

January 2017—The Americans are coming!

*Rachel Yates, Associate Director of Program
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U.S.-Russian relations occupy the news. Diplomatic tensions are rising, along with concerns about resurgence of the nuclear arms race.

In some respects, this political rift is not new. For decades, these two superpowers have flexed their geopolitical muscle, often seemingly divided along irreconcilable ideological grounds.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), however, has chosen to bridge that divide with a twinning project that pairs U.S. and Russian congregations that commit to work, pray and worship together. Regional Liaison Ellen Smith leads the Russia-U.S. twinning program for Presbyterian World Mission. Now more than ever, she urges Presbyterian congregations to deepen their ties with Christians in Russian through our global partners. She works hard to pair similar congregations to minimize power differentials or theological friction.

Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church in St. George, Utah, joined the twinning program two years ago and was paired with Word of Life Church in Dorogobuzh, Russia. After several email exchanges, the U.S. partners traveled to Dorogobuzh to meet their Russian counterparts. They politely exchanged greetings and information during worship and over tea, all in good diplomatic fashion.

The meeting, however, took a turn after an evening prayer meeting when one Russian summoned the courage to ask these new U.S. partners what they meant by the oft-used term “partnership.” Smith shared what happened next. “We talked about praying for one another, helping one another and encouraging one another. We talked about our need for one another, for fellowship across the boundaries the world creates, and that we had come to them not as Americans, but as Christians.

“That comment changed the tone of the conversation. [One Russian church member] Volodya looked up, understanding completely what we had just shared, and said, ‘And we were waiting for Americans.’ In some way this different understanding of our purpose allowed Volodya to ask the hard questions—asking about race relations in the U.S. and the Supreme Court decision on marriage equality. They asked about church growth, and somehow we ended up in a conversation about infant baptism and confirmation. They weren’t challenging us, but we were challenged. They wanted to understand and we wanted to help them understand. We talked for hours that night, and somewhere along the way a hidden barrier fell away.”

As we engage in international mission, whether in Russia or elsewhere, we may rightly question whether we go as Americans or Christians. Do we reach out as a people imbued with privilege and power? Do we export our wealth and appetite for progress? Or do we empty ourselves, cloaked only in the servant leadership of Christ?

The latter is hard work. It eschews quick fixes and efficacy in favor of respect, mutuality and interdependence, shared grace and thanksgiving, open dialogue and transparency, and sharing of

resources, all values that define our model of partnership. Today, that [model of partnership](#) frames our work. More than words on paper, it enables us to move beyond a colonial model of mission to a place of deep Christian relationship. Whether mission takes us across town or across continents, may our identity be found first in the unity of God's grace that extends across all boundaries.

February 2017—The world is watching

*Rachel Yates, Associate Director of Program
Presbyterian World Mission*

We monitor the security of our mission personnel, in part by reading daily briefings from news sources and the U.S. Department of State. Typically the reports follow no pattern: a kidnapping, an outbreak of disease or a military conflict, affecting various countries.

January 20 was different. On that day, when Americans prepared to inaugurate their new president, the world reacted. To the North, we were alerted: “Security Message for U.S. Citizens: Ottawa (Canada), Planned Demonstration.” To the South, we were warned: “The U.S. Embassy in Mexico City informs U.S. citizens that due to demonstrations scheduled to take place in the vicinity of the Embassy during the afternoon of Friday, January 20, 2017, the Embassy will be closed to the public.” It wasn’t just an occurrence among our nearest neighbors. Similar protests or planned demonstrations were reported for Spain, Hungary, Kosovo, Denmark, Paraguay and the Netherlands. Press coverage that day identified protests occurring on every continent, including Antarctica.

No matter your personal views on President Trump or your political affiliation, we cannot deny that the world is watching America closely. The scrutiny won’t be limited to our government’s actions, but will extend to our actions as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Our faithfulness to the Bible, our Reformed theology and our commitment to social justice will be tested.

Our global partners have been tested similarly, and we have much to learn from their experiences. This spring, our mission co-workers in Africa will gather for training in Rwanda. The brutal genocide in 1994 still haunts Rwandans . . . and the church. In only three months, nearly one million Tutsis, and their Hutu sympathizers, were massacred. Many sought refuge in multiethnic Protestant and Catholic churches, only to find that some church leaders were complicit in the killing. Others who were not active participants in the genocide either failed to denounce the violence or lent support to the government. In a news conference later that year in Geneva, a World Council of Churches deputy director said, “In every conversation we had with the government and church people alike, the point was brought home to us that the church itself stands tainted, not by passive indifference, but by errors of commission as well.”

