

Lunteren Ecumenical Conference 14-16 June 2016 'Have no Fear': A Statement

Introduction

The World Council of Churches (WCC), the Conference of European Churches (CEC), the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) and the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN), recognising a need among member-churches and ecumenical organisations to reflect on responses to the global refugee crisis, organised a conference in Lunteren between 14th and 16th June 2016. The conference brought together more than sixty representatives of churches, ecumenical organisations, experts and volunteers from all over Europe working with and for refugees, many in local parishes and groups in various countries. The exchange on the experiences gained by churches and by church-related groups at local level facilitated learning from each other, to understand better what more needs to be done and to identify joint assistance and advocacy initiatives.

A Call to intensify efforts

Reflections centred on the visible and worrying pervasiveness of fear. The existential fear of violence driving refugees from their home, fear of the dangers to be faced during the journey, - amply demonstrated as real by the thousands of people losing their lives while crossing the Mediterranean - and fear for the reception - or rejection - in the countries of arrival. In receiving countries, fears range from the impact of immigration on societal norms and values, strains on local resources - sometimes already stretched, as in the case of Greece - and political manipulation of these doubts and fears. Against this background, the message was to be found in Isaiah 41:10 'Have no fear: I am with you': Fear paralyses where effective solidarity and compassion in the receiving countries is a vital, necessary condition in offering humanitarian responses to refugee needs.

Special concern was voiced over a trend visible in main-stream political parties, to respond to the perceived threat of far-right demagogues by moving in their direction. Governments, in some countries under real, in others under perceived, societal pressure are eluding or watering down their human rights obligations as defined in international and European Treaties. Churches and civil society organisations, too, mindful of social tensions that are also present among their constituencies, are sometimes hesitant to address the public on these trends despite their significant work in assisting refugees.

This is especially true of the efforts of churches and church-related organisations in our countries: across Europe: thousands of volunteers are engaged in substantial programmes of daily assistance to refugees including attention to immediate basic needs, shelter, legal aid and counselling. In doing so, they often complement the sometimes grudging services provided by states.

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By shouldering this responsibility, churches and church-related groups strengthen their moral right to call on their governments and societies to respect their obligations under European and international human rights treaties. Despite this practical and concrete testimony, churches are hesitant to engage in the public debate: as Archbishop Emeritus Anders Wejryd, WCC Europe president expressed during the conference: *“We hoped that the churches would be leaders, out-spoken and listened to, giving reasons why human rights are expressed the way they are and that the commandment to love your neighbour is supposed to be stretched out in time and space.”*

The Lunteren Conference calls on churches and church-related organisations to significantly step up their participation in the public debate and in the advocacy efforts in the present refugee crisis. Issues to be addressed urgently, both at national level and in the European Union include the following:

