

# **"When God recommends guests and sojourners to them ..."**

## **The Church's Mission and Work in the Context of Migration**

A Reflection on Scripture, Theology, and Practice

By the [WCRC Europe Task Force on Migration and Refugees](#)

### **Part I: Scripture, Theology, and Migration**

The recent challenges brought on by migration in Europe compel us not only to engage in critical studies of law, politics, and society but also to return again to the life-giving word of God, witnessed to in Scripture, embodied in Jesus, and known by the Spirit. A commitment in our Reformed heritage is to be a church reformed, ever reforming according to the Word of God. While we stand in a long tradition shaped by the councils, confessions and insights of Christians before us, we also must consistently return to God's Word as our final standard and criteria for both teaching and action. What unites us as a Reformed family across Europe and the globe is not so much any one confession, ecclesial hierarchy, or theologian—although we share many of these—but God's grace given in Jesus and known by the Spirit. As the Heidelberg Catechism states, we are not our own, “but belong, body and soul, in life and in death” to our “faithful saviour, Jesus Christ.” This claim issues in theological commitments to the sovereign, justifying grace of God, the priority of Scripture, and the call to follow the Spirit in acts of personal and social transformation.

It is unsurprising that the various public statements issued by Reformed church communities in 2015 and early 2016 have a recurring emphasis on key scriptural commitments. As stated at the 2016 consolation in Bad Neuenahr, “The biblical references to refugees and migration serve as a guideline for church action.” Nearly every statement issued by European churches about the refugee situation includes references to the biblical call to “love the sojourner” (Deut 10:19) and to treat “the stranger that resides among you...as if they are native-born” (Lev 19:34). The parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25 and Jesus’ reminder that anything done on behalf of stranger, prisoner or the “least of these” is done to Jesus himself, were also recurring motifs. While these are vital and important statements, they are not the only biblical reference to migration. There are other broad biblical motifs of migration from the Exodus and Exile to the New Jerusalem. Even so, there are other accounts in Scripture that emphasize wariness to difference and maintaining strict communal identity. Given this range of biblical accounts, it is important that we place these ethical commands within their

broader scriptural and theological frame if we are to understand them properly. As we struggle together to respond faithfully, creatively, and justly to the current challenges and opportunities in Europe and beyond, it is important not to limit our biblical engagement to a few verses but rather attempt to read scripture holistically, charitably, and Christologically as befits the best of our Reformed hermeneutical tradition. As such, the church should understand the biblical commands around care for the stranger and the alien not simply as ethical imperatives; they carry deeply theological implications about God and humanity.

### *Old Testament*

According to the Old Testament, God's relationship to Israel is marked by migration. Beginning with the pre-history of the Patriarchs, Abraham is chosen by God, promised land and a people, and called out as a light to the nations. "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). God's promise is an invitation to exile. The *telos*, of Abraham's call and God's promise of a nation is not exile, of course, but a homeland that will draw all nations to God. However, the journey to this home is one filled with migration. Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Joseph, and later Israel's own existence is one of near constant movement between the promised land and various other temporary homes in Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and more. While there are certainly differences between the biblical accounts and modern-day forms of migration, biblical scholar Casey Strine argues that there are analogies between modern-day causes of migration and the biblical accounts in Genesis. He notes how famine and environmental crisis impact the movement of Abraham and Jacob and how Joseph experiences the reality of forced migration, smuggling, and trafficking.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond Genesis, the Old Testament is bookended by two accounts of massive migration that serve as central catalysts for the construction of Israel's identity as a nation, first, the Exodus from Egypt and second, the Exile to Babylon. Israel is founded by twin acts of God, first, the deliverance from slavery in Egypt and second, the giving of the law at Sinai. These acts form

---

<sup>1</sup>

[https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/uploads/content/bible\\_in\\_transmission/files/2015\\_spring/BiT\\_Spring\\_2015\\_Strine.pdf](https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/uploads/content/bible_in_transmission/files/2015_spring/BiT_Spring_2015_Strine.pdf)

the deepest memory of Israel's existence, with Passover serving as a yearly re-enactment of God's saving power. Walter Brueggemann says, "Israel's testimony to Yahweh as deliverer enunciates Yahweh's resolved capacity to intervene decisively against every oppressive, alienating circumstance and force that precludes a life of well-being."<sup>2</sup> Thus, even when Israel resides in a bounded territory, it is called to worship the God who delivers the oppressed and thus constantly gives attention to its own migratory heritage. This is especially clear in the Torah. The laws of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy all include injunctions to care for the stranger (*zar*), the alien or foreigner (*nokri*) and the sojourner or resident alien (*ger*). These injunctions are rooted in Israel's experiences of being saved from slavery in Egypt by God and their forty-year wandering in the deserts of Sinai. "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as a one of your own citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God" (Lev 19:33, 34).<sup>3</sup> Care for the alien, stranger, and sojourner is an act of theological significance. Because God has acted on behalf of alien Israel, Israel is called to act like the God it worships by caring for the aliens in their midst. This is to be legally enacted in both civil and purity laws through the non-discrimination of aliens. "You shall have one standard for stranger and citizen alike: for I the Lord am your God" (Lev 24:22).

Claiming that Israel's existence is constantly influenced by its experience of alienation and migration is not to underplay the important acts of political constitution, land, and kingship that occur between the settlement of the Land and the exile to Babylon. However, the experience of Exodus from slavery comes to take ritual, legal, political, and moral form in the ongoing life of Israel. Even when Israel is settled in the land, they are asked to remember their wandering. We see this in 1) the ritual reenactment of exodus through Passover; 2) the establishment of legal and economic responsibilities to strangers and aliens; and 3) a theological vision that understands care of strangers as an act that mimics God's response to Israel. In

---

<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997) 174.

<sup>3</sup> Similar injunctions occur in Ex. 12:21, 12: 49, 23:9, Lev. 24:22, Num 9:14, 15:15-16, and Deut. 1:16.

one strand of the biblical narrative of the Old Testament, care for strangers is understood as a reflection of God's care for and liberation of Israel.

The second major event of migration occurs in the destruction of the Temple in 587 BCE and the exile of Judah to Babylon. "This fissure became decisive for the faith of Israel as it is voiced in the Old Testament."<sup>4</sup> The Old Testament is filled with various interpretations, reflections, laments, and accounts of this seminal event. Prophets such as Jeremiah and Habakkuk envisage Babylon as a tool in God's hand sent to punish Judah. Ezekiel depicts a God with wheels who accompanies Israelites into exile. The psalmist of 137 sits by the rivers of Babylon and weeps. Psalm 74 implores God to remember those in exile, while Psalm 79 hopes for Israel's return. Daniel offers narratives of exilic living and Jeremiah asks exiles to work and pray for the good of Babylon. Nehemiah and Ezra depict the various strategies of inclusion, exclusion, and protection that accompany return to the land. In the experience of exile, Israel calls upon the God of Exodus. "Israel is now, as a nation scattered through the world...not only occasionally, but as a pattern throughout history, Israel's experience has been oppression, alleviated by Yahweh's protection."<sup>5</sup>

Within these exilic and post-exilic texts, there is a clear ethical and political tension in how the writers view outsiders and non-Israelites. On the one hand, texts such as Ruth, Jonah and Jeremiah 29 emphasise God's lordship over the world and call the people of Israel into some form of covenantal relationship with their neighbours, strangers, and even enemies. On the other hand, it is important to also note how other biblical texts invoke a much more restricted and bordered account of the people of God. Ezekiel critiques Israel's dalliance with foreign powers in chapters 18 and 20 and his vision of the restoration of Israel in 44:7 bars non-Israelites from coming near the vicinity of the Temple. Both Ezra and Nehemiah have a strong vision of purity as indicated in the depiction in Nehemiah 13:3 of the people of Israel "send-

<sup>4</sup> Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Fretheim, and David L. Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 327.

