

22 September 2020

(organisations and signatories at the end of the letter)

For the attention of: European Commission President, H.E. Ursula von der Leyen

Advocacy statement on situation of migrants and refugees in Europe

Summary: The recent events in Moria camp on the island of Lesbos in Greece highlight longstanding shortcomings of EU migration and asylum policy, inconsistent with the EU's own core values and with fundamental ethical or faith principles. Churches and international church-based organizations reaffirm their commitment to a compassionate response to people on the move. We call for adequate support both for people on the move and for their host communities. We appeal for an EU Pact on asylum and migration that respects relevant commitments under international law, the Global Compacts on Refugees and for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, and the EU's core values of respect for human dignity and rights and of effective solidarity among EU members.

For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. (2 Timothy 1:7 NRSV)

Our organisations represent churches throughout Europe and globally, as well as church-based agencies particularly concerned with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. As Christian organisations we are deeply committed to the inviolable dignity of the human person created in the image of God, as well as to the concepts of the common good, global solidarity and the promotion of a society that welcomes strangers, cares for those fleeing danger, and protects the vulnerable.

We also share the conviction that the core values of the European Union regarding human dignity and respect for human rights¹ must be reflected in its day-to-day politics. We recall the endorsement by the EU and its member states of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and by the EU and most of its member states of the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) at the end of 2018, both of which confirm states' commitment to their obligations under international refugee law, international humanitarian law, and international human rights law pertaining to the rights and dignity of people on the move, including and in particular those without proper documentation and in need of protection. It is against the background of the recent destruction by fire of Moria camp on the island of Lesbos, our deep concern for those affected by this incident, and especially the upcoming EU Pact on asylum and migration, that we issue this appeal.

Migration is an integral part of human history and experience. Although people have varying degrees of control over their decision to move, and a variety of root causes - including old ones such as conflict, famine and poverty, and new ones such as climate change - migration remains and will remain part of human life for many people. Accordingly, we express our deep concern over the stigmatization of mobility - especially for those less fortunate and in need of protection - in the public discourse in many countries, including and especially in Europe, and call for a change in this discourse in politics, in media, and in our communities, in line with the principles of dignity, solidarity, and human rights.

¹ Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) states: "The EU's founding values are 'human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities'"

We see

The events of the night of 8 September 2020 in the Moria camp and during the following days have once again exposed the fundamentally broken state of European migration and asylum policy and the suffering it has created: the desperation of people seeking protection who have often been forced to live for years in inhumane conditions, the anger and frustration of locals who feel that Europe has left them alone with the challenge of reception and care, the current response which has addressed the symptoms of a greater problem but not the actual cause, and a reaction by the EU which expresses sympathy but shows no real commitment to helping those in need of protection as well as the Greek state and the local population hosting them.

The immediate concern has been triggered by a fire, but the reasons behind it are the continued refusal of the EU and its member states to assume their international obligations to protect refugees and to protect and fulfil the human rights of all people regardless of their migration status. The creation of 'hotspots' and the provisions of the 2016 EU-Turkey deal have led to a situation in which the EU and its member states have declared the challenges of population displacement to Europe as 'solved', closing the doors - and the eyes - of Europe. But as the events at the EU-Turkish border in March 2020 - and now the Moria disaster - have shown, none of the underlying issues have really been solved.

While the arrival of one million people seeking asylum in 2015 and several hundred thousand more in the following years certainly is a challenge, it represents only a small proportion of the total number of people forcibly displaced globally, which UNHCR estimated at 79.5 million in 2019, including 45.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). Of those that crossed borders, 85% are hosted in developing countries, and 73% in countries neighbouring their own. Two-thirds of the world's refugees are hosted outside of Europe, in Africa (31%), Asia (20%), the Middle East and North Africa (13%) and the Americas (3%). It is in fact poorer and more vulnerable countries like Uganda, Sudan, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran and Colombia that are bearing the brunt of this responsibility. Indeed, just outside the EU, Turkey is host to the largest number of refugees of any single country (3.6 million in 2019). And while the reasons for displacement are diverse, a significant number of them - like economic injustice, climate change, the heritage of colonialism or conflicts - are closely related to past or present activities of European actors.

Within the EU, the economically-motivated support for the freedom of movement for its own nationals has been accompanied by an inadequate sharing of responsibility for those coming to Europe in search of protection. And this is accompanied by a public discourse in which migrants and refugees are often the focus for hate speech in social media, as well as distorted and dehumanizing portrayals in the media.

