Church Planting Among Refugees in Perth, Australia

Every year in the last few years 13,000 refugees come to Perth. Most of them come from war ravaged parts of the world including Sudan, Burundi, Afghanistan, and the Thai/Burma border. In 2005 two families of refugees from Sudan and Burundi started to attend the Morley Seventh-day Adventist Church in the mid-east northern suburbs of Perth. This multi-cultural church averaged seventy participants on Sabbath. The local church pastor, John Horvath, noticed these new families and made a visit. These visits proved to be fruitful. Six years later there are five new churches and 120 people have been baptized. In that time John and the team he has developed have learned a number of key factors in successful ministry to refugees to Australia.

The Leader Must be Prepared

Pastor John Horvath, a man in his fifties, is the son of a Hungarian soldier and German mother. He was brought up in the bush or isolated parts of North Queensland, Australia. As a boy he remembers being called names because he was a new Australian (a much nicer name than others that were used). Life was tough and his father and mother struggled with the new language and culture. After John met Jesus in prison he travelled and worked as a natural health worker and volunteer lay ministry in other countries including Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Honduras, Canada, the United States, and Tonga. After he became a pastor he served the people of Kiribati as a pastoral leader for four years. This personal background and cross-cultural ministry experience gave him the capacity to relate to people from different cultural backgrounds. He was able to listen to and connect with the refugees coming to Australia. As a person, John is a rugged individual with a tough exterior but a very soft heart. He knows what it is like to be an underdog—an Australian expression with various connotations including coming from a low socio-economic background in life. John is very down to earth, open, and flexible in relating to...
people. His compassionate heart for the marginalized and broken is evident if you spend time with him. This is a very passionate, hardworking man. The more recent new Australians love him, greeting him with smiles, handshakes, and hugs—depending on the culture.

**Go and Visit the People**

One of the ladies John first visited from Burundi had a list of the people who had arrived in Perth on the same plane as she and her family. She went with John and visited many of these families, welcoming them to Australia. John would bring a small food parcel or excess bread from a local bakery. Another recent arrival knew when others from their country were arriving on a plane. John and some of the other new migrants met the plane with small gifts of welcome. A few of the arrivals were also Adventists and they gave John names of some of their friends. Because John was willing to visit in the homes he developed a huge network of friends among the refugees.

**Understand the Needs of the People**

John knew what it meant to be found and saved by Jesus himself. He now shares Jesus’ same passion to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). His ministry philosophy is based on a statement regarding ministry to people from the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s visionary founder Ellen White. “Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me’” (White 1942:143).

Most refugees that John and his team have worked with are from Burundi, Sudan, and the Karen people from the Thai/Burma border. All of these people have come from a simple agricultural village life in the third world where family and community are the key values. They are black and white thinkers. Although Perth is a very liveable city, it is busy, loud, and spread out. It is an abstract concrete jungle in comparison. Everything is different—language, signs, food, culture, etc. The new migrants believe they are in a better place but feel lost in this new environment. The familiar sounds, smells, and people are replaced with completely new ones. However in all this turmoil most adults want to keep their own cultural rituals, values, and traditions.

Because refugees are initially dependent on government pensions to survive, some develop a welfare mentality. Refugees who used to be competent in previous cultures and who now have to learn the new language and modes of transport before they can work become frustrated. Frustration also comes from idleness among adults and children and can lead to
increased tension in the home and community. Drunkenness and fighting are sometimes a result and some just give up and accept what comes in the pension cheque every two weeks. As welfare is accepted, work becomes a distant dream.

All refugees need to learn to communicate in English, learn how to travel on public transport, or learn to drive. Most want to work and become self-sufficient but the process is not easy. They will do newspaper and junk mail rounds (distribution of advertizing pamphlets), and grow gardens just to get started. Eventually, as a result of work place training courses and previous experience, more find work. Common jobs include support work in the Aged Care industry and security companies.

