

# Adventist Refugee Ministry in North America

---

## WILLIAM WELLS

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.

---

The first immigrants reached by the young Advent movement in North America were French, German, and Norwegian-speaking persons in the mid-west and Canada in 1857. More recently, in June 2009 the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists created Adventist Refugee and Immigrant Ministries (ARIM) that specifically focuses on coordinating and directing the work of more than eighteen language-specific refugee and immigrant groups in North America. Beyond the organized institutions of the Seventh-day Adventist church, two independent ministries have taken active roles in refugee ministry: Adventist Frontier Missions and ASAP Ministries (Advocates for Southeast Asians and the Persecuted).

## Introduction

The North American continent has seen numerous waves of migration. Both Canada and the United States, as modern nation-states, formed as a result of these waves of migration and have long been the end of the refugee highway where many displaced persons and refugees long to resettle.<sup>1</sup> Today, the North American Division (NAD), comprised of Canada and the United States and its territories, receives steady flows of migrants and refugees. Both countries are signatories of the 1967 United Nations Protocol *Relating to the Status of Refugees* (Canada, 1969; United States, 1968)<sup>2</sup> and have generally maintained an open posture towards refugees since the ending of World War II.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of a refugee gained its modern use and prominence through the organization of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. A refugee is defined 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... War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, internally displaced persons and asylum seekers are included in worldwide estimates of all persons who are displaced. Not only do Canada and the United States receive refugees, they also receive many asylum seekers (United States) or refugee claimants (Canada). Both countries process refugees and asylum seekers differently, which this short article is not designed to describe or make any moral evaluation.

It is important though to consider that refugees and displaced persons have a much longer history in North America than the post-World War II era. When considering the definitions of displacement, refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced persons have been a part of the human experience for thousands of years. Even in North America, the First Nations peoples inhabiting the continent became the first refugees and displaced persons after the arrival of European immigrants, and were subjected to genocide and many other cruel machinations of the emerging governments.<sup>5</sup> Indigenous peoples became refugees. Many of the European arrivals were also refugees, fleeing some of the same problems, i.e., violence because of religion, race, or social group. One more group of people who were forcibly displaced were the Africans, brought as economic slaves during the early centuries of European and American civilization in North America. It is important to understand this historical tension when considering the Adventist responses today. Especially with Adventism's role in abolition and mission to immigrants arriving by the tens of thousands until the early twentieth century and then after World War II.

## A Growing Ministry Towards Immigrants and Refugees

Historically, ministry by Seventh-day Adventists to foreigners and displaced persons began in the United States and Canada.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century and into the first two decades of the twentieth century, immigration into the United States and Canada from Europe was at an all-time high. A lesser number also came from Asia.

The first immigrants reached by the young Advent movement were French, German, and Norwegian-speaking persons in the mid-west and Canada.<sup>7</sup> They were reached through the translation of Adventist publications in 1857. It was not until 1873 that Ellen G. White made her first statement about reaching the immigrants and foreigners in America and Canada. Her last was in 1914. Over nearly forty years, she urged the Adventist Church to harness the opportunity of reaching immigrants, displaced persons, and refugees (using the mid-twentieth century term adopted by the UN). Officially, work with these populations began in 1905 with the formation of the North American Foreign Department,<sup>8</sup> which was reorganized 1957 as the North American Home-Foreign Bureau, and later yet renamed the North American Missions Committee. It was given the additional responsibility of coordinating mission work with the First Nations tribes.<sup>9</sup> The North American Missions Committee coordinated mission with other language groups living in North America until 1988 when it was reorganized again and named the NAD Multilingual Ministries department.<sup>10</sup> The purpose of the department is to be more intentional in reaching the multitude of languages represented in the North American Division.

Meanwhile, as the North American Home-Foreign Bureau was shifting to a new focus, a new committee, the Committee on Displaced Persons, was formed in 1946 to explore and direct the efforts of assisting displaced persons after World War II.<sup>11</sup> It was created in response to the overwhelming numbers of refugees in Europe after World War II. Its purpose was to sponsor and resettle displaced Adventist refugees after the war. By 1988, more than 11,000 Adventist refugees had been brought to America from Europe and Southeast Asia.<sup>12</sup> During the same forty years, the committee had changed names several times, including the Disaster and Relief Committee (today known as ADRA)<sup>13</sup> and the NAD Refugees Committee,<sup>14</sup> later reorganized under the NAD Church Ministries Department.<sup>15</sup>

During the decade of the 1980s, several organizations began initiatives assisting refugees and displaced persons across the globe. Rosemary Entz, along with her committee members, carried the burden for refugee sponsorship in North America under the NAD Refugee Committee.<sup>16</sup> The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), which provided helpful oversight of the Refugee Committee, also initiated and managed numerous projects with refugees around the world. Currently, ADRA provides services and ministry with various refugee populations located in the countries where they are working (See ADRA for more details).<sup>17</sup>

