

Dec 27 2024.ES.Hospitality with Refugees

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Sat, Dec 21, 2024 10:30PM • 38:28

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

hospitality with refugees, Mission Center president, Congolese refugee, Brussels community, World Service Corps, refugee awareness, climate refugees, World Refugee Day, refugee solidarity, language barriers, community space, local systems, cultural diversity, refugee support, refugee integration

SPEAKERS

Blake Smith, Joey Williams

Blake Smith 00:30

Hey, Project Zion Podcast listeners. This is Blake Smith, and I want to welcome you to another Extra Shot episode in the hospitality series. Recently, the Council of Presidents of Seventy led a two-day session on hospitality in the Central Mission Center. The council has been gracious enough to allow us to air these presentations for you, our listeners. This episode is titled, "Hospitality with Refugees," and was led by President of Seventy, Joey Williams.

Joey Williams 01:01

This session is going to focus on hospitality with refugees, and I have, this has fallen upon me as time has gone by. I used to be the mission center president, and I was also, most recently in the, the president of seventy for Europe and for Africa. But Africa is very recent, and I think it has something to do with some of the work that I've been doing in Europe and here in the United States as well. But how did I fall into work with refugees? Well, there was this guy named Elray, and Elray had just moved from Norway to Brussels in Belgium, and he had also just been called to serve as a seventy in Community of Christ. And so here I was mission center president, and you want to use your seventies, right? And so, every time I would go through and as I started to visit, because I didn't usually stop in Brussels, because he's the only member that we had in Brussels at the time. So, when I started to take trips to go see him, he would say, Joey, I'm really not sure what I need to do with my seventy call. And I said, Well, I've gotten some emails from this guy named Methode, and he has been asking. He says he's a Congolese refugee, and he's interested to know more about Community of Christ. And El Rey was [...], I used to work in Africa with my other agency, and that sounds like a lot of work. And he goes, I think it might be something different. So I go on to do some of my work. Go visit other people around Europe the next time I come about six months later, what do you think El Ray asked? Joey I've been really thinking about, what should I do with my new call to seventy? And I'm like, Well, I've met with this guy now named Methode. He seems pretty neat, and maybe you could go and meet him and talk about Community of Christ. He's like, Oh, I don't know. You know? I mean, I I've just been praying and really

thinking about what it is God has for me. Six months later, what do you think happens? Hey, Joey, I'm thinking, you know, what does God maybe have for my ministry here and... go meet Methode, Elray, go Methode. So finally, Elray takes the time to go do this. Elray is a person of signs. He looks for signs in his life. And as we get off the tram to go and visit Methode, where is the stop that we get off at? Martin Luther King, the it's the it's a square, the Martin Luther King Square in Brussels. For Elray, this was already a sign. And so, we go and we meet this guy, Methode, and it turns into meeting after meeting and month after month to finally renting a space, to bringing over a World Service Corps person, Kahelani from French Polynesia, who came to serve for two years in Brussels, but he's ended up moving to France. He's now been there six years as a World Service Corps volunteer, but he's been also part with Elray of growing this small group that started with a guy named Methode who contacted us and one member, two people in one location. Where there are two or more gathered there, I will be with you. And so, as we began to meet other people, we had some visitors, another visitor from French Polynesia who probably came to visit Kahelani, but heard of the good work that he was doing in Brussels, and wanted to meet this community as well. Sandy Gamet came and taught classes on peace, and I remember this one guy who had really had some issues, and when she came and talked about peace, not just being the absence of violence and conflict in our lives, but a filling of our lives with prosperity and goodness and wholeness, and seeking completeness in our lives, everything changed for him in his perspective. And so, this little class, that's the guy right there, and that's Sandy. Janae came, and she's taught us lots of fun songs, as you can imagine. And with time, that congregation began to grow. And now all the people you see over here are kind of the core group of leaders that work in Brussels right now. Of course, that came with a couple baptisms, which were kind of fun. This was also in the place that we rented. It had a little bitty patio in the middle of the home that we could go out. And so, of course, we use the kiddie pool. We bought a kiddie pool and filled it up, because we couldn't find a place in town, a hotel that would let us actually do a baptism in their hotel pool. So, we ended up coming up with, kind of our own idea of what that would look like. And then, of course, it came with classes and ordinations, until it was a full community with leaders in Brussels today. It extended outside of Brussels. There was a community of probably 60 or more people that spoke Swahili in a small town about an hour away from Brussels, called Verviers. And out of that, we met just with a couple families who were also very interested and they still have good connections, as they continue to share in ministry with the people there. You see Robin Linkhart, this is the Kahelani I was telling you about, and some of the minister ministry that he did. And then, of course, Elray, working with some of these kids. Verviers, do you remember when there were tons of there was tons of floods that happened in Germany, and it killed like 100 people or so, really horrible floods down their rivers. Well, Vervier was a town that's kind of near the German border, and it also flooded really bad. And I was amazed. I wish I had the pictures with me to show you some of the work that the congregation did there to collect bottles of water and some essential foods and send it over there. Even one of our kids had to have a stomach operation at that time, and just the support of some of the food and what they did for that family during that time was pretty amazing. So recently, I went to a hymn conference, a national hymn conference. And the question there was, what do you truly need? As we were thinking about some of the things going on in our world, and I have written now two songs kind of about needs of people in the world. One of them was specifically for the refugee group that I'm going to tell you about in a minute. But the other song I wrote just a couple months ago was this song, and it's actually not about a refugee group, but a migrant family that came from Honduras. I met this little boy when he was 11 years old building houses for Habitat for Humanity in Honduras, San Pedro Sula. And when he

