

Message of the 2021 CCME (extraordinary) General Assembly

Together we can save a million vulnerable humans in Europe again!

"Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40)

We met as the extraordinary General Assembly of the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) from 14th to 16th October 2021 in Brussels representing 41 Churches, Councils of Churches and related organisations from across Europe.

We are worried. The global public has in recent months been following with shock, despair and anger how desperate people have tried to flee Afghanistan via Kabul airport in panic. European citizens in particular have been ashamed of how "the West" has completely left behind those believing in a free and democratic Afghanistan, and done little to open escape routes. The terrible fire in the refugee encampment in Moria/Lesbos in September 2020 – recently remembered in the EU - underlined how dangerous and precarious the reception situation remains at many points on the EU external border. We look with anger at pushbacks of asylum seekers. We look with horror at the thousands of deaths in the Mediterranean.

We are also hopeful. We look at the many coalitions of the willing in cities and in regions who did a great job saving a million people in 2015 and the years immediately thereafter. Whilst there was tragedy, if we prepare ourselves by adopting a humane and realistic policy on asylum, migration and social integration of the newly arrived and resident population, with Europe-wide sharing of this common responsibility, coalitions of the willing could do the same again. We have space in our cities and in our hearts!

We are mindful that, although we saved a million in the past years, the current starting point of the EU's response to all migratory movements is the mantra "There should be no new 2015". This general statement is, in our view, difficult to understand. It is true that there have been difficulties and problems mainly in the sphere of reception responsibility, with a few states and their population largely being left to shoulder this. These problems arose primarily as a result of EU member states refusing to acknowledge reality and, prior to 2015, to listen to advice predicting a large movement from the Middle East and to prepare for that. Most EU member states did not implement the agreed rules on reception conditions and no one held those states to account. Unfortunately, very little has been learnt from that failure.

We are encouraged. The encouraging experience of 2015, however, is that civil society - not least churches - stepped in to resolve the problem. While there are continuing problems in some places, the situation on the ground is looking positive in most locations: the role of those who arrived in 2015 to staff the health sector during COVID 19 is indicative of successful rebuilding of lives and integration. The fact that media, in particular social media, and politics often paint a different picture can mainly be explained by vested interests talking about and constructing a crisis.

We are aware that many will try to qualify our appeal as unrealistic. Indeed, our proposals will require commitment and courage. Overall, they are certainly more realistic and humane than the deficiency of current policy and practice. Immigration is here to stay, and we had better prepare.

Prepare now: safe passage, asylum and migration - based on realism, compassion, solidarity and fundamental rights

A fundamental change in the direction and rhetoric of European asylum and migration policy is needed to overcome suffering at the European border as well as fear and hate of the other in Europe. In this situation, we urge EU institutions, European countries and governments to aim in their practice and legislative work:

- To provide meaningful channels for safe passage from the displacement crises across the globe into Europe in addition to support for protection and dignified reception in the region, e.g. by increasing resettlement quotas for Afghans but also other refugee populations;
- To abandon plans of keeping even more people in need of protection in deplorable conditions or in the hands of dubious regimes at the European external border;
- To create a real system of being prepared for and responding to refugee flows by strengthening reception capacity and the capacity to examine asylum claims – instead of stripping Europe's fundamental right to asylum of all its content – as would be the consequence of the proposed regulation on crisis on force majeure;
- To put into place a predictable and binding system of responsibility sharing and solidarity for protection within the EU between ALL members, which takes into account asylum seekers' links and preferences - instead of repeating the mistakes of the Dublin Regulation time and again;
- To give security of status to asylum seekers in Europe who have escaped from individual threat or general violence in countries where no return to safety is an option;
- To allow family reunification of refugees and persons enjoying other forms of protection,
- To put an end to the criminalisation of humanitarian support to refugees and migrants, including search and rescue;
- To fully implement the existing legal framework ("acquis") on asylum developed between 1999 and 2013, including the existing directive on temporary protection.

We commit ourselves as churches in Europe

- To strengthen the coalitions of the willing in cities, regions, and countries. We strengthen their voice and support their energy and inspiration;
- To continue to support efforts to welcome in Europe through our expertise and networks,
- To mobilise resources to increase the number and quality of protection places in clear addition to state efforts;
- To highlight the encouraging experiences of integrating persons who arrived in need of protection or help to keep Europe running through labour migration,
- To engage in intercultural, interfaith, and ecumenical work to detect tensions and conflict in communities and address them in constructive ways,
- To continue our practical engagement for the marginalised among both resident populations and the newly arrived, and our political engagement for solidarity and common good,
- To challenge political actors and media who foster fear, hate, racism and prejudice and, where necessary, withdraw support from them (election, disinvestment, boycott).

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