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Welcoming the Stranger: Difficult and Necessary

The arrival in Europe of massive numbers of Middle Eastern refugees is causing crises for humanitarian organizations and churches as well as for governments. At such a time, scripture draws us to Matthew 25:35b: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me,” Jesus said in a sermon about the behavior he expects of those whose lives reflect the grace and love of God.

The thousands of displaced persons pouring out of Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and various parts of Africa into Europe put a tremendous strain on regional and global economics, political and social systems, and human compassion. Christians know our responsibility: Welcome the stranger, and that can be a tough mandate, difficult and risky, demanding of sober realism, and also full of potential for new insights and understandings about human and cultural relations.

United Methodists are wondering and asking the General Board of Global Ministries about how The United Methodist Church in Europe and at the international level is responding to the migration crisis. The information below is an attempt to respond to the most-common questions and concerns.

Scope of the Crisis

The thousands of people entering Europe include war refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants seeking better ways of life. Nation states treat each of these groups differently. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 14) and various United Nations protocols on refugees put responsibility on nations to accept and assist persons seeking asylum when facing death or loss of freedom at home. Host countries are expected to recognize the right of asylum, allow safe entry and/or passage, and provide long-term needs for work, education, legal aid, and documents for travel. The church and other humanitarian organizations try to serve all who stand in need.

While the European Commission is currently trying to place 160,000 persons currently in Greece, Hungary, and Italy into other European countries, the total number that have arrived in those countries so far this year is 549,000, and some 794,000 persons have applied for asylum across Europe. The number of refugees in Europe by the end of 2015 is expected to be 4.7 million. (Statistics from the European Commission, the United Nations, and other sources, as compiled and reported on September 10 by The New York Times.)

Care for the refugees is one component of the crisis. Another component is nations finding ways to stop the conflicts that give rise to displaced persons: by bringing peace to Syria and ending the violence against civilians; controlling the so-called Islamic State which has overrun parts of Syria and Iraq, and persuading Middle Eastern and Arab states that are harbingers of much of the problem to become advocates for peace, justice, and honesty. The refugee crisis will not be solved until the states of the Middle East and Arab lands learn conciliation, and we must acknowledge that many of those states are allies of the affluent nations of Europe and North America.

Prayer

Prayer is one immediate response Christians can take, prayer for peaceful means to bring an end to military actions causing such widespread displacement of people from Syria and Iraq; prayer that refugees will be welcomed around the world with warm, calm hospitality; prayer for those who provide asylum and refuge. A collection of prayers from Germany reminds us to pray for the exhausted people on the move as well as those still in refugee camps in the Middle East; to “strengthen our connection with Jesus” as we minister in his name; to pray that politics “find its right mind” in confronting the situation; and to thank God for all who provide care — for all the “unconditional charity and solidarity” that is coming from the churches — and that in this time that God’s will be done on earth. (See also a prayer from UMCOR at <http://www.umcor.org/umcor/resources/hotline-news-archives/2015/september/umcor-hotline-for-september-9>.)

Local Responses

The pathways of the current refugees are from southern and southeastern Europe toward northern and western Europe, notably Germany. The small — very small — United Methodist communities on the route are joining neighbors to meet immediate needs for food, water, and clothing.

- In Macedonia, which is on the refugee route from Turkey and Greece, church members and employees of the Miss Stone Center, a diaconal institution, are greeting the travelers and responding to the immediate needs.
- In Hungary, United Methodist congregations in Budapest are active in “Christians for Migrants,” a group offering assistance in refugee camps. The Hungarian United Methodist Church is a member of Hungarian Interchurch Aid, also active in the camps. The Wesleyan Alliance, in which Methodists are involved, set up a baby-bath center at Keleti Railway station.
- In Austria, United Methodists are working with Caritas, a new group called “Train of Hope,” and Diakonie Austria. A diaconal (ministry) center in Linz [Diakonie Zentrum Spattstrasse] has opened living space for unaccompanied minor refugees.
- In Germany, the destination of many refugees because of an open welcome, the public support system is better equipped to handle the influx than in less-highly organized and less-affluent areas. Germany has a long memory of dealing with mass movement of people from the days after World Wars I and II and the opening of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The difficulties of many refugees in reaching Germany, though, is raising human rights concerns. “The right of individuals

from all countries to ask for asylum is under threat,” said United Methodist Bishop Rosemarie Wenner of Germany. “We as people of faith have to make use of the fact that the reality proves the failure of the current regulations to work not only for humanitarian aid but also for more just procedures for those who come to Europe.” For those who do reach Germany, many churches are opening their doors to house them.

(For more information on local efforts, see “European Refugee Aid Goes Beyond Food,” <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/european-refugee-aid-goes-beyond-food>).

