

BEFG / German Baptist Union

Report on Refugee Situation and Response of Churches

- **About the refugee situation in Germany**
(statistics about refugees, asylum seekers)

During the last decade, Germany has received an average of about 40000 asylum applicants per year. Since 2012 this number has increased dramatically from 77000 (in 2012), to 127000 (in 2013), and 202000 in 2014.

In 2015 we have had just over 256000 asylum applications until August. The expected number for 2015 is about 800000 – up to 1 million.

In 2015 there have been about 152000 decisions on those applications:

40 % positive (asylum granted, refugee status and other)

41 % negative

19 % transfer (Dublin regulations)

In August 2015 there were over 250000 applications not yet decided. The Federal Office for migration and refugees has employed over 1000 new staff to handle the extraordinary demands. Over 20 % of the refugees are from Syria – they are mostly accepted under the refugee status. Nearly 40 % of the asylum applications come from citizens of Albania, Kosovo, Serbia and Macedonia – less than 1 % of them are accepted. Their home countries are regarded as “safe states” under German policies, many of these migrants are transferred back home by the German police.

- **Reaction of the government and society to the refugee situation**
(legal situation, political responses, social atmosphere)

The German government emphasizes the basic human right for every person that is persecuted to be granted asylum or refugee status in our country.

The European systems of responsibility and transfer have been defended strongly; at the same time Germany has made the protection of refugees the higher goal of all migration politics.

The arrival of tens of thousands of refugees every month of this year has stretched the capacities in Germany to the limit and beyond. The political and administrative authorities are trying hard to cover the basic needs of these people.

The German public opinion has been very welcoming and many citizens have offered their voluntary help and assistance. The deaths of refugees in boats on the Mediterranean and even in vehicles on European roads have shocked the public and pushed the majority to demand more protection for refugees.

Images of the refugee treks through southeastern Europe have reminded many Germans of their own history of forced migration during and after World War 2.

The combination of these factors results in a strong public opinion of acceptance and welcome and support for refugees.

At the same time there is a growing uneasiness about the enormity of the task, a dissatisfaction with the response in other European countries, and a developing discussion about the appropriate political and practical solutions.

While the strong German economy seems to be able to shoulder the challenge of accepting a million new inhabitants, the group of people with lower incomes and limited prospects start to voice their fears of being overseen once more.

And there is a certain percentage of the population that gives strong messages of xenophobia and even turns to violence against refugee homes and individuals.

- **Response of churches and involvement in the refugee situation**

German Baptist churches have developed a strong sense of involvement in the affairs of their home towns and regions. Many social projects have been established with the motto from Jeremiah 29:7 (“seek the peace and prosperity of the city”) and in the light of Jesus’ teachings in Matthew 25:31-46. Churches have learnt to be “missional” in the sense that their involvement in the community is part of God’s redemptive mission in our world.

Another preparation for the refugee challenge has been the growing number of migrant churches associated with our union. For 10 years already we have seen groups of francophone Africans, Vietnamese or Tamil speakers and others become affiliated or member churches in our union. During the last five years we have trained over 20 migrant leaders and 10 of them are ordained pastors already.

Then came the experience that some of the new refugees especially from Iran have come as Christians fleeing the persecution in Iran or have converted to the Christian faith in Germany. Many Baptist churches have accepted these Iranian Christians into membership, many of them were baptized in our churches.

So now, we find ourselves not only trying to handle the challenge of migration, but in fact celebrating the new diversity in our churches and union. Our motto for 2015/16 is “Bunte Gemeinde”, meaning: we celebrate diversity and discover Christ in the other, the stranger.

According to our recent enquiry, at least 50 churches have responded specifically to the refugee challenge this year: they are offering language courses, Bible study groups, practical help with clothes and furniture, offering sports or children’s activities, visiting the refugee homes, organizing intercultural events, helping with translation in the church services and so on. Our recent enquiry has brought great response from the churches and the list is growing every week.

Our Annual Assembly in May 2015 has endorsed a resolution called “Welcoming Christ in the stranger”, with clear demands and proposals for action and advocacy. The national leadership has appointed a coordinator for integration and migration issues in the person of Pastor Thomas Klammt, who has taken that position in March 2015. He is coordinating the work of the migrant churches as well as handling the questions and requests of German churches regarding integration issues.

While we see refugee help in Europe to be an urgent issue, we know that the challenges of migration and integration will remain on our agenda for many years to come. And we understand cultural diversity to be a reality and strength of the Christian church since Pentecost and even in heaven (Revelations 7:9)

- **About the role of the EBF in dealing with the migration/refugee crisis**

We are pleased to see the topic on the agenda of the EBF Council and hope for fruitful discussions.

We think it is good and necessary to share our experiences and opinions, different as they may be. We are sure that many Baptist churches and unions in Europe have similar experiences, and we would love to see good cooperation and networking in EBF in response to the refugee challenge.

We propose that every EBF member union appoint a coordinator for migration issues. Many times we come across questions that need European cooperation. For example when refugees who have been members of a German Baptist church are transferred to another country and we would love to help them by connecting them with brothers and sisters in that country.

We also propose that the EBF council prepare and endorse a statement of support for all churches and Christians who offer help, love, assistance and witness to refugees in Europe and beyond. We are aware that our fellow Christians in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey carry the heaviest load of refugee help. Shall we pray for them and give them our strong support in every regard!

Jesus says: *"I was a stranger and you invited me in."* (Matthew 25:35)

Let us follow