Australian culture empowers woman more than the cultures of origin. Women receive the pensions and monetary support that each child is allowed in Australia. The women appreciate this new role and accept it as increased value in their personhood. Men struggle with what seems to devalue their traditional role as providers for the family. Adult men and women also struggle with the new freedom that their children receive. This freedom comes from a less structured and less rigid discipline in school and the fact that children pick up the language and the culture much quicker than the adults. Some families use this advantage to their benefit and get the children to do many of the interactive tasks between the family and the outside world. Others struggle because adults are supposed to be the competent ones, so some children do take advantage of their new freedom and can be hard to control.

John and his team have listened and ministered to and provided support in all of these challenging new situations for the refugees.

**Differentiate Between Cultural Groups**

John and his team work with three main people groups and have discovered the different characteristics of each of these groups.

The Karen people from the Thai/Burma border are quiet, shy, sensitive, relaxed, and gracious. They do not mix with the surrounding culture very much and can become condescending and passive aggressive when life becomes overwhelming.

The people from Burundi are very thankful for all the benefits they receive in their new country. They think the twice a month pension payments are like manna from heaven. They tend to think that all Australians are rich and can become jealous of others. This can lead to aggressive behavior. However they like visits as they like to talk.

The Sudanese are gracious, unassuming, but naive. They are driven by fear, in particular they fear Muslims and stick to the familiar.

Listening, mixing with, and observing people have helped to develop
this unique appreciation for the various ways the different refugees cope with their new world.

Develop a Niche Ministry

All refugees who come to Perth are processed through the Salvation Army or Catholic Migrant Centre. The people from these services provide support in getting the refugees their government payments through Centrelink (government pension agency). They also get them rental homes and furniture, enrollment in free education for all children, 500 hours of English as a second language, free government medical coverage, and connection to a free trauma counseling service. Monetary income, access to medical and support facilities, and a place to stay are basics needs for all people, not just refugees. The people working in this sector are well trained and do care, however their resources are stretched. Sometimes it is the little things that count. Besides offering free day old bread from a local bakery to refugees on what is known as a “bread round,” John and his team have found other ways to support the refugees. Food parcels, extra blankets, and clothes from op shops (thrift stores) have been appreciated. Fixing bikes or trampolines and providing simple home maintenance has been a blessing to many. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has purchased a couple of buses. John and others have taken women to new markets and shopping centers. He takes families to the beach and on picnics. They sometimes go for a drive in the country. Whenever the people get on the bus with people from their own culture they do not stop talking—these ongoing cultural links are important. When people have to move to a new house John has supplied suitable transport for the furniture. All these things show that the church does care and is the niche ministry that the church provides.

Working with ADRA (Adventist Development Relief Agency) Australia John has a group of people who teach refugees to drive for a reduced rate. Transport in a spread out suburban city like Perth is a must and the church is helping. Other projects that ADRA or the Seventh-day Adventist churches could work on include parenting skills in a new environment, the implications of handling finances in the extended family, a refuge for women and support for men who resort to violence as a coping mechanism because of all the change.

Be Upfront about Jesus, the Church, and Discipleship

In all the activities that John and his team do they do not hide their identity—they are proud Seventh-day Adventists. If the people show any interest in the Bible or spiritual things, Bible Studies that disciple people for Jesus are offered. The churches that have been established for refugees
offer children’s Sabbath Schools, Kids Clubs, sports, and game nights during the week. The buses that take people on special outings are also used to collect children and parents for church activities. Most of the refugees from Burundi, Sudan, and the Karen people are familiar with Christianity and its rituals. Many want a place to be connected to spiritually and because children and families are well catered for, many come. Christian Satellite TV is also offered for those who would like it. At least twice a year public evangelistic meetings are held in the rented church premises and translated into the different languages. These meetings are very popular and those who respond are followed up by Bible workers who give Bible studies in the home.

**Develop a Ministry Support Team**

Over the last six years John has developed a diverse team of people supporting the ministry with refugees. There are volunteers who help in visitation, driving the bus, giving other transport, running the kids programs, and other church programs. Two Pathfinder clubs have recently started as the children grow older and desire more fun-learning activities. There are Bible workers who are paid a minimum hourly rate to do pastoral care and Bible studies for those interested. In their doorknocking and letterboxing of cards they find new refugees to support and many choose to be involved in the churches in some way. The team John has built around him for this ministry has the same ability to connect with people at the grassroots—they too have had challenging situations in their backgrounds and although they do not always understand the cultural nuisances, their compassionate hearts cover a multitude of sins.