Twenty-three years later, as Rwanda heals, the church faces the difficult task of rebuilding trust. The Presbyterian Church of Rwanda has made reconciliation a primary goal. Our mission co-worker Kay Day reflected on the pain she still senses: “Their spirits seem to cry out to those who visit [the memorial] to remember the dead, to remember the pain of the conflict and to not repeat it. . . . Over the spirit of the dead I heard the words of the apostle Paul calling us to be ambassadors for Christ, to be agents of reconciliation where there was once division” (2 Cor. 5).

Kay wrote her lament while on assignment in the U.S., visiting congregations and Civil War sites. “There are still so many situations in both countries that cry out for reconciliation. I sensed

that so strongly, standing amid the spirits of the past battles. I think it is a call to all who will listen.”

Indeed, it is an urgent call to be ambassadors for Christ, and we must not shrink from it. The world is watching.

March 2017—Mission 180: Transformative Mission

*Rachel Yates, Associate Director of Program
Presbyterian World Mission*

Presbyterian World Mission celebrates 180 years of international mission service this year. From its inception until now, much has changed. Over 180 years, we have done a 180-degree turn in how we understand our role in God's mission.

Our earliest missionaries were sent to teach, preach and heal. Presbyterian mission outposts were known for these three pillars: schools, churches and hospitals. Faithful missionaries took their understanding of what it meant to be disciples of Christ across the globe, laying the foundation for the churches that we now count as partners in mission. More than 94 million Christians today claim the heritage of these efforts.

Today we engage more intentionally in a ministry of partnership, recognizing that our partners have as much to offer us as we have to give them. With respect, mutuality and interdependence, we celebrate the 180-degree transformation that begins in our shared grace in Jesus Christ. We affirm humbly that the transformation of communities and lives that we witness together in mission is not a result of our effort, but the real presence of God at work in our midst. With joy, we accept the call to work together in mission—as mission co-workers. As part of our 180th anniversary, we declare a Mission 180 of a church reformed, and always reforming.

The work of early Presbyterian visionaries continues to bear fruit today. In 1899, Dr. Horace B. Silliman, a retired New York businessman, petitioned the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions, with the conviction that the Filipino people needed a new kind of education. To support this vision, he gave \$10,000 toward the founding of an industrial school. Although the Board was reluctant to begin a new mission in the Philippines, Dr. Silliman persisted. In 1901, the Dumaguete Mission Station opened. Seven months later, missionaries Dr. David Sutherland Hibbard and his wife, Laura, founded Silliman Institute with fifteen students and four desks.

Silliman University today is a melting pot of cultures and religions, with more than 9,000 students from 44 countries. Silliman University Church—a church ministering to all students regardless of their denomination and religious affiliations—retains a prominent place on campus. Silliman University Medical Center is a university-owned hospital and is considered one of the top hospitals in the country. The Silliman University Medical School and College of Nursing, among other programs, build capacity for future advances in health care.

Last year, Silliman University in Dumaguete, Philippines, held a special celebration that embodied its own Mission 180. In recognition of its Presbyterian roots, the University dedicated a garden on the campus with three large boulders to mark the legacy of teaching, preaching and healing. Our current mission co-workers and World Mission staff joined with the delegation from Silliman University not only to honor the past, but to cast a vision for our ongoing work together in God's mission. Silliman University and our partner, the United Church of Christ in

the Philippines, have become the teachers, preachers and healers in which Silliman sets the priorities for its future.

God's mission begins with our own personal transformation: from sin and repentance to forgiveness and grace. But, it does not end there. We are called to model that 180-degree turnaround in our mission partnerships with others.

World Mission's 180th anniversary represents much more than years on a calendar. It is a celebration of our shared calling in God's life-changing mission.

April 2017—Coming Down from the Cross

*Rachel Yates, Associate Director of Program
Presbyterian World Mission*

Throughout Lent, we have accompanied Jesus on the path toward his crucifixion. Some of us have practiced self-deprivation, charity and more faithful prayer, modeling Jesus as we prepared spiritually for Good Friday.

His suffering shapes our understanding of how we engage the world. In the living Jesus, we see one who was mocked and reviled. Refusing to adhere to life-denying, cultural norms, he reached out to those shunned by society. He served the diseased and poor with his own hands; he advocated on their behalf; he lifted them up, so they were empowered to return to the fullness of community. The crucified Jesus then made the ultimate sacrifice of his life for those whom God loves.