The NAD is the only division, so far, to have a multilingual ministries department. In June 2009 it created a coordinator position called Adventist Refugee and Immigrant Ministries (ARIM), which specifically focuses on coordinating and directing the work of more than eighteen language-specific refugee and immigrant groups in North America through church planting consultants. ARIM has observed the growth of refugee ministry from nine languages to more than eighteen; from fifty-seven to more than 170 congregations; membership in refugee congregations has quadrupled along with tithe, which increased eight-fold from \$300,000 per year to more than \$3 million tithe dollars per year, according to Terri Saelee, ARIM coordinator. This has the potential to continue to grow as all levels of the Church seek to serve refugees in their local communities. Ministry to refugees from Islamic countries are coordinated by Adventist Muslim Relations (AMR).<sup>18</sup>

Within the NAD various conferences have sought to incorporate a refugee ministry coordinator position (sometimes titled differently) at one time or another. These include the Oregon, Iowa-Missouri, and Michigan conferences. At the conference level, the general purpose was to seek to better coordinate and direct the work of church planting and ministry with refugees. Beyond the conference level, many churches in both Canada and the United States have sought to serve refugees as a congregation through direct support or sponsorship. To list the number of congregations who have or are currently working with refugees and to what capacity they serve is not possible here. In addition to this, Adventist Community Services (ACS) is a resource that is readily available to help guide a congregation through the process of serving the humanitarian and psycho-social needs of refugees<sup>19</sup> along with ARIM and AMR.

Beyond the organized institutions of the Seventh-day Adventist church, there are two notable independent ministries that have taken active roles in refugee ministry. Adventist Frontier Missions (AFM) adopted refugee

ministry in the 1980s through the work of Judy Aitken. Today, it continues to conduct relief work in the countries where its missionaries are operating.<sup>20</sup> In 1995, ASAP Ministries (Advocates for Southeast Asians and the Persecuted), founded by Judy Aitken, grew out of AFM's original refugee ministry vision. ASAP Ministries' work with refugees has continued to expand and is now working with refugees and displaced persons in many countries. ASAP's work with refugees over more than two decades has helped to grow the Adventist church throughout Southeast Asia and beyond.<sup>21</sup> ASAP Ministries works in coordination with ARIM and other Adventist institutional leaders to support, guide, and advocate on behalf of refugees in North America and beyond.

## Summary

Interest in refugees and refugee ministry waxes and wanes as world events and public opinions change, yet members of the Seventh-day Adventist church in North America continue to believe that God has providentially led the Church's various ministries to refugees much in the same way as he has brought refugees from across the globe into the NAD for the purpose of extending to them a knowledge of the Kingdom of God and his soon return. Ellen G. White summarized this model of ministry succinctly in 1914:

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>22</sup>

The possibilities of God's missional intentions surrounding refugees and the migration of humanity today can be found in several issues of the *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*<sup>23</sup> and from the Biblical Research Institute Ethics Committee (2021, 8-10).<sup>24</sup> Even though countries may be closed to the preaching of the gospel, nearly the whole world is represented in the NAD, which grants an opportunity to fulfill God's kingdom purposes in ministry to the diasporas and refugees whom God has "thrust them . . . into our arms." This can be seen in the 2020-2025 "I will Go" initiative, where two specific Key Performance Indicators include ministry towards these groups (KPI 2.7 and 2.8).<sup>25</sup> One other helpful resource is "World Refugee Sabbath," which is the third Sabbath of June every year and is set aside as a day to remember, learn, advocate, pray, and serve the refugees and displaced around the world.<sup>26</sup>

The presence and reality of displaced persons and refugees extends back to the First Nations peoples and continues to the present, where millions are displaced for similar reasons. Since 1873, the Adventist Church in North America has utilized the movement of peoples as a means of rapidly extending a knowledge of Jesus' kingdom and soon return. As the needs grow, so does the urgency. Refugee ministry is one of many ways that local church members, churches, conferences, and unions extend a global ministry from their own local communities. And though this field is dynamic and always changing, Adventist continue to believe God is orchestrating his people, church, and the movements of humanity in such a way as to bring to pass his purposes in this world.

---

## SOURCES

Adventist Community Services, 2022. Accessed November 29, 2022.

<https://www.nadadventist.org/departments/adventist-community-services>

"A History of Service." Adventist Development and Relief Agency, 2009. Accessed December 2, 2022.

