



Update from **JJ TENCLAY**



Update from JJ TenClay
September 2026

Dear Friends & Supporters,

I'm writing this letter to you today, having just returned from a much-needed family vacation, which ended with a few days in Rome, Italy.

During my time in Rome, I had two experiences with the theological ideal of *philoxenia* that served as profound reminders of why this calling is so important to me, and why I feel compelled to invite others into this sacred space of loving immigrants and refugees in the name of Christ.

Angels Unawares

In September 2019, a new piece of art was installed in St. Peter's Square in Vatican City to commemorate the 105th World Day of Refugees and Migrants.

The title of this piece: **Angels Unawares.**

It is a life-sized bronze and clay statue of 140 people in a raft, depicting diverse groups of people through diverse times in history who have experienced forced or mass migration. A Polish woman fleeing communism. An Irish boy fleeing the potato famine. A Jewish man fleeing Nazi Germany. A Syrian child fleeing the civil war. A Cherokee man fleeing the Trail of Tears. All accompanied by the Holy Family, fleeing persecution themselves. And then, in the middle of the statue, there is a pair of angel wings visible above the tightly packed crowd, symbolizing the sacredness of the lives of each and every migrant and refugee, and their roles as messengers from God to us. The inspiration for the statue comes from Hebrews 13:2:

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

In this passage, the word used in scripture that we translate as "hospitality" is the Greek word *philoxenia*, which means "love of the stranger." A familial type of love that says, "you may have arrived as a stranger, but now you are one of us." And the word for "angels" used is *angelos*, meaning "messenger."

The statue is imploring us to see both the people who have experienced forced displacement and/or migration AND the biblical call to welcome them with Christ-like love and compassion.

I love this Bible verse and this statue. Both are prominently displayed on my business cards and on my desk. But this is the first time I've spent time with the statue in person, and what I experienced was a holy moment. I left St. Peter's Square with a renewed sense of both the urgency and the sacredness of the call to love immigrants and refugees in the name of Christ.

My daughter, Sophia, is becoming quite the amateur photographer, and took these amazing photos of the statue. Who do you see in the faces represented? What messages might God be sending you as you look at them? (See next page for pictures.)

Philoxenia Over Pizza

In previous missionary updates, I've shared stories of [Eliah](#), A Syrian man who fled Syria during the civil war and was living in Lebanon. He remained at risk of harm—both because he was a Syrian refugee and because he had converted from Islam to Christianity. By the grace of God and the hard work of so many people who walked alongside Eliah on his journey to refuge, he arrived in Rome, Italy, in October 2024 through the Humanitarian Corridors program led by Mediterranean Hope (one of the mission partners I worked with while living in Italy). Every individual involved in the Humanitarian Corridors program is pre-screened by the Italian government and arrives with a humanitarian visa, but they are not given full refugee status until they undergo a final asylum interview with a local tribunal. This process typically takes 6-12 months. For Eliah, the wait was almost two full years! Why? Just two months after Eliah arrived in Italy, the Assad regime fell in Syria, and countries all around the world suspended processing of Syrian refugees, waiting to see if Syrians could now return home safely. Unfortunately, Syria remains in turmoil, and, as I mentioned in my last missionary letter, people in parts of Syria are experiencing some of the worst conditions imaginable since the beginning of the civil war in 2011 (15 years).

After months of advocacy by Mediterranean Hope and other non-governmental agencies, the Italian government decided to move forward with the asylum applications for Eliah and approximately 300 other Syrians who had arrived in Italy and were living in limbo. After a five-hour interview (yes, five hours!) with the tribunal, Eliah was finally granted refugee status in Italy.

I was first introduced to Eliah in May 2022 through a video call, but I had never met Eliah face-to-face, until this vacation trip to Rome. Tim and I were blessed to meet Eliah for dinner one night, and while sharing a meal of Neopolitan-style pizza (still our favorite after living in Naples!), we talked about life, and love, and hope, and faith, and Jesus.

And friends, you were there with us, practicing *philoxenia* by proxy. Even though you weren't in the room, and you have not had the opportunity to meet Eliah in person, it is your ongoing love and support for me and this ministry that allowed this meeting to happen.