I dare say our mission work often seeks to mirror these aspects of Jesus' life. Christ's compassion, generosity and sacrifice resonate with us, and they shape how we engage in God's mission. We accept the challenge to pick up our cross and follow Jesus. Presbyterians reach out to those in need, and we speak out against injustice. We give generously to the work of the church. As Presbyterians, we set aside our own interests to help others. Congregations and mid councils across our denomination emulate the values seen in the suffering Jesus.

Yet, Jesus no longer hangs on the cross. The tomb is empty! As an Easter people, we must move beyond suffering and sacrifice as the motivation for our mission efforts, to the joy of the resurrection.

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Cor. 5:17–19).

Jesus' sacrifice was not an end in itself, but a bridge across which we might be reconciled to God and, in turn, to our neighbor. If we, too, are to come down from the cross, God's mission must be about more than unilateral compassion, generosity and sacrifice. It must evolve to a place of deep relationship and friendship.

Tracey King-Ortega, regional liaison for Central America, understands this well. Last year, friends and associates came together to celebrate her husband's birthday at their home in Managua, Nicaragua. “Everyone was on their way home,” Tracey writes, “when I learned my father had passed away. As soon as they heard, they immediately turned around and came back to be with me, covering me in love and prayers.”

Christ crucified might be evident in our food programs, skills training workshops and refugee assistance, but Christ resurrected is found in the interstitial spaces of our mission activities. Through our friendships with mission partners around the world, we witness to the joy of Easter and can loudly proclaim, “Hosannah! He is risen!”

Mission Matters

Select Language ▼



A monthly update from World Mission, a ministry of the Presbyterian Mission Agency

The Mission Matters column addresses the impact of Presbyterian mission in the world and the issues that affect mission co-workers, the people we walk alongside and assist in service to God, and our partners around the globe.

May 2017—Who is the Jesus you think you know?

*Rev. Jose Luis Casal, director
Presbyterian World Mission*

Author Philip Yancey responds to this question — Who is the Jesus you think you know? — in his book *The Jesus I Never Knew*. In the first chapter, he writes:

“I first got acquainted with Jesus when I was a child, singing Jesus Loves Me in Sunday school, addressing bedtime prayers to ‘Dear Lord Jesus,’ watching Bible teachers moving figures of Jesus across a flannel-graph board. I associated Jesus with Kool-Aid and sugar cookies and gold stars for good attendance. Later, while attending a Bible college, I encountered a different image. ... Among his contemporaries, the Bible says he somehow gained a reputation as a ‘wine drinker and a glutton, friend of tax collectors and outcasts.’ Those in authority, whether religious or political, regarded him as a troublemaker, a disturber of the peace.”

With this background let us respond to the initial question: Who is the Jesus we think we know? The answer relates to our vision of the church. Yancey writes a very critical statement about this. He says: *“Somehow we have created a community of respectability in the church. The down-and-out, gathered by Jesus when he lived on earth, no longer feel welcome in our churches. How did Jesus, the only perfect person in history, manage to attract the notoriously imperfect? And what keeps us from following in his steps today?”*

The church is a community of faith, and the nature of a community is openness. Closed communities surrounded by fences and walls are a distortion of the real nature of a community of

faith. The church of Jesus Christ is a community where everybody is invited and everyone is welcomed.

Within this community, Jesus invites his followers to a new type of interpersonal relationship, which defines the nature of the church. Jesus never demanded obedience to a list of duties. He never requested participation in specific rituals. He never demanded a single-minded attitude. He never declared that unanimity would be the rule among his followers. If we want to be the church, it's time to find the real Jesus and accept this relationship with him. If we accept the relationship it will produce obedience, and obedience produces discipleship; discipleship produces prophetic preaching; and prophetic preaching produces healthy churches that grow not because of the numbers but because of the witness and service they provide to the communities in which they are located.

This vision applies not only to the church in the United States but also to the church around the world.

That is God's mission.

