

# The Role of Churches<sup>1</sup> in Hungary in Providing Pastoral Care and Humanitarian Help for Migrants

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## Migration and the Mission of Churches

Churches meet the requirements of their mission by performing tasks by providing humanitarian assistance in the form of charity. Therefore, just like the Catholic Church, the Protestant Churches run charitable organizations as well as institutions such as old people's homes, mother and baby homes, drug prevention centres or refugee shelters. Churches display sensitivity to tasks pertaining to social welfare. Internationally, Protestant Churches are also involved in distributing aid packages via their member churches. One such international charitable institution is ACT International. [1]

Europe is to face the biggest surge of refugees since World War II. While the leaders of churches in Europe have raised their voice with the aim of providing shelter to refugees and migrants, emphasizing that the principle of humanitarian treatment has to be applied, political leaders often favour other options: their rationale is determined by quotas or protective fences. Although the church and the state have different tasks to undertake, they share some of the duties to be fulfilled. The principal task associated with the activity of the church is to support those in need of help, which in case of Hungary manifested itself in the fact that it did not have to accept refugees as it was not a target country. Instead, refugees were to be taken care of during the transfer period by providing them with supplies of food and accommodation. In western countries, however, churches and governments also have to brace themselves for long-term problems associated with the settlement and integration of refugees. Viewed from a legal perspective, the responsibilities of a government are different from those of the church. The former has the additional task of both ensuring and maintaining security in view of the currently accessible social services.

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When it comes to public opinion on the issue of migrants or that of immigrants, media footage of this topic generally reveals two kinds of characterization. One shows migrants only as innocent victims in need of support and advice in the western world which is new and unknown to them. The other is the image of aggressive migrants, people who are violent, all of them being terrorists. I think what we have on our hands is far more complex than these two extreme characterizations. Both the culture and civilization where the migrants and refugees come from are different from ours. A tribal society, be it the background of those arriving from Afghanistan or countries in the Middle East or in Northern Africa, makes it difficult or even impossible for these people to adapt to our western type society and civilization. Some of them will be successful in meeting the requirements of integration, some of them will fail to do so. Based on the commands of Christ, the church has to take upon itself the task of providing help to those in need. Migration is, therefore, a course of action based both on the motivation and the decision of an individual, brought into play with the aim of meeting the needs of that individual. Put differently, migration can also be contextualized through the involvement of individuals, i.e. individual ambitions will affect the emergence, direction, composition and permanence of migration. [2] In the light of the above, migration can only be differentiated as a course of action followed either by one individual alone or pursued concurrently by several individuals in a more or less identical manner when considerations such as space and time are taken into account.

Individual migration is an event unfolding independently, both from the point of view of decision and action. While in movement, several migrating individuals might occasionally stick together, but that is a loose relationship which can eventually lead to permanent separation. Individual migration has, from the outset, been an individualistic kind of option to follow. Considerations behind the need for movement are associated with one person alone without revealing a context of close relationships. [3]

The definition of the term *group migration* reveals a relationship among individual objectives. Actions in this case are not confined to *ad hoc* encounters occurring either in a temporal or spatial paradigm, they constitute a group effort where migration is a course of action which, from the outset, is followed in which the mutual interests of migrants on the move are also taken into account. My opinion is that, relationships between individuals and friendships might also be the driving force behind group movement. This kind of relationship can have a crucial role during the departure, arrival or integration of migrants. Situations in which the head of a family or an individual with the strongest potential for income earning embarks on a migratory journey can also be categorized as group migration with the aim of having the family reunited by following, sometime later, [4] the individual who was the first to set out on the migratory journey.

The characteristics of migration that comprises a larger number of people are different from other forms of individual or group movements. The reasons behind mass migration that crosses frontiers might be (and often are) the consequence of natural disasters, although the domestic policy of certain states (violence within those countries) or their foreign policy (war, aggression, international threats) might also trigger it. [5]

In early 2015 Hungary was unprepared for the influx of refugees and immigrants. The commandment to love our neighbour is a commitment for the church to help our fellow human beings who in many cases spend several months on their migratory journey by supplying them with food, drink and hot meals. This was the reason why the church requested

our helpful fellow citizens to take their donations to charity organizations of the church as those organizations are capable of giving help in the most efficient manner by making sure that donations reach their destination.

The primary mission of the church is to help those in misery, trouble or dire need. Solidarity, therefore, is an injunction that cannot be misunderstood.