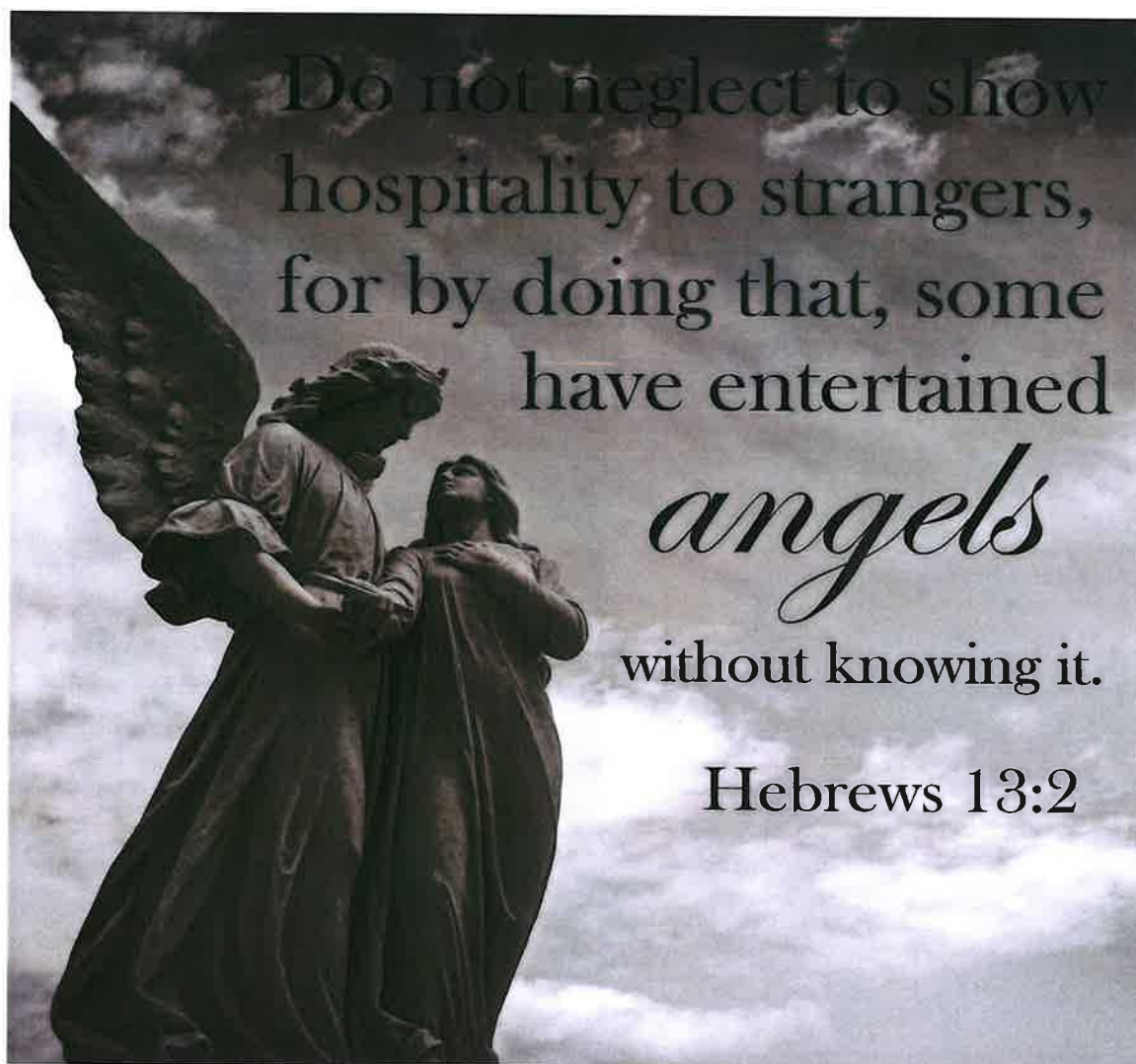
As you and your families, churches, and middle assemblies review your budgets and missional giving for this year, and begin setting new budgets and missional giving goals for the next, it is my hope that you will continue to partner with me to share the good news of God's love for people seeking refuge around the world.

In deep gratitude,

JJ TenClay
Missionary
Refugee Ministries Coordinator
RCA Global Mission







New Roots Review

They're Watching Us. By Fred Wilgenburg

September 2026



**NEW ROOTS
MINISTRY**

Though World Cup 2026 finished a few months ago, a moment in the tournament especially stuck with me; right after the final whistle was blown, declaring Spain as the champions, over Argentina, Lamine Yamal, the teenage star of Spain, dropped to his knees in a prayer of thanks. That image was in stark contrast to the post-match altercation involving shoving and arguing that was going on a few yards behind him, especially by some of the losing team's players. That was not unique for Yamal, who as a young Muslim man offered sujud, the act of prostration in an Islamic prayer, as well as other prayers throughout the tournament.