The Work of UMCOR

United Methodist leaders in Europe and the United States are encouraging church members to contribute to the work of UMCOR. For years, UMCOR has worked with partners in serving persons displaced by fighting in Syria and Iraq, and persons temporarily living in other Middle Eastern locations or making their way westward. To date, UMCOR has allocated \$2 million to provide the basics of life to persons displaced in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Turkey. Middle Eastern countries of far less affluence than the nations of Europe have proportionately admitted many, many more migrants than are now entering Europe. Our work among those displaced persons must continue. In addition, UMCOR is collaborating with partners to provide for refugee families in Greece, including the islands of Lesbos and Kos. With an Italian partner, it is responding to refugees from North Africa arriving in Sicily and other parts of Italy.

Next steps in ministries with the asylum seekers will be guided in large part by the recommendations coming from the European Methodist Council, of which The United Methodist Church is a part, which will be meeting in mid-September. European and international ecumenical organizations are urging all of the churches and church-related humanitarian organizations to collaborate in the long-term work of resettlement, much of which will be in Europe. Concerning the Middle East, we have long-term relationships with the Middle East Council of Churches and its member communions.

Contributions to UMCOR’s ongoing work with the refugees/migrants in Europe and the Middle East should be made to the International Disaster Relief Fund, Advance #982450, at www.umcmmission.org/Give-to-Mission/Search-for-Projects/Projects/982450.

Enlarging the Welcome

The question on many lips is, “Why is the U.S. not doing more to respond to the European refugee crisis?” The U.S. currently has a ceiling of 70,000 carefully screened refugees for 2015. Since the war in Syria began in 2011, only 1,500 identifiable Syrians have been admitted as refugees, with another 300 expected by the end of September. At the same time, the U.S. is the largest donor of funds for humanitarian assistance among those displaced by the Syrian/Iraqi wars, having given \$4.1 billion in the last four years. Secretary of State John Kerry announced on September 9 that the U.S. would raise the refugee ceiling to 75,000 for 2016, and of those, 33,000 slots would be for persons from unnamed locations in the Near East and South Asia. A subsequent White House announcement directed the administration to prepare to take in an additional 10,000

Syrian refugees over the next year, in its first specific commitment toward increasing its acceptance of refugees from the country.

Global Ministries welcomes these announced increases, but finds them inadequate. We agree with human rights and relief agencies that the U.S. Congress should allow 100,000 refugees from the Syrian-Iraqi conflict to enter the country. Our relief partner, Church World Service (CWS), is one of the agencies organizing the campaign, and churches that want to join in the call to Congress can find information online at <http://www.cwsglobal.org/get-involved/advocacy/syrian-refugees-need-your-voice.html>. The care of the refugees, however, is not only the responsibility of the U.S. and European nations; other wealthy nations, such as Saudi Arabia and those of the Gulf States, need to do a great deal more to absorb refugees and provide for the care of those displaced in the region.

Resettling Refugees in the U.S.

Congregations that want to apply as sponsors for refugee resettlement must follow the rules of their respective countries. In the U.S., this means working through a local or regional organization certified as a refugee resettlement agency, and for United Methodists this means CWS, our long-time partner in refugee resettlement.

CWS has a network of its own and affiliate offices spread across the U.S. A list of those offices is online <http://www.cwsglobal.org/our-work/refugee-services/irp-affiliates.html>. Contact information for the CWS main office is online at <http://www.cwsglobal.org/our-work/refugee-services/irp-offices.html>. UMCOR does not have a refugee resettlement program, but refers interested United Methodists to CWS.

Concern for Backlash

We must realistically acknowledge the risks that are involved in welcoming strangers from politically volatile regions in a time of tight security concerns brought on by terrorist activities. We would be blind to ignore this factor. One terrorist attack by a “refugee” in Germany or the United States would change the whole lay of the land, causing social backlash against all migrants and potential international chaos. The avoidance of such incidents brings us back to the need for creative action to bring an end to conflict and militancy.

We must also be alert to the possibility of “charity fatigue” on the part of those assisting the migrants should this mass movement of people continue well into the future. This raises the need for taking time for our own spiritual and physical renewal as we seek to help others.

Interfaith Implications

Since most of the new refugees are Muslim, interfaith relations becomes an issue when newcomers are resettled among majority Christian populations and culture. The arrival of migrants is an opportunity for the practice of Christian hospitality and efforts toward strong, respectful interfaith dialogue and community interaction.

The United Methodist Church, through its legislating General Conference, has provided guidelines on interreligious relations. These can be found in The Book of Resolutions 2012, item 3141, beginning on page 269. The document is online at <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/called-to-be-neighbors-and-witnesses-guidelines-for-interreligious-relation>. Other relevant resources can be found on the website of the General Board of Church and Society at <http://umc-gbcs.org/resolutions/our-muslim-neighbors>.

Mission and Humanitarian Service

In serving the needs of refugees/migrants in Europe and the Middle East we reach toward a world of peace and justice, where children can grow to adulthood without fear, and families can live in harmony with their neighbors far and near.

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The United Methodist Church