It is both a right and an obligation for countries to maintain public order and to make every effort in meeting the real needs of the community which they represent. This has to go hand in hand with a very specific commandment of love, i.e. “*whenever we come across people who starve and we have food to offer, we have to feed them.*” [25] However, a gesture like this will not solve the huge, worldwide problem on our hands. Therefore, another obligation is to eliminate the reasons behind migration and to create a situation in which everyone can live in peace in their home country. Naturally, this is much more difficult than direct humanitarian help as a fairer economic world order should be established and a more peaceful political environment should be created with the aim of changing entire continents in order to attain that objective. It is the right and duty of every state to defend its frontiers, should the need arise to do so. All over the world border barriers are seen as a method used for border closures, the prevention of illegal activities and the control of the migration of huge masses of people on the move. At the same time, in the absence of around-the-clock technical backup along with support from troops carrying out border patrol, barriers can do little to solve the problem. [6]

## Who is to be Granted the Right to Settle?

“Today there are two myths in existence. One is about us being a nation ready to welcome people. In the course of the past thousand years, whoever wished to live here has been granted permission to do so, the doors have always been open. The other being that deep down we are against the idea of newcomers settling down in this country, our inner self being determined by intolerance rooted in our Asian ancestry [...] both myths have an element of truth to them, stemming from real experience obtained in the course of history. A misunderstanding will arise if either is regarded as being an exclusively valid approach to reality.” [26] These are the words of literary historian Gy. Csaba Kiss, formulated in his concise characterization of the risks inherent in today’s popular, over-simplified perception of reality. A chronicle of the historical events that occurred both in Hungary and worldwide could be used to complete Hungarian as well as global history. According to chroniclers, Hungary had, since the organization of the state of Hungary, been a place offering asylum to those seeking refuge. During the reign of St. Stephen the *Böszörmény* tribes, (Ishmaelites) were allowed to settle in Hungary. During the rule of King *Kálmán* (Coloman the Learned) the Kabars and, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century the Cumans were forced to take refuge and settle in Hungary. In the mid-sixteenth century the *Habans* (Hutterites), were forced to flee because of their belief in Anabaptism, settled in Hungary, while some of them moved to Transylvania in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. However, there was no valid pattern to apply for the reception of those seeking refuge during a mass migration.

In the Middle Ages the term *asylum* was only used to protect individuals found guilty of a crime. The creation of a comprehensive system tackling the problem of migration

both legally and administratively, which was also capable of coping with a huge number of refugees, being at the same time geared to the needs of asylum seekers who were not guilty of a common criminal offence, took place only as part of Hungary's modernization. This is partly due to the fact that foreigners had more freedom to move as it was only in 1886 that an administrative law stipulating the movement of foreigners was enacted. [7]

International organizations such as the World Council of Churches or the Conference of European Churches have also issued statements on the subjects of migration and refugees.

The Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) have together issued a publication tackling the problem of migration in Europe and the response of churches to that challenge. [8] The document focuses on the problem of global migration, using churches in Europe as an example, looking into the issue from the perspective of theology and sociology.

The Rev'd Darell Jackson, missiologist, and sociologist Alessia Passarelli have jointly (as authors) issued a publication which includes theological reflections, the assessment of findings pertaining to sociological research and the personal accounts of immigrants. The publication comprises topics such as *integration*, *personal ties* and *community*. It highlights both the experience of immigrants and the manner in which their presence shapes or helps create church communities in Europe. [20]

This publication is the updated version of a similar work, a previous collection of studies. Its findings are based on a comprehensive questionnaire, containing answers from member churches, including the contribution by the refugee mission of the Reformed Church in Hungary. Its aim is to help better understand the key aspects of migration and the discrepancy between the response given by European societies and the churches in Europe. In today's globalized world emigration and immigration are grave political problems with serious ramifications, affecting every section of society, turning the current religious environment into a more colourful one, also having an impact on the churches' concept of mission and the practices thereof. The current migration and refugee crisis to which Europe is exposed is an opportunity for churches on the old continent to both accommodate the needy and to extend their protecting hand by offering help to those in need, while defending the principle of human dignity, a right to which even the weak and vulnerable are entitled.

Migration as a phenomenon is as old as humanity but—unlike the case of our ancestors, the decision to migrate is less a decision for life—except, of course, the case of forced migration, when those on the run seek refuge from violence and war. People no longer have a lifelong commitment to live in the same country. They often live in various other countries before they return to their home country.