June 2017 — God is on the margins

Rev. Jose Luis Casal, director
Presbyterian World Mission

“. . . God called to him from out of the bush, “Moses! Moses!” He said, “Yes? I’m right here!” God said, “Don’t come any closer. **Remove your sandals from your feet. You’re standing on holy ground.**” Then he said, “**I am the God of your father: The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.**” Moses hid his face, afraid to look at God. God said, “I’ve taken a good, long look at the affliction of my people in Egypt. **I’ve heard their cries for deliverance from their slave masters; I know all about their pain. And now I have come down to help them . . .**”

—Exodus 3:4–8 (The Message)

One of the greatest mysteries of the Christian faith is to discover the place where God dwells. As a rule, God is placed in holy, secluded and special places. For many centuries theology kept God away from humankind and, for humans to reach God, they had to go through processes of purification and self-perfection.

Judaism placed God in the holy place to which only the priest had access once a year. The “habitation” of God was so far from society’s that to locate God in the normal habitat where life happens was almost a sacrilege. Nevertheless, the Bible continuously reminds us of the God who lives around us, amid our environment, and is present in the most tragic situations of our human lives.

The story of Moses and the burning bush is a good example of this. Moses was in the margins of the village, near the desert and the arid lands around Mount Horeb. This isolated area could very well be considered the margin. There on the margin God shows Moses that God dwells in that area. “This is holy ground,” God tells Moses. In this way, the margin becomes sacred not because God blesses it, but because God is present, inhabiting that place. God is on the margin!

Unfortunately, our concept of margins is so negative that we do not allow for this challenging interpretation. For us the margin is the residual, the disposable, what society rejects, and those who inhabit the margin are marginal. Many people think that the salvation of the marginal is to remove them from the margin and to sanctify them. This has been applied many times to mission work. Our mission has been interpreted in many places as a “rescue” of individuals and groups of people deemed marginal. In many cases this has often included a drastic cultural change. What if we apply the story of Moses and try to discover the God who lives in the margin? What if we find the God who is present in places we consider marginal? This is the strategy Paul uses in Acts 17 when he preaches to the people in Athens about an “unknown God.”

The history of our mission work is a history of “discovering.” Our mission co-workers discover the presence of God around the world. To do mission work is to join God in the world because God is already there. To do mission work is to join God on the margins and from there to illuminate the world.

Let's find the God on the margins.

July 2017 — God’s mission and people’s mission

*Rev. Jose Luis Casal, director
Presbyterian World Mission*

“I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and **have heard their cry...**”
Exodus 3:7

Vox populi, vox Dei is Latin for “the voice of the people is the voice of God.” This statement is based on the conviction that God works through people, and it has a special character when it’s combined with the concept of mission. In the church, God is the architect and designer of mission, so there is no such thing as “our mission” apart from God.

Many questions arise from this maxim about God’s voice: How do we discover God’s mission? Who or what announces that mission? How do we identify it? If the voice of the people is the voice of God, then listening to and understanding people can help us identify God’s mission.

Of course, we may also identify times when the voice of the people, even with good intentions, didn’t produce spiritual fruit of justice, peace and love. This happens when we try to apply the rules of our political system to the “*vox populi*.” The voice of a majority may not accurately represent God’s voice and the mission of God.

We need to remember that “*vox populi*” is also the voice of the “little flock” (Luke 12:32), “the remnant” (Isaiah 37:31) or the “few chosen” (Matthew 22:14). God’s mission is always associated with justice, peace and love for God’s children, without exception. You don’t need to be affiliated with one specific party or belong to a specific culture, race, gender or social class. **God’s love** embraces *all of us* and that’s God’s mission. **God’s justice** is applied to *all of us* and that’s God’s mission. **God’s peace** is granted to *all of us* and that’s God’s mission.

How can we apply this to the practical work we do around the world? How can we be sure we are doing God’s mission and not “our” mission? How can the voices of the people we hear everywhere help us identify God’s mission?

There are many needs around the world, and we receive many requests each day. Is God’s mission coming to our attention through these requests? Sometimes a request is not a signal of God’s mission, but justice for all human beings is. The recognition of a need is not always a signal of God’s mission, but the mandate to love one another is. Providing food and clothes to others is not always a signal of God’s mission, but fighting for peace among human beings is.

When people cry for justice, love and peace, they are announcing God’s mission — and that’s the place we need to go.

August 2017 — Role of race and culture in God’s mission strategy

*Rev. Jose Luis Casal, director
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“Go into the world. Go everywhere and announce the Message of God’s good news to one and all ...” Mark 16:15 (The Message)

The *Head of Christ*, also called the *Sallman Head*, is a 1940 portrait of Jesus of Nazareth by American artist [Warner Sallman](#) (1892-1968). This painting has been reproduced over half a billion times worldwide. The art has come to be a visualization of Jesus for Christians in the western world and beyond. In fact, I was one of those hundreds of millions who honestly and innocently believed that this picture of a white “western” man was, in fact, the real face of Jesus.