<sup>5</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 84.

ing away anyone who had any foreign ancestors.” These biblical texts that emphasize community coherence and purity remain an important, albeit often ignored, component of contemporary debate, and they reverberate in later texts such as I John and Matthew.

At the same time, migration and welcome is a much more dominant feature of Isaiah, a group of texts that have long influenced Christian biblical interpretation and liturgical practice.

There, the author(s) poetically describes a day when God will make all things new through God’s chosen suffering servant. The prophet promises that Israel will be gathered again (Isaiah 43:5-6) and vindicated. The nations that had oppressed Israel will humbly stream to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple. Isaiah 58 describes a day when the walls of the Temple will be rebuilt, and proper worship will be offered to God as justice is extended to the oppressed. The enduring hope of the Old Testament’s response to exile is that 1) God will gather and reconstitute Israel after its exile; 2) God will reveal God’s lordship over the whole earth; 3) other nations will be humbled before God; and 4) Israel will become a light to nations and a comfort to the afflicted.

### *New Testament*

The New Testament picks up on these themes of exile, restoration, and God’s rule in surprising ways. No sooner is Jesus born than he is forced into exile in Egypt. When his public ministry begins, Jesus is constantly on the move, even saying that he “has nowhere to lay his head” (Luke 9:58; Matthew 8:20). After his death and resurrection, the disciples are also sent out in mission and migration to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Paul travels throughout the Mediterranean sharing the good news that God had reconciled the world through Jesus of Nazareth. The missionary impulse of the New Testament includes a radical reworking of personal and communal identity. No longer are human beings defined first and foremost by their economic or political status (slaves or free, citizens or alien, Gentile or Jew) or by their sex (male or female), but they are united in Jesus Christ. In the end, the New Testament promises that a multitude will be gathered from every tongue, tribe, and nation. In the heavenly Jerusalem, “the nations will walk by” God’s light and “the people will bring the glory and the honour of the nations” before the Lord and the Lamb (Rev: 21:22-26). Weapons of war will be beat into tools of sustenance, tears will be wiped away, death will die and mourning will cease. “Every knee will bow” and “every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10-11). Then God will be all in all, and God’s kingdom will have no end.

Yet, for now, Christians live as pilgrim people in the “long and meaningful middle”<sup>6</sup> between Christ’s resurrection and eschatological consummation. In this middle period—what Augustine calls “this passing age”<sup>7</sup>—Christians are both citizens and aliens. Christian identity, their *polis* or commonwealth, is beyond the world—eccentrically located in God. “Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20). This citizenship, unlike the citizenship of Rome, Israel, or ancient Athens, not to mention present-day nation-states, is open and offered to all through Jesus Christ and his Spirit. In Christ and through baptism, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female” (Gal 3:28). “The cross challenges the *exclusion* by which the rulers and authorities define their identities.”<sup>8</sup> The dividing wall between nations and ethnicities has been broken and a multitude from every tongue and tribe is proleptically gathered into the community of worship at Pentecost. What has been promised in the Psalms and Prophets occurs in and through Christ and Spirit.

This eschatological citizenship creates worldly exile—however, this exile is not exactly the same as that which occurs in the Old Testament. On the one hand, the church lived in exile like Israel. Sociologically, the church was a diasporic community scattered throughout the Roman world.<sup>9</sup> However, this physical exile was not the primary marker of worldly exile. It was the church’s existence as an eschatological community that defined its pilgrim identity. The New Testament references to exile are more commonly indicative of a moral or political ambivalence caused by the in-breaking of God’s future in the resurrection of Jesus than a physical exile from space. The church is called to be a people set apart from the powers and values of the world, even as they are made to be salt and light in the world. For instance, Peter writes to those physically dispersed throughout Asia Minor, imploring them to understand their lives in the world as a “time of exile” (I Peter 1:17) in which they are “aliens and

<sup>6</sup> Joe R. Jones, *A Grammar of Christian Faith: Systematic Explorations in Christian Life and Doctrine*, 2 Vols. (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 1:259.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Oliver O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, 233.

<sup>9</sup> See Peter C. Phan’s essay “Migration in the Patristic Era: History and Theology” in *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration*, Edited by Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 35-61.

strangers” (I Peter 2:11). A Christian commonwealth is not physically located in this world; it is a future reality that exists in God’s coming reign.

However, the church’s self-understanding of journeying through time as exiles towards an eschatological culmination, did not necessitate complete withdrawal from the political communities and laws of the present age. Most famously, Paul demands the church in Rome “be subject to the governing authorities” (Romans 13:1), and Jesus says to “give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17; Matthew 17:24-27; Luke 20:25). The Lord’s Prayer invites God’s kingdom to be made present in the world and God’s will to be done in the here and now amongst the messiness of political life. Even Peter, who writes to exiles and strangers in this world, asks his readers to “accept the authority of every human institution” (I Peter 2:13) and to honour governors and the emperor. Christian citizenship may lie beyond history, but this does not eliminate Christian existence in and with the political realities of this passing age. As the anonymous author of the *Letter to Diognetus* notes, “They share everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land.”

In summary, the New Testament offers an image, particularly of Gentiles, as people that were once aliens and strangers to God’s covenant with Israel, who have been welcomed and saved by the hospitality and grace of God in and through Jesus of Nazareth, and are now empowered by the Holy Spirit to be agents of divine welcome and justice in the world. How this hospitality and justice is to intersect with the political and legal rulers of its own day, let alone with ours in the twenty-first century is left fairly open-ended. It is no wonder then, that many of these ambiguities still impact our churches and their relationships with one another and the world today.

### *Toward a Theological Framework*

As the above sketch illustrates, the biblical vision of migration and hospitality toward strangers cannot be limited to ethical commands alone. It includes a broader theological vision about God, God’s care for humanity, and our calling to reflect this divine hospitality outward in the world. A distinctly Reformed theology of migration should be grounded in a recognition of who God is and what God has already done for us and the world. Scripture shows us that God exists *pro nobis* and for those who are neglected and despised in the

world. God comes to us, even when we are ignorant or in rebellion, and acts to make us part of the people of God. God's reconciling and justifying love toward human beings is the ground upon which we base our trust. God elects the outsider—first Abraham, and through him, the people of Israel. God is the One who frees the slaves from bondage and accompanies Israel into exile, never forsaking them. In fact, the story of the Christian Gospel is one of a divine-human movement, one might even say a migration, where God elects to accompany and save us as one of us. As Karl Barth famously said in *Church Dogmatics*, the Gospel tells the story of the journey of the Son into the far-off country—a journey undertaken by God for the sake of reconciliation, justice, and grace for human beings. In Jesus Christ, we discover that while God's love is deeply particular, it is also indiscriminate. The work of God in Christ and Spirit is not something only for us—for our people or churches—God's love is for all. Much of the story of Acts is the gradual realisation of the early disciples and Christians that God's work in Jesus Christ extended out to the whole world. This is seen in the very foundation of the Church, where all hear in their own languages or in the increasing inclusion of the Gentiles throughout Acts 7-15. God's love extends, then, not just to Israel—a reality the Old Testament already indicates in the command to care for strangers and the stories of prophets such as Jonah—or to the Church, but to the whole world. When we meet human beings who are different from us—those who have migrated across the globe in the search of security, justice, or simply a better life—we encounter someone who is loved and treasured by God. Migrants are human beings created in the divine image and those whom God loves. God's love in Christ—and not fear nor political citizenship—is the foundation from which Reformed churches should base our theology and politics of migration.