[https://web.archive.org/web/20090216062722/http://www.adra.org/site/PageNavigator/who\\_we\\_are/our\\_history](https://web.archive.org/web/20090216062722/http://www.adra.org/site/PageNavigator/who_we_are/our_history)

"ADRA Commits to Achieving Objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees." Adventist Development and Relief Agency, 2019. Accessed November 27, 2022. <https://adra.org/tag/refugees>.

ASAP Ministries, 2022. Accessed November 21, 2022. [www.asapministries.org](http://www.asapministries.org).

Biblical Research Institute Ethics Committee. "The Love of God Compels Us: A Statement of the Biblical Research Institute Ethics Committee (BRIEC) on the Humanitarian Crisis of Refugees, Migrants, and Displaced Persons." *Reflections* 74 (May 2021): 8-10. Accessed December 6, 2022. <https://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/Reflections-74-April-June-2021.pdf#page=8>.

Blackmer, Sandra A., Victor J. Hulbert, and Corrado Cozzi. "World Refugee Sabbath." Adventist World Radio, 2020. Accessed November 29, 2022. <https://www.adventistworld.org/world-refugee-sabbath/>.

Charles, Mark and Soong-Chan Rah. *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2019.

"The Church's Ministry to Refugees." *The Atlantic Union Gleaner*. August 13, 1985.

Cooper, Emma Howell. *The Great Advent Movement*. Rev. and Enl. ed. Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1968.

General Conference Committee. General Conference Archives. Accessed February 26, 2023.

<https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC>

Halswick, Louis M. *Mission Fields at Home*. Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, [1946] 2013.

Hoerder, Dick. "European Migrations." In *The Oxford Handbook on American Immigration and Ethnicity*, edited by Ronald H. Bayer, 35-52. New York: Oxford, 2016.

*Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, 2022. Accessed November 27, 2022.

<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jams/>.

Martin, Susan F. "Forced Migration in North America." In *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, edited by Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Gil Loescher, Katy Long, and Nando Signoa, 677-689. New York: Oxford, 2014.

"Multilingual Ministries." North American Division, 2022. Accessed November 22, 2022.

<https://www.nadadventist.org/departments/multilingual-ministries?page=0>

North American Division Committee. General Conference Archives. Accessed February 26, 2023.

<https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/NAD>.

Olsen, M. Ellsworth. *Origin and Progress of Seventh-day Adventists*. Takoma Park, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1926.

"Refugee Ministry." Adventist Frontier Missions, 2022. Accessed November 27, 2022.

<https://afmonline.org/missionaries/detail/2597>.

Sahlin, Monte and Rosemary Entz. "North America Celebrates 40 Years of Refugee Ministry." *ARH*, December 15, 1988. 1372-1373.

Spalding, Arthur W. *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists*. Vol. 3. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1962.

"Strategic Plan: 'I Will Go.'" Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2020. Accessed November 27, 2022.

<https://iwillgo2020.org>.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "What is a Refugee?" UNrefugees.org, 2020. Accessed December 30, 2020. <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/>.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees." United Nations Treaty Collection, 1967. Accessed December 11, 2022.

[https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtmsg\\_no=V-5&chapter=5](https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtmsg_no=V-5&chapter=5)

Wells, William. "Foreigners in America: A Study of Migration, Mission History, and Ellen G. Whites Missional Model." *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 185-199. Accessed January 6, 2020.

<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jams/vol15/iss2/12>

Wells, William. "Seventh-day Adventist Mission to Immigrants from 1920-1965: An Exploration of Immigration Trends, Laws, and the Churches Missional Response." D.Miss. diss., Andrews University, 2020.

White, Ellen G. "The Foreigners in America." *ARH*, October 29, 1914.

"Why are We Called the Refugee Highway Partnership?" Refugee Highway Partnership, 2022. Accessed November 22, 2022. <https://www.rhpna.com>.