Today's migration and refugee crisis reached Europe in 2015. The global ramifications of the Arab Spring, along with a crisis brought about by the current political situation and the war in the Middle East, are obvious—inevitably so. "Last year put both the friendliest and ugliest complexion on the way Europe responded to" [27] unprecedented numbers of refugees along the borders of the EU. The crisis, which has not ended to date, has involved over sixty million people so far. The conflicts and persecutions forced those people to leave their homes. Two thirds of them found refuge in their home country, while one third crossed frontiers, seeking international protection. A significant number of those leaving their home country found refuge in neighbouring states. In Syria alone, twelve million people became

homeless, while more than four million live outside the country—Jordan, Lebanon or Turkey and around the world.

In the absence of help and as a result of resettlements, refugees took matters into their own hands. By the autumn of 2015 a total of 723 thousand people had crossed the Mediterranean with a death toll of around 3,400. Unlike in previous years, these refugees came mainly from Syria, Eritrea, Iraq and Afghanistan. The number of new refugees is high and Europe should be braced for even higher numbers as the more protracted the crisis, the more refugees are forced to leave their homes. To keep the situation under control is, however, still not impossible for the 28 EU member states.

The question is this: who should be allowed to settle? Everyone or anyone who claims to be persecuted for religious or political reasons? Should refugees be in possession of identification documents or all they need to do is name their home country? In the words of Imam Miklós Kovács Ahmed who represents the Hungarian Islamic Community, “should the go-ahead for the acceptance of refugees be eventually given by Hungary, the country would only be ready to take refugees who have undergone the necessary security screening, people who can become useful citizens of the country. We do not want extremist Muslims who resist integration into our society.” [9] The world is not becoming universal. It is becoming global. Globalization, however, should go hand in hand with multiculturalism, cultural diversity and richness. Presumably, otherness will remain an inseparable part of our world for a long time to come. Science and technology will not put an end to diversity. On the contrary: it makes possible for various civilizations to preserve their characteristics and embark on the journey of modernization by following their own traditions. This might also be the future for the Islamic civilization. Islam will need to preserve—and change—its orientation towards tradition, just as it did during the early centuries of history, by reacting flexibly to new phenomena and by accepting it, while integrating them into its system and allowing them to become part of its traditions. [10] The only solution is to separate radical and orthodox Islam. Solidarity within the Muslim world plays into the hands of radicals. Only an Islamic cultural war will be able to reshape the frontiers between radicals and moderates so that the latter might come out the winner. It is of crucial importance that a struggle like this should not lose sight of the religious foundations of Islamist terrorism and that this should create a counterbalance recognized by the moderates and the public, as well. Quran, contrary to what many think, does not encourage violence. [11] In my view, due to the proliferation of violence, Islam will, in the face of terrorism killing innocent people, need to follow this road all over the world in the future. The struggle will be a difficult one, given the unpredictable nature of asymmetric warfare. However, when a specific conflict needs to be addressed, those with the highest level of expertise and professionalism should be used to tackle the problem at hand, both on the Western and on the Islamic side. [12]

The churches are seen pulling their weight in tackling the current conflict. For instance, in October 2015 the WCC, together with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria, organized a high-level meeting for the heads of European, African and Middle Eastern churches with the aim of fostering closer cooperation among themselves. In Europe, migration brought to life a more active and multifaceted manifestation of the presence of Christian churches. The churches of individual countries are affected by the crisis to a varying extent and in various ways. As a result of immigration and the activity of volunteers, mobilized to provide assistance for the refugees, several minor churches are seen gaining significance. An illustrative

example of this is the rising number of Protestants in Italy and Ireland, the strengthening of the Roman Catholic religious community in Sweden or the growing Orthodox Christian community in France. A growing number of congregations and denominations speaking various languages are to be found in the cities of Europe. However, it is almost impossible to make an accurate estimate of the actual numbers involved, given the continuous movement of people and other rapid changes. In many European cities churches provide both unselfish and unconditional help for refugees and migrants. All participating churches share the view that the biblical message of unconditional solidarity and human dignity, to which all human beings are entitled, is an important principle to be followed.

## **The Refugee Mission of the Hungarian Reformed Church**

A total of one hundred refugees are integrated annually into the Hungarian society by the Refugee Mission of the Hungarian Reformed Church (HRC). The mission has been operational since 2006 and has a permanent staff of three plus an additional staff of seventeen, paid via funds assigned to specific tasks, along with a total of around sixty volunteers. The work they perform has manifold aspects: their task is to teach the Hungarian language and culture, they are in charge of the accommodation and food provided for refugees, they provide access for children to public education, while offering legal help to foreign (mostly African) migrants currently in refugee status. After a four-year training period, when refugees have achieved an adequate level of the Hungarian language, the mission staff will help them enter into employment.