- Attention should be paid to the significant lack of awareness in our societies about the exact nature of the refugee crisis: while Middle East countries such as Lebanon and Jordan, with the help of UNHCR among others, are shouldering the major burden of the refugee exodus from Syria, the whole of Europe has last year received 6% of the total of 20 million international refugees: the crisis in Europe is a crisis relating to reception-capacity but also of public perception that is often manipulated for political purposes. At the same time, European states, in public advocating for refugee reception 'in the region' are slow or unwilling to financially assist these states and UNHCR and other humanitarian organisations in alleviating suffering and offering basic services to the refugee population.
- Refugees assume serious risks in trying to reach safety. At the same time, fears arise in European countries concerning the stability of societies and their 'way of life'. These fears are increasingly used and manipulated by populist, nationalist political movements stoking the fire of insecurity and xenophobia. The so-called refugee crisis is treated as a security issue rather than a humanitarian one, and this has to be challenged; this is preventing progress gives reason to the fear people have, as real needs are not met. Churches and church-related groups have in-depth knowledge and in daily contacts with refugees need to confront these fears, while at the same time respecting the fears people have – these fears cannot be simply overlooked, they must be met with understanding in order for people to be liberated of them. Churches and church-related groups can and should help ensure that the debate does not revolve around a faceless 'category' of people, but around individual human beings, their faces and their stories and the suffering that obliged them to leave their homes and embark on dangerous journeys: they can and need to help them tell these stories.
- Respect for the sanctity and dignity of human life requires Europe to develop safe and legal channels of entry, guaranteeing the right, enshrined in European Human Rights Conventions, to request asylum in Europe and avoiding the immense suffering caused by the present smuggling and trafficking system. Concrete measures to comply with this imperative include refugee resettlement, humanitarian admission programmes, private sponsorships, family reunion, humanitarian visa; more student scholarships and labour mobility schemes would reduce the pressures on the protection system.
- The conference found that many European states, responding equivocally to perceived societal pressure, are raising barriers to recognising asylum-seekers and restrict refugee-rights enshrined in international and European Conventions: the most pernicious of these are creating uncertainty about the duration and requisites of the processing of asylum claims and making family reunification more difficult by extending waiting periods. Negating human rights standards and obligations in this way is unacceptable: churches should therefore advocate for testing these measures against human rights obligations.
- Testimonies during the conference also showed that churches and church-related organisations are hesitant about using legal and judicial instruments at their disposal when confronting

violations of migrants' and asylum-seekers' human rights. These rights are commonly enshrined in national legislation that also needs to comply with international and European treaties and convention. When the national judicial process has not produced redress, both United Nations and European mechanisms exist for the purpose of guaranteeing effective remedy in cases involving human rights violations. The conference heard testimony among other about the successful CEC-PKN complaint lodged against the Netherlands at the European Committee for Social Rights regarding violation of rejected asylum-seekers rights.

Three UN Special Rapporteurs (on Poverty, Migrant Rights and Adequate Housing) also intervened in the case, ensuring among others that the European Court of Human Rights has granted the case priority. The United Nations Human Rights Council also has various mechanisms, accessible to churches and civil society organisations to examine compliance with international treaty obligations. Given the downward trend by states in recognising refugee and asylum-seekers rights, the conference calls on churches to reflect and examine their possibilities in suing these mechanisms to become more effective in their protection duties.

- The conference learned about recent policy and legislative proposals by the European Commission which aim at reducing the number of refugees arriving. Having regard of the fact that the vast majority of persons arriving are in fact in need of protection, such a narrow approach is criticised by churches and non-governmental organisations. What is needed is more sharing of responsibility for protection within Europe; however, a merely technical distribution may not provide the solution. More thought ought to be given to considering preferences and needs of refugees. It may not always be possible to meet the desires, yet, good and reliable information and counselling, talking with them, is key to facilitate that they are able to rebuild their lives.

As the refugee crisis is global, and particularly impacted the Middle East, complementary action and policies are vital to address it: Support for the countries hosting the vast majority of refugees in the Middle East and Africa need support. The pledges of UN agencies mandated to support refugees and for resettlement require adequate responses from European states, and the durable solutions of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees have to complement each other, not be played against each other. The conference learned about the conference planned by the UN Secretary General on large scale movements of migrants and refugees in September 2016. It is hoped that the responses by the international community of states will provide for sharing of responsibility rather than shifting responsibilities on other, often weaker countries.

Based on the extensive experience on the ground and the positive experience of working with and for refugees, we encourage churches in Europe to engage with societies, to create spaces to meet refugees, talk with each other about each other's' fear and foster active participation. It is also of vital importance that interfaith relations are encouraged in aid to tackle fear. Solidarity and communication should be demonstrated by faith communities together.

From a Bible study by Archbishop Kari Mäkinen of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland, the conference learned that migration and refugee situations are common in the scripture. Changes in life often create fear, yet, in such situations the word of God is: "Have no fear, for I am with you". Thus Christians and churches can confidently serve refugees and communities. *"Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. (Hebr. 13,2)*