became an adult, he's in his 40s now, he wrote me on Facebook one day and said, I'm coming across the border. And I go, Oh my gosh. The first two years were awful. And in fact, a couple months ago, he was in a really bad situation where he was being scammed, and a family had brought him in, you can come and stay with us. No worries. Two weeks later, we need \$1,000. So, he calls me and says, I don't know what to do. I'm in the worst situation. I need a place to go. I'm at my wit's end. I've done everything I can to survive here, and I can't do it anymore. And I called, and I tried to make ways for that to happen. Salvation Army, who often are the best at finding ways to meet people's physical needs said, if you can get him up to Olathe, we have a place for him. And so, he's out there right now with his family. This song came from that situation, and you'll hear themes that you've probably heard about in this, but I want to invite you not to sing it with me, because I wanted to be put on the spot, but you can be a part of it. So, if you just want to stomp and clap... [Joey sings...] "No more people forced to leave their homes, no more walls to climb, risky futures, unknown. No more children separated from their mama, sitting in a prison cell all alone. It's time to humanize. It's time to take a step back and to realize. It's time to reconnect sister, brother, help each other so that everyone survives." So when we talk about refugees, I bring this up because I want to recognize sometimes it's a lot easier with refugees. They come with status. They often come with the ability to get jobs. They get a number, an identification number, they can legally be here, legally find work. But we need to remember, there's other migratory groups, asylum seekers and immigrants and others who have come, who may not have those same legal status or ability to kind of make their lives start to happen. So I just wanted to mention that as we talk about forced displacement, that often is the result of that. I also don't want to forget that often it's the environmental situation that has displaced people, and more and more we're learning about that. So why are we talking today about refugees? Well, because if you have ever been a delegate, or if you were a delegate at the last World Conference, you actually voted to say this is an important issue for us. So, World Conference resolution 1329, at the last World Conference was for compassion for refugees and to recognize the United Nations World Refugee Day, with two kind of goals from that. The first is to show solidarity with refugees and recognize June 20th. So, write that down in your calendars as the International Refugee World Refugee Recognition Day with the United Nations so you can they have information on their website that can actually help you celebrate that day and things that you can do. The second part of that was that the ecumenical and interfaith ministries team would collect and prepare multilingual resources for mission centers, congregations and groups for refugee awareness and that, and also support, including climate refugees in that. So, that's if you went to reunion this last summer, hopefully in your reunion class, one of the days focused on the effects of displacement and the effects that the climate, and when we don't react to the climate, what that can create and cause, and it creates these climatic refugees. Also, we will be talking about refugees next year in Lent so the whole Lenten season will be the journey of displacement, and the journey of the refugees. So look for that. And why would we even consider that? Well, it is part of our story. There was a time where we were forced out of Missouri and found ourselves at the border, waiting for the ice to freeze enough so that we could cross into Quincy, Illinois. Do you know how many people were living in Quincy at the time? It was pretty big town, about 3000 people. Do you know how many of us crossed over? More than 5000. Imagine the amount of people coming in. And so we know what it's like, not only to be persecuted and thrown out of our homes and forced to leave our homes, but we also know what it's like to be received, and the hospitality that the people gave us there. And so, we want to reflect not only that history, but we want that to be our current history that we are making today. So, refugees are important for us. So, I told you I was working with refugees in Europe. I had a group in London that I

