

To the LWF Member Churches in Europe

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.
(Hebrews 13:1-2)

Each day's news brings new stories of the desperate—and all too often deadly—plight of refugees coming to Europe. Shocking images convey to us that the current stalemate among European countries to jointly address the rights of refugees translates in human lives being lost every day, including children. The inability of the international community of States to work together to effectively address the root-causes that force people to flee – the four years of conflict in Syria being among the most dramatic examples – expresses itself in the current inability of the international community, both in Europe and globally, to work together to address the predictable consequences of their failure to address these root causes.

Together with precious human lives that are being lost, the current situation reveals the crossroads at which the human family finds itself in view of the values that will undergird relationships in this one world we are called to share: will solidarity, mutuality and human dignity still matter? Will the notion of human beings – including refugees – as right holders still matter? It is decisive to get the answers right!

I write to you this new letter, following up on my letter to you from April, as well as on the strong statement from the European LWF Church Leadership Consultation in Trondheim in May. The European Lutheran church Leadership affirmed and committed:

It is for us as churches crucial and natural from our theology and from our understanding of church that migrants and refugees are our brothers and sisters and that we have to support them in all possible ways. ...

As Lutheran churches we commit ourselves to increase our efforts to welcome refugees in our midst.

Indeed, it has been inspiring to see the numerous ways in which Lutherans and other Christians, as well as other people of good will, have reached out to show hospitality and welcome for those who have had to flee. On behalf of the Lutheran World Federation, a global communion of churches, I want to express my deep appreciation for this prophetic presence, as well as affirm and encourage you in those efforts.

The needs are growing; this is obvious. At a briefing yesterday in Geneva, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), reported as follows:

Since the beginning of this year, 322, 500 refugees and migrants have arrived in Europe (115, 500 in Italy, 204, 954 in Greece, 94 in Malta, and 1,953 in Spain). The top countries of origin are Syria 49%, Afghanistan 12%, Eritrea 9%, Nigeria 4% and Somalia 3%. According to the latest UNHCR estimates, 4000 refugees and migrants arrive on the Greek Islands everyday and this has placed severe pressure on the reception capacities and asylum systems of Greece, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia, with thousands of people camping rough without shelter, sanitation, food and water. As a result, UNHCR declared a level-2 emergency for these three countries on 30 June 2015 and called for action in the following three years; to boost post-rescue reception capacity in receiving countries through support for States, civil society and local communities; strengthen protection systems and prevent *refoulement* including through presence and capacity building; and increase strategic messaging and advocacy to and about people of concern.

In discussions with LWF staff, UNHCR officials have underlined how important is the role of churches and church leaders. This is so both in providing diaconal assistance for refugees and—perhaps even more important—in speaking out for a generous welcome that recognizes each refugee’s human dignity and that counteracts the populist messages of fear and exclusion.

It is at the same time important to me to emphasize that the protection of refugees is not only a moral obligation. As signatories of international law, in particular the Refugee Convention (<http://www.unhcr.org/4ca34be29.pdf>), European nations have committed themselves to the duty to protect refugees. As a result of it, refugees have a right to protection. I believe church leaders have an important role in advocating that while the question about “how” this right to protection can be effectively met through joint approaches at a European and global level, they will never allow anybody to question the fundamental right of refugees to be protected.

Therefore, I urge you to:

- Continue to speak out strongly for a generous welcome for refugees.
- Continue nurturing and sustaining both your diaconal presence among refugees, and your prophetic voice on their behalf.
- Continue to advocate with your governments to uphold their duty to protect people in vulnerable situations under the international humanitarian law, of which they are all signatories.
- Continue to advocate with your governments for legal and safe pathways for refugees to seek refuge in Europe, and for a spirit and systems of solidarity within Europe so that refugees are treated with dignity.

- Disseminate within your churches the Affirmations for Faith Leaders, the Welcoming the Stranger document that LWF and other faith-based organizations developed together with UNHCR (https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Welcoming_the_Stranger.pdf).

The encounter with the refugee is often transformative, both for the refugees and for the local church. This should not in any way be a surprise for us, for we know from Matthew 25 that this is one of the ways in which we encounter our Lord. Jesus said, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

Yours in Christ,

Rev. Dr. Martin Junge
General Secretary