As the new Australians gain more confidence in their new home they become more involved in the expanding ministry. John takes great pride in telling us that the new church people translate during visits and Bible studies. They pick up people for various church meetings. There are two African driving instructors. Some prepare food at the church gatherings. Others organize church programs and lead out. Some have even returned to their home (since much of their income goes back to relatives in the refugee camps or home villages) and have taken the gospel and Adventist truth back to their families.

**There Are Always Challenges**

John is well loved by the people but as the ministry grows he has less time to be friends with all of the refugees. Some of them have the unrealistic expectation that John can help them with every little problem. It would be good if the Seventh-day Adventist Church could clone John! However he is the pioneering type—ministry and churches just grow up around
him and he cannot meet every need of the people as the ministry and new churches come into existence.

He would love the people to keep the good aspects of their cultural heritage and discard the unbiblical ones. However, often the opposite occurs. The immigrants soon get caught up in the materialistic lifestyle and learn to be as wasteful as others. Because of setbacks some lose the desire to work and become dependent on welfare. On the top of John’s wish list would be suitable free land for the people to farm, where they could grow their own vegetables and fruit and become more self-sufficient.

The visits of the new refugees six years ago really grew the Morley church. Within nine months they averaged 130 people and there was not enough space in the worship room or chairs to seat everyone. John was encouraged to start a church. He had completed some professional development on church planting so John chose to look for a ministry base in the suburb where many of the refugees came from—Koondoola. The local council had a civic hall that was available on Sabbaths and other times during the week. It was near a major shopping center and on public transport routes. When the local government saw what John and the Seventh-day Adventist Church were doing for the local families they offered the civic hall rent free. Koondoola All Nations Church was birthed with all three of the major people groups—Karen, Burundis, and Sudanese as participants as well as other nationalities including Australian born people. On most Sabbaths about eighty-five people worship and fellowship there.

Although the refugees often like to live in close proximity to each other this is not always possible. Adequate rental homes are not easy to find in an economy booming from mining growth. Many of the Burundis and Karen were living south of the Swan River which divides Perth into north and south. The less than direct and timely public transport system prevented many who wanted to come to worship from coming. The church buses were also full with people in their more local rounds. In 2007 the Queens Park All Nations group was started from people mainly from Burundi. They had secured a community hall that gave them good access in a quiet area not too far from where most of them lived. Thirty-five people worship there on any given Sabbath. In 2008, the Karen people formed another group in the south at Maddington. At first they used a veranda of a home of one of the church people. However this soon became too small and was too cold in winter and too hot in summer. Twenty-five Karen now worship in a community hall in the same area.

Gordon, a Sudanese who had been an Adventist before migrating to Australia, asked Pastor John to come to his house on Sabbath afternoon. John was surprised to see his back yard shed full with over twenty people who had gathered there for worship. John was asked to preach and
the people really liked it. A few Sundays later John took these Sudanese people to the beach for their first experience in the sand, sun, and surf. It nearly ended in disaster. Two young girls and an adult leader nearly drowned. They were saved by local people and the ambulance officers. A few days later the Sudanese community had a thanksgiving service. John was asked to speak to the 150 gathered and he is now called “Father John” and considered their pastor. Now about 40 Sudanese meet in a community center every Sabbath.

In 2010 John started another church in the Rivervale area just south of the Swan River, which is more multi-cultural but has a few refugees in it with about fifty people fellowshipping in a community hall each Sabbath.

John is a pioneering pastor, who is learning to listen to God’s call and plant churches where there are needy and receptive people. The Western Australian Conference leaders have recognized John’s gift and have given him the freedom to exercise it. The Western Australian Conference also provides good incentives to new churches—giving an evangelistic grant back to the local group based on the tithe received from their church. In this way the new churches are able to employ Bible workers to support the evangelism in the churches. John runs a three-hour Bible worker meeting each week. The meeting includes prayer, Bible study, testimonies of witness from the past week, and some practical training in developing the Bible workers’ ministry. At any given time he could have between six to nine Bible workers.