I appreciate the example set by this young man, but more, I was disappointed by the reaction of the people of "my family," that is, my siblings in Jesus. I realize that while about 75% of Argentines identify as Christians—58% as Catholic and 17% as Protestant, that does not mean Argentines in general, as well as Argentina's soccer players, are necessarily active Jesus-followers, but how we think, act, and speak not only sets an example to others who do not identify as Christians, but it is at the heart of faith. James is clear in his letter that faith that does not transform a person is really not faith at all; "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:17). Further, James 2:21-24 describes the patriarch, Abraham: "...His faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did....And the scripture (Genesis 15:6) was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Our Savior and Lord, Jesus, speaks on this subject as well, in Revelation 3:15-16, as he admonishes the church in Laodicea: "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm...I am about to spit you out of my mouth."



I write this newsletter as someone who thinks hard on these things, in part because personally, while my faith in God and love for God have grown stronger with age, I also find myself still speaking with the Apostle Paul: "...In my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am...." (Romans 7)! In fact, personally, age seems to bring not only more physical aches at times, but need to more carefully manage temperament, and attitude and mood. I am thankful for the truth of Ephesians 2:8: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast," and I am thankful I can with Paul his ending words: "Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 7:25)! But still, let's remember, it is a transforming grace, that cost God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the life of Jesus for the sake of saving us. It is to change us to live redeemed, sanctified lives, largely through the counseling and working of the Holy Spirit.

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While reading about the soccer players as I wrote this newsletter, I was encouraged upon reading about one of the Argentine players—one who often seemed feisty during the tournament, and who was involved in the post-match altercation. Here is a quote of this guy after one of the games, in the July 8, 2026 issue of *Sports Spectrum: Where Sports & Faith Connect*: "Thank God, who sustained me, guided me, and blessed me in every stage; and thank my family, the fundamental pillar of my life, and everyone who accompanied me and stood by my side." Here is an additional quote from the same guy, who was baptized: "I am a believer. God truly changed my life. He truly transformed me. My heart, honestly He transformed it." As I know

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(continued...)

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We did a 22-minute video interview, "Financial Basics for Facing Life Challenges," with a goal of getting it to many of our immigrant friends. Load the title in YouTube's search bar to watch it. If you find it helpful, please share it.

We produced this as often we find immigrants working hard for many years, yet having small 401K retirement account balances. This may be due to a lack of trust in the American stock & bond markets after coming out of countries with much corruption, or seeking to balance heavy financial needs of family in their home countries with saving for retirement, or borrowing against their 401K. Beyond retirement accounts, other practical financial information was also discussed.

myself as very "human," but made right with God by His grace, so I am pleased this soccer player is my brother in Jesus, and is transparent on the world-stage about his faith. But, may he manage his competitive spirit better so he conducts himself well, as an example to others.

As I have researched various belief systems much over the last decade working with New Roots Ministry, especially as our focus of ministry is on immigrant people, and many of them identify with other faiths, I increasingly appreciate and revere our Christian belief system. Some belief systems are purely rewards-based, and seemingly "manufactured." Others are based largely on fate, which, hopelessly, a person oftentimes cannot change. Another major belief system does not have a divine being to worship. Rather, by meditation and observance of moral precepts, adherents hope to ultimately escape out of the difficult earthly life and into a place of peace and stillness of mind. Quite differently, faith in

God, as described in the Bible, in which a person is made right with God only by His amazing grace, and which is to then have the effect of a person living out a life of thanksgiving and commitment to God, is most natural, peace-producing, and fulfilling. Yet, we all would admit that it takes effort, and it is an organic relationship that needs active nurturing for the best outcomes.

Unfortunately, too often, the world sees mis-theology—flawed theological teaching and lifestyles—within Christianity. Let's change that within ourselves, and as Jesus taught, through discipleship, for the sake of the world to whom we are called to be ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20), and for our own sakes of living out our most fulfilling lives. How?! This newsletter does not have space to lay that out fully, but I think reading and seeking to apply Ephesians 4:17—5:2 to our lives is helpful. That passage offers practical examples for shedding the old, and putting on the new. The last two verses provide an excellent summarizing call-to-action: "....Walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

May others see us and think, "I want to have what she/he has."