God's prior love and hospitality is to be reflected outward into the world. This is a key hermeneutical principal to understand Scripture's views of love and care for others. The Bible asks us to remember that we are all in some sense strangers and exiles that have been made friends and neighbours to God and one another by the grace and work of Jesus (Ephesians 2:13). The call to remember echoes throughout Scripture, a call to remember God's freeing of Israel from bondage and for Gentiles to remember our surprising inclusion into God's covenant. Those who have been welcomed and saved by the hospitality and grace of God are empowered by the Holy Spirit to be agents of divine welcome and justice in the world. There is a long Reformed tradition, evident in the confessions and catechism, that understands human work and sanctification in this fashion. Take the Belgic confession as one example of many,

“Far from making people cold toward living in a pious and holy way, this justifying faith, quite to the contrary...moves people to do by themselves the works that God has commanded” (Belgic Confession, Article 24). Christian engagements in society, as well as our own personal acts of justice and charity, are not a means to establish God’s kingdom or merit salvation. Instead, people who have been justified by God’s grace are freed and empowered by the Spirit to act responsibly for their neighbour and society’s well-being. The freedom of the Christian, in Luther’s famous tract, is a freedom from the tyranny of self-justification, but it is also a freedom to live with and for our neighbours. The grace, welcome, and justice that we have been given is to be shared outward with the world. To participate in the church’s mission with, for, and as migrants is to rediscover a central reality of our own salvation. We who have been claimed by God’s grace in Christ are empowered to extend this same welcome outward to the world.

There are also important theological ramifications for understanding the nature of the church in light of migration. While much of our church statements as well as this report have emphasised the church as host, that church as a community of faith is also present among guests and migrants. The one Body of Christ is not only those member churches and congregations who welcome new migrants into Europe, but also as migrants themselves who come with their hopes, dreams, gifts, and faith and seek ways to be welcome and contribute. Across borders and differences, we are united together through faith as one body in Christ. As John Calvin wrote in the *Institutes of Christian Religion*, “The church universal is a multitude gathered from all nations.”<sup>10</sup> Instead of thinking of the church as first and foremost on the side of hospitality, it is important to see the church and Christ coming to us in the stranger made friend.

While there is a recurring element of Scripture that seems to circumscribe God’s love within a community, the broader theological logic continually presses both Israel and the Church to recognise how the Spirit is at work in the world. Since God’s love in Christ is bound by no human categories, slave or free, male or female, Jew or Gentile, the church’s work on behalf

---

<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1960), IV.1.9.

of others is not to be constrained by categories such as religion, political or legal status, or discussions on the worth of migrants. As Paul reminds the church, “What do we have that we have not received?” (I Corinthians 4:17). These gifts that “we have received” include salvation, our talents and skills that we share with the church and the world, as well as other basic realities that we often overlook or take for granted: food and shelter, political membership and citizenship, access to work or the freedom to speech—those very things that most migrants have had taken away from them. Thus, just as God’s love and grace is not something to be earned, the inherent worth and dignity of each person is not tied to their status. In his commentary on the Good Samaritan, John Calvin draws a parallel between the parable and the command to care for the stranger in the Torah in order to make a clear point about our duty to humanity:

When God recommends guests and sojourners to them, just as if they had been their own kindred, they thence understand that equity is to be cultivated constantly and towards all men...They are commanded to love strangers and foreigners as themselves. Hence it appears that the name of neighbour is not confined to our kindred, or such other persons with whom we are nearly connected, but extends to the whole human race; as Christ shows in the person of the Samaritan, who had compassion on an unknown man, and performed towards him the duties of humanity.

There is no justification, then, to limit the church’s work or advocacy to only Christians or those we think might merit our charity. We are empowered by God to meet each person as one who is deeply loved and worthy. Scripture is clear that not only does God call us to love the neighbour but that in loving and welcoming people, particularly the guest and stranger, we are somehow welcoming and loving God. This is most abundantly clear in Matthew 25, where Jesus Christ identifies himself with the “least of these.” The author of the epistles of John also reminds his community that we only love God in so far as we love our sisters and brothers that we see. Theologically speaking, God is present in and with strangers—migrants are a site of divine presence.

## **Part II: Theology and Mission in Action: Case Studies from the Task Force**

In light of the scriptural witness and some of these more basic theological commitments, the churches in Europe are called to live out, by the grace of Christ and in the power of the Spirit,

our mission of hospitality, witness, and justice. While the church is to be guided, shaped, and formed by God's reconciling grace and the invitation of Scripture to care for migrants, it is important to recognize that the church is a human community on the way, *in media res*. We live as a people both justified and still sinners. Our perspectives are not God's and we still 'see through a glass darkly' (I Corinthians 13:12). As such, the move from Scripture and theology to personal, political, and ecclesial action is a complex one, shaped by the unique perspectives, histories, and contexts of individuals, congregations, national churches, and politics. Our acts of hospitality, struggles to understand and relate to new neighbours, engage with different religions and cultures, share the Gospel, struggle for justice, respond to tragedy, war, and terrorism, and care for those afraid are all realities that we must acknowledge. Nicholas Healey argues that the church needs to take more seriously these realities when constructing its theologies of the church. Rather than focus on ideal blueprints of the church from the perspective of God, he argues that the church is called to offer a 'practical-prophetic ecclesiology' that takes seriously Scripture and theology on the one hand, but also the challenges, contexts, and questions facing the church in the world on the other. "The concrete church, living in and for the world, performs its tasks of witness and discipleship within particular, ever-shifting contexts" that shape our work.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the last few years, the WCRC task force on migration in Europe has understood even more profoundly the importance of addressing how the changing contexts, politics, and human needs impact the churches ministry. Far from being secondary factors in the church's work, these are fundamental realities that must be addressed. There are European and even global contexts that are important to attend to. At the global level, these include the climate change that has led to food insecurity in many countries and the lack of political will in solving the Syrian civil war. Within Europe, decisions about Schengen, shared responsibility to resettle refugees, the closure of the Greek/FYROM border, and various deals with Turkey and Libya to restrict migrant flows have altered the landscape since late 2015. The lingering economic uncertainty of many people in Europe, the rise of populism and radical right groups, and the breakdown in political relationships are also key factors that are shaping

---

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Healey, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (London: Cambridge, 2000), 39

society and the church. Throughout our work as a task force, we have also seen how the different regional and national contexts impinge on the church's work and mission. For instance, what the Greek churches and Italian churches encounter on the borders of Europe is significantly different than the work of churches in the United Kingdom or Poland. As the 11 January 2016 document from a consultation in Bad Neuenahr notes, the distinct cultural, historical, and political situation of churches in Europe impacts their approach to refugees and migrants. Despite these differences, "All countries experience difficulties with a view to the acceptance of refugees" (EKR). At the same time, we have much that is worth sharing, celebrating, and debating about our local and national ministries. In light of this, it is vital that we understand one another better and examine how different communities are wrestling with Christ's calling for us to be salt and light in our societies. As such, we want to present case studies from our task force member churches that describe the social and political contexts in which each church community has been working. This allows us to understand and learn from one another's perspectives, but also to see best practices and examples of the church's engagement with refugees. Attending closely to these case studies, as well as the other work and contexts of member churches, will help us understand where the churches currently are in our ministries, how we got here, and where we might see God leading us into the future.