The work performed here is neither spectacular, nor can it be completed in a rapid manner. Mission data shows, however, that the work effort of the staff has a high degree of efficiency as around 90 per cent, sometimes a hundred per cent of the refugees they provide assistance to are successfully integrated into the Hungarian society. These people will never become criminals and the work of the mission is indicative of the fact that Hungary is not a country that bows to xenophobia. The refugees themselves describe Hungarians as helpful, kind-hearted people. [13] At the same time, experts seem to disagree on the maximum number of those who can be involved in the integration programme.

The number of people who were granted a refugee status was between three hundred and five hundred even when only a few thousands of refugees made it to Hungary, and that figure did not change when the number of those crossing the border was around 40 thousand. A possible reason behind this is that those fleeing from places from where escape is the only viable option face severe hardship. Moreover, these people undergo the ordeal of having to keep moving around in various places for several years before reaching Europe. Initially, they cross frontiers to go to the neighbouring countries—for example from Afghanistan to Iran, having no intention of leaving their home for good—where they wait for two to three years, hoping to hear the news that might allow them to return home. Then they move on to other countries and, in a period of seven or eight years, they will have spent one or two years in a total of four countries. In other words, these people will need to familiarize themselves with the customs and the system in four countries and will also need to speak the local language with at least some degree of success in those countries.

Many among the refugees are Christians suffering from persecution which they are subjected to for religious reasons. In most cases, however, this information will never be made public, the reason being that those who wish to settle in Europe are faced with the reality of animosity towards those who have fled for religious reasons. While the 1951 Refugee Convention [14] stipulates that any human being persecuted for reasons such as religion will be regarded as a refugee, refugees are advised by western authorities running the migration centres in Europe not to mention religion among the reasons of refuge. The European Union keeps facts related to religious persecution under wraps.

## **The Refugee Mission of the Hungarian Evangelical Lutheran Church**

The Diaconal Department of the Hungarian Evangelical Lutheran Church (HELCL) has a number of projects, many of which are operational, while a number of them are in a preparatory stage. All of them are intended for the assistance and support of refugees.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church is involved in various projects; the Evangelical Diaconia, for example, in cooperation with the social network and those providing pastoral care, is involved in rendering assistance to refugees by supplying them with their basic needs such as water and food and by looking after unaccompanied underage persons on their migratory journey. [15]

As part of a separate project, clothes donated to children are collected for distribution and information, both coming from and meant for young people; these are compiled in the schools. Also, refugees are offered information in various languages, while the church is also involved in the so-called *crisis intervention*. The opening of the House of Integration, another project, is also in the offing. This service is intended for refugee families who stay in Hungary and is offered for the duration of one year.

With the assistance of the Association of Paediatrician GPs in Hungary, the Diaconal Department of the HELCL also donates medical supplies to child refugees in need of help. [16]

Several congregations and priests have also offered refugees assistance on a voluntary basis. The HELCL has published a brochure in various foreign languages, e.g. English, French as well as Persian, Urdu and Arabic.

Evangelists, based on Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms, make a distinction between the secular and spiritual realm. The former is the responsibility of politicians, the latter is that of church leaders. If possible, they do not wish to interfere directly with issues relating to secular politics.

## **The Refugee Policy of the Catholic Church in Hungary**

The refugee policy of the Hungarian Conference of Catholic Bishops is to provide assistance for people whose arrival in Hungary is the outcome of their dire situation. "We are glad to act by approving the appeal to admit and help refugees and are also prepared to do whatever is necessary to achieve that end. Words of encouragement spoken on the issue strengthen

our resolve to carry on with the work. We express our thanks for the inspirational guidance along the paths of the Gospel, which puts us on the right track for action.” [17]

However, it needs to be made clear that despite the current refugee crisis the most important responsibility of the Catholic Church is to carry out its pastoral duties by helping Catholics who have for some reason been forced to leave their homes. Both the first church documents and the activity of the gradually established church institutions appear to substantiate this. Meanwhile, the Holy See and local churches both undertake humanitarian and diplomatic action to address, both globally and locally, the refugee problem. It has also become imperative for the church leadership, due to a rapid succession of events, to carry out an ad hoc evaluation of the situation. But the words of encouragement, coming from the Pope or the Holy See, are not to be interpreted as a statutory law. They are guidelines for those public administration organizations within the church which provide humanitarian help and pastoral care for immigrants. Although the significance of this should not be underestimated, it should not be overestimated, either. It is not about the amendment of specific regulations or the creation of new institutions. The situation has changed with the emanation of a motu proprio entitled *Humanam progressionem* on the 31<sup>st</sup> of August 2016, which led to the foundation of a new *Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development* inside the Vatican. [18] Nor is it about the distribution of tasks. It is about adopting a fundamental attitude and determining moral principles. Moreover, not every local church institution is adequately equipped with the kind of infrastructure or financial and human resources required for the task at hand. [19] The refugee problem is mostly tackled as part of the social teachings of the church. Documents produced by the church were reflections on a social phenomenon if for some historical or economic reason it became relevant, or if emigration became a general, global security issue. In tackling the problem of emigration, there is a varying level of scrutiny detectable in the Pope’s statements. These statements are not supposed to create a legal framework.

