The Refugee Crisis and the Ecumenical Response

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The World Council of Churches (WCC) has a long history of involvement in refugees work. In 1948 WCC has been founded also in order to respond on the disastrous humanitarian impact of the Second World War which caused massive population displacements. Throughout its history, WCC took position and action on several refugees crisis which took place in different parts of the world. Therefore, immediately after the refugee crisis broke up in Europe, the WCC General Secretary, Rev. Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit issues a Statement on refugees in Europe¹ (at September 4th 2015) in which he acknowledged firstly the actual refugee crisis as being the worst since the Second World War. He called for more action from all European countries: "It is now absolutely and critically necessary that all European states take their proper responsibility in terms of reception and support for people seeking refuge, safety and a better future for themselves and their families. This cannot be left only to the states where they enter first." He also criticized the fact that some countries might reject refugees because of their religion: "We are shocked to hear of some countries rejecting refugees on the basis of their religion." While acknowledging that WCC member churches from affected countries made big efforts, sometimes even beyond their resources, he challenged "churches worldwide to rediscover their identity, their integrity and their vocation as the church of the stranger. For we are the Church of Jesus Christ, the child refugee (cf. Mathew 2:13)."

On 9 September 2015, a joint letter issued by the World Council of Churches, the Conference of European Churches and the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe² addressed to their member churches and associated organizations, called them to mobilize their efforts in order to respond properly to the emerging refugee crisis. The letter contented also examples of policies and positions on refugees and migration as well as practical actions taken by churches and ecumenical bodies to respond to refugee crisis.

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¹ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/general-secretary/statements/statement-on-refugees-in-europe>

² <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/international-affairs/letter-on-european-refugee-situation>

On 29 October 2015, WCC, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria and the Evangelical Church in Germany jointly hosted a Church Leaders' Consultation on the European Refugee Crisis.³ 35 participants came from Churches and ecumenical organizations from the Middle East, Europe and Africa. This meeting offered an opportunity for exchange of information from places that are countries of origin of refugees, from those countries of transit and from host countries. At the end, the participants formulated the following ten affirmations:

1. As Christians we share the belief that we see in the other, the image of Christ himself. (Matthew 25.31-46), and that all human beings are created in the image of God (Genesis 1. 26-27).
2. The experience of migration and crossing of borders is known to the Church of Christ. The Holy Family itself were refugees; the very Incarnation of Our Lord is a crossing of the border between the Human and Divine.
3. While we deeply deplore the crises forcing people to leave their homes, we welcome all refugees in Europe as we see in them the image God, and as God's children they bring their gifts to our continent.
4. Today there is evidence of a renationalization of politics. However the Church is both local as well as universal, and in the life of Churches we resist tendencies to work in isolation and we affirm our deep commitment to a universal and ecumenical horizon.
5. Many in Europe are willing to provide assistance and help to all refugees. At the same time there is a high degree of fear and anxiety. In addition we observe polarising tendencies that cause instability. In the face of this challenge the Church promotes collaboration, cooperation and solidarity.
6. The need of sustainability of support systems was evident in many reports. The refugee crisis is not merely a short-term issue. The Church always takes the long view; we are ready to accompany people into their future. A new paradigm is emerging in Europe - living with fragility, but as Christians we understand how our fragility can also become our strength.
7. Governments are recognizing that the Churches can offer additional and fresh wisdom, and some are turning to Churches to ask for ideas, vision and partnership. The UN is wishing to engage in a closer dialogue with the WCC. We welcome this developing deeper cooperation.

³ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/other-meetings/communique-munich>

8. The strong message heard in reports was an appeal to stop the wars, persecution and injustice. These are the main causes forcing people to flee their homelands.
9. We resist the tendency to look at the refugee crisis only in terms of numbers and statistics. This violates the Christian value of respect for the dignity of every human being. These are people with lives, families, homes, and youth.
10. We recognize the devastating effects on their homelands of the flight of many young, skilled and educated people.

Based on these ten affirmations, the following eight "recommendations" have been formulated:

1. We recognize that there are no quick solutions and we urge political leaders to acknowledge that persistent, consistent long-term efforts are needed and as Churches we wish to accompany our governments in seeking these sustainable solutions.
2. As Church leaders we recommend to governments and political parties to refrain from any exploitation of this human crisis for political ambition or benefit. We urge political leaders not to let any such fears shape their policy.
3. We also hear the fears of Christians and others in society, fear of loss of material and job security, of being in competition with others, and of loss of identity. We urge Christians not to let our fear mean a rejection of refugees. We are aware that integration of newcomers is hard work. However Christians are a people of hope and we can see the arrival of refugees among us as a potential blessing, bringing new life and energy to our communities.
4. We make an appeal to all governments in Europe to uphold our common values and shared responsibility for life as a community living in this continent. This means addressing in a spirit of solidarity, cooperation and fellowship, not only the emergency situation, but the upcoming related challenges of integration in society, education, and design of inclusion policies.
5. As Churches this is an opportunity to share more widely experience and expertise in offering spiritual and pastoral support, ecumenical and interfaith cooperation and building bridges between diverse communities.
6. We urge political leaders to ensure a balanced approach, addressing the root causes of refugee crises, supporting refugee camps in neighbouring countries, and receiving refugees in our own countries. We urge these to be addressed in a complementary way. As Church leaders all situations are equally important to us.

7. As Church leaders we recommend to all people of good will a deep commitment to communicating the truth avoiding distortion and exaggeration.
8. We recommend investing in safe passage, assisting those regions which are receiving the majority of refugees, such as Greece, Italy, and other countries of transit.