### ***The German Context and Church Responses*** (prepared by Martina Wasserloos-Strunk)

Since 2013 many people from outside of Europe have arrived in Germany looking for a new existence and home, either as a temporary or permanent residence. The large number of refugees and asylum seekers entering the country, particularly since 2015, initially surprised the government, society, and social institutions. The infrastructure of the country was not prepared for the approximately 600,000 people entering the country who needed legal help, shelter, and provision. This required national and local agencies to create new temporary accommodation and social services very quickly. At first, the state organizations needed to rely on the help of volunteers. Throughout the country and also within our churches, numerous people worked pro bono for refugees. Their first motivation was not only to help the municipality, but chiefly to help migrants. The great openness of the people in dealing with the migrants has reasons deeply related to German history. The generation who survived World

War II, and their children, often feel a responsibility to help others resulting from the persecution and expulsion of the Jews and other minorities during the time of National Socialism.

As churches, we have both provided and relied on volunteers to engage with migrants and to assist them in navigating the country. For instance, volunteers provided German language lessons to migrants. They accompanied people to the authorities and helped to them file legal requests. They brought local people and migrants into dialogue and conversation and sought information about the causes of their flight and the plight of people in refugee camps. Many Germans came back to Christian communities who had not entered a church for a long time. As Christians, this was the opportunity to speak about our faith and share what moves us to act on behalf of people. In addition, engagement of the Muslim community in Germany was very high, as they tried to give refugees new homes and contact with the local communities. A [study by the Bertelsmann foundation](#) has shown that Muslims within Germany have often engaged with new arrivals more than others.

Across Europe, many refugees dream of Germany as their final destination. In their eyes, other European countries, such as Italy, Hungary or Greece, for example, are merely transit stops on the way toward Germany. The attraction of Germany was furthered by Angela Merkel's decision in the summer of 2015 to remain committed to the Schengen Agreement and guarantee that asylum seekers would have their case adjudicated by the law. Due to the fact that Germany is normally not directly accessible to refugees, there are a large number of Dublin III cases coming to a decision here.

This has created many challenges, both within Germany and across the European Union. For instance, within Germany, the question of giving migrants some kind of temporary right to residence opens up the possibility of stabilizing their lives, bringing their families to Germany, and providing structure after years of displacement. However, not all migrants have a legal, long-term right to stay, and this would encourage dreams that are far from reality. The German government is currently trying to remedy the situation by identifying more countries as "[safe countries of origin](#)." For those migrants who are now coming from safe countries of origin, such as those within the EU, Balkans countries, as well as Senegal and Ghana, it is now much more difficult to receive right of residence.

Since the so-called “refugee crisis,” the political situation in Germany has slowly changed. The statement of Chancellor Merkel, “We can do it” at the height of the “crisis,” divided people in Germany. The great openness of many people has more and more changed in reserve, worry, and fear. At this time, right-wing parties are getting stronger and stronger both in public and at the polls. They make use of people's fear about Islamism and terror in order to pursue an extremely harmful policy. This is the first time, since after World War II, that the right-wing parties have participated in the German parliament with more than 10 percent of the vote.

In this historic situation, churches in Germany have an important role to play. For instance, the church needs to strengthen the structures within the church to better help refugees and migrants who are in need of support, both diaconal and legal. The number of church-asylum cases in Germany is rising, so the government wishes to change the tolerance of politics. In this situation churches should be, and often already are, mediators and advocates for those who need help to communicate with government and community. Churches should be a voice to give advocacy to those who cannot help themselves and often have legal policies against them, such as [refugees from Afghanistan](#). In addition, the church should offer the moral and theological framework to empower volunteers against attacks from parts of civil society, as well as their families and from right-wing parties. The church in Germany must offer a theological and political vision of the Christian legacy and heritage of our country than those promoted by exclusion.

Churches should give contextual theological background about the issue of flight and migration to their members. They should (and they do) sensitize people to the fact that God is close to the oppressed. Churches can people make aware that changes in life often create fear, but, as the [Statement of CCME expresses](#), in such situations the word of God is: “Have no fear, for I am with you.

### ***The Greek Context and Church Responses*** (prepared by Alexandra Nikolara)

It all started in February 2015 when Idomeni, a village situated on the border between Greece and FYROM, became a pass-through for refugees from West Asia who were travelling toward others destinations in Europe. The [Evangelical Church of Greece](#), having become sensitive to the despairing image of people who were snatched from their home and carried their whole

“life” in a bag, began helping refugees in transit by providing bottled water, basic food items, and hygiene items, along with a wish for smooth continuation of their journey. In August 2015, Elder Elias Papadopoulos set up the wireless network in Idomeni to enable refugees to communicate with their relatives and friends and to stay in touch with the overall development in their home countries and elsewhere.

In the next six months the aid intensified in an organized and systematic manner with the assistance and support of all the churches of Northern Greece. Our volunteers cooked meals in transit, distributed basic items, and responded to various needs. Six families were hosted in Katerini by Elders of our Church in their own homes for two a half months. Some other families were hosted in a similar way in Serres, Thessaloniki, and Neos Mylotos.

In March 2016, when the borders with the neighboring countries were closed, Idomeni was transformed into a “permanent parking area” for thousands of refugees. Tents filled the surrounding fields and about 15,000 people were trapped only a few meters away from the border.

The Evangelical Church of Greece responded directly and in a coordinated way, with a great deal of love, care, zeal, and perseverance to the needs that were emerging:

- Many visits were made at Idomeni from volunteers to distribute bottled water, food, blankets, clothing, shoes, and raincoats.
- Volunteers approached people and addressed their medical needs as well as possible.
- Great help was given with the provision of food, clothing, and hygiene and other items, to the refugees who arrived at the Port of Piraeus from our islands.

Today, the Evangelical Church of Greece continues, through a variety of actions, to actively respond to the refugee crisis throughout Greece. This response includes the following: Specifically:

1. The church meets people and responds to their needs in the camps in Serres, Thessaloniki, Veria, Volos, and Athens.
2. Through the creation of Day Centers in Athens and Thessaloniki, we try to respond to the daily needs of refugees in the region. For instance, mothers with children and families are offered breakfast, bath amenities, recreational time, hygiene items, milk, food items, and clothing. In addition, we offer unaccompanied adolescents in Athens safe accommodation, meals, bath amenities, psychological support, transfers to hospitals, recreational time for children, clothing, and other items.

3. Vulnerable families with pregnant women are hosted and supported accordingly in Neos Mylotopos in fully equipped homes.
4. Many families and individuals are accommodated in Katerini (through three funded housing projects) in fully equipped homes or apartments and are supported with the aim of helping them to “stand on their feet” again, either as they continue their journey to Europe or by becoming part of the Greek society after they have obtained a residence permit. Since May 2016, 2,000 people were accommodated overall. A new NGO, [Perichoresis](#), has been established.
5. We provide medical and pharmaceutical support to those in need.
6. We provide legal support to those who ask for it.
7. We provide psycho-social and psycho-educational support to children, families, and adults.
8. We provide educational programs for all ages (Greek & English language lessons).
9. We create a climate of communication, osmosis, and integration into the local community through joint activities.

Positive feedback and comments from various recognized local organizations, international organizations, etc., record the quality, discretion and reliability of our service and mission. Respecting the basic principles of human rights, personal data and privacy, and driven by our commitments to the Gospel, we hosted and cared for people whom who felt as our own.

#### ***The Hungarian Context*** (prepared by Ódor Balázs)

Between 2012 and 2015, the number of asylum seekers in Hungary increased dramatically. Refugees had been coming through Hungary for many years, but this migration movement was not visible to the wider public until 2015. The increasing number of arrivals in 2015 led to the adoption of a number of severely restrictive measures, including the erection of fences along Hungary’s borders with Serbia and Croatia. At an EU summit of Member State interior ministers, in July 2015, the Hungarian government officially announced that Hungary was completely unwilling to accept any more refugees or asylum seekers.

