

# An Accidental Missionary

by Linda Unger

**M**atthew Laferty folds his 6-foot, 7-inch frame into a window seat on a train headed to Vienna. A seasoned traveler, he does this with more ease than one might expect. In fact, Laferty—a

Global Ministries missionary serving in Austria—gives the impression of being at ease, no matter how harried, uncertain, or constricting his circumstances may be.

At age 30, he is on his second missionary assignment, serving as pastor of the English-speaking United Methodist Church (ESUMC) in Vienna. “I sometimes describe myself as an ‘accidental missionary,’” he says, as he settles into the hour-long train ride from Linz, where he’d been visiting a United Methodist

youth program. “I was looking for a one-year mission experience to help me transition from seminary to local parish ministry. Now, four and a half years later, I’m grateful that, by accident, I received a full-time missionary appointment.”

## Welcoming the Stranger

His first appointment was in Moscow, Russia, where he served four years as pastor of the Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy (MPC) and executive director of the MPC Social Services. The ecumenical chaplaincy—which includes United Methodists, Presbyterians, Evangelical Lutherans, Reformed Church in America members, and American Baptists—dates back to 1962. Its social-services arm was founded during the Perestroika/Glasnost period of the early 1990s.

Laferty’s Moscow congregation was a multicultural one, and its members, he recalls, “helped us to recognize the need to work among immigrants.” During his tenure, that work took diverse forms—from providing health care, particularly for women, to fighting racism, feeding the hungry, and offering Russian-language classes to help speed newcomers’ integration.

That ministry set Laferty up for his current work in Austria, where he again leads a multicultural parish. Once more he has become immersed—almost by accident—in a ministry of welcome and hospitality for migrants and refugees.