The high point of WCC involvement in the refugee crisis was an international conference organized in Geneva on 18-19 January 2016 in cooperation with representatives of governments, UN agencies and civil society organizations, including churches and faith-based organizations. Extensive presentations have been presented by WCC General Secretary⁴ Xavier Creach, United Nations High Commission for Refugees⁵ Dr. Thomas de Maizière, German Federal Minister of the Interior.⁶ At the end of the conference, the following joint declaration has been issued:

Europe's Response to the Refugee Crisis
Statement from the WCC/UN High Level Conference: Refugee
Crisis in Europe.

From Origin to Transit, Reception and Refuge, A Call for Shared
Responsibility and Coordinated Action

On 18-19 January 2016 representatives of governments, UN agencies and civil society organizations, including churches and faith-based organizations, met at a high-level conference on the refugee and migrant crisis in Europe, hosted by the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva, Switzerland, and co-sponsored by UNICEF, UNFPA and UNHCR. The conference aimed to promote principled, human rights-based and coordinated responses to refugees and migrants in Europe and to the root causes of their displacement. The conference provided an opportunity for participating faith-based organizations to apply faith principles (especially the belief that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God) in putting at the centre of the responses the human dignity and rights of all those affected.

⁴ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/general-secretary/speeches/opening-of-wcc-un-conference-on-refugee-crisis>

⁵ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/umer/mission-from-the-margins/migration/presentation-by-xavier-creach-unhcr>

⁶ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/umer/mission-from-the-margins/migration/keynote-by-dr-thomas-de-maiziere-german-federal-minister-of-the-interior>

In 2015, more than 1 million refugees and migrants arrived in Europe by land and sea. Arrivals include people fleeing from many other situations of danger and despair, especially in the Middle East, Asia and Africa. The refugee and migrant crisis has rapidly become a children's crisis, as children currently account for one in three of all refugees and migrants arriving in Europe. All children, no matter where they are or where they come from, whether they are refugees or migrants, are entitled to care and protection of their dignity, rights and well-being.

The conference focused on responses to the crises, predominantly in Europe but also in the wider context of the 60 million people displaced globally. It examined the entire trajectory of forced displacement, from origin through transit to destination, and acknowledged the challenges that European governments and societies are facing in meeting legal obligations under international refugee, humanitarian and human rights laws while at the same time addressing political, security and economic concerns.

The conference participants call for stronger collective engagement by the international community in seeking political solutions to conflict, violence, inequality and exclusion that are root causes of the current unprecedented global crisis of forced displacement. In particular, we appeal to all those with capacity to help stop the fighting and to alleviate the intolerable suffering in Syria to put aside their political differences and to join in common action for peace now. Protection of women and girls from sexual and gender-based violence and exploitation, and their access to life-saving sexual and reproductive health services, are essential components of a humanitarian response to the crisis, and are critical investments in future recovery and resilience. In addition, countries neighbouring the conflicts from which the refugees are fleeing, and which carry a disproportionately heavy burden of hosting the majority of refugees, must be acknowledged and better supported.

The conference participants concur that alleviating the suffering of people affected by displacement is a shared responsibility, not only in Europe but also elsewhere. It is vital that governments, civil society, international agencies and others work together in a consistent and coordinated manner to provide a safe and humane environment for refugees and migrants, and to meet the immediate needs of people escaping war, generalized violence and oppression -- and over the longer term to facilitate social inclusion and integration. It is of urgent importance that safe and legal passage for refugees coming to Europe be expanded and facilitated. Closing national borders to refugees is not a solution because it only shifts the responsibility to the next country.

The conference participants call for better coordination and cooperation of Europe's response to the refugee and migrant crisis. Implementing, strength-

ening and improving the common EU asylum system is urgently needed. Strengthened coordination in the European response is required to meet the needs of refugees and migrants, including protection against sexual and gender-based violence, education for children and adolescents, and the specific health, nutrition and protection needs of children, adolescents and women, the elderly and people with disabilities. It is essential to uphold principles of international law in the context of the crisis. All people fleeing from conflict and persecution are entitled to seek protection under international refugee law. Access to a fair asylum process must not be limited on the grounds of nationality, ethnicity, religion, health status or any criterion other than need. Cooperation is also urgently required to oppose xenophobic, racist and Islamophobic statements and actions, and political exploitation of the crisis. And it is essential immediately to begin implementing measures to help refugees and migrants integrate into their new societies. In addition to considering the legal obligations and moral principles that require a compassionate and welcoming response to people in need, it is to be noted that the contributions made by refugees and migrants through their labour, skills and creative capacities can be of great value to their host communities.

Civil society, including faith-based organizations, has a unique and substantial role in responding to humanitarian crises. Better coordination of their actions with those of governments and international agencies, as well as stronger inter-religious cooperation that brings in the voices and capabilities of other faiths, are essential to maximize efforts at ensuring the survival, rights and dignity of refugees and migrants.

We call for these intentions to be translated into action, and for the voices and views of refugees and migrants to be heard and taken into account to the maximum extent possible. This will entail defining roles and responsibilities, sharing information and knowledge, resources and activities, building on each other's comparative strengths and advantages, and holding each other to account. It will require concrete mechanisms for strategic planning, implementation and accountability, and a plan of action to set specific, measurable, achievable and time-bound goals. To this end, the conference participants call on the co-sponsoring organizations to work together to strengthen participation and contributions of faith-based organizations in responses to the refugee and migrant crisis at country and regional levels, building on existing initiatives already underway, and on a quarterly basis to review and share progress in addressing issues raised at this conference.