

Ecumenical delegation: With winter coming, refugees are in critical need



WCC general secretary Olav Fykse Tveit with children in a refugee camp in Idomeni near Polykastron Idomeni at the border of Greece with Serbia. © WCC/Marianne Ejdersten

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Representatives of the World Council of Churches (WCC) visited Greece from 14 to 18 October to strengthen efforts in support of refugees in Europe and the Middle East.

Although windy autumn weather has affected sea crossings from Turkey over the past few weeks, refugee and migrant arrivals in Greece continue to climb. Greece remains by far the largest single entry point for new arrivals in the Mediterranean.

The total number of refugees and migrants crossing the Mediterranean this year now stands close to the 530,000 mark. In September, 168,000 people crossed the Mediterranean, the highest monthly figure ever recorded and almost five times the number in September 2014.

In a visit on Friday to a refugee camp in Idomeni near Polykastron Idomeni at the border of Greece with Serbia, the delegation joined with Metropolitan Dimitrios of Gomenissa to listen to the experiences and expectations of the people there.

The head of the WCC delegation, general secretary Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, stated, “It was good to see how the residents and volunteers there met people, affirming their human dignity in such a situation. I was even more struck by how the refugees keep their human qualities of care, dignity, and hope. This is a lesson for us all, including the churches in Europe.”

He added: “This is a critical moment for the churches and their societies. I see a strong witness of Christians in Greece. We are proud to see how churches have responded with love and solidarity. We must continue to be faithful to our mission and values. Let’s stay together, as one fellowship.”

The WCC solidarity visit was hosted by the [Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople](#) and the Church of Greece. The delegation also included H.E. Metropolitan Prof. Dr Gennadios of Sassima, vice moderator of the WCC central committee; and Marianne Ejdersten, director of WCC Communication. Prof. Dr Dimitra Koukoura, member of the WCC central committee, joined the delegation in Thessaloniki.

In Greece, the delegates met Archbishop Hieronymos of Athens and All Greece and Metropolitan Gabriel of Nea Ionia.

The Church of Greece was represented in discussions by Metropolitan Klimis of Methana Chief Secretary of the Holy Synod, Metropolitan Athinagoras of Ilion, Acharnon and Petroupoli, President of the Integration Centre for Migrant Workers – Ecumenical Refugee Program, Archim. Chrysostom Simeonides, director the Integration Centre for Migrant Workers – Ecumenical Refugee Program, Archim. Ignatius Soteriades, secretary of the Synodal Commission on Inter-Orthodox and inter-Christian Relations; Archim. Maximos Pafilis of the Synodical Committee on Inter-Orthodox and inter-Christian Relations; and Mrs. Evelina Douris, Secretary for Refugees, Ecumenical Refugee Programme The delegation also met the leadership of Apostoli Mission and the UNHCR representative in Greece, Alessandra Morelli, senior operations coordinator.

On Thursday morning, the delegation met Church of Greece representatives, and they had the opportunity to exchange views and find ways of further cooperation between the WCC and the Church of Greece.

At the meeting extensive reports detailed the difficulties that the country is facing due to the refugee situation in Europe and the humanitarian crisis caused by the massive population movements, mainly from the regions of Syria and through Turkey and Greece to the rest of Europe.

Metropolitan Klimis of Methana referred to the work done by the Ecumenical Refugee Program in Greece in collaboration with local churches and many volunteers. Archimandrite Chrysostomos Simeonides mentioned the specific and individual actions of the Centre and the partnerships it has developed with the UNHCR, the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Health and other agencies in Greece and abroad.

Archimandrite Ignatius Soteriades spoke about the activity of the Committee on Inter-Orthodox and inter-Christian relations, while Mrs. Evelina Douris stressed the need to find immediate safe passage for migrants to Europe, so that they are not further exploited by traffickers, and the need for rapid provision for immigration documents.

In the afternoon of the same day, the delegation visited Archbishop Hieronymus. At the meeting, also attended by Metropolitan Gabriel of Nea Ionia, participants discussed the political dimension of the migration, the positions of primates of the churches in Europe and humanitarian impacts from further worsening the problem.

Archbishop Hieronymos, expressing his gratitude to the WCC for its visit to Greece, underlined the need for an international solution to help the refugees and respect the international laws. Having returned that same day from one of his weekly visits to the affected areas in the country, the archbishop said, “This is only the beginning. We do not know what is waiting the next months. The winter is coming soon, and it will be a very critical situation for the refugees.”

UNHCR representative Alessandra Morelli stressed, “The pace and scale of the movement into Greece continue to put enormous pressure on the government and many communities. While authorities have worked to improve reception and registration facilities and operations in the islands, bottlenecks still occur.”

UNHCR is concerned that the lack of reception capacity in Greece could seriously jeopardize the relocation programme agreed upon by the European Council, as eligible refugees have nowhere to stay while awaiting relocation. If this is not immediately addressed, secondary movements to neighboring countries are likely to continue.

Morelli said also “Our efforts are focused on supporting and working with local authorities, NGOs, churches and the central government to improve the response; supporting the registration process; providing information to refugees; identifying and referring people with specific needs; and providing support to help improve reception conditions. UNHCR is also delivering basic humanitarian assistance.”

[Apostoli in Greece \(in Greek\)](#)

[IOCC in Greece](#)

[ACT Alliance in Greece](#)

[Coverage of the visit in local press release \(in Greek\)](#)

[The Church of Greece report on the Solidarity Visit \(In Greek\)](#)

[Statement on responses to migrant crises](#)

[CCME project: Safe passage](#)

UNHCR in Greece

The World Council of Churches promotes Christian unity in faith, witness and service for a just and peaceful world. An ecumenical fellowship of churches founded in 1948, today the WCC brings together 345 Protestant, Orthodox, Anglican and other churches representing more than 550 million Christians in over 120 countries, and works cooperatively with the Roman Catholic Church. The WCC general secretary is the Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, from the [Lutheran] Church of Norway.

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