

Final Document

of the Consultation “‘For You Yourself Were Foreigners’ – The Refugee Issue as a Challenge to the European Partner Churches”

Bad Neuenahr, January 9-10, 2016

Prior to the regional synod of the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland, Praeses Manfred Rekowski invited the leading clergy of the European partner churches of the Rhenish Church to deliberate on the issue: “For You Yourself Were Foreigners...” – The Refugee Issue as a Challenge to the European Partner Churches.

The following leaders of the partner churches participated in the consultation:

The partner churches were represented by:

Paolo Naso, Evangelical Church of the Methodists and Waldensians in Italy
Stefan Cosoroaba, Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession in Romania
László Fazekas, Reformed Christian Church in Slovakia
Daniel Zenatý, Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren
Jerzy Samiec, Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession in Poland
Marek Izdebski, Evangelical Reformed Church in Poland
István Szabó, Reformed Church in Hungary
Sándor Zán-Fabián, Reformed Church in Transcarpathia
Christine Treichel, United Protestant Church in Belgium
Doris Peschke, The Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe

On behalf of the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland, the following representatives took part:

Manfred Rekowski
Christoph Pistorius
Johann Weusmann
Barbara Rudolph
Jürgen Eberl
Bernd Baucks
Barbara Schwahn
Monika Lengelsen
Marion Unger
Eva Hoffmann von Zedlitz
Helga Siemens Weibring
Jens Sannig
Hans-Joachim Schwabe

Christine Busch
Rafael Nikodemus
Markus Schaefer

Praeses Manfred Rekowski opened the consultations with a reminder of the first statement of the Barmen Theological Declaration: "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in holy scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death."

1. The refugee flows into and through Europe pose a tremendous challenge to the community of states in Europe and to their citizens. The countries have assumed very different stances on the issue, depending on whether they are located at the outskirts or at the centre of Europe, whether they are a country of destination or a country of transit, whether they already admitted a large number of refugees or received only few, and depending on their respective social and economic situations and their historic background (East-West). There are countries like Poland with a homogenous cultural identity, a factor which rather favours the spread of anxieties, and countries like Italy, in which multiculturalism has long become an accepted reality. However, all countries experience difficulties with a view to the acceptance of refugees.

2. The Evangelical churches in Europe take an effort to meet these challenges considering the respective situations in their countries. The churches act against different backgrounds, deal with different situations and consequently adopt different stances and solutions in dealing with the issue.

We recognise the following common challenges:

- The churches' assumed responsibilities comprise immediate support and political and social advocacy.
- In order to be able to act in confidence, anxieties need to be reduced.
- European identity will be reflected in the way we treat refugees.
- Churches share responsibility for the situation at the EU external borders.
- Support and funding of the UNHCR, which provides care for the refugees in the troubled regions, need to be ensured by the individual European countries.
- The following questions arise: How can biblical ethics and guidelines win recognition in the face of resistance? How can our congregations integrate refugees even if those are of Muslim faith?

The participants in the consultation jointly reject the Dublin III Regulation. They do not believe the current tide of migration to be a temporary phenomenon but rather a reality which will entail sustainable structural changes to societies.

3. Despite all differences, the churches are united in jointly listening to the word of God and to their ecumenical brothers and sisters. This is why the biblical references to refugees and migration serve as a guideline for church action. The following aspects might be addressed:

While the message from the bible cannot simply be applied to the current situation, it presents many parallels to today's realities, i.e. as far as the causes for migration are concerned. The bible refrains from characterising or judging refugees on the grounds of their reasons to flee. According to the Scripture, mercy prepares the ground for the appropriate treatment of refugees. It highlights the command to have the same rules for everyone. The bible unambiguously demands care for refugees. It puts responsibility for joint action on all Christians. With the biblical message in mind, questions arise about one's own identity and about the Christian perspective on the difference between integration and assimilation. Ultimately, from a biblical point of view, every human being

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is a foreigner on earth. The strength or weakness of our identity is manifest in the way we deal with refugees.

4. The partner churches agree to continue talks and exchanges on the issue and to strive for further cooperation:

- They want to exchange resolutions adopted by their respective synods.
- They want to increase exchange on their experiences with refugees and on approaches to jointly tackle the challenge of integration.
- Intercultural theology is to be promoted, and cooperation with volunteers is to be intensified. The Evangelical Church in the Rhineland was asked to assume the initiative.

And, very concretely, the Reformed Church of Hungary and the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland announced to jointly organise a further meeting on the issue in Budapest. A date will be provided when available.

5. Praeses Manfred Rekowski started his sermon held during the consultations with the watchword for January 10, as published by the Herrnhut Brotherhood: "I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them" (Ezekiel 11:19-20).

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