I was raised in the church in my home country of Cuba, where I saw pictures of a “white” Jesus with children, knocking on a door, kneeling in prayer, walking on water — all using the same white man. So, for me, the artist’s [Head of Christ](#) depiction was like the photo ID of Jesus Christ.

I believed these “white Jesus” images until I was 13 years old and a visiting missionary in my church showed us an 18th-century Ethiopian painting of a black Jesus.

I began to investigate and discovered that other cultures in Asia and elsewhere also interpret the race of Jesus as that of the local population (Chinese, Indian, Japanese, etc.).

This brings to my mind two questions: Where is the point when Christian faith interconnects with race and culture? What is the role of race and culture in God's mission?

Our answers to these questions may lead us to reflect about the value of race and culture in the proclamation of the gospel and, more than that, the importance of race and culture in the diaconal work of the church.

Proclamation and service are the two pillars of God’s mission, and those pillars are strongly influenced by our race and the race of those we are serving, as well as our culture and the culture of those with whom we are communicating the gospel.

God’s mission is molded by culture and race. What is acceptable in one culture may be unacceptable in another; something that is pleasant for people of a specific race may be offensive for other ethnicities. We will be unable to reach out to every race and culture if we announce a gospel that is confined to the boundaries of one ethnic and cultural group.

Yes, race and culture matter in God’s mission!

September 2017 — Why the ‘second’ mile matters

*Rev. Jose Luis Casal, director
Presbyterian World Mission*

*“... And if a soldier forces you to carry his pack for one mile, carry it for two!”
—Matthew 5:41, Complete Jewish Bible*

Why is the concept of the “second mile” important in God’s mission?

This Scripture in the Gospel of Matthew is a recommendation that Jesus offered to his disciples about the way to oppose violence. When we read this passage in the Complete Jewish Bible (CJB) or the Good News Translation (GNT), we discover the meaning of the second mile.

The CJB version reads, “... if a soldier forces you ...,” and the GNT says, “And if one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one mile, carry it two miles.” When we think in terms of soldiers, our perspective changes. These words are preceded in Matthew 5:39 by the admonition not to resist an evil person. What does it mean “not to resist”? In our daily life, lack of resistance may be perceived as a passive and submissive attitude. Yet the second mile Jesus speaks of has a different, active connotation. It makes me think of the word *resilience*, which is derived from the Latin verb *resilire*, meaning “to jump back” or “to recoil.”

Resilience is not the absence of emotion or action. Nor is it an unfeeling attitude toward pain, abuse or challenge. Instead it suggests bearing a heavier load, but not forever. It involves taking time to understand the unthinkable, but then to continue moving forward with renewed strength. Resilience is demonstrated when we recognize that life is tough and unfair, but we recover or bounce back from the impact of this reality and continue moving forward. That’s the meaning of the second mile!

The image of a soldier forcing you to carry a burden for one mile and you continuing for a second mile is symbolic of resilience, not submission. The Lord was recommending that his disciples transform their discouragement, brought on by oppressive and unjust treatment, into a strong and powerful tool. He is not asking them to carry this heavy load forever; he tells them to continue for the second mile as a nonviolent response to injustice.

In the mission field, we have many opportunities to show resilience. God’s mission is always challenging and always dangerous and could be threatening and discouraging. Our best response is to meet the challenges with resilience. In the midst of the destruction produced by hurricanes, our volunteers in Presbyterian Disaster Assistance are a symbol of resilience. The mission co-workers who serve in critical and dangerous places are symbols of resilience. The pastors and elders of the church who raise their voices to support millions of undocumented persons in the U.S. are symbols of resilience. The Dreamers are symbols of resilience.

God’s mission is painful and demands resilient people who are willing to go the second mile.

Yes, the second mile matters in God’s mission!

October 2017 — 500 years . . . why did it take so long?

*Rev. Jose Luis Casal, director
Presbyterian World Mission*

In July, I had the privilege of attending a special event celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, held in Wittenberg Cathedral in Germany. This monumental occasion, organized by the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), commemorated the year in which the most symbolic figure of the Reformation, Martin Luther, shared his 95 theses with the church and the world.