was working with of Congolese refugees. I was working with the group in Brussels. I was also working with migrant groups and immigrants. There were two groups that I was working with of Filipinos, one in Madrid and one in Germany. And then, I also had a group of Hondurans that I was working with, who have a congregation today in Madrid, Spain as well. So, this was kind of just like growing as a common theme of what was going on. Then, I come back to the United States on March 20, 2020 and you remember what happened a few days after that? I was actually coming home to get my visa to move back and work with that group in Brussels. I was going to move from England, where I was living, over to Brussels, and all of a sudden, the pandemic shut everything down. And, in that time, I was really frustrated, because I wanted to be over in Europe doing the work that I was supposed to be doing. I'm doing everything online, and most of our refugee communities didn't even have access to online, or if they did, I remember one service that I was doing, and one of our refugees was at work on his break, on his phone, and right when I asked for him to say the prayer, his battery went out. Another one of the Hondurans that I was working with in Spain, right at the time, where he was supposed to speak online, he writes me. He goes, I'm so sorry, but I'm out of credit because he didn't have internet in his home. He was using, and I didn't even know for weeks he had been using his phone credit to be online with us. And of course, zoom, It does have a call in function, but he probably didn't even know how to you know that that was available at the time. It was all new to us, but all that video was taking up all of his credits on his phone. So here I was. They changed my function. All of a sudden, I was no longer working in Europe. I'm now the Temple director of tours. I'm the hospitality guy here at the Temple. And I'm like, okay, so this is, this is kind of new. And I get an email at tours@cofchrist.org that said, Hey, we are the Salvation Choir. My name is Eddie, and I work with this group of young people that are all refugees from the Congo, and we're looking for gloves and coats. And I'm like, This is so weird. It came to tours. I write him back immediately, and I said, Well, this is the headquarters. You might need to find a local congregation. Here's our website. Go find a local congregation you can connect with, and I put this email away. And for two weeks, my mind just kept spinning on this, and I'm like, This is so strange. I worked with these groups over in Europe. Surely, it's a group in Europe contacted me. I get out the email, and I say, I write back, and I say, Okay, tell me more about this young choir that you work with. He said, Well, we we meet up on the square at a church. They open the door for us for two hours each week. And I wrote back and said, I gotta know more. So we met up at the coffee house on the square where I meet a 23 year old young man named Eddie. And Eddie said I lived down the street from the Temple, not very far from about four or five blocks from the temple, and he says, I've been coming up here all the time, but it's always locked. And I said, Yeah, we're still closed because of the pandemic, because I would love to see that place. I go. You got the right guy? I literally have a key. I'm the tour guy. You can come and do that. So he comes up the first time, brings four of his friends with him. They all have socks and sandals on and long shorts on. It's the middle of winter, and so here's all these Congolese boys going through the Temple and just staring like it's the most I felt like I was in a Catholic church. You know, when they say that they used to use the stained glass to tell stories. They would tell, they would teach by using that. That's what I felt like as I was going through the meditation chapel and going through our sacraments and then up the worshiper's path. A few days later, he writes me on what's happening. Says, are you busy? And I go, No, there's the pandemic. I'm doing nothing, absolutely nothing. And he goes, Can I bring some more people up? So I'm thinking, here's coming, four more boys, right? Well, this time it's leaders. It's a small group of leaders. He comes up with these people all dressed up in their suits and and now I'm thinking, well, we'll probably do the same thing we did the first time, where I speak in English and he translates to Swahili. Well, this time it's adults, so

