



Conference of European Churches



Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe

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Member churches and organisations  
of the Churches' Commission for  
Migrants in Europe and the  
Conference of European Churches

4th May 2023

## **World Refugee Day: Call to commemorate refugees who lost their lives at European borders**

Esteemed church leaders, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, dear friends,

In this period between Easter and Pentecost, filled with hope and light intended for all humankind, we are again deeply saddened that the suffering, hopelessness and death, continues for thousands of our brothers and sister on the outer borders of the European Union and wider Europe.

Considering this reality, and continuing with tradition from past years, we appeal to the churches across Europe to commemorate around World Refugee Day (20 June 2023) the persons who lost their lives in the Mediterranean. We encourage churches to hold dedicated services, prayers and vigils on **25 June 2023** the Sunday after CEC's General Assembly in Tallinn and the CCME "virtual" GA on zoom. For some, commemorations on other dates or occasions in the year have become a tradition.

Our appeal is made in times when the war in Ukraine rages on. The direct consequences of the Ukraine war continue and will continue to force people to flee. While the displacement from Ukraine is still a terrible reminder of the horror of the war, reception of those fleeing from Ukraine, not least by churches, has set several impressive, good examples. The facilitated entry of Ukrainians into the EU and other countries has shown that borders do not have to be deadly for those who are fleeing.

You will find a short factsheet attached. We are also offering resources that can be used as worship materials or intercessions during a service. In 2018, we updated these materials, which were initially produced together with the German Ecumenical Committee on Church Asylum, supported by the Evangelical Church in Berlin, Brandenburg and Silesian Oberlausitz and the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD). The resources are available in English and German and can be downloaded from ([https://ccme.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/2018-06-18\\_Commemoration\\_Day\\_June\\_2018\\_00000002 .pdf](https://ccme.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/2018-06-18_Commemoration_Day_June_2018_00000002.pdf))

As churches and Christians, our calling is to be witnesses and servants of the Resurrection, as well as to be promoters of new life in justice and peace for all, regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or religion. We know that we are part of a global fellowship of Christians in

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Conference of European Churches - Conférence des Églises européennes - Konferenz Europäischer Kirchen  
Tel. +32 2 230 17 32 - Fax +32 2 231 14 13 - email : [cec@cec-kek.be](mailto:cec@cec-kek.be), [www.ceceurope.org](http://www.ceceurope.org)

Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe – Commission des Églises auprès des Migrants en Europe – Kommission der Kirchen für  
Migranten in Europa

Tel. +32 2 234 68 00 - Fax +32 2 231 14 13 - email: [info@ccme.eu](mailto:info@ccme.eu) - [www.ccme.eu](http://www.ccme.eu)

Rue Joseph II 174 - BE-1000 Brussels - Belgium

remembering together those affected in their respective regions, and in reflecting on the causes of their displacement.

Let us remember the documented, as well as the undocumented, who died at the European borders; let us share our sorrow in prayer.

We would be grateful if you could inform us at [info@ccme.eu](mailto:info@ccme.eu) about your activities and share any resources you have developed.

With our best wishes and greetings,



Dr Jørgen Skov Sørensen  
General Secretary  
Conference of European Churches



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

## FACTSHEET:

*The following facts and figures describe the context behind the joint CEC and CCME call to the churches to commemorate persons seeking safety who lost their lives in the Mediterranean, including responses from churches on the situation, together with useful links.*

- Around 2,400 persons lost their lives in 2022 on the borders of the Mediterranean alone, according to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM)<sup>1</sup>. This represents an increase compared to the previous years in which COVID-19 substantially reduced mobility. Deaths in the Mediterranean continue, and little-known places of emergency, like the borders of Belarus with the EU or in the (English) Channel last year, received more attention as deaths increased. Regions outside Europe such as the Sahel remain major dangers for many on the way to Europe.
- Since 2000, more than 30,000 people are reported by IOM and other sources to have lost their lives on their way to Europe, drowning at sea or in rivers, suffocated in containers on trucks or ships. The fate of those still in international waters or waters of North African countries is often unclear and their numbers increase as EU member states send boats back to Libyan waters.
- As in previous years, 2022-23 has not seen any systematic activity from states in search and rescue. An ongoing criminalisation of civil society actors in search and rescue or assistance at the land borders<sup>2</sup> or those rescued themselves have remained evident and a major concern for the churches.
- Churches in Europe have responded to the ongoing loss of life at the borders of and in Europe by offering practical solidarity, but also by advocating for safe and legal ways for refugees and migrants to enter Europe. Churches in several countries have concretely offered to host those rescued at sea or relocated to unblock the political impasse and allow for disembarkation. Churches in several places are supporting or launching search and rescue initiatives. Development and humanitarian organisations of churches are working on mitigating the consequences of the ongoing crisis. Churches are among those to have organised broad civil society assistance to those forced to flee within and from Ukraine.
- CCME, together with partners, launched the “Safe Passage” project a few years ago. An exchange between churches for safe passage has thus been facilitated. Projects for sponsoring safe refugee arrivals through resettlement, humanitarian visa/humanitarian corridors and other pathways have been undertaken by more and more churches in Europe. These efforts have been connected through events conducted in October 2022. On a political level, in December 2019 the EU pledged for more resettlement after 2020 – a pledge of which CCME reminded member states in June 2022<sup>3</sup>. However, the pledge of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/data>

<sup>2</sup> See a recent statement by the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights OHCHR <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/02/italy-criminalisation-human-rights-defenders-engaged-sea-rescue-missions>

<sup>3</sup> <https://ccme.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Joint-Statement-For-publication-on-13.06.22.pdf>

places for 2023 remains disappointing with less than 16.000 places pledged for resettlement (in addition to some 13.000 humanitarian admissions).<sup>4</sup>

- The General Assembly of CEC, held in Budapest in July 2013, renewed the call on churches “to commemorate those who have died on their journey to find a dignified life in Europe through an annual day of prayer.” In past years, many churches and parishes across Europe have taken up this call and held commemoration services, prayers or vigils around 20 June, International Refugee Day.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-12/Resettlement%20pledges%20submitted%20by%20Member%20States%20for%202023.pdf>