As of 15 September 2015, all those entering Hungary without authorization through the border control fence are considered to have committed a criminal offence, which is punishable by an actual or suspended term of imprisonment of up to three years and mandatory expulsion. Asylum-seekers, who under international law have a right to a trial and protection, are not exempted from these new criminal procedures. The law further criminalizes “damaging of the border fence” and “hampering of the construction work of the border fence.” The biggest reception

centre in the country has been closed down with the effect of reducing access to proper accommodation with protection sensitive arrangements.

In March 2017, new asylum rules went into effect in Hungary. In practice, the new law means that every asylum-seeker, including children, is to be detained in shipping containers surrounded by high razor wire fence at the border for extended periods of time. The European Commission has started and then, later, moved forward an infringement procedure against Hungary concerning its asylum law, and the UNHCR, along with a number of countries, has called for the [temporary suspension of transfers of asylum-seekers](#) from other EU member states to Hungary under Dublin regulations.

At the same time, the Statement on the European Migration Crisis issued by the Presidium of the General Convent of the Hungarian Reformed Church stated that those who have been welcomed are entitled to treatment according to the Christian values, and that protection goes hand in hand with the guarantee of basic human rights. “It is our church’s inescapable task to help people in need: those fleeing from direct threat to life and those coming simply in the hope of a better life. We must help those who are practicing Christianity and those of other faiths; those who have no qualifications and those who are graduates; those are simply travelling through our country and those would like to settle here permanently. We thank the aid organizations of our churches and those congregations and church members who have already taken part in this service, and we ask and encourage others to do so always.”

- [Statement of the General Convent on the European Migration Crisis \(2015\)](#)
- [RCH's Press Release regarding the Refugee Crisis \(2015\)](#)
- [RCH's Strategy on Mission among Refugees \(2008\)](#)

In addition to public statements, the RCH has been working with refugees since 2006, and in the beginning of 2017 the [Refugee Ministry](#) was [reorganized in order to have a bigger impact](#) on clients in need. The ministry now falls under the umbrella of the RCH Diaconal Office and partners with a local implementing partner, [Kalunba Social Services Ltd](#), in the work of integrating recognized refugees into life in Hungary.

In December 2016, RCH's Diaconal Office committed to actively participate in a [HEKS project](#) for the promotion of integration of refugees, and signed an agreement of cooperation with Kalunba in order to provide the necessary framework for the cooperation with HEKS. The HEKS project focuses on the sensitization of the church constituency on the one hand, and on the expansion of Kalunba's after school tutoring program on the other.

The HEKS Refugee Project is fully in line with the Strategy of the Reformed Church in Hungary on Mission Among Refugees as adopted by the Synod, which states, "The situation in which members of Hungarian society and refugees live in close proximity provides great opportunities to gain experiences, leading to the fading of prejudices and the building of multicultural connections. Our congregations can also become more open and inclusive communities if they take in refugees and serve among them."

[Kalunba](#) takes a comprehensive approach to integration work among refugees, with the conviction that services should be people-centred and tailored to meet each individual's needs. The final aim is empowering people and making them more independent. The three main areas of service are housing, education and employment.

Kalunba provides housing services for refugees, either through the direct provision of apartments or through rent subsidies. Once they become involved in the project, refugees are monitored for a year, which ensures that their integration is sustainable. Integration is considered successful when families, or single refugees, are able to fend for themselves and provide for their own home after one year.

With regards to education, Kalunba strives to prevent social exclusion and a lack of integration via partnerships with schools in Budapest that accept to take refugees among their pupils. The organisation sends teachers to these schools to complement and support them in this effort. Students and their mentors meet throughout the school year to work on homework, study languages, and socialize. Social workers meet the children in the program first, working with them one-on-one to determine the best ways to teach them and create an individualized program of study. When this is done, children are carefully matched with volunteers, some from local RCH churches in Budapest, to help them reach their educational goals. In the 2016-2017 school year, 37 children were enrolled in the after-school activities, and it looks as though even more will join for the 2017-2018 school season. The children come from around the world, including

Syria, Algeria, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Congo, and Cameroon. Adult learners also come to take free Hungarian lessons and tutoring in school subjects.

Kalunba also tries to directly integrate refugees in the labour market, having contact with public employment services and local employers who are open to hiring them. Moreover, from 2010 onwards, the organisation itself has been able to hire refugees among its workers as social advisors, translators and co-workers. Having staff that experienced the same difficult transition in their life allows the organisation to interact better with beneficiaries, and it facilitates the development of community life. The Hungarian Reformed Church Aid has also been sharing in the work, providing [humanitarian support](#) both in Refugee Reception Centres and at the crowded railway stations.

***The Italian Context and Church Responses*** (prepared by Ciccio Sciotto)

For decades, but especially since the war in Libya began, Italy has been the major country of arrival for migrants coming to Europe from Sub-Saharan West Africa and East Africa. With the closure of the Balkan route, these groups have been joined by refugees from wars in West and Central Asia, Syrians, and above all, Afghans. Nearly all these people have arrived in Italy from Libya, brought by human traffickers, after enduring extremely costly and often terrifying experiences. These included journeys across deserts and living in holding camps in Libya, followed by dangerous crossings of the Mediterranean Sea. Italy has faced a very large influx of asylum seekers, this being the only category presently recognized for entering into the Schengen area. As a result, Italy's reception system has been overwhelmed due to our country's inability to accelerate the evaluation and granting of requests for asylum. A few months ago, the government of Prime Minister Gentiloni decided to "externalize" the border, making deals with Libyan militia bands and with traffickers themselves. This deal, in effect, turned the smugglers into prison guards. The NGOs involved in assisting the migrants travelling across the Mediterranean have been held at bay by a vicious media campaign against them. Thus, de facto control of the international waters of the Mediterranean Sea has passed to the Libyan Navy.

From 2011 onward, the Waldensian Church has not held back from its vocation to welcome and assist people who have landed on Italian shores in enormous numbers. The church has created small-scale projects providing housing, language lessons, cultural mediation, and

other services with the aim of fostering social inclusion. In these years, the number of persons hosted by the Diaconia Valdese is not large: a few thousand, including adult males, unaccompanied minors, and women, some of whom were victims of sex traffickers. The Diaconia has hosted most of these people in cooperation with programs provided by the Italian government and involving municipalities or prefectures. Significantly, the Diaconia Valdese has also drawn on its own financial resources to house and assist small groups of particularly marginalized people who fell outside the government protection schemes and were left quite vulnerable.

The humanitarian corridor opened by the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy is an important project for three reasons: it was the first such project in Europe, it is an ecumenical project, and it offers a template that can be, and has been followed by other European countries. Both France and, more recently Belgium, have launched projects based on the Italian model. The idea behind the project, called Mediterranean Hope, was as simple as it was innovative - to go and bring out migrants who had been blocked along their way either in refugee camps in Lebanon or elsewhere along Europe's borders. The relevant legal framework comes from the Schengen agreement, which says in article 25 that every state of the European Union can distribute temporary visas to migrants in situations of particular vulnerability. The Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy, in partnership with the community of Saint Egidio and the Italian foreign Ministry and Interior Ministry, opened a humanitarian corridor in Lebanon. Thanks to this corridor, approximately 1,000 people have arrived safely in Italy in the past two years, and another 1,000 will arrive in 2018-2019. The costs for housing, welcoming and integration of families and individuals are all borne by the churches, which have dedicated funds from Otto per Mille, money which has been entrusted to the Waldensian Church by Italian taxpayers. The project is ecumenical, as noted above, as it was launched together with the Community of Saint Egidio. The Community recently launched a second project for the Horn of Africa which has received the backing of the Roman Catholic Council of Bishops. The project has proved replicable because it is based upon a European regulation, applicable in all the countries that signed the Schengen agreement. It provides the best way to divert power and money away from the criminal organizations that profit from a cruel traffic in human beings or make money by erecting walls or barbed wire barriers to keep the migrants contained. In addition, the projects make it possible for single countries to study the background of candidates outside their own territory, a system that is safer both for the migrants and for their potential hosts.