they speak French. So you have to understand these refugees were in the Congo, and then the Rwanda thing happened, and they go to Tanzania, which is English and Swahili speaking, where they lived in a refugee camp. None of these children have ever been to the Congo. All the children in the group that that I work with have all been from Tanzania, and so when they come over here, they have no papers, no home, really, because they lost their papers from the Congo as well. So, it's a it's such an interesting case. So this time, I'm talking in French, and they're translating into Swahili from the French this time as we're going around. Lucky for me, I had learned French, so it was just quite an interesting thing. Another group comes the fourth time. The fourth time, it is 10:30 at night, and I get a Whats App that says, hey, what you doing? I said, Well, I'm going to bed and I'm watching TV right now. And he goes, Is there any way I could get a tour with my family? I said, Sure. What day you want to do that? He goes, Well, maybe in like an hour or so. He said, my family all works at different times. My mom works an evening shift. He works a night shift. His dad works an early morning shift. It's the only time where our whole family is together. And so I said, Sure, come on up. At 11:30, I meet them up at the temple. It's kind of typical for me to maybe come up here around that time too. So I'm walking them around, and we get to the entrance of the worshipper's path. We're right there in front of the burning bush. And I say, this is just so weird. I worked with a group in London of Congolese refugees. I've worked for the last six years with a new group. We've just started in Belgium. He goes, Oh, Belgium. I would love to go there. And I go, Oh, because it's Europe, and it's an amazing place to be. He goes, No, I have family there. And he gets out his phone, and he goes on Facebook, and he shows me a picture of his aunt. He says, This is my aunt, Vivian. She She lives in Brussels. And I pulled out my phone, and you're not going to believe this, and I held up a picture, and I said, this is me in your aunt's home. I had been working with his aunt, his mom's sister, for the last year and a half. Now this was a full circle moment, and probably most people who work with refugees don't have that type of full circle moment, but I could no longer not pay attention to what was going on, right? The ways that God just has, those God moments that kind of give us a direction of where we're supposed to go, or possibility of a road that we might take. So I want to introduce you a little bit to Eddie and his family. This is him with his sisters singing in their house. [Audio of Eddie and his family singing.] This is their youth group who actually came up and helped to spread some of the mulch so that the temp the Auditorium would look nice, and the parking lot would look nice for World Conference. They met for the very first time at Speaks, the old speaks building that I had asked the church, is there any place that this group might be able to meet? We had just entered a contract with Habitat for Humanity at that building, they said, well, it'll be available for a few weeks, and we met the week before World Conference. And if you were at World Conference, you'll remember they sang for the communion service. So, imagine your first week being in this new space that's going to be your building to use, and the second week, you're gathered with 1000s of other people from around the church and the world, and they're looking out, singing and seeing this representation of people from all over the world. It must have been kind of overwhelming and yet divine for them. So for your, a little over a year, we met in that congregation there, and I would bring them up to the Temple sometimes, because they didn't have great places with tables to sit. And we would, for 13 weeks, we gave the disciple introduction to Community of Christ class to prepare them for baptism. This is them in groups where I put them in different tables for a different enduring principle, and they all had to come up with a song that that responded to that Enduring Principle from their culture. [Audio of group singing] There you see, Eddie picks up his paper at the end, worth of all person. An amazing thing happened after that. The church said, right, we need that building back. And, I went to the Mission Center president, Greg Wilson, and I

