



## Conference of European Churches Governing Board

Brussels, 20-22 November 2019

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### European asylum & migration policy: exercise solidarity, share responsibility, show leadership

Appeal to

The European Commission, Att of Ms Ursula von der Leyen, President-elect of the European Commission

The European Council, Att. of Mr *Charles* Michel, President-elect of the European Council

The European Parliament, Att. of Mr David Sassoli, President of the European Parliament

Our organisation(s) represent(s) Churches throughout Europe – mainly Anglican, Orthodox, Protestant and African instituted – as well as Christian organisations particularly concerned with migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. As Christians, we are deeply committed to the inviolable dignity of the human person created in the image of God, as well as to the concepts of the common good, of global solidarity and of the promotion of a society that welcomes strangers.

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It is against this background that we address you today on the issue of a comprehensive, protection and human rights oriented, realistic EU asylum and migration policy.

This is our way to contribute to the “fresh start” suggested by Commission president-elect von der Leyen, at a time where the situation of many of the most vulnerable asylum seekers, refugees and migrants is becoming more and more alarming, both within the EU and at its external borders. We therefore issue this appeal for solidarity, responsibility sharing and leadership, also aware that in several of the situations of displacement outside the EU, EU member states have through their activities or lack thereof contributed to the causes of displacement. This takes up the compassion and sorrow about the consequences of current EU policy, as they were expressed after the disaster of 39 migrating human being in Essex a few weeks ago.

In particular, we would ask the EU institutions to play their role in:

- Agreeing on a comprehensive, preferably long-term, legally sound mechanism for Search and Rescue at the EU`s southern border. This should either include state led and EU-supported search and rescue or support to civil society activities. Moreover, there is urgent need to clarify EU legislation so that civil society

Search and Rescue, like any other humanitarian assistance to refugees and migrants needs to be clearly decriminalised.

- Adopt a system of relocation of those rescued at sea as well as a relocation of those arriving in the member states at the EU external border. While Italy and Malta clearly need solidarity on Search and rescue, Greece and Cyprus who need more support for dealing with new arrivals (Greece) or a high number of beneficiaries of international protection (Cyprus). It is clear that all the countries mentioned can be expected to do their bit, but need support for those challenges they experience as external border states of the EU. In both countries, there has been ongoing and significant rise of arrivals recently, in Greece combined with extremely difficult situation in the Aegean hot spots, largely created by the 2016 EU-Turkey deal. As European church leaders have formulated in their 2018 Christmas message: "Solidarity should be the guiding aspect when governing migration and particularly refugee reception. Solidarity means that the stronger shoulders accept more responsibility than the weaker ones, but also that everyone contributes what they can". In this sense comprehensive national efforts and European support must go hand in hand.
- Developing an EU wide system of evacuating those refugee and migrants stuck in Libya under conditions violating their human rights, as well as physical and psychological integrity. The system should be based on the example of nationally operating humanitarian corridors and should try to provide solutions for at least some 50.000 persons of concern currently registered by UNHCR.
- Upscaling the EU commitment to resettlement in the context of global responsibility sharing by providing more places. The target of 30.000 places annually put forward by a coalition of civil society organisations is a good goal for 2020, and one that should be pledged at the Global refugee Forum in December.
- Advancing the reform of the dysfunctional and dehumanising system of the current Dublin regulation. A preference and links-oriented model of mandatory redistribution should form the basis of such a reform.
- -Creating legal migration routes: Without safe and legal migration routes to Europe and without a human rights-based refugee and migration policy, people will continue to take dangerous routes and risk their lives to reach Europe. The creation of safe and regular pathways for persons in need of international protection and migrants across all skills levels, by issuing humanitarian visas, allowing for safe and speedy family reunification, extending resettlement programmes and concluding labour migration policies and student visa agreements with third countries is necessary.
- The external dimension: The EU must be guided in its action and funding by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, moreover the European Convention on Human Rights and the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees that all EU member states are party to, and must not enter into any agreements with states that do not guarantee the full respect of human rights. The principle of non-refoulement must always be respected as a binding

We are aware that these asks may seem difficult due to the current discourse at EU level, which often focuses on the protection of borders rather than protection of the vulnerable and on return rather than welcome.

It is however clear that all the demands taken together, including the number of “spontaneous” arrivals into the asylum systems of EU member states, are presenting an entirely manageable task for a community of a 446 million inhabitants (after Brexit) in one of the richest regions of the world.

While we appreciate efforts by the EU and its member states to speed up asylum procedures, all efforts that do so by reducing access to legal counselling, legal review appeals or exclusion from the procedure undermine the right to asylum and should be rejected.

It is equally clear that a policy of solidarity would need to be underpinned by a solid integration, inclusion and anti-discrimination policy.

What we ask you for is leadership in addressing both myths and moods in the EU on migration and bringing evidence back into the debate. The widespread practice of presenting migration as an unsolvable problem and crisis, with Europe as the location of the crisis and the promise to be “tough” on migration is a useless attempt to address fears in society. We are alarmed by efforts in member states to advocate against any migration, decrease asylum and other humanitarian commitments even withdrawal of integration support.

Migration is and will be a feature of life in Europe in an increasing number of member states and can, if well organised, contribute to wealth and social harmony in the EU. This however requires policies which aim at overall cohesion and inclusion in society, so that citizens and newly arrived do not need to fear unsurmountable challenges in the areas such as jobs, housing or access to social services.

Churches across Europe have over decades, and in particular since 2015, contributed massively to a structure and culture of welcome. They will continue to do so. They also stand ready to support those defending Christian values and practice through loving our neighbour.

***“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” Matthew 24: 40***