

Racial and Cultural Understanding in Appointments

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NEPTUNE - GNJ in partnership with the General Commission on Religion and Race (GCORR), is taking on intercultural competency in the church through love and learning. On Saturday, September 23, GNJ hosted the first Cross-Racial Cross-Cultural Appointment Training with the goal of strengthening and growing diversity, communication, and collaboration in our local churches and communities.

Rev. Juel Nelson, Director of Leadership Development, spoke about the importance of the training. She pointed to the statistics of the cross-racial and cross-cultural appointments in GNJ saying, "This year we had nearly half our new appointments being cross-racial or cross-cultural, meaning the pastor is a different culture and or race than the majority of the congregation."

Cross-racial and cross-cultural appointments are a gift to the pastor, congregation and community. However, these appointments can also be challenging without the tools to openly engage in a dialogue of understanding around differences, but more importantly, similarities.

The Cross-Racial Cross-Cultural Training was led by Rev. Giovanni Arroyo and Rev. Dr. Grace Pak of General Commission on Race and Religion (GCORR). Nineteen churches participated in the event along with District Superintendents

and several members of the Intercultural Competency Taskforce, the team leading GNJ's 10-year commitment to growing intercultural competency.

"Racial and cultural understanding takes hard work and intentionality," said Pak. "As a faith community, putting our trust in a God larger than this world, this is a message and initiative that we should all be able to get behind."

The day kicked off with devotion and was followed by breakout sessions covering the topics, 'identifying your own cultural identity' and 'understanding culture.' Participants then broke into small groups to process what they had heard and were given the opportunity to come up with a strategy to share what they learned with their congregations. Participants were also provided with GCORR training resource "Learning from Strangers" which takes a deep dive into the joys and challenges of cross-racial and cross-cultural ministry.

After hosting a successful first training session, the work is only just getting started for these congregations. This training served as an introduction to the topic, while more meaningful follow-up conversations around cross-racial and cross-cultural dynamics have already been planned. Rev. Nicole Caldwell-Gross, Director of Mission and Community Development noted that a pastors gathering will take place on January 31, 2018, and a pastors and congregational gathering is also scheduled for March



On Sept. 23, GNJ hosted the first ever cross-racial, cross-cultural appointment training at the Mission and Resource Center with the goal of strengthening and growing diversity, inclusion, and collaboration in local churches and communities. Photo by Biho Chung



The training, led by Rev. Giovanni Arroyo and Rev. Dr. Grace Park of GCORR provided a time of learning, worship, fellowship and laughter. Photo by Biho Chung



While the training served as an introduction, further meaningful conversations around cross-racial and cross-cultural dynamics are being planned for 2018. Photo by Biho Chung

Rivers of Life Transforming Lives Among Arabic-Speaking Community Pt. 2

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centuries of our common era. Their long history and deep-seeded cultural tradition makes transition into a Protestant church difficult. Some Coptics in New Jersey would like to keep it that way. A priest from a nearby Coptic Orthodox Church even warned parishioners not to visit Rivers of Life lest they be barred from communion. This warning, however, only stirred curiosity sending Egyptian Coptics out to visit Pastor Gerges in Bayonne.

Even though many were Christian before coming to Rivers of Life, Gerges and his lay leaders developed a well-defined discipleship system to nurture spiritual growth among parishioners. It usually starts with a personal conversation with the pastor or lay leader. Then, the newcomer receives an Arabic language book that explains what it means to follow Jesus. The next step is an invitation to a small group where he or she learns about the foundations of faith. Gerges administers a test after a person completes the class. The test helps determine a person's readiness to join the church and what kind of service they would like to do. They are given an application (like a job application) to help identify the appropriate area of service in the life of the faith community.

"I wasn't expecting many people to complete the applications," said Gerges. "I was surprised when so many were coming back. We had to work hard to

find appropriate places of service for the people."

Gerges and his lay leadership want to be sure that a newcomer to the church finds the right place to fit into the mission of the church. Whether it is leading youth, serving as a technician in the recording studio, forming part of a volunteer in mission team traveling to a place in need, or making hospital visits, the church wants everyone to feel that they are part of the mission.

Gerges has a larger vision to establish a Center for Arabic-speaking People that would reach out to all refugee people in the New Jersey and New York areas. He envisions this center providing much needed services to immigrants and refugees, helping them navigate life in the United States, from obtaining proper documentation, including drivers' licenses, to finding the right kind of cemetery to bury a loved one. Often, immigrants find the US practice of burial starkly different from what they have known. This is especially true of immigrants from the Middle East and Asia. He sees a place that would provide hospitality and care, help immigrants learn how to speak English, and find a place to stay for up to two months while they find their bearings in a new land. He also would help immigrants—regardless of where they come from—to find a place to worship in their own language. Gerges and the "Rivers of Life" congregation could use some

community partners and fundraisers to help them realize their vision.

When asked how the new governmental administration has affected Arabic-speaking immigrants and refugees, Gerges replied, "People are afraid." It is much harder to obtain political asylum and get proper documentation nowadays. Many are forced to find work without documents and are at the mercy of employers who pay wages far below the minimum.

It also makes it hard to run a church. Despite having 200 or more in worship, only 2-3% of the members have the means to support the church with tithes. Many others have family in their country of origin who count on them to send funds to help them put food on the table.

"How can I not support someone who sends much needed funds back home?" asked Gerges. "They are a life-line to so many people... But we still have bills to pay, a heating system to get us through the winter, electricity bills, and contributing to the shared ministry of our denomination. It is a big challenge."

Indeed, the church building that houses Wesley UMC was built in 1848. The parsonage is also very old. Keeping them up and running takes a lot of resources.

"And yet," says Gerges. "We are blessed by our connection in The United Methodist Church. We are blessed to have a building and to have colleagues in ministry who provide a larger family of

people together and building peace with justice. Remember, this work is not just a one-time event, but this is a process of changing the culture of our churches, our families, our communities and our world...May the Lord bless you on this journey toward God's Kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven! Thanks be to God!"

Bishop Schol and current District Superintendent, Rev. Manuel Sardiñas, have urged Gerges to plant satellite campuses of Rivers of Life. He plans to respond to that call as soon as he completes his Masters of Arts in Ministry degree at Drew Theological Seminary at the end of 2017.

The Pastor and lay leaders of the church would welcome any help they could receive so that their ministry could continue to provide hope and life to Arabic speaking immigrants and refugees living in the New York area. Persons interested in supporting this ministry should write to Pastor Gerges at Wesley UMC, 970 Avenue C, Bayonne, NJ 07002-3023.

In the meantime, the ministry of transforming lives in the name of Jesus continues. The Muslim woman who found thirst-quenching help continues to be in contact with Gerges and she has found a job. She found something more through the encounter. She found a lifeline to Jesus and a community of faith willing to hear her story. Rivers of Life are flowing through the streets of Bayonne and the wider New York metropolitan area thanks to the ministry of Wesley UMC, its lay leaders, Pastor Emad Gerges, and his family.