said, Do you have any buildings we might be able to move to? And this is all he did. He smiled, and this weird smile, and I'm like, Well, what does that mean? He goes, let me make some phone calls, and I'll get back with you. So he called John Boyd, who's pastor at the East 39th congregation in Independence. A congregation that had been reducing in size for a little bit and trying to figure out a way how to move on and where their their mission might go. And so, Greg presented kind of this wild idea, and this congregation took a step that I think was one of the most mature things I've seen a congregation do. I've been a mission center president in Europe for eight years, and I never saw this type of sacrifice and maturity. They decided they wanted to still keep meeting, but they were going to give their Sunday morning prime time as well as Saturdays, the time that the choir gets together, the women's group gets together, the classes that we have. Have happened. They would give their prime Saturday and Sunday time. So, this congregation that we started with 65 people the week before conference in just a year and a half had become about 120 people, 80 of them under the age of 20. Imagine the needs of that type of congregation. But what a mature thing. And this is their first baptism. You'll hear their excitement about being in this it's the second week that they meet, and their first baptisms. Two people got baptized that day, but I've symbolically just because of my story, and I actually couldn't be there, which about killed me, but I made sure that Bunda baptized Eddie, and you can see how excited he was that day. So I'm going to give you five things that I've kind of learned, and if you're working with refugee groups, things that you might want to keep in mind. This is the words to the other song I told you that I wrote, New Hope, new land, new freedom, New Hope, new dignity, new words in strange new syllables, new voice and new songs to sing. So how do we work around the language barriers? Because often refugee groups that we're going to work with do not speak the local languages. One of the things we might talk about in our congregations is, do we provide translation services? Do we find people? What? What network do we have that might have people that speak Spanish? Or do we know someone like Suzanne Gunn from the the Stone Church congregation, who's from Kenya, who, guess what? She speaks Swahili. Now she's not Congolese, culturally, two different cultures. And yet, when we when we came to stone church, she got up and she just did a beautiful job with the translation of that service. We might consider, how can we use Chat GPT or AI or our phones, all those might be really hard words for you. I hope you heard those words, especially phones. But sometimes it's hard to find those apps, but there's ways to communicate now with apps on our phone that can help us, like Microsoft translate would be one of those. Also when it comes to resources, we might consider, what resources does the church already have? So make sure you call somebody at the church, and it's probably better to write an email these days, but write an email and say, I'm looking for some resources, and hopefully you'll get to someone who might be able to do that. Have you, do recognize this book, Sharing in Community of Christ. It's a little booklet about 90 pages. It's beautiful, has pretty pictures in it, but it tells all about the identity, mission, message and beliefs of Community of Christ. We have it translated in several languages. We actually had a version, an older version, in Swahili. And so luckily, because I work with the church, and part of my job is formation ministries, I was able to get that and format the new Swahili, and we just completed, just a few months ago, the Swahili for that, you might have to work with kids. This is the 19 year old daughter of one of the pastors, the guy that that runs the choir, Eddie's dad. It says Eddie sister, and she's actually our translator now that comes with advantages and disadvantages. One of the disadvantages is she might not know all the words right that are coming out in English. She might not know when you say this has to happen in this congregation. She might not say it with kind of the force that you're winning, because she's telling leaders from her own group. And so she can kind of, you know, calms it down, rather than giving it the