Another area where the Federation of Protestant Churches has been active for many years is represented by the project “Being Church Together.” The title reflects a complex, ever-evolving phenomenon by which our local churches have been pleasantly shaken up by the arrival of many brothers and sisters from all corners of the globe. Churches have worked to welcome and integrate these newcomers into the worship services and all other activities. Italy has been and remains a country of emigration, but the phenomenon of immigration is new to the last three decades. Our churches, always representing a small minority in a predominantly Roman Catholic country, have tried different models for integrating brothers and sisters from abroad into each local congregation, rather than merely letting ethnic groups use church premises for their own services. Some of our churches today have groups of newcomers from two, three, or even ten different nationalities. It is undeniable that these brothers and sisters have stimulated our reflection and renewal in terms of our liturgy, our sense of vocation and Christian service, and our spirituality. We now face a new challenge from differing views on some theological and ethical questions.

#### ***The Swedish Context and Church Responses*** (prepared by Emanuel Furbacken)

Uniting Church of Sweden/*Equmenia kyrkan* has been working for and with refugees and asylum seekers from, among other places, Palestine, Iraq, Iran, and North Africa for many years even before the Syrian war. [The work](#) have been intensified since the Syrian war, especially since the fall of 2015. During that year, Sweden received more than 160,000 asylum seekers. While some churches had experience working with asylum seekers and refugees, for many it was a completely new reality to find large groups of asylum seekers suddenly arriving in their town, city, or area.

Through a questionnaire sent to our churches, we know that between 250 and 350 congregations, that is to say, more than 35percent of the 720 congregations of the Uniting Church of Sweden are or have been engaged in the work of asylum seekers, new arrivals, and refugees. Uniting Church of Sweden employed four part-time refugee co-workers around the country to support local parishes in this work.

The most common form of the parish engagement is through different kinds of meeting places. The most common form of meeting places is the Språkcafé language cafe and Swedish language classes. Other venues for meeting include sports activities such as bowling, football, table tennis, swimming, and bike lessons. In addition, there are games for children and families, women's groups, open churches with varied activities such as barbecue evenings, camps, study visits, and dinners. Cultural activities have also been another form of our work with and alongside people seeking asylum. We have varied music activities, including guitar groups, choirs, and a symphony orchestra, as well as dance and theater groups which connect across cultures and offer community.

Many congregations have also offered some form of advice, transportation, contact with authorities, and institutions. Engaged people in parishes also provide support and counseling during the asylum process by accompanying people to different authorities, offering transportation to and from housing and to meetings with authorities and health centers. In some parishes there are activities such as creating a language friend, sponsoring families, or acting as legal representatives. This entails Swedes taking personal responsibility for one or more new arrivals to our country.

The new reality has had a profound impact on our local congregations. Everyone who comes to other meetings is invited to worship. The congregations welcome all people, regardless of faith and tradition. This has changed our worship services, as texts are now read in different languages, and interpretation is offered. New musical styles and liturgies have also been introduced. We have received several reports that attendance has increased, and new members of the congregation have been welcomed. Several churches offer classes in the Christian faith and Bible studies, and some people want to be baptized. In several cases, we have seen hundreds of converts from other faiths. The asylum seekers and new arrivals bring new energy and joy into the congregation and community life.

In several parishes there are Arabic-speaking groups within the congregation and the Uniting Church of Sweden has hired an Arabic-speaking pastor from our sister church in Egypt, the Synod of Nile. Some local congregations have also hired Arabic-speaking pastors from the Synod of Lebanon and Syria who have had to flee from the war in Syria. We also have other language groups. This is a sign of our churches' commitment to ecumenism and to drawing

on the resources, gifts, and skills of Christians in the Arab world. Moreover, through our co-operating churches and partners, including those in Syria, the Uniting Church of Sweden is actively working with local congregations to provide assistance to people. The campaign, “[Lighting a candle for Syria,](#)” is ongoing with efforts to fundraise for the ssistance of people in Syria and Lebanon.

In attention to these ministries of welcome in local congregations, the churches have had an intensive work in shaping public opinion in Sweden. In response to the government's decision on restrictions on refugee policy and a changed asylum law, the Swedish Christian Council and local parliaments have been very active in advocacy. [Now that the changed asylum laws have come into force, the formation of opinion continues, and we will closely follow the consequences of the restriction law and, above all, highlight the right to family reunification.](#)

Another major challenge in Sweden is that we have a large group of unaccompanied children and young people in Sweden (about 100,000), especially from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and Eritrea. Many of the young people from Afghanistan have had their asylum applications refused. Hundreds of families now volunteer to help families by providing a home, and without financial support, advocating for the government to reconsider their cases. Volunteer organizations have been built in Gothenburg to support these children and young people.

Several of our parishes are very active in the work called Agape in Gothenburg and surrounding areas. Agapeoffers leisure activities, as well as support in structuring everyday life and schooling. We run an open house with an overnight stay with a total of 32 seats. Since the beginning, approximately 150 homeless young people have been helped to get a home in the Gothenburg area. Agape started as a reaction to the government's regulation of asylum policy, a regulation that had major consequences for teenagers and young adults. Many had to move homes and found themselves in much more difficult situations with poor accommodation, increased crime, and a lack of support. The environment was unsuitable for anyone to live in, much less children. In addition, young people lose their place in school during a move, since one is not entitled to apply for a new high school at the age of 18. This has in-

creased homelessness for young people. In response, Agape works very actively with lobbying to support young asylum seekers who themselves organize on these issues to meet and challenge politicians in our parliament and government.

The Uniting Church of Sweden sees a continuing need to support parishes' work with asylum seekers and new arrivals. Integration, inclusion, and integration for people who have arrived new to Sweden is a long process. Therefore, it is important that we continue to devote resources to deepen and develop our church and parish diversity and integration efforts. Local congregations often cooperate with other churches and organizations in order to improve local work. It may involve language training, introductions to Swedish society, internships, help writing a CV, and finding work and/or housing. In summary, our churches make great efforts to welcome and include people in our parishes and society. We see that the work gives congregations new energy, joy, and pride.