What is New Roots Ministry?
It "equips immigrants & engages the local church." This is done through workplace chaplaincy (we provide chaplaincy at Smithfield Foods & we train & place bi-lingual chaplains on commercial farms), through Timothy Leadership Training, through hosting special educational events, through empowering immigrant pastors, leaders, and their churches, through offering unique Service Opportunities—serve in, or visit, stores owned by new Americans, then hear their stories, through helping people navigate the American system and achieve their goals, like education, through driver training for immigrants, through Everyday -Ambassadors Practicum, and through English training.



Adaga was our 40th driving student. (We are presently training the 41st & 42nd students.) She and her family are Kunama, a minority people group from the country of Eritrea, Africa. Sioux Falls has the largest group of Kunama people in the US.



September 15, 2026

First Reformed Church
901 Pleasant St.
Boyden, IA 51234

Dear First Reformed Church Family,

This morning, as I drove into work, my mind was doing what it usually does at 6:30AM – making a mental list of the meetings and deadlines, the spreadsheets and emails that needed attention, and all of the little wheels and cogs that keep an organization like New Life running. I was so caught up with the daily “doing,” that I didn’t think twice about following the GPS as it routed me around and through the road construction that had certainly not been there the day before.

Somewhere in the middle of these detours, I found myself turning onto a gravel road I had never traveled. It was well maintained, as far as gravel roads go, but I knew better than to trust an unfamiliar country road at full speed. Having grown up on a farm, I learned early on that loose gravel has a way of turning an uneventful journey into something far more exciting than I prefer.

As I came over the top of a long hill, from the corner of my eye, I noticed some movement. I slowed down and out of the tall grass stepped a doe with a tiny fawn bounding along beside her. I stopped to let them cross, and I realized that the fragile little creature was so small and unsteady that it couldn’t have been more than a day or two old. When they reached the middle of the road, mother and baby stopped right in front of me, and for one quiet moment, the three of us simply looked at each other. Right then, during that pause, my mind was not cluttered with spreadsheets or budgets or schedules. There was only awe at the miracle of creation, and thankfulness that right there, on a gravel road I never intended to be on, I had been given a front-row seat to His glory.

Had I not been rerouted onto that unfamiliar path that I never meant to travel, I would have missed this gift entirely. That is so often how God works, isn’t it? He interrupts our carefully mapped-out plans with something we didn’t know we needed, all to help us remember that, truly, *His mercies are new every morning (Lamentations 3: 22-23)*.

By the time I walked through the doors of New Life, my head and my heart weren’t full of numbers and deadlines. They were full of gratitude and a renewed understanding of what actually matters: the miracles we get to witness and be part of, every single day, if we only slow down enough to notice.

I thought of the halls filled with laughter, comfort, and kind words. I thought of the men and women who walk through our doors broken and afraid, and who leave learning what it means to heal and what it feels like to be loved. I thought of the staff who show up to cook meals made with real care, who tend bodies that have been through more than any body should have to endure, who speak words of healing over people who are drowning in shame, and who lift each other up in prayer when the day has been hard. Living inside miracles like that, day after day, is humbling and wonderful and one of the great privileges of my life.

I wanted you to know all of this because this house of miracles belongs to you too, even from a distance. You are the reason God's glory keeps showing up in our hallways. Every gift you give, every hour you have volunteered, and every prayer you have prayed on our behalf has helped make New Life Treatment Center the refuge it is and the refuge it will continue to be. None of it goes unnoticed, and none of it goes to waste.

I know what it means to be shown grace by people who owed me nothing, because that is the story of my own recovery. So, when I see you extend that same grace to the people who walk through our doors, most of whom may never know your name, it means more to me than I can put into words.

Thank you for walking this road with us. Thank you for lifting us up and for being the hands and feet of Christ for people the rest of the world may have given up on. I am more grateful that I can say that you continue to stand with New Life as our brothers and sisters in Christ.

From my heart to yours, thank you for everything you make possible here, and thank you for being a living picture of God's love in this world.

With sincere gratitude,



Heather M. Hedger, MSM, MADC, LADC
Executive Director
New Life Treatment Center