

## European churches and ecumenical organizations respond to refugee crisis



The churches have noted that the world is seeing the largest number of displaced people since World War II. Photo: Johannes Minkus/ELKB

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**While governments in Europe debate strict border controls in dealing with the recent refugee influx, churches and ecumenical organization have marshaled resources to support and welcome those seeking safety in the region from war and conflict.**

According to the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR), more than 300,000 refugees and migrants have traversed the dangerous sea route across the Mediterranean this year, with more than 200,000 landing in Greece and a further 110,000 in Italy.

The year-to-date statistics from the UNHCR represent a large increase from last year, when around 219,000 people crossed the Mediterranean.

Recently, ACT Alliance EU, a partner organization of the World Council of Churches (WCC), urged EU member states to respond collectively to the refugee crisis with a fair and mandatory sharing of responsibility and respect for human rights.

ACT Alliance members are providing life-saving humanitarian aid in the countries of origin of refugees, including Syria and Iraq; in neighbouring countries, including Turkey and Lebanon; and increasingly in transit countries, including Greece, Serbia and Hungary.

Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) with its members across Europe is engaged in monitoring the situation, advocacy among churches and European institutions, awareness raising and legal counselling with a focus on family reunification, especially with its project [Safe Passage](#).

In a public letter issued by the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), an organization representing Reformed, Congregational, Presbyterian, Waldensian, United and Uniting churches – its general secretary Rev. Christopher Ferguson said, “The current refugee crisis in Europe is the latest challenge to us as a worldwide family to raise our voices and act to aid those in need—and call on those in power to do the same.”

Ferguson urged churches in the region to contact their government leaders, imploring them to open borders to welcome more refugees.

## **Protecting the vulnerable**

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF), a global communion of Lutheran churches with headquarters in Geneva, is calling on political leaders to uphold their duty to protect the vulnerable, which European states have committed to as signatories of the Refugee Convention. A number of initiatives have been undertaken by LWF member churches in support of the refugees, and their stories can be followed through [#WhatChurchesCanDo](#) and [#welcomingthe stranger](#).

The Conference of European Churches (CEC), along with CCME and WCC, in a recently issued joint letter encouraged European churches to deepen their efforts in supporting refugees. Through an official statement, CEC urged churches to “address national governments and responsible authorities in EU member states in order to support such human-centred migration policies” in line with the spirit of showing “hospitality to strangers.”

Bishop Dr Heinrich Bedford-Strohm of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), a member church of the WCC, has recently been visiting refugee receiving countries, including Hungary and Serbia. The updates he shared through [Facebook](#) tell stories of men, women and children, hoping to find refuge in Europe. Bedford-Strohm's updates highlight responses by the local churches and the UNHCR. “A Europe that safeguards itself with barbed wire is not the Europe of the future. I hope that European countries, perhaps inspired by readiness to help that we have seen in Germany, can act together and are willing to do their part to accommodate the refugees,” says Bishop Bedford-Strohm.

Among other initiatives, the Reformed Church in Hungary has been catering for refugees and is currently providing medical services in one of the country's refugee camps. The Lutheran Church there and Hungarian Interchurch Aid have also been providing assistance to refugees.

WCC member churches in Greece are also supporting refugees. In the Aegean islands, some parishes are providing for the basic needs for those arriving from neighbouring Turkey. On the Greek mainland, churches' aid ranges from soup kitchens to providing items needed by the refugees. This emergency help is accompanied by legal support services provided particularly by the Ecumenical Refugee Programme of the Church of Greece.

## **Using human and Christian values to protect refugees**

The UNHCR in July published the [story of late Fr Efstratios Dimou](#), also known as "Papa Stratis" from the Orthodox Church, who had been helping refugees in the Greek island of Lesbos since 2007 through the NGO Agkalia. Fr Dimou died in the first week of September.

"I have seen small children with blisters on their feet and pregnant women holding their bellies and crying in pain," said the late Fr Dimou in an interview with *UNHCR Tracks*. "These people are not migrants; they do not choose to come here. They are children of war, fleeing bullets. They are life-seekers, they search for life, hope and the chance to live another day."

In a statement issued last week, the WCC general secretary Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit said, "Today, Europe – both West and East – is being tested on the strength of its commitment to human dignity and rights. This is a test of our human values and Christian legacy."

He stressed that it is "absolutely and critically necessary that all European states take their proper responsibility in terms of reception and support for people seeking refuge, safety and a better future for themselves and their families. This cannot be left only to the states where they enter first."

[\*\*Statement: ACT Alliance calls for a collective and rights-based response from EU Member States to the refugee crisis\*\*](#)

[\*\*WCRC Letter on the Refugee Crisis in Europe\*\*](#)

[\*\*Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe\*\*](#)

[\*\*WCC statement on refugees in Europe\*\*](#)

[\*\*Migration and social justice\*\*](#)

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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