



European Methodist Council

Refugee Ministries in Europe

Newsletter 1 – December 2015

Editorial

When The European Methodist Council met September 12-15, 2015 in Ruse, Bulgaria, we had intensive bible studies, prayers and conversations in the light of the situation that thousands of refugees are arriving in Europe. We sent a pastoral letter to all our member churches. It ended with the words:

“We believe that God also calls us to welcome those who arrive as our fellow pilgrims. We commit ourselves to immediate actions and the long-term perspectives that the issues raised by migration require. With a united voice, the European Methodist Council calls on our fellow citizens across the continent to join us in reflection and action.”

The European Methodist Council installed a working group and asked the European Methodist Children and Youth Council to send representatives to that group. We “meet” once a month via phone call in order to share best practices of migrant ministries and seek to support one another as Methodists in Europe. We decided to work on a newsletter to inform the people in our connection and to encourage them to reach out to our new neighbors throughout Europe.

May God bless us all as we live out the call to welcome the stranger.

Olle Aiklund (Uniting Church in Sweden); Christian Alsted (United Methodist Church Nordic and Baltic Area); Maria Sonnleitner (United Methodist Church Austria); John Stephens (Methodist Church in Ireland); Greetje van der Veer (Methodist and Waldensian Church in Italy); Alison Walker (Methodist Church in Great Britain); Rosemarie Wenner (United Methodist Church in Germany); Emil Zaev (United Methodist Church in Macedonia); Miriam Zajicova (United Methodist Church Czech Republic)

Reports

Italy

“Mediterranean Hope”

What Methodists in cooperation with other people of faith do in Lampedusa and throughout the country, is an inspiration for all of us in the European Methodist Council.

Read more under: <https://mediterraneanhope.wordpress.com/english-version/>

Balkan Route

People are on the move on the so called “Balkan Route” from Greece to Germany and further on to Scandinavia. We have small United Methodist Churches in most of the countries in the Balkan. The congregations work with others to offer solidarity, humanitarian aid and counseling. Here is a report from October 2015. The needs even have grown because of the bad weather in late autumn.

Read the report http://www.umc-europe.org/artikel_3346.php

Austria

The Austrian government started to discuss whether a fence should be built in order to "organize" the immigration. United Methodists, although they are a small group, reach out to those, who are arriving, many of them want to pass through. Here are a photo and a report of a youth meeting that recently took place:



"They are youths, who like to play football or Uno, listen to music or watch youtube videos as much as we do - just in a different language and with a different history..."

That was the summary the methodist youth of Austria took with them from a weekend from the 30th of

October to the 1st of November all on the topic of refugees. About 17 youth from all around Austria gathered and looked at this topic from different aspects. They discussed if or how they have encountered refugees in their past. Shared their experiences and opinions on it. It came up that many of them found the term "refugee" very abstract and over-used by media, they had no personal connection to it. So they looked at how the refugee experience is depicted in the Bible with the people of Israel (Numei 20-24) and they continued to have open conversations about it.

Eventually it changed as they met refugees. A whole afternoon of playing football, Kupp and other outdoor games, as well as an evening with card games and preparing and eating a dinner together.

This for many of the methodist youth put faces to the abstract term "refugees". All of a sudden it was Chava, Achmed and Suneel and no longer just "refugees".

One of the participants explained their experience at the service on Sunday, by using a metaphor: he showed a 20€ note and asked who would want it. A few people raised their hands. He continued by crumpling it, by throwing it on the floor and eventually by stomping on it and continued asking each time who would want that note. Obviously people still raised their hands. "The value does not change - even when the note is treaded badly," was his statement. "It is the same with people. Even if they lost their home and had traumatizing experiences. Even if they are called words such as asylum seekers, economic migrant or what not. The value of the people does not change. And now for us it changed as well. Whenever we will hear the word "refugee" there will be the faces and names of the people that we have met this weekend, and with whom now some of us are even Facebook friends."

You can find the original post in German on the Austrian UMC webpage:

<http://emk.at/blog/Oesterreichisch-Afghanische-Begegnung-beim-Jugendtreffen>

Germany

United Methodist Churches offer great hospitality to the refugees that arrive in big numbers and are blessed because of the fellowship with the new neighbors.

Here is a visual impression of the community building process that takes place at Messstetten, a small town with about 6.000 inhabitants and currently about 3.000 refugees who stay there for a short while. Methodists engage making contacts with the refugees and they respond very openly, even by attending worship services. How good it is that all are welcome at the Lord's Table!



See also an interview with Rev. Rolf Held who is currently stationed at Messstetten: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvB0gbm7M2w&feature=youtu.be>

Pastor Thomas Leßmann D.Min. from Lübeck in North Germany tells a story that is typical: People are harsh and some even hostile. They often change their minds as soon as they have personal encounters with refugees:

Touched

The student of economics was quite clear: "We cannot give shelter to all of them! We have to close the border and send the people back!" I had come to an end with my arguments and became silent.

It happened that he attended worship the following day. A refugee shared her story. For nine months now she is coming to our refugee meetings, worships and faith-courses. She feels at home with us and trusts us. Frankly she shared her story in worship: "We lived in Eritrea. My father died as a soldier when I was three years old. To prevent the same happening to my brother, we moved to Ethiopia, the homeland of my mother. One day my brother visited our relatives in Eritrea - it took years for him to come back! They kept him and forced him to fight in the army. After years he could leave and come back to us in Ethiopia. But when they heard that during the years abroad he had fought for the enemy, the Ethiopian police came and took him along. We have never seen him again. We were desperate. My mother left Ethiopia and fled with my sister and me to Khartoum, Sudan. But soon the civil war came. Refugees like we were threatened, they stole our belongings and my sister was raped. Not being save any more my mother decided: "Go on! I am too old, but you can make it!" So again I moved on - this time alone. In Libya I worked to get the money for the trip over the Mediterranean Sea. Everywhere was fighting and killing - they left the dead lying where they were shot. It took me two years to come to Germany. I am so glad to be here. Not to be afraid any more for my life. For the first time in my life I am really safe."