---

## NOTES

1. "Why are We Called the Refugee Highway Partnership?" Refugee Highway Partnership, 2022, accessed 22 November 2022, <https://www.rhpna.com>.
2. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees." United Nations Treaty Collection, 1967, accessed December 11, 2022, [https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtmsg\\_no=V-5&chapter=5](https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtmsg_no=V-5&chapter=5).
3. Susan F. Martin, "Forced Migration in North America," in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, ed. by Elena Fiddian-Qasbiyeh, Gil Loescher, Katy Long, and Nando Signoa (New York: Oxford, 2014), 677-689.
4. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "What is a Refugee?" UNrefugees.org, 2020, accessed December 30, 2020, <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/>.
5. Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah, *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011), 111-113, 119-124; Dick Hoerder, "European Migrations," in *The Oxford Handbook on American Immigration and Ethnicity*, ed. by Ronald H. Bayer (New York: Oxford, 2016), 34-38.
6. William Wells, "Foreigners in America: A Study of Migration, Mission History, and Ellen G. Whites Missional Model," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 185-199, accessed January 6, 2020, <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jams/vol15/iss2/12>. See also M. Ellsworth Olsen, *Origin and Progress of Seventh-day Adventists* (Takoma Park, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1926); Arthur W. Spalding, *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists*, vol. 3 (Washington, D.C: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1962); Emma Howell Cooper, *The Great Advent Movement*, rev. and enl. ed. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1968); Louis M. Halswick, *Mission Fields at Home* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, [1946] 2013).
7. William Wells, "Foreigners in America: A Study of Migration, Mission History, and Ellen G. Whites Missional Model," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 185-199, accessed January 6, 2020, <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jams/vol15/iss2/12>.
8. William Wells, "Foreigners in America: A Study of Migration, Mission History, and Ellen G. Whites Missional Model," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 198-202, accessed January 6, 2020, <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jams/vol15/iss2/12>.
9. General Conference Committee, May 9, 1957, 879, General Conference Archives, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC1957-05.pdf>; William Wells, "Seventh-day Adventist Mission to Immigrants from

- 1920-1965: An Exploration of Immigration Trends, Laws, and the Churches Missional Response" (DMiss diss., Andrews University, 2020).
10. North American Division Committee, November 1, 1988, 197, General Conference Archives, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/NAD/NAD19881101-01.pdf>.
  11. General Conference Committee, March 28, 1946, 2345, General Conference Archives, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC1946-03.pdf>; General Conference Committee, December 13, 1948, 1302, General Conference Archives, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC1948-12.pdf>.
  12. Monte Sahlin and Rosemary Entz, "North America Celebrates 40 Years of Refugee Ministry," *ARH*, December 15, 1988, 1372-1373.
  13. General Conference Committee, February 5, 1959, 216, General Conference Archives, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC1959-02.pdf>; General Conference Committee, March 26, 1959, 246, General Conference Archives, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC1959-03.pdf>.
  14. "The Church's Ministry to Refugees." *The Atlantic Union Gleaner*, August 13, 1985, 16-17.
  15. Monte Sahlin and Rosemary Entz, "North America Celebrates 40 Years of Refugee Ministry," *ARH*, December 15, 1988, 1372-1373.
  16. "The Church's Ministry to Refugees," *The Atlantic Union Gleaner*, August 13, 1985, 15-16.
  17. "A History of Service," Adventist Development and Relief Agency, 2009, accessed December 2, 2022, [https://web.archive.org/web/20090216062722/http://www.adra.org/site/PageNavigator/who\\_we\\_are/our\\_history](https://web.archive.org/web/20090216062722/http://www.adra.org/site/PageNavigator/who_we_are/our_history); "ADRA Commits to Achieving Objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees," Adventist Development and Relief Agency, 2019, accessed November 27, 2022, <https://adra.org/tag/refugees>.
  18. "Multilingual Ministries," North American Division, 2022, accessed November 22, 2022, [https://www.nadadventist.org/departments/multilingual-ministries?page=0](https://www.nadadventist.org/departments/multilingual-ministries?page=0;); Terri Saelee, interview by author, Berrien Springs, Michigan, December 5, 2022.
  19. Adventist Community Services, 2022, accessed November 29, 2022, <https://www.nadadventist.org/departments/adventist-community-services>.
  20. "Refugee Ministry," Adventist Frontier Missions, 2022, accessed November 27, 2022. <https://afmonline.org/missionaries/detail/2597>.
  21. ASAP Ministries, 2022, accessed November 21, 2022, [www.asapministries.org](http://www.asapministries.org).
  22. Ellen G. White, "The Foreigners in America," *ARH*, October 29, 1914, 4.



23. *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, 2022, accessed November 27, 2022, <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jams/>.
  24. Biblical Research Institute Ethics Committee, "The Love of God Compels Us: A Statement of the Biblical Research Institute Ethics Committee (BRIEC) on the Humanitarian Crisis of Refugees, Migrants, and Displaced Persons," *Reflections* 74 (May 2021): 8-10, accessed December 6, 2022, <https://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/Reflections-74-April-June-2021.pdf#page=8>.
  25. "Strategic Plan: 'I Will Go,'" Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2020, access November 27, 2022, <https://iwillgo2020.org>.
  26. Sandra A. Blackmer, Victor J. Hulbert, and Corrado Cozzi, "World Refugee Sabbath," Adventist World Radio, 2020, accessed November 29, 2022, <https://www.adventistworld.org/world-refugee-sabbath/>.
- 

encyclopedia.adventist.org is an official website of the [Seventh-day Adventist World Church](#)

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000