COVID-19 and its consequences have in many places rendered the already difficult situation in these countries and for the displaced populations they host even more precarious: be it due to inadequate hygiene in migrant and refugee facilities or the dramatic cuts in food rations and other assistance available to them. Widespread restrictions on internal and cross-border movement in the wake of the pandemic have further reduced people's access to protection. In addition, the economic survival of many people on the move, as well as of their hosts, has been imperiled by lockdowns and related measures, which have hit those employed in the informal sector particularly hard, and have had a disproportionate effect on women and their livelihoods.

We believe

As Christians, we believe that every human being is created in the image of God. All human, social and political interactions should be underpinned by this belief. No individual or group deserve to be labelled as 'problems', but instead merit a dignified treatment as people loved by God.

We believe that the human experience encompasses both particularity and complementarity, with every individual possessing innate rights, while also being an integral part of a whole. The Divine creation is not a random process. Every human being constitutes an integral part of creation and of the Divine plan. To recognize the personhood of the migrant and refugee is to recognize that we, as society, are in relation to and find our own humanity in seeing the “other” as not some distant construct but the very key to our existence both as a whole but also individually.

We believe that God's unlimited love for humanity through Jesus is the good news for all people. Jesus himself was a refugee: He took refuge in Egypt as a child when Mary and Joseph fled Herod's threat to kill him. He also experienced life under Roman occupation that deprived people of their freedom and trampled on their dignity. Therefore, Jesus identifies with the refugee and the oppressed and calls on us to similarly identify compassionately with the vulnerable.

We believe our calling as Christians and churches compels us to welcome the stranger as our response to Jesus himself. When recognizing Christ in the face of the stranger, we begin to transform the situation of ‘us’ and ‘them’ into a new relationship of ‘we’, there is blessing in the encounter, and we become human together.

As a consequence of this conviction, we reject the notion that a compassionate welcome to those newly arrived is to the detriment of those presently living in Europe. Policies should address the specific needs of new arrivals in Europe and encourage their potential to contribute, while at the same time addressing the expressed fears, legitimate concerns and needs of existing inhabitants. Rather than divisiveness and exclusion, we should strive to do this by promoting mutual respect and support.

We commit

In advocating for a more dignified approach to the reception, protection, and care of people on the move, churches and church-based agencies have been and will be proactive in offering a compassionate welcome, and promoting social integration and a just and peaceful living together, in Greece, the whole of Europe, and beyond.

We will continue to:

- Offer various channels of safe passage, be it through humanitarian corridors, sponsored resettlement or help with family reunification.
- Respond directly in Lesbos and beyond: e.g. by financially supporting activities for newly arrived and locals alike.
- Promote child protection in emergencies.²
- Contribute, through our partnerships in peace and development work, to conditions in which people are no longer forced to leave their home countries

Churches on the Greek mainland have opened their doors and offered hospitality to those relocated from Lesbos and other ‘hotspots’. Churches are also among the driving forces for offering relocation spaces in other EU countries and have been instrumental in welcoming and receiving new arrivals. Churches in many places offer hospitality to the newly arrived, an open ear to the concerns of existing inhabitants and newly arrived alike, and a space for encounter between new and old neighbours, irrespective of nationality, gender, age or belief.

² [Child Protection in Emergencies \(Churches' Commitments to Children](#) nr. 1c)

Conflicts will inevitably arise where people of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds are living together, particularly under rapidly changing circumstances, and in a climate of economic hardship, in which the most vulnerable members of society have long been neglected by those in power. Living together in diversity can be both enriching and challenging. We therefore seek a spirit of solidarity and goodwill and a commitment to constructive engagement. To this end, we will seek to model an inclusive and respectful public discourse about and with refugees and migrants. Within our churches we will facilitate exchange and encounter between those of different opinions on migration, including with refugees and migrants themselves.

We ask

While we are still shocked and saddened by the events in Moria, we ask that lessons are learned from this experience. First and foremost, those on Lesbos must be offered durable and equitable solutions. On the eve of the launch of the European Commission's Pact on asylum and migration, we are encouraged by President von der Leyen's speech on the State of the Union on 16 September:

“We will take a human and humane approach. Saving lives at sea is not optional. And those countries who fulfil their legal and moral duties or are more exposed than others, must be able to rely on the solidarity of our whole European Union.....
if we step up, then I expect all Member States to step up too. Migration is a European challenge and all of Europe must do its part...”