At lunch the student talked to me: "No way, one cannot send people like her back! That would not be human." Again I was silent - this time out of joy. Two weeks later I called him on his handy. He: "Sorry, can't talk now. We are at a football game with the refugees." - "We? You?" - "Well, after that worship I talked with some fellow students to help in an accommodation for refugees. We asked in which way we can support them and they asked us to take them along to cultural events."

The interaction with the refugees touches our hearts. We from the "Christchurch" do not only give - we also receive a whole lot. We experience the word of the Bible: "I was a stranger and you took me in." God is encountering us in these refugees. That is Christmas - in the midst of the year!

Thomas Leßmann, D.Min. United Methodist Church, Lübeck

Great Britain

Methodists in Great Britain reach out to the refugees and they engage with politicians and people who put their emphasis in protecting the country from refugees instead of protecting those who flee war and conflict.

Here are a few examples:

Birmingham Methodist Churches & Citizens UK successfully campaign to win promise of 50 homes for refugees from the local council

<http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/your-church-stories-birmingham/>

Wesley Hall Methodist Church, Blackburn's Asylum and Refugee Community centre, set up 11 years ago, continuing to offer support through the asylum application process and afterwards

<http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/your-church-stories-the-asylum-and-refugee-community/>

Fleet Methodist Church receives donations to be sent to the Calais refugee camps – a typical involvement.

<http://www.gethampshire.co.uk/news/local-news/refugee-crisis-fleet-collection-held-10026816>

Growing solidarity with Syrian refugees in the Shetland Islands churches, raising money, awareness and an openness to welcome people

<http://www.shetnews.co.uk/news/11451-growing-solidarity-with-syrian-refugees>

York Methodist churches will also offer to house a refugee family

http://www.yorkpress.co.uk/news/13771876.York_churches_offer_property_to_refugee_family/

A walk through other European countries

- **Macedonia** is a country where refugees pass through. Methodists are assisting them in many ways with food supply, warm clothes etc. If they were allowed to distribute cooked meals they could extend the work of the kitchen for “meals on wheels” in Strumica.
- Only a small number of about 300 refugees are allowed to stay in the **Czech Republic** and so far churches are not allowed to work in the camps. But Christians reach out to those who are on their way through the Czech Republic.
- **The Baltic Countries** are only beginning to receive their first refugees, and so far the numbers are quite small. The UMC is involved ecumenically, and particularly in Latvia the church is considering how it can play a more active role in offering housing to refugees. There are strong voices protesting against receiving refugees, even among some Christians, particularly the most conservative there is a strong opposition against receiving muslims.
- Until recently about 6.000 refugees arrived daily in **Sweden**. Since November 11 there are border controls. Only Syrian refugees are allowed to enter Sweden. The Uniting Church is very busy in offering places to stay, language classes and any other services needed.
- With increased border control, the issue was immediately raised to do the same in **Denmark**, this has however not happened yet.
- The **Solroed UMC in Denmark** coordinates the national house to house collection for refugees in their municipality/region, and many United Methodists are taking part in this.
- In **Norway** a number of churches are offering language-classes as this is not offered before refugees and migrants have been given asylum.

- The Government in **Finland** and **Denmark** have made significant cuts in the development aid (Finland 40% and Denmark 20%) and are in addition using the development aid budget to manage the refugee situation. **Norway** is in the process of making a similar decision, we do not know how far they will go yet.
- In **Ireland** the number of refugees is fairly small. Churches begin to prepare themselves to step in as soon as people from Syria and elsewhere arrive.

Please see the block of Rev. Paul Jeffrey, a GBGM missionary and photographer who travelled in Europe. He shares his perspective on what's happening and offers great **pictures and insides**: <http://www.kairosphotos.com/blog/europe-welcomes-refugees/>

“In the face of violence, we are called to be peacemakers”

After the terrorist attacks in Paris, Bishop Dr. Patrick Streiff who has the oversight for the United Methodist Church in France, issued the following statement:

“During a meeting on partnerships between United Methodist local churches in the United States and Central and Southern Europe, I heard the news of the terrorist attacks in Paris. We interrupted our meeting and prayed for the families of the victims, the wounded and the difficult intervention of the security forces.

Together with all people of good will, of whatever religious belief, we are horrified by the depth of violence despising human lives and finding pleasure in the death of others.

We are people who believe in Christ. Our life shall witness that Christ is the “Prince of Peace”. He has blessed those who make peace. This shall model our answer to the terrible attacks in Paris.

In a time when Islam is on the forefront of the news through violent extremists, we want to meet our Muslim neighbours with respect and honour and to let them feel that for us the love of God is offered to everyone.

In a time when refugees arrive in high numbers in our European countries, we want to support politicians and the civil society in offering them a place to live among us, be it for a limited or a long term, and without consideration of their religious background.

In a time when terrorist attacks reach Europe, we want to support those who help alleviate the refugee disaster in the Middle East, particularly in the countries around Syria, and also in many regions of Africa, whether through State development aid or non-governmental organizations.

As people who follow Christ, we promote an open, democratic and plural society. We do not condone the tendencies of nationalist radicalization in the States of Europe. As United Methodists we understand ourselves as part of the worldwide Body of Christ. In the face of violence, we are called to be peacemakers.”

Let us continue to pray and to work for peace and to see the face of Christ in any single person who crosses our path as a stranger.

In the name of the EMC and EMYC Working Group,



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