gravitas that I'm hoping when I say, Well, this has to happen, so that we can make this other thing happen. But you might also run into the advantage, though, of using a young person is she's going to get good at this, right? She's going to get the English, and she's also going to understand Community of Christ. Because of going through her brain. We also use, of course, the adults. So, he speaks French, so I'm able to give classes in French. And he's an excellent, excellent translator with lots of theological knowledge as well. He's currently our financial officer. So when you're working with language, with groups, you might ask this question, how can we, my person or my congregation respond to language needs and offer language support, even if no one speaks that language, you'll have to ask that question of yourself. If you want to work with groups. How do we offer community space for gatherings? And I want to make it clear here that this is not when we talk about hospitality for refugees. This just happened to be a group that then wanted to become Community of Christ, but I never pushed that agenda. My question was, what do you need? And you heard me saying this when you're coming in as the last group was going out. We are a bridge to communities and people in our lives. Always, we're never asking people to come into Community of Christ, we hold up a bridge. And whatever those people's needs are, we try to find responses to that. When I worked in in England, I would say, Mind the Gap. You know, when you go on the subway system in London, there's a there's a sound that comes out the speaker system that goes Mind the Gap, because there's a gap as you step into the subway, if you don't mind the gap, what are you going to do? You're going to fall. And so, we think in people's lives, when people are seeking wholeness, that there's this gap sometimes in their lives. And so we're there to mind that gap to help people get from where they're at to where they hope to go, with not our agenda at the other end. It's not a bridge that leads to Community of Christ, it's Community of Christ that holds together that gap. They may turn and walk into Community of Christ because of that experience. Good for us, good for community. Good for them, hopefully. But they may also go to the exact place that they need to go, which may not be through our doors. So, that's a really important concept when we talk about these spaces. So, it may just be spaces for groups to come in for their cultural events. You may offer a place for them to stay for meetings where they can just meet for learning English as a Second Language class that is offered in your space and your congregation, not just to give classes that might lead to membership and Community of Christ. When you think about spacious think about what ways could your congregation provide space for refugee communities. What might be some of the benefits of that, but also what could be some of the challenges? Relationships are crucial, and this is one of the issues, and almost a problem is, hardly any of these people, you might find them living next door, but most of them probably live on the other side of 435, closer to the city where there's there's easier access to some some places to live or and our jobs to places where they're going to try to find work. And so just imagine, though, how important it is to have people in their lives that are just people, one that are not just giving positivity. That's really important. That's what we do best. I think, in in some of our our connections that we have with people, but also just those people to ask a question to, how do I do this? How does that work? A lot of times their parents have no idea how the systems work. And so that's the next one. How do we assist, especially these kids, navigating with local systems? And one example of that is I asked Kat, what's her last and i She's the Mission Center president over in Midlands, and she works at a bank. So I said, Hey, is there any way that you have anybody that happens to talk with kids about how to get scholarships for school, because many of our kids have graduated but don't know how to get on to just Community College. And she said, we actually have a person that their job is to go around and help kids understand what loans are available and what school programs they might qualify for. So, I brought her up to the Temple and brought a group of kids

in, and she worked with several of those kids to help fill out their FAFSA I think they had to do to get some college aid so we can be a connection. The question you might ask yourself is, what local resources could your congregation connect with to help refugees navigate these systems? In Belgium during the pandemic, nobody could go to school, and so where did kids go to school? At home. And how? Via a computer. How many of the 10 families that we were working with do you think had a computer? One. Exactly one. So we started a charity called co-citizen, the Co-citizen Project, and from the Co-citizen Project that allowed us to go into some companies. And it was actually that one member who went to his own company and said, Hey, is there, are there any computers? And then they went to a couple other businesses, ended up collecting 10 computers, one for each family. As a part of that, we also raised money for a stipend for someone from that community who kind of had some computer knowledge, but also could work with families, to go and visit the families on a bi weekly basis, every two weeks, to make sure that they had access they were using those computers. And also to kind of assess needs that that the group had. We had a little form that they filled out to make sure that their needs were met during the pandemic. It was pretty cool. That's all Elray though. He does some amazing stuff with along with that, is building relationships. And we just talked about about that. So here's this guy who was like, I don't know if this is my ministry, this seventy. And look at just a few of the pictures I found of the ways that he began to build relationships, which actually was the best part of this, not so much. I mean, yeah, we created a charity, pretty cool. Yeah. We got some members out of this who are pretty formed in Community of Christ, identity, mission, message and beliefs. But look at all the people that he began to connect with. So, here this guy that came by himself, alone with his partner, to Brussels, and then ended up with this huge community surrounding him. So how can your congregation foster meaningful, ongoing relationships with refugee families? And lastly, embracing cultural and religious diversity? So with this, especially if you're working with a group that may have interest in Community of Christ, to come open to the idea that it may not look like the Community of Christ that you think happens on Sundays. They may come not only with songs that sound louder, with prayers on the floor, or in different positions as they're offering their prayers up, or foods that taste very different from the foods you might make for the potluck after church on Sunday. As they incorporate their own cultural traditions, music and prayers into worship services, How do we be open enough, understanding that it might not meet our spiritual needs, but how do we provide that space where they can use the skills and the traditions and culture that they have, but slowly we will begin, if we stay in relationship with them, it's that relationship that's key, that slowly we will begin to see the Enduring Principles of Community of Christ shining through. The Worth of All Persons, Common Consent, making decisions in different ways than they may have been doing before. So all different ways that if we stay in relationship with them, we might be able to answer this question ... how might embracing cultural diversity in this group enhance our own personal or even our congregation sense of what community is and looks like and feels like?