## **The Role of the Ecumenical Church and the Activity of the European Union**

*Mapping Migration*, an English language publication, [20] is a collection of studies in theology and sociology, also including some personal accounts. This publication has essential infographics, as well, to help readers understand today’s most acute crisis. This collection of studies was first recommended for public attention during a conference on the issue of refugees, organized in Geneva between 18 and 19 January 2016 by the WCC and the UN.

The member churches in Europe of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) are committed to placing decision-makers under more pressure, so that they adopt a more welcoming approach in dealing with refugees. [21] In a closing statement summarizing the position of the LWF at the end of its Trondheim conference, the leaders of forty member churches called upon the European Union to launch an initiative, identical with Operation Mare Nostrum, with the aim of searching and rescuing refugees in the Mediterranean.

Additional documents written by church leaders reflect the view that “the secure journey of refugees from places such as Syria, Iraq etc. should be ensured.” [28] “The statement



includes the recommendation that a fairer system for the distribution of refugees should also be created—churches of the countries in the region affected are called upon to ensure that these urgent issues are raised with their respective governments.” [22]

As a reminder, church leaders emphasized the fact that the LWF has, since its foundation in 1947, always been sensitive in its approach to the issue of refugees. In the aftermath of the Second World War, European churches integrated many refugees. “For us as churches it goes without saying that to regard migrants and refugees as our brothers and sisters is a fundamental matter of attitude and that we have to assist them by all possible means.” [22] These are words quoted verbatim from a document produced at the end of the conference.

That document underlines that when it comes to refugees forced to leave their home country, the current figure, which is in excess of fifty million, is the highest of its kind since World War II.

The church leaders remarked that “the lives of many of those trying to make it to Europe were put at risk during the journey.” [22] According to figures published by the UN Refugee Agency, more than 36 thousand migrants and refugees crossed the Mediterranean this year alone with the aim of reaching the coasts of Southern Europe, 1,600 of them having died at sea.

The first supply of aid, coming from the Evangelical Church, was delivered to the camp at Nagyfa on 1 July 2015, by the Hungarian Interchurch Aid. This was followed by regular aid provided during the next two months for migration centres at Vámoszabadi and Bicske, along with another registration location at Röske.

The Hungarian Interchurch Aid was also involved in a regular aid effort elsewhere. The aid effort was extended to Barcs and Horgos near the Croatian border, where the supply with food and drinking water for a continuous influx of migrants from Croatia was ensured. [23]

As for a balanced approach to immigration, the EU’s efforts on this issue are focussing on creating a balance between tackling the problem of legal migration and dealing with the issue of fighting illegal migration. Proper measures in dealing with migration movement include fair treatment of third country citizens staying legally in an EU member state, stepping up efforts to fight illegal migration and promoting a comprehensive cooperation with third countries. To ensure that legal immigrants are granted the same rights and have the same obligations as EU citizens is a principal objective for the EU. [24]

As regards the principle of solidarity, in accordance with the Treaty of Lisbon, the policies shall be governed by the principle of solidarity and fair sharing of responsibility, including its financial implications. (Article 80 of the *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union*.)

As a final thought on the issue I have to say: in my view, in the current migratory situation in Europe the church should continue to carry out its mission. Migration is a significant challenge for the Christian community; it poses the question to what extent that community is both ready to accept and capable of dealing with cultural differences. Accept means to love people and to take them seriously, to make it possible for everyone to be themselves and to ensure that they experience no sense of threat for being different from others. The actions of the church have to be guided by its mission: the principle of solidarity. The church is responsible for the management of a number of institutions involved in helping refugees who reach the frontiers of Europe. The church has no intention of acting as a replacement for the state, but it has to react to human suffering. It cannot, at the same time, ignore the reality that a legal framework must prevail for all migratory movements. In the absence of this, those movements will pose a threat to public order.

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