### **Part III: The Church's Ongoing Mission in Light of Migration**

Across the five case studies, not to mention other churches throughout Europe, individuals, congregations, and national denomination bodies have responded to the arrival of people with compassion, creativity, and care. Basic human needs for food and shelter have been met; community has been nurtured through arts, language, and sport; legal and governmental institutions are engaged through advocacy and accompaniment; new forms of being church together have developed. At the same time, the church in Europe is not immune to the challenges, fears, and difficulties of the last few years. Churches, both local and national, have been divided over how to engage with migrants and the politics around it. Security concerns and the attacks in Nice, Paris, Berlin, Manchester, and elsewhere—whether or not they were actually committed by migrants—have raised fears of human beings from different cultures and religions. As Susanna Snyder writes, changes in society often create ecologies of fear, a “vicious cycle in which geopolitical insecurity, the fears of the established population, negative media discourse and governmental policies and practices serve to intensify each

other, which in turn induces fear” both in and of migrants.<sup>12</sup> Immediate hospitality has turned into longer term struggles around the politics, law, integration, housing, and jobs. The church’s work lies at the intersection of these realities. On the one hand, all churches hear and heed the biblical call to care for the stranger and the migrant. On the other hand, churches and Christians live in the world and engage their society and politics differently. The socio-political realities facing Europe and the globe over the last years presents significant challenges to the church, but they are also an opportunity. The church and Christians might rediscover the Gospel, revitalise itself, rediscover the global nature of the church—not just in confession but in concrete local practices. These intersections and our struggles to live faithfully and justly raise a number of important questions about the WCRC’s ministry and work in the next few years.

### *1. Migration Ministry Between Mercy and Justice*

Across the WCRC member churches are in agreement about the biblical command to care for the refugee. We see this in the public statements issued by churches in Hungary, Poland, France, Spain, the Netherlands, and more during 2015-2016. However, there remains significant disagreement about what this command entails for our social, political, and ecclesial action. Are these commands first and foremost interpersonal, calling individual Christians to offer temporary hospitality or personal care only? Or do these biblical injunctions entail social advocacy and political action? If so, questions remain about how the church should relate to governmental authorities and international, European, and national laws. To what extent should existing laws be challenged? Do national or international law take priority? How should churches respond when the laws seem to contradict human dignity and even the Gospel? These are all profound questions that demand more theological and political reflection. We must ask how the church’s diaconal and mercy-oriented ministries of the church relate to the church’s prophetic call to demand justice from governments and rulers. This remains a key point of disagreement and tension throughout the WCRC in Europe. For our further conversation, we might divide these into two aspects.

---

<sup>12</sup> Susanna Snyder, *Asylum-Seeking, Migration and Church* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 13.

First, while policy and political perspectives within the churches will be divided, it is vital to understand that refugees and migrants necessarily demand some level of legal and political response. For the majority of human beings who migrated to Europe over the last few years, their lives are still marked by uncertainty. Many in countries like Germany or Sweden wait for rulings on their asylum cases; others in Greece or Italy await both their legal cases and news of where they might be resettled. Even those who have received permanent residence struggle to learn new languages, find employment, and integrate into the societies. All the while, most of the major news attention that was given to the issue in 2015 and early 2016 has moved on to other more dramatic stories such as the surge and victory of far-right groups in recent elections across the continent. In this context, the church is still called to care and advocate for strangers, neighbours, and even would be enemies. Long after attention has move elsewhere, the work of hospitality and justice continues. The human beings scattered across Europe, not to mention the many more stuck in camps or cities not only need humanitarian assistance and human community, they also need political stability. The church should not and cannot ignore this. As Emma Haddad has argued, “There cannot be an apolitical humanitarian solution to the politically charged events of mass human displacement.”<sup>13</sup> What this means is that the churches’ various impressive diaconal ministries of hospitality, care, and integration need to recognise also the broader legal and political challenges facing migrants and asylum seekers. One of “the most important long-term political need of a refugee is a nation state and/or a legal arena that offers protection.”<sup>14</sup> While caring for immediate needs is one aspect of our work, as the case studies above show, these inevitably extend beyond humanitarian assistance into some forms of political engagement that address the questions of law and citizenship. Migration is both a deeply human reality that requires humanitarian response, and also a political and legal reality that requires some form of advocacy.

---

<sup>13</sup> Emma Haddad, *The Refugee in International Society: Between Sovereigns* (New York: Cambridge, 2008) 204.

<sup>14</sup> Joshua Ralston, “Toward a Political Theology of Refugee Resettlement,” *Theological Studies* 73 (2012): 376

Second, recognising that the challenges of migration include a legal and societal element does not immediately answer the questions about what stance churches should take toward governments or what policies we might advocate. In light of the Barmen Declaration, we might rule out two options for how churches engage politically. On the one hand, the church should not be apolitical and acquiesce to the demands of the state when they overreach their limits or deny the rights of human beings to be treated with dignity and equality. The March 2018 response of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy to the criminalisation of sea rescues in the Mediterranean is an example of the church refusing the state's law in the name of both international law and the Gospel. A strict theology of two kingdoms that quarantines politics from the Gospel is dangerous. "We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords—areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him" (Barmen, 8.15). On the other hand, Barmen and the longer tradition of Reformed political thought also notes that the church should not replace governmental authorities and legal apparatuses. They are to be respected and honoured, even as they are not divinised. Laws and governments exist to provide peace and justice according to the best measures of human judgement and ability. "We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church, over and beyond its special commission, should and could appropriate the characteristics, the tasks, and the dignity of the State, thus itself becoming an organ of the State" (Barmen, 8.24).

Ruling out either a complete rejection of the state or a complete acquiesce to the state's ideology, WCRC member churches and WCRC Europe are called to discern how and to what extent it engages in legal assistance and political advocacy. Some churches, depending on their standing within the country and political position, may prioritise local humanitarian and ecclesial ministry, while others might have the ability and resource to engage more politically. Since migration includes aspects of international law, European law, national law, and even local laws, this will inevitably be varied by each context. At the WCRC European level, it would be beneficial for member churches to consider how and to what extent we might coordinate our advocacy at the European level. In so doing, we might draw on the opinions and perspectives of organisations like the Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe as well as national and local church bodies. At the national levels, churches might share with one another what methods, strategies and perspectives they have undertaken and what they perceive to be the limitations and possibilities of civil and political engagement.

Moreover, it is important to link advocacy around laws to the ongoing diaconal work with migrants. This will entail listening closely to the hopes, desires, and needs of migrants as well as the questions, challenges, and aspirations of our congregations and society. How to balance the political and social interests of existing communities and new migrants remains another open question.

## *2. Cultural and Religious Diversity in Society*

In addition to considering how the church might integrate our diaconal and prophetic roles in Europe, there are also the longer-term questions about the role of churches and congregations advancing societal integration and cultural understanding. Migration has not only produced profound political challenges across Europe, but it has also been the spur for renewed debates about cultural and religious difference and the nature of society. Part of the longer-term role of churches in Europe, as we have seen in the case studies, is to provide a gateway for social integration, cross-cultural change, and mutual transformation. This comes in very everyday ways such as language learning, shared table fellowship around meals, cultural festivals, community worship, the development of social networks of belonging and more. For many human beings who have arrived in Europe, church congregations and individual Christians will be the first or primary place of encounter and welcome. These relationships have profound possibilities for building longer-term trust and social cohesion. They also demand a willingness for both new migrants and long-term residents and society to be mutually transformed, renewed, and challenged. The onus for social integration is not only on new arrivals but also on host communities, cities, civic organisations and churches to be open to learning.

Of course, there are much more fraught debates about migration in Europe as well. A central feature of this debate revolves around the place of Muslims and Islam in Europe. For many Christians and secular Europeans, Muslims are viewed with suspicion if not outright hostility. There are both deep and recent historical reasons for this—some based on mythologies of inherent conflict, some due to mutual misunderstandings, but some also caused by real conflict, tensions, violence and disagreement. One of the key commitments of our task force has been to recognise the importance of Christian-Muslim relations in Europe and to find ways to improve the church’s ministry of dialogue, evangelism, and cooperation with Muslims.

This reality also raised a number of questions about the future ministry and work of the WCRC that are worth further discussions and debates.

