

# Love Thy Neighbor

Seminary students embrace Syrian refugees

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By: Samantha Angeles

On Friday, Feb. 3, a group of 22 Seminary students and eight Arabic translators headed to Kalamazoo, Michigan, to serve Syrian refugees who have fled the violence of [their nation's civil war](#).

The team was led by Hafiz Ally, co-president of the Seminary Student Forum (SSF), which sponsored the event. Ally discovered the Syrian families' need while searching for a way to complete the seminary's Week of Spiritual Emphasis.

"God placed upon our hearts that we needed to do some sort of outreach," he said. "We needed to do something practical to respond to the messages we would be hearing during the emphasis week."

Ally asked God to lead them to the right outreach opportunity. In November, he found himself before the Syrian refugees.

“My heart broke as I listened to their stories,” Ally admitted. “Some children had been in Michigan for a month but had only the clothes on their back. Same underwear, same thin windbreaker pants, same shirt. I wondered, how are they going to get through winter?”

In response, Ally mobilized the [Seminary](#) community to address the need. Throughout the Week of Spiritual Emphasis, the SSF collected nonperishable food items, winter clothes, diapers and funds. They also challenged students to join them on the trip to Kalamazoo. On Friday morning, they had a team of volunteers and enough supplies to fill two trailers.

As they made the hour-long drive to Kalamazoo from Andrews University, the students shared their reasons for coming on the trip.

“If we had to leave our country because of violence and couldn’t connect with other people because of fear, how would we want to be treated?” asked Yvette Parham, a third-year MDiv student. “God is not just a God of us Christians. He’s the God of everybody.”

Others, like Neil Santos, saw an opportunity to respond to the current political climate in the U.S.

“I wanted to see from their perspective, learn about the process they went through and see how they’re adjusting,” he said. “We’re all part of God’s big family, and as Christians we are to respond to social injustices.”

When they arrived in Kalamazoo, the group split into teams, loaded boxes with food and size-appropriate clothing, and began to visit families. In one home, the husband conversed with the male students in one room while his wife and two small daughters welcomed the female students in another, according to their custom. Despite the language barrier, the women were soon sitting on the bed laughing, sharing photos of family members and caring for the children.

“They were like family,” said Dorothy Ruffin-Pettigrew, a third-year MDiv student. “It was like we had known them for a long time. I felt like the Holy Spirit had gone before us, and we got to be God’s instrument, showing them that He loves them.”

One expecting Syrian mother shared ultrasound pictures of her third daughter, who is due in less than two weeks. Her family fled first to Jordan and then the U.S. when she was seven months pregnant. In Syria, her husband had been a successful businessman. The war had destroyed their home and business and now her greatest need is for warm clothes for her soon-to-be newborn baby.

Other students sat with individuals whose cities had been leveled to the ground before their eyes.

“They have no home to return to, and their families are scattered all throughout the globe,” one student said. “I can’t imagine what that would be like.”

Many students were impacted by the numerous people who expressed that, despite their lack of physical possessions, their greatest need is the closeness of a community. “They want us to be their family,” marveled Damien Grant, Seminary student.

Each family expressed deep gratitude for the shelter they have found in America and how privileged they are to be here. They also shared their concerns about relatives left behind in Syria and in refugee camps around the world. The translators communicated students’ promises to lift prayers on their behalf.

As they headed home, students shared repeatedly how much the trip helped them see that the Syrian refugees were three-dimensional humans, not a faceless group that is discussed in the media.

“The humanity of the Muslim community is what stood out to me the most,” said Grant. “We don’t really intermix with these communities, so we put them in a box and make assumptions about them. They are very loving people. Humble people. It was a great blessing that we could put smiles on their faces.”

The volunteers also discussed the further needs that had been discovered and ideas for how to serve in the future. Numerous students expressed their desire to reconnect with the families they had met.

“We’re planning the next trip in a month’s time,” said Ally. “We want to continue to build relationships.” In the meantime, Ally has helped Adventist pastors in Kalamazoo connect with the Syrian families to provide continuing support. “God has placed this on their hearts, too,” he said.

The team still needs funds to purchase food and clothing for the refugee families. Supporters can visit [gofundme.com/restorenexdoor](https://gofundme.com/restorenexdoor) to make a donation online.

“The Bible is always on the side of the refugee,” commented one volunteer. “That’s the person they call ‘the stranger in your land,’ and we are to do what the Bible says: take care of them.”

## Related Links

- [What's happening in Syria?](#)
- [What is a refugee?](#)
- [The Hands & Feet of Christ: Students take action to help local refugees](#)
- [More about the Seminary at Andrews](#)

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