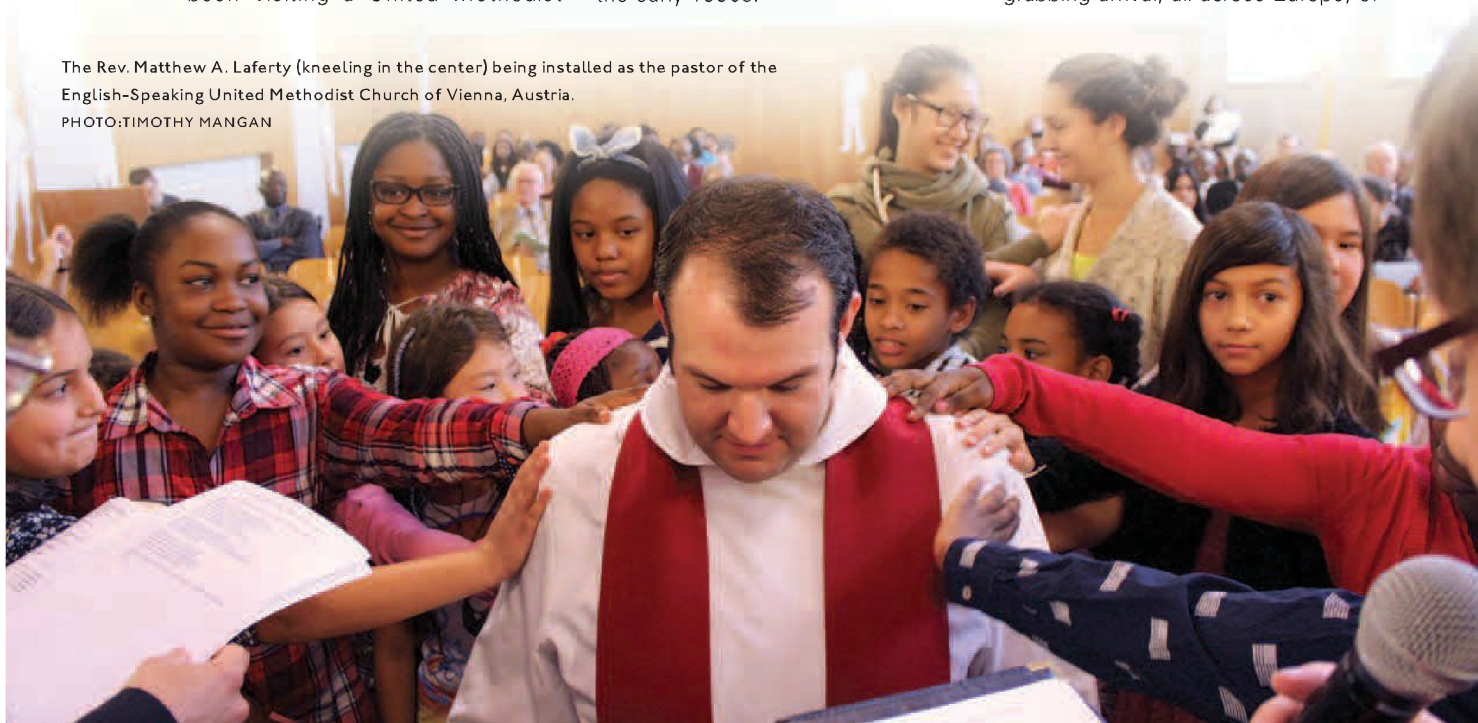
## Europe’s Refugees

Laferty’s arrival in Austria in August 2015 coincided with the headline-grabbing arrival, all across Europe, of



The Rev. Matthew A. Laferty (kneeling in the center) being installed as the pastor of the English-Speaking United Methodist Church of Vienna, Austria.

PHOTO:TIMOTHY MANGAN



tens of thousands of refugees and migrants from the Middle East and North Africa. This wave of newcomers reached a peak over the summer, just as Laferty was moving into his new role as pastor of the ESUMC.

"Vienna is a transit city, so most people are moving on to Germany, Sweden, and Denmark," he explains. "So there is a significant need for overnight accommodations." When the ESUMC and the German-speaking United Methodist congregation with which it shares a sanctuary learned of the need, they quickly provided a space for 50 overnight guests, receiving 300 people in three weeks.

For three weeks, they maintained the space, befriended the refugees who came and went almost daily, and provided food for them. Thank-you notes drawn by small children still adorned the walls of the space more than two months later. The two congregations have decided to meet the need for medium-term living space for 10 refugees awaiting the outcome of their asylum petitions.

"Of all the contemporary social issues," he points out, "the Bible speaks most often about hospitality and welcome. We're reminded that Jesus himself was a refugee. So imagine what would happen if Jesus were born in Syria today. Would he be one of the infants on a flimsy boat crossing the Mediterranean Sea? Would he be one of the children who drowned and washed up on a beach in Turkey or Greece?"

Laferty knowingly draws on Wesleyan tradition when he considers the challenge posed by global migration and the proper Christian response. "We look to do no harm," he says, and "to fully consider what it means to do good."

### God's Mission

Born in the village of Crestline, Ohio, Laferty says its local United Methodist church was an important part of his family's life. The church in which he was raised was the one where his parents were married and worshiped and where his maternal grandparents had their funerals. His own missionary vocation was nurtured and encouraged there.

When he was 15, Laferty attended a Lenten presentation at the church. A woman from a nearby congregation had come to talk about the annual conference's Russia Initiative program. "I came home afterward," he says, "and informed my parents that I was going on the trip to Russia that summer." His parents, who had raised their children to be independent, agreed, but stipulated that he would have to raise the \$2,000 cost himself. Thanks to the support he received from the congregation and community, he ended up raising twice as much.

Two years later, Laferty again traveled to Russia and volunteered in an orphanage that was home to 600 children—all of whom had either physical or mental disabilities. There, he met a young man his own age who couldn't walk, talk, or hear. Sitting with this youth while other children ran and played, he says, "I started wondering where God was in the midst of that, and I could hear and feel God saying, 'I am here. I love these children in ways you will never, ever understand.'"

Shortly after that experience, Laferty discerned a calling to ordained ministry and mission. He went to Ohio Wesleyan University, where he studied

political science and international affairs, and then continued on to Yale Divinity School.

In the few—but full—years since his ordination, Laferty says that he has come to understand mission as "a community of believers who are the body of Christ in the world." Continuing, he notes, "It's interesting that in Matthew 25, in the parable about the sheep and goats, Jesus never asks: 'How many people did you



Messages regarding missing refugees and migrants are placed on a wall in the Hauptbahnhof railroad station in Vienna, Austria, where asylum seekers congregate. A massive outpouring from volunteers organizing via social media turned the train station into a one-stop refugee referral for all kinds of services. PHOTO: PAUL JEFFREY

proselytize? How many were saved? How many were baptized?' Rather, his eschatological vision is concerned with questions like: 'When did you see me poor? When did you see me naked?' And, I would add, 'When did you see me as an immigrant or a refugee?' And then, 'What did you do?'"

*Linda Unger is the senior writer for the General Board of Global Ministries.*

**Matthew Laferty's work can be supported through The Advance, #3021378.**