In this context we reaffirm the principles of the EU Tampere summit 1999, in particular the “absolute respect of the right to seek asylum” and “the full and inclusive application of the Geneva Convention” as guiding principles for asylum policy today. This must include effective access to a procedure for people seeking asylum, irrespective of how and by what route they came to Europe.

We denounce activities designed to keep those seeking safety and protection at the borders of Europe or outside. A continuation of the ‘hotspot’ approach, border procedures or externalisation will not solve the protection problem but is bound to create many new tragedies.

Within the EU, the responsibility for reception and welcome needs to be more equitably shared. The current “Dublin” system with its de facto focus on allocating responsibility to countries of first entry to the EU - such as Cyprus, Malta, Greece and Italy - is fundamentally unfair to both those seeking asylum and countries at the external border, and in practice compromises the right to adequate reception.

Media professionals and journalists must respect the human dignity of migrants and refugees, ensure balanced coverage of their stories, engage with migrants and refugees and enable them to tell their own stories, and avoid stereotypical, negative expressions, as well as victimization and oversimplification.

Protection in the region of origin and improvement of conditions in countries of origin remain important, so that people are not forced to move. However, as long as people are compelled to move, Europe should accept its obligation to welcome and protect - as one of the richest and most developed regions of the globe - instead of coercing third countries into stopping migration to Europe.

Solidarity should be the guiding principle governing migration and particularly refugee reception in the EU. Solidarity means that the stronger shoulders accept more responsibility than the weaker ones, but also that everyone contributes what they can. We therefore call for a system involving all EU member states in effective reception and integration.

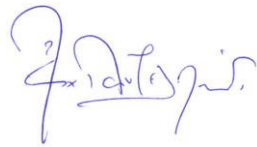
EU asylum and migration policy needs to go beyond crisis mode - regular migration channels, including through safe passages, will be an essential part of reducing incentives for dangerous journeys and of undermining the business model of smugglers. Such safe passages should be open for persons seeking protection but also involve persons joining their family or coming to Europe to improve their own well-being and the well-being of the region by working in Europe.

In conclusion, we strongly advocate for immediate humanitarian assistance to enable the Greek authorities and humanitarian actors on the ground to respond to the needs of the displaced people, as well as for long-term structural solutions for the region's response to people on the move. In particular, we call for an EU Pact on migration and asylum that will ensure that every member state fulfils its obligations so that countries at the boundaries of Europe do not face such challenges alone. All EU member states, assisted by local actors including churches, should assume their responsibilities for the reception and integration of refugees through permanent relocation and other burden-sharing mechanisms. We expect the EU to reject the discourse and politics of fear and deterrence, and to adopt a principled stance and compassionate practice based on the fundamental values on which the EU is founded.

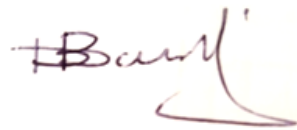
Yours sincerely,



Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca, World Council of Churches interim general secretary



The Very Reverend Archimandrite Panteleimon Papasynefakis, Integration Center for Migrant Workers – Ecumenical Refugee Program, Non Profit Organisation of the Church of Greece



Rev. Dimitris Boukis, Secretary of the Executive Committee of the General Synod of the Evangelical Church of Greece

Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity of the Roman Catholic Church

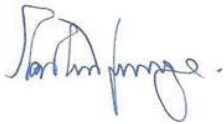
Dr Jørgen Skov Sørensen, Conference of European Churches General Secretary



Dr Torsten Moritz, Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe General Secretary



Rudelmar Bueno de Faria, ACT Alliance General Secretary



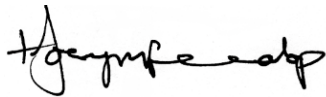
Rev. Dr Martin Junge, Lutheran World Federation General Secretary



Rev. Chris Ferguson, World Communion of Reformed Churches General Secretary



Martina Wasserloos-Strunk, World Communion of Reformed Churches, European Region President



The Most Reverend Dr Josiah Idowu-Fearon, Anglican Communion Secretary General



Bishop Ivan M. Abrahams, World Methodist Council General Secretary



Stephen Brown, World Association for Christian Communication Europe President



INTEGRATION CENTER
FOR MIGRANT WORKERS –
ECUMENICAL REFUGEE PROGRAM
NON PROFIT ORGANISATION OF THE CHURCH OF GREECE



actalliance