An important way that the church might address this role is by facilitating new frameworks for Christian engagement with Muslims and better understanding of Islam. In the face of large scale migration, Christian theology and ethics are confronted with our own limitations and inadequate approaches to Islam. As the Princeton Seminary professor and theologian Daniel Migliore wrote in the context of post 9/11, “Adding to the problem is the lack of preparation that the Christian church and Christian theology bring to this new and complex engagement with Islam.”<sup>15</sup> Christians in Western Europe and North America have much work to do to in order to understand Islam, theologically reflect with Islamic thought, and engage with Muslims. Unless and until Christian theology, ministry, and political ethics confronts its long and uneasy relationship with Muslims and understanding of Islam, we will remain caught between the dominant motifs of fear and nostalgia that cling to past Christian Europe or simplistic accounts of tolerance that calls for a generic love of neighbour but fails to address genuine difference. The political, ethical, and theological issues that Christian-Muslim encounters occasion are not going away in our lifetime. It is thus all the more urgent for Christians in the West to muster both the courage and humility to begin to risk genuine engagement with Muslims and to move beyond the fear and recrimination that has dominated most public and ecclesial debates. This should include an educational component, such as the possible continuing education course for WCRC Christian leaders and members to be held in the summer or Autumn of 2018, that introduces Christians to the basics of Islam and offers theological and practical frameworks for dialogue and shared mission. Christian-Muslim engagement must also balance the dual commitments to mutual understanding and share action on the one hand and commitment to sharing the Gospel and recognising real cultural and theological differences on the other.

Another key aspect of the church’s role in facilitating Christian-Muslim relations relates to the place of Islam and Christianity in public discourse and politics. The rise of many far-right

---

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Migliore, *The Power of God and the gods of Power* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 116.

parties that praise European culture and Judeo-Christian values do so in the name of rejecting human beings who are seeking refugee or a new life. Throughout Europe and North America, we continually hear other memories invoked in relationship to refugees. Memories of crusades or Ottoman wars, memories of national power and victory, or more recently the powerful images of terror attacks in Paris, Brussels, Berlin and elsewhere have been used to depict migration as a continuation of a clash of Christendom and Islam. In fact, with a few exceptions, if you hear a European politician invoke Christianity or the Judeo-Christian values of Europe, it is most likely to make an argument for the inherent otherness of migrants or a justification for why borders must be closed and the rule of law around asylum-seeking curtailed. Is this the public witness that the church seeks? The WCRC and its member churches have continually issued public statements and raised alternative voices to these—reminding people of the inherent worth of every individual before God, encouraging people to not be afraid, and to find just solutions to our problems that take seriously both the real questions around Islamic Jihadi groups but also recognises the humanity and dignity of Muslims and that most Muslims reject such violence.

Without denying the reality of these stories—and the pain and fear that they have caused—the church finds its life and witness from an alternative dangerous memory that needs to find more public voice both with society and our churches. The memory of our own community's migrations and history is meant to be an impetus toward action. Unfortunately, the church's memory—like the people of Israel—is amnesic. We forgot our own histories. We forget that we were once aliens and strangers to the promises of God. We forgot that God's grace is not a possession that we earn or keep, but a gift of the Spirit to be received by grace through faith. Still the memory and presence of the Jesus's cross and resurrection presses us to become who we already are (Bonhoeffer), something that Paul reminds us to remember and proclaim whenever we gather around bread and wine. We need to draw on the memory of being welcomed into community “gathered from all nations” (Calvin) by the grace and love of God. These rich Biblical and theological motifs profoundly shaped the history of the church, and in particular the Reformed tradition. John Calvin was himself a refugee from France that was welcomed in Geneva. French Huguenots and Scots found safe haven in Geneva and the low countries. Hungarian Christians persecuted during the early parts of the reformation fled east and found some protection in the Ottoman Empire. In fact, a church historian, Heiko Oberman, has dubbed the Reformed tradition a community formed by a

“reformation of refugees” given the profound ways that migration shaped our communities. More recently, we can see in the case studies of this report alternative accounts of the church’s witness with and alongside Muslims. There are powerful stories across the Reformed communities in Europe that might serve as impetus for action.

One particularly powerful example comes from the churches in northern Greece and Katerini. In the midst of the Greek economic crisis and the EU policies on closing borders, congregations in Northern Greece have acted creatively and justly to welcome and advocate for migrants. All of this has been done in quiet and enduring ways long after the news media and international attention has moved on. They exemplify the promise of Jesus Christ that anyone who loses their lives for Christ's sake will gain new life. In addition to being compelled by the Gospel and human compassion, their own history as a congregation has formed part of the deeper impetus for engagement. This community was originally a Greek community in Pontus near the Black Sea in what is now Turkey. In the early 1920s as the Ottoman Empire crumbled and war and persecution broke out, they had to flee. The community ended up in and around Aleppo and were hosted by Arabs and Kurds for 6 to 18 months before they were resettled to Greece and the city of Katerini. So many in the community talked about how this experience of their grandparents and great-grandparents--the matriarchs and patriarchs of the local church--has shaped their response to the crisis today. They are now repaying the hospitality, nearly a century later, to the very same community that offered it to them when they were refugees. It is a living witness to the biblical command to care for the migrant in your midst since you too were once aliens and strangers.

### **Questions for Consideration and Discussion**

1. How might member churches draw on scripture and theology to encourage church members to engage with and care for migrants? How can churches challenge the religious narratives used in public and political discourse that foster fear of others, especially migrants?

2. How do member churches understand the call to care for the stranger and migrant at the diaconal level? What are the challenges and opportunities facing the church's work with migrants?
3. How can member churches build a deeper understanding of inter-religious and cross-cultural engagement, particularly Christian-Muslim relations? How might churches and local congregations encourage neighbourly relationships with migrants, be they Christian, Muslim, or from another religious community? How can churches play a role in facilitating trust and dialogue between Muslims and Christians and also carry out our mission to share the Gospel, building on existing good practices in the case studies?
4. How might churches find ways to integrate our work of charity and hospitality to migrants with the work of political and legal advocacy and support? Is this work best done at the national level or European wide?
5. What roles can church congregations play that civil society or government are not able to? How can we as churches support grassroots, civil society, and political institutions in the work of welcome and integration?
6. In light of the case studies, what are opportunities for member churches support each other, address common challenges, coordinate and learn from each another moving forward?

### **Suggestions for Further Action**

1. To improve Christian-Muslim relations by increasing cooperation and dialogue with the Middle East partners of the WCRC, and also learning from the experiences of other WCRC European partners in their cooperation with Muslims. This can entail formal dialogues between Reformed ministers and Muslim imams, local partnerships around shared action in civil society.
2. To continue discussions on integration, and encourage focus on integration and inclusion of migrants in European communities, attending especially to the dynamics of cultural and religious differences.
3. To react to the increasing xenophobia within our communities through dialogue and discussion of political messages, with special focus on “Christian identity in secular

Europe”, and finding space to confront right wing parties and populist ideologies even within our churches, all taking into account the current political climate within Europe.

By Dr Joshua Ralston, Church of Scotland

In consultation with the WCRC Task Force on Migration and Refugees

*Co-Moderators*

Martina Wasserloos-Strunk, WCRC Europe Vice-President

Rev. Balázs Ódor, WCRC Europe Vice-President

*Members of the Task Force*

Rev. Martin Engels, Reformed Alliance in Germany

Rev. Emanuel Furbacken, Uniting Church in Sweden

Dóra Kanizsai, Reformed Church in Hungary

Alexandra Nikolara, Greek Evangelical Church

Dr Joshua Ralston, Church of Scotland

Rev. Francesco Sciotto, Waldensian Evangelical Church