

Mission in an Era of Migrants & Refugees

Conference raises awareness of this important ministry

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Attendees to the conference listen attentively to plenary speaker Will James on Thursday morning. James is the senior pastor of Paradise Valley Church in San Diego, California. (Photo by Clarissa Carbungco, IMC student photographer)

By: Hannah Gallant, with contributions from Samantha Angeles

Up to 300 people attended the Mission in an Era of Migrants and Refugees Conference held at Andrews University from September 13–16, 2017. The conference was sponsored by the Andrews University Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary Department of World Mission, the Lake Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, the NAD Evangelism Institute and NAD Adventist Refugee and Immigrant Ministries. Speakers came from a variety of locations and backgrounds including a conference president, a church pastor, ministry leaders and various academic professionals. There were also 42 breakout sessions on a widely diverse group of topics.

"We picked the topic of migrants and refugees because it is certainly in the news, it's a missiological issue, political issue, economic issue... All of us function in a political environment, but our job as Christians is to respond to refugees and migrants who come to our shores in a Christ-like way," says Gordon Doss, the primary conference organizer and professor of world mission in the seminary's Department of World Mission.

The conference began on Wednesday evening with a plenary session presented by Sung Kwon, director of NAD Adventist Community Services since 2001, and Gabriela Phillips, coordinator for Adventist Muslims Relations in the North American Division.

Kwon called the church as a whole to look beyond the politics of the influx of migrants and refugees and be a missional church community that participates actively and non-hypocritically. He pointed out the need for timeliness and dependability in the church's response. "It is not the church of God that has a mission. It's the God of mission that has a church," he proclaimed.

Following a touching personal story by Jimmy Shwe, a church planting consultant for the Karen community, Phillips poignantly addressed the need to recover and listen to refugee voices in the midst of their migration and confusion. She quoted how one refugee friend of hers asked, "At what point do we become ordinary people again?" This question echoes the widespread need for refugees to be heard and radically served in tangible ways that can foster normality, independence and dignity.

Phillips also asked the church to "re-humanize those lost behind faceless socio-economic labels" by recognizing that we were created in the image of God and have the capability to be rational, loving, thoughtful, connected, spiritual beings with others.

On Thursday morning, Will James, senior pastor of the Paradise Valley Church in San Diego, California, illustrated this idea of tangible assistance with a compelling story of his church's transformative experience of serving their local refugee population. They currently have a food distribution program, a locally accredited English language school, community gardens and a local thrift store/work training center for the refugees in their area. The 900-member church translates their Sabbath service into six languages (friendshipsforhope.org). "Love them. That's the biggest thing. Refugees are lonely, lost, don't have friends, don't know what to do, where to go, how to work the system — they need somebody who will love them for who they are and help them with whatever their needs are," James summarized.

Attendees Shirley and Jerry Finneman of Tabernacle Church in Battle Creek, Michigan, thanked James for inspiring them to start a refugee ministry in their community. They visited Paradise Valley Church years ago and were motivated to begin a refugee program in their area. Tabernacle now has an interdenominational ministry that partners with many local organizations to offer English language schools, evangelism through singing, local community gardens and other ministries to refugees. Two churches have been raised up from this ministry.

As part of the first Change Day at Andrews University, conference attendees and Andrews students demonstrated practical service by filling backpacks for Syrian refugee children. Ingrid Weiss Slikkers, assistant professor of social work at Andrews, says this project was intended to help "students to know there's a world outside of themselves" as well as "inspire Adventist church leaders to see what can be done for refugees."

That evening, Kristine van Noord, program manager for Bethany Christian Services' Refugee Adult & Family Programs, and Cristian Dumitrescu, professor of world mission and intercultural studies and research at the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies in the

Philippines, shared facts and statistics to correct misconceptions of refugees and raise further awareness.

“The difference between a refugee family that will thrive and a family that will barely survive is whether or not there is a church or organization that will co-sponsor the family,” describes van Noord.

Following this plenary session, Mariela Shaker, honored by President Barack Obama as a Champion of Change for World Refugees, shared her touching story as a Syrian refugee. She was at Aleppo University, receiving her diploma, when it was bombed and 82 students were killed. She spent the next six months running from bombs and mortar shells to find internet access and electricity to submit applications to graduate schools in the United States. Thankfully, a Muslim man in Saudi Arabia finally sponsored her to attend Monmouth College in Illinois.

“I live in constant fear for my family and friends that are still struggling to survive in Aleppo without the basic necessities of life. Every day, I wonder if they will be alive tomorrow. And I wonder if I will be reunited with them one day,” Shaker said.

She called the church to view refugees not as burdens, but rather displaced people who need a second chance. “Syria has many talented people, but life now is truly impossible for them. As they experience daily horror and death, Syria needs help. We need to hear the sound of music again, over guns.”

Her story was met with a standing ovation, and attendees gathered to surround her in prayer. The Lord’s Prayer was prayed simultaneously in Arabic and English, ending with a united “Amen.”

Daniel Carroll, Blanchard Chair in Old Testament at Wheaton College Graduate School in Illinois, served as the primary plenary speaker for Friday’s sessions. He focused on the necessity of seeing the refugee/immigrant issue from a biblical perspective instead of merely a political, economic or legal one. “Begin not with an immigrant’s legal status, but with their humanity,” said Carroll.

Carroll showed how the Bible is saturated with a theme of migration. Through the lives of Bible characters such as Joseph, Moses, Jacob, Ruth, etc. we see that God works through the migration of people. “The migration patterns of the world are part of the movement and mission of God, and He has called us to minister in their midst.”

On Sabbath, Dean Coridan, president of the Iowa-Missouri Conference, clarified the difference between migrants and refugees. “It’s a mistake to lump together migrants and refugees. Immigrants have a desire to come to this country. Refugees are here because they can’t live where they want to be because of persecution, civil wars, etc.,” explained Coridan. He emphasized that whether someone is an immigrant or refugee should not affect how we treat them. Both groups need the church to rise up and recognize our calling to serve them as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Homer Trecartin, director of the GC Global Mission Centers, was the closing plenary speaker for the conference, followed by a panel discussion held at the Howard Performing Arts Center.

As a final act, the entire group present voted this official statement: "The conference participants share the deep conviction that ministry to refugees and immigrants is a core element of the church's mission. We believe that ministry among refugees needs to be a part of local churches' commitment to missions. Therefore, we recommend appropriate action to enhance Adventist cooperation with other agencies and to develop refugee and immigrant ministries within the church organization."

Doss wrapped up the entire point of the conference, "If migrants/refugees live next door to me, it becomes incumbent upon me to respond as a Christian to them and say, how would Christ respond to them and how does the Bible guide me to respond to them? All the speakers have answered those questions from every different angle."

Video recordings of all plenary sessions are currently available [here](#), and materials and recordings from the conference will also be transferred to the online [Adventist Learning Community](#), making the information available to the wider church.

To learn more about how you can personally get involved with serving your local immigrant and refugee population, contact Terri Saelee, coordinator of Adventist Refugee and Immigrant Ministries for the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, at 608-443-6575, email terri.saelee@nad.adventist.org or visit refugeeministries.org.

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