The center of the ceremony was the signing of the Joint Declaration on “justification by faith alone,” generated from the dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation. This statement was submitted to and approved by WCRC and, as a result, I had the privilege to visit the cathedral and see the pulpit where Martin Luther preached, as well as other parts of the church building. It was an incredible experience that renewed my Reformed beliefs and my commitment with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

In addition to the signing ceremony, we were celebrating that, for first time, the WCRC had elected a clergywoman as its president, the Rev. Najla Kassab of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon. She proclaimed the Word of God on that historic occasion. She began her sermon saying, “Here I stand, a Middle Eastern woman in the pulpit of Luther.” And she continued, “Martin Luther is a symbol of speaking up. To speak your mind in freedom, that is essential. This could have been Martin Luther’s 96th question to the church. Not why is there a woman in this pulpit, but *why did it take so long?*”

The Reformation is not an isolated historic event that just happened one time; it was a process that disrupted the whole of Western Christianity, challenging the church to look for a new vision.

The repercussions of Reformation created wars and a new redistribution of the world. It established the bases for the emergent capitalist and modern socioeconomic mentality. It is necessary to look to the church of the Reformation (*ecclesia reformata*) as Calvin described it, “always reforming” (*semper reformanda*). That permanent and continual Reformation is the reason the Rev. Najla Kassab asked: Why did it take so long? The Reformation was the holy disruption of God to 16th century society. But more than that, it is still an ongoing holy disruption today.

God created the holy disruption of the Reformation to renew the society, the church and the world. The ordination of women is only one element of this holy disruption God is using for renewal of the church and society as a whole. There are many other holy disruptions that must come.

How will all this disruption change the way we do mission, preach the gospel, serve the needy and feed the hungry? It’s time for us to think of the missional models we are using that perpetuate images of the church that are no longer acceptable and will not solve the needs of the world.

Our millennials are eager to see the church respond to the Reformation's heritage with more than worship celebrations and activities. God disrupted the world with the Reformation. Our church's founding fathers and mothers disrupted the traditional church in obedience to God's disruption. Are we ready to accept God's call to disrupt the status quo of our church, our society and the world?

Holy disruption was, is and will be God's mission! I hope that in the future, we will not hear a preacher ask, "Why did it take so long?" Let's accept God's call to the holy and disruptive work of faith now!

November 2017 — Syrian refugee children learn the meaning of Love

*Rev. Jose Luis Casal, director
Presbyterian World Mission*

“Since the uprising in Syria began in 2011 and evolved into civil war, more than 300,000 people have died and 11 million Syrians have been displaced. Around 1.5 million Syrians have crossed the border to find refuge in Lebanon, a country with a population of 3 million. This dramatic increase of people is a challenge for Lebanon. The conditions in the refugee camps are minimal but the great tragedy is that 60 percent of the camp’s population are children,” said our host, Dr. Mary Mikhael, communicator on behalf of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon (NESSL).

The Lebanese public school system doesn’t have the capacity to assimilate this huge number of additional children. “The children live in muddy camps or on the street, begging for food, money, anything,” Dr. Mary said. In response to this humanitarian tragedy, NESSL created educational centers for Syrian refugee children. The church has now five educational centers with around 600 children ages 3 to 10, most of whom have never been to school before. The centers serve children, with no discrimination toward race, religion or gender and no proselytizing. “We bring the children from camps and teach them the four main subjects: language, science, mathematics and ethics in a spiritual, Christian atmosphere. Our purpose is to show them love through service,” Dr. Mary said. The centers also provide uniforms, books and materials, snacks, medicines and one meal that includes clean drinking water, milk and juice every day.

One of the schools is in the Bekaa Valley, about 19 miles east of Beirut. The center has 130 children. The young and dynamic director of this center is the wife of a local pastor. Asked what differences she had noticed in the children’s behavior after a year of attending the center, Dr. Mary responded, “When they came, they were insecure, afraid and barely smiled, but now they are happy. They have learned how to behave in a social context. They have learned to play like other children. They have learned the meaning of the word love.” She added, “We try to make them normal and productive citizens and prepare them for the day when they’ll be able to return to their country.”

I asked one of the children, a little girl, what she would like to be in the future. I was expecting a response like “I want to be a doctor” or “I want to be a teacher,” but she responded very seriously, “I want to be a human being.”

[NESSL](#) is teaching Syrian refugee children the meaning of love and preparing them to be real human beings. To God be the glory!