As the ministry expands John has to delegate more and more work to others. He finds this hard as he likes to be involved in hands-on ministry. The Conference is trying to support him and the new churches with leadership development. This is the greatest need in these churches. A new pastor, Abby Aviles, with a Filipino background and with similar passions for evangelism but with other gifts of nurture and leadership development, is now working in the Morley and Koondoola churches to bring continued growth for those people. John trailblazes the path, others build the road; John creates the church, others build it up.

There are many lessons that John, his team, and the Western Australian Conference have learned in working with refugees to plant churches.

**Know Your Objective—Let the Details Take Care of Themselves**

The church planter and team need to know that their objective is to establish a viable ministry among the refugees and ultimately to plant a church. An exact step-by-step plan is not needed, and is usually too complicated for people from a village to value its strategy. Besides, the opportunities that arise for ministry cannot be planned. John did not plan to vis-
it people who came off a plane until he had met a refugee who knew that information. God seems to open the door and if his people are there and listening they will make the most of the opportunities that are presented.

**Be Willing to Get Your Hands Dirty**

The people value hands-on ministry. If you are not willing to get down to their level nothing will happen. Delivering bread, fixing bikes, transporting furniture, and sitting and listening are keys to see this type of ministry develop.

**Cultural Differences Are Always a Challenge**

The expectations for church and how worship and discipleship are done vary from culture to culture. Sometimes the Australian culture clashes with the home cultures of the refugees. Australians are less formal and structured in worship style, like worship to flow, and are very upfront with how it should happen. The refugees prefer a far more structured and formal program but tend to be very passive in giving their point of view. Sometimes this creates tension between refugee groups or the Australian team and the new immigrants. This tension was not discovered until churches formed and started to meet. Church and worship do need to be a blend of the old and the new cultures but it takes time to work this through.

**Cultural Groups Function Best in Their Own Language Group**

When the ministry first started all the different cultures met and worked together, but this created chaos and tension at times. As numbers increased it was easier to work with larger groups of Karen, Sudanese, and Burundis on their own. People like things in their own language, even though all refugees receive 500 hours of free English classes. Church planters must realize that a new language can take years to learn.

**Discipleship and Leadership Takes Time**

Discipleship for refugees sometimes takes longer than others because of all of the new experiences they are facing. For example, eating healthy food is part of discipleship, but coming from places where food was rationed to a place where there is an abundance of food, even if it is not cheap, results in some people buying cheaper food or luxury and junk food that may not be the best for them. Healthy cooking courses however do make a difference. All of the communities have leaders, but it also takes time for these people to feel comfortable in their new environment to take
leadership. The natural leaders are often taken aback by Australians who are very brash and upfront but who may not be leaders at all. It takes the new arrivals awhile to work this difference through in their minds. Patience and gentle direction is continually needed in both discipleship and leadership development.

**Patience and Love Deal with Most Issues**

If you do not love people you really cannot do effective ministry. On one occasion John distributed some out of date tinned food to a number of families. One of the families saw that the food was out-of-date, alerted the other families, and most of them stopped being involved with the church. John could not work out what the issue was as nobody was talking. This was very frustrating to him and others. Eventually John was told that the people thought he was trying to poison them. John was able to explain that he eats out-of-date food and that the date is only “best before” the date on the can and that the people would know if the food was rotten as soon as they opened the can. John could have become disillusioned with these false accusations and passive aggressive behavior; however, by being patient and reminding the people that he had spent hours supporting them, they realized he really did care. God’s love through human lives does make a difference.

As more refugees come to Perth and the ministry grows there will be more to learn. John, the refugees, his team in the churches, and the Western Australian Conference are committed to allowing God to lead them to plant churches that connect with these refugees. After all, it is God’s mission and we humans are only invited to support God’s great work.

**Works Cited**


Glenn Townend has been President of the Western Australian Conference for eight years. During that time he has focused on fulfilling the vision of renewing the Adventist movement—reaching different people groups has been a part of that.