



Conference of European Churches Governing Board
Brussels, 8 – 10 June 2016
Public Issues Statement: A Europe that protects and welcomes

“Together we will do our part towards giving migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers a humane reception in Europe.”

“We commit ourselves to work for structures of peace, based on the non-violent resolution of conflicts. We condemn any form of violence against the human person, particularly against women and children.” Charta Oecumenica

Europe is entering yet another summer during which significant groups of refugees and migrants will be arriving at the borders and shores of European states. This is a particular challenge for southern European countries and those having already received large numbers of refugees.

Conflicts in the Middle East and several African countries lead to massive displacement of populations. Neighbouring countries to conflicts deserve gratitude, and substantial support by the international community for hosting the largest numbers of refugees. While more support for the Middle Eastern countries has been pledged, it is a painful reality that most basic needs such as food or adequate shelter can in many situations not be provided in the neighbourhood of conflicts. United Nations agencies are still in dire need of funding to respond to the various crises. CEC acknowledges that many European states support efforts in conflict regions to re-establish peace. The CEC Governing Board welcomes these efforts and encourages those European countries not yet active to join them. However, addressing root causes of displacement requires, too, serious engagement in implementing the agreed sustainable development goals. Peaceful conflict resolution and more just trade relations require more vigorous efforts.

The Governing Board of the Conference of European Churches wishes to thank and commend the work of its Member Churches who are, along with others, continuing to provide support and welcome to refugees. In many places this support is essential for ensuring a decent reception of newly arrived and indispensable for establishing good-neighbourly relations between them and resident populations. The Governing Board of CEC also applauds any efforts to counter the increasingly dehumanising rhetoric of some political actors vis-à-vis refugees and migrants. The Governing Board is aware of diverse opinions in churches in different European countries, sometimes leading to controversies about the best response to the challenges. The Governing Board encourages the Member Churches to continue and engage in a regular and systematic exchange with each other on the situation of refugees, and how churches can best and truly respond to the calling “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Mt. 25:35).

Convinced of Europe’s ability and responsibility for protecting refugees, the CEC Governing Board expresses its concern about efforts of shifting this responsibility to other regions which are less equipped to shelter refugees. A particularly worrying instance in this context is the EU-Turkey agreement which creates the risk that refugees may not find any protection at all, but rather be sent

back into conflict zones. The Governing Board had learned about many restrictions for persons applying for asylum and accorded a protection status in recent changes to asylum legislation in a number of European countries. Particularly the restrictions to family life for refugees and asylum applicants are shocking and the Governing Board calls on governments of European states to uphold the right to family life and improve the accessibility of family members to necessary procedures. Churches are concerned that even those who have a right to enter Europe are not able to avail themselves of this right. Such restrictions are extremely detrimental to the wellbeing of the children and adults concerned.

It remains a responsibility of Europe to assist in protecting the refugees knocking at Europe's door. The CEC Governing Board deplores that since the beginning of this year hundreds of persons have lost their lives when trying to reach European territory. It therefore reiterates the call to establish safe passages into the EU by ways of providing for more refugee resettlement, humanitarian visa, better family reunification, and lifting of visa requirements.

The Governing Board of CEC encourages European states and EU institutions to engage in meaningful ways and contribute to the UN high-level meeting on large movements of refugees and migrants in September 2016.