

Syrian migrants build bridges with Swiss church

Anna Shammass and Rami Ziadeh are founders and pastors of an Arabic-speaking United Methodist congregation that reaches out to other migrants—and to the German-speakers in the church.

by [Annette Spence](#) in the [October 24, 2018](#) issue



Anna Shammass, co-founder and pastor of the Arabic-Speaking United Methodist Church in Aarau, Switzerland. Photo by Annette Spence / United Methodist News Service.

Anna Shammass was homesick and lonely on a subway in Switzerland in 2002. A migrant from Aleppo, Syria, she was wary when another passenger began to draw pictures and talk to her two-year-old daughter.

When the Swiss woman learned that Shammass was a Christian, she invited her to worship, drawing a map to the United Methodist church in Aarau. At the time, Shammass was “without a friend, without language skills, without security, and most of all without God.”

Today Shammas, 38, and her husband, Rami Ziadeh, 43, are founders and ordained leaders of the Arabic-speaking United Methodist congregation in Aarau. It gathers 70 to 80 Christians from Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, and European countries—as well as some from the Muslim faith.

In Shammas's first visit to the United Methodist Church in Aarau, church members "looked to me with love, with eyes of love," she said.

Since jobs were hard to get for migrants, and Shammas and Ziadeh could only afford one bus ticket at a time, they took turns attending church.

She learned that God "can talk to me and he can change the situation. He does, every moment in my life. I want to hear his voice, to live together with God."

Shammas began to recall a dream of becoming a pastor. She started a Bible study and dinner group in their living room, and within a year it had grown too large for the apartment. Shammas asked to move it to the church building.

"You are the roots," she told church leaders. "We want to be part of this tree."

Heinrich Bolleter, retired bishop of the United Methodist Church of Central and Southern Europe, has been learning Arabic and helps build relationships with the German-speaking congregation.

"People's hearts were open for the strangers, but the communication was limited by the language gap," he said.

The two congregations occasionally hold bilingual worship, and they share a ministry, Marhaba ("hello" in Arabic), to "overcome the fear that separates Swiss from migrants," Shammas said. Each week 10 to 40 people meet to share coffee, cake, children's activities, German-language instruction, and a devotion.

Shammas and Ziadeh understand well the struggles of migrants. The couple applied for asylum when they left Syria, but eight years after they had established a life in Aarau, they were scheduled for deportation. The Aarau congregation organized an all-night prayer vigil and a letter campaign to the Swiss government to allow the family, which includes three children, to stay. The church also provided education and employment, Bolleter said. A United Methodist grant enabled the couple to complete seminary training in Aarau.

The couple now shares a part-time salary for their pastoral roles. Ziadeh has a second job as chauffeur. Shammass receives a part-time salary as a coach for the Abbar Project, a pilot program in evangelism and relationship-building at the Aarau church.

Shammass is proud of a Saturday night gathering for people ages 17 to 26.

“They come from war and are very young and have lost their friends,” she said.

“They need each other.” —United Methodist News Service

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “People: Anna Shammass and Rami Ziadeh.”