> Out of a need for safety they leave their home. They may stay in a neighboring location in their country until they are forced again to cross into another country. Once they do cross to another country, they are eligible to seek a protected status as an asylum seeker or refugee with the United Nations. This only guarantees protections and rights if the host country is an adoptee of the UN Human Rights conventions on refugees.<sup>4</sup> Once this status is achieved by an

individual, they wait, often for up to twenty years or more, for a durable solution to their displacement. Less than 1 percent of refugees are ever resettled into a developed nation.<sup>5</sup> All other refugees either wait, move to other countries looking for better options, or repatriate when stability has returned to their home country, and it is safe to do so.

## Why Should Adventists Minister to Refugees?

The movement of peoples around the globe today demonstrates God's kingdom purposes of bringing people from isolated regions of the world into proximity of the church.<sup>6</sup> This movement is observed in the Bible and throughout Christian history.<sup>7</sup> It demonstrates God's continued desire for the church to witness for the kingdom of God and lead to redemption the migrating masses.

From the very beginning and at the direction of God in Genesis 1:28, humans were to fill the earth. This implies movement from the garden outwards. Not long into the biblical narrative the first record of forcibly displaced persons and migration is recorded when Adam and Eve are sent out from the garden. Through the rest of Genesis migration and forced displacement is recorded in story after story. It paints a narrative of the reality that humanity is closely tied to migration and that the story of migration is embedded within the human experience. The Exodus marks a major turning point in which the story of migration, displacement, and refugees becomes anchored into God's covenant with His people. God specifically includes the resident alien or foreigner into both the cultic and civic laws of Israel (Exod. 12:49, 20:10, 22:21, 23:9, 23:12; Lev. 19:9, 10, 19:33; 34; Deut. 10:18, 19, 24:14, 17, 27:19). These resident aliens or foreigners are given the same protections and inclusions as the widows and orphans that make up the most protected people in Israel and are commonly referred to as the "vulnerable triad." The prophets pronounce judgment on Israel for the horrible treatment of foreigners (as well as widows and orphans) as part of the violation of the covenant (Jer. 22:3, Mal. 3:5).

The New Testament (NT) does not abrogate the Old Testament command and teaching but enhances it further even though it is less vocal on the subject. Jesus Himself was a refugee, forced from his home in Bethlehem with his family to Egypt due to the soon coming wrath of King Herod, who wanted Him killed (Matt. 2:11-16). In Jesus' teaching He provided the principles of ministry to the foreigner or stranger through the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and in His own life (Mark 7:25-30, John 4). Jesus builds on this in His last series of parables in Matthew when He indicates that serving the "least of these" included the stranger. Those who did serve the stranger are called His sheep and are granted a place in His kingdom (Matt 25:31-46).

The early Christian church spread as a result of being persecuted and, being refugees, fled from Jerusalem across the Roman Empire for safety and the proclamation of the Gospel (Acts 8:1-3, 11:19, 20). Paul, James, and Peter all speak toward the importance of ministry to the stranger and hospitality as crucial elements of ministry in the church (Rom 12:13, Heb 13:2, James 1:27, 1 Pet. 4:9). One of the best passages that demonstrates God's heart and missional intent when it comes to the migrating masses who are refugees, displaced, and more is Acts

17:26, 27: "And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us. . . ." Paul is showing the connection between the movement of humanity, God's design and how, through it, the purpose to draw the nations to Him is being fulfilled.

Ellen G. White (EGW) further supports this theological foundation with numerous statements on the importance of reaching foreigners. Her magnum opus statement on the subject, written in 1914, is her final and fullest comment about ministry with migrants from over forty years of writing on it:

God would be pleased to see far more accomplished by His people in the presentation of the truth for this time to the foreigners in America [or any country] than has been done in the past. . . . As I have testified for years, if we were quick in discerning the opening providences of God, we should be able to see in the multiplying opportunities to reach many foreigners in America [or any country] a divinely appointed means of rapidly extending the third angel's message into all the nations of earth. God in His providence has brought men to our very doors and thrust them, as it were, into our arms, that they might learn the truth, and be qualified to do a work we could not do in getting the light before men of other tongues. There is a great work before us. The world is to be warned. The truth is to be translated into many languages, that all nations may enjoy its pure, life-giving influence. This work calls for the exercise of all the talents that God has entrusted to our keeping,—the pen, the press, the voice, the purse, and the sanctified affections of the soul<sup>8</sup>

The importance and urgency of ministering to refugees are set before Seventh-day Adventists in the Bible and in the writings of EGW. No matter the country or place on the refugee highway, wherever a refugee or foreigner is located there is a responsibility to minister to the needs of the individual and to share the gospel. Ministry to persons along the refugee highway is one place Seventh-day Adventists have in the past and today can continue to make a difference.<sup>9</sup>

Today nearly four hundred thousand babies are born every year to families and single-mothers who are refugees. Every year the number of displaced persons is always increasing.<sup>10</sup> This is reason enough that ministry in this area is of special concern for both the humanitarian and the spiritual needs of those experiencing displacement and the traumas thus associated. To recognize this need, the Seventh-day Adventist Church adopted in 2016 a day of remembrance called, "World Refugee Sabbath," which marks the third Sabbath of June every year as a day to remember, learn, advocate, pray, and serve the refugees and displaced around the world.<sup>11</sup>

For consideration, the refugee ministry has two sides. First, there is a ministry with refugees who are displaced along the "refugee highway" in the world, many of whom are in developing nations and, since around 2000, 60 percent of whom now live in urban centers rather than refugee camps.<sup>12</sup> The second side of the refugee ministry is the ministry to the refugees once they are resettled, i.e., a Syrian refugee family being resettled in Germany

from a city in Turkey or a Sudanese being resettled in Canada from a camp in Uganda. Ministry to the resettled refugee is just as important as ministry along the refugee highway, where they are scattered abroad. The next two sections will briefly describe Adventist Ministries seeking to work with refugees, both along the refugee highway and in settlement.

To further highlight the importance of this ministry in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Biblical Research Institute Ethics Committee (BRIEC) released a statement in 2021 titled, “The Love of God Compels Us,” in which the place and importance for a compassionate response by the global church is part of the Great Commission and a “sacred responsibility to be actively engaged to work for the health and well-being of others and to share God’s grace and salvation to a perishing world.”<sup>13</sup>

## Ministry Along the Refugee Highway

Once a person is displaced from their home or country, they begin traveling the refugee highway. This journey in life takes a person or family through many hardships and turns. Today, nearly every division in the Seventh-day Adventist Church touches this highway. The divisions of the church that contain the largest outward movement of refugees and displaced persons include (these can change any given year given sociopolitical and environmental factors): East-Central Africa (ECD), Euro-Asia (EUD), Inter-American (IAD), Middle-East North-Africa Union (MENA), Southern Asia-Pacific Division (SSD), and West-Central Africa Division (WAD). In each of these divisions special effort is taken to minister to the refugees and displaced persons who are moving and looking for life’s basic necessities like safety, shelter, and food. No two divisions have the same model or structure for refugee ministry within their context. Coordination of these ministries is often done by the Adventist Mission or Adventist Muslim Relations directors. Some divisions have had ministries to refugees as an ongoing part of what they do. The 2020-2025 “I Will Go” General Conference strategic initiative encourages each church entity to seek, identify, and be intentional in fulfilling two Key Performance Indicators (KPI 2.7 and 2.8) as part of the global churches’ goal of reaching the world.<sup>14</sup>

Many countries within each of these divisions host large populations of refugees and displaced persons. In each of these countries and administrative sectors of the church, mission and ministry meet together in ways that are often very challenging. Governmental laws and legal frameworks sometimes dictate what can and cannot be done by the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) or institutionally led activities. Yet, on a personal and church level, restrictions can be less prohibitive as the “stranger” is ministered unto personally as Jesus directed in Matthew 25:34-40.

## Adventist Ministry With Resettled Refugees

The practice of refugee ministry is also very important in countries that welcome and resettle refugees. For each country the process of resettlement is different. The needs for a resettled family are nearly the same no matter

what country is processing and hosting their resettlement. Depending on the country, the amount of government support and the requirements of the host community, church, or sponsors will vary.

As refugees are resettled, local government or non-government agencies receive the refugees and rely on local community volunteers and partners to assist. Any refugee ministry begins with meeting humanitarian needs as the beginning point. Practical support relationships can be formed. It is through these relationships that the kingdom of God can be shared. In addition to the practical support and developing relationships, help through psycho-social-spiritual support is vitally important as many refugees have experienced tremendous trauma and need help navigating their mental health and spiritual challenges. As kingdom-oriented relationships are formed and trust is established, discipleship can follow for those who take an interest in spiritual things.

The divisions of the Seventh-day Adventist Church that receive the largest inflow of refugees, asylum seekers, or displaced persons include (these can change year by year given sociopolitical and environmental factors): Inter-European (EUD), North American (NAD), South American (SAD), South Pacific (SPD), Southern Asia (SUD), Southern-Asia Pacific (SSD), and the Trans-European Division (TED). In each of these divisions proactive measures are taken to minister to the refugees who are arriving. Coordination of these ministries is overseen by various departmental leaders, ADRA, and the North American Division Multilingual Ministries.

## Summary

The global nature of refugees and displaced persons indicates that this population segment will stay present in the world until Jesus comes. In the movement of peoples, the hand of God is at work in bringing people from around the globe into places where they can hear the gospel and be invited into the kingdom of God and be disciples of Jesus. Today's missional potential is an opportunity for all Seventh-day Adventist believers to serve and share Jesus to the nations that now live next door.

For more information on the subject of ministry with immigrants and refugees, see the *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* that includes numerous articles and two specific volumes focusing on this area of ministry.<sup>15</sup> And each year the third Sabbath of June is World Refugee Sabbath and is marked as a time to pray, learn, advocate, and serve the displaced and suffering in the world today.

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