

To the
Member Churches and Associated Organizations of the
World Council of Churches
Conference of European Churches and the
Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe

9 September 2015

**European refugee situation: churches' initiatives for refugees and other migrants
Priority for Safe Passage**

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,
Dear Colleagues and Friends,

In light of the on-going migration of refugees, we write to reiterate the calls issued by our respective organizations for a compassionate ecumenical response to the people most affected by this crisis – desperate people arriving in Europe after great suffering and danger.

We also wish to share some of the stories of responses by churches and related organizations to current needs, and to solicit stories from your own communities.

Over the past weeks, we all have observed dramatic developments regarding refugee and migrant arrivals on the shores and at the borders of Europe. The most recent news and images have been especially moving, as thousands of refugees assembled around Budapest train station, and there seemed no solution. But then Austria and Germany agreed with Hungary to open the borders and let the refugees move on, and the new arrivals have been welcomed warmly in these countries by citizens including church leaders. Though not as widely reported, support by citizens – particularly in Greece, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary and Italy – has been essential so that people on the move may survive and regain strength.

Arrival of tens of thousands of migrants in Greece or Italy has not meant that refugees find a safe place and the protection they deserve. Thousands of refugees continue to make their way onward.

The most dramatic refugee crisis remains in countries bordering Syria. Of the estimated total of 12 million Syrians displaced by the ongoing unresolved conflict; 4 million have crossed into neighbouring countries, with Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey hosting the majority of them. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees has pleaded with the international community to act urgently and effectively to respond to the biggest refugee crisis since World War II.

But as the international community's response has been insufficient to meet the emergency humanitarian needs – let alone bring about an end to the brutal conflict – those refugees who can are trying to find their

own way. As no safe legal channels have been opened, they turn to smugglers, sometimes falling prey to groups trafficking in human beings. Increased loss of life in the Mediterranean is a shocking reality.

Policies and positions on refugees and migration

On 12 June 2015 the World Council of Churches (WCC) Executive Committee, in its statement on responses to migrant crises, invited “WCC member churches and ecumenical partners, together with all people of goodwill, to promote a more open and welcoming approach to the ‘stranger’ and to the neighbour in need and distress, and to help receive and care for refugees and migrants in full respect for their God-given human dignity.”

The governing board of the Conference of European Churches (CEC), in its statement “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers” of 3 June 2015, requested churches in Europe to:

- Continue to pray for those who flee conflict, war and destruction;
- Commemorate those who have lost their lives on their way to Europe and use material developed for the annual day of commemoration (21 June 2015) proposed by CEC and the Churches’ Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME);
- Continue to work on addressing the root causes of forced displacement;
- Build up capacity to welcome refugees, commending the examples given by churches in the Mediterranean and elsewhere;
- Provide places where fears about the arrival of strangers can be discussed and constructive ways of living together can be found;
- Cooperate in changing policies in the EU and associated states from migration deterrence to those putting the human at the heart of migration policies, including by cooperating with CCME in the “safe passage” project;
- Address national governments and responsible authorities in EU member states in order to support such human centred migration policies.

The CCME Assembly 2014 called for

“a change of attitudes regarding migration in accordance with European values. This also implies a truly human approach to refugee protection in line with the relevant European and international conventions. This includes legal and secure access to Europe for those in need of protection.

We advocate for a Common European Asylum System including decent reception conditions as well as a Common European Resettlement Scheme that puts the human being and his/her dignity at the centre of the processes. Therefore, we call upon the European governments to embark upon policies that aim to address the main causes for forced migration.

We urge the European governments to take responsibility in particular for the situation of minors, the most vulnerable group, who are often deprived of basic stability, a full family life and education.”

As the EU Commissioner for Migration and Home Affairs, Dimitris Avramopoulos, declared in December 2014 at the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Conference: “Europe can and must do more”. The urgency of the situation requires our prayers, compassion and action.

Indeed, during the last months, Europe has seen a widespread movement of solidarity with refugees among the WCC and CEC member churches and ecumenical partners.

Select examples of practical action by churches and ecumenical bodies:

- In many parts of Greece, churches are supporting newly arrived refugees. On the Aegean islands, some parishes are providing for the basic needs for those arriving from neighbouring Turkey. On the Greek mainland, churches are helping in various ways ranging from soup kitchens to providing items needed by refugees in reception centres. This emergency help is accompanied by legal support services particularly by the Ecumenical Refugee Programme of the Church of Greece.
- In Hungary, the Reformed Church has been catering in various ways for refugees, and is currently providing medical services in one of the country's refugee camps. The Lutheran Church and the Hungarian Interchurch Aid are also active in this emergency situation.
- Church-related humanitarian aid agencies in the Nordic countries and Germany have committed to helping improve the reception of refugees in Southern European countries. Calls for donations have been launched and the agencies are rolling out their work in cooperation with partners in the region.
- In the UK, numerous church leaders have spoken out on the refugee crisis at Calais near the Eurotunnel, calling for compassion and humanitarian responses to the situation.
- In Germany, churches have initiated and supported local initiatives supporting refugees. Synods have spoken out in favour of refugee reception and resettlement, and churches are generously donating money to solidarity activities in other countries.
- In Sweden, churches are providing the ground for a continued reception of refugees under the slogan "make space!"
- In Italy, the Federation of Protestant Churches is monitoring the situation on the island of Lampedusa, and providing reception and meeting spaces between the local population and newly arrived refugees in Sicily. Churches are playing an important role in the reception of refugees throughout the country.
- In the Czech Republic, the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren has appealed to the government to allow for the resettlement of Syrian refugees with special needs.
- The Protestant Church in the Netherlands has in a public statement assured the state authorities of its support in securing reception places for refugees in the municipalities and asked for safe and legal pathways into Europe.
- Churches from Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and other countries have sent solidarity delegations to Italy or Greece to express their support to the churches in these countries and their work for refugees.
- ACT Alliance through its members in Greece (IOCC/Apostoli), Hungary (Hungarian Interchurch Aid) and Serbia (Philanthropy) have begun to provide humanitarian assistance in this complex situation. An ACT appeal issued on 9 September will enable a continued and expanded response. A coordination structure under the ACT Europe Emergency Response Group will be established, and a meeting will be held in Belgrade/Serbia on 16 and 17 September in order to ensure that all members of ACT work collaboratively within this ACT response.

This list is far from exhaustive. But these activities for support, reception and advocacy provide examples of how churches can further engage in responding to the refugee crisis. In this critical moment, ecumenical cooperation in the response is especially important, in order to enhance the collective impact of our various activities, to encourage others and to give a common witness of compassion, justice and peace.

The nature of this crisis calls for both humanitarian support and advocacy with governments. To assist you in your advocacy work, please find attached a summary of the most important advocacy points.

And please let us know of the commitments and engagement of your own church or organization, in response to our common Christian calling,

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in.” Matthew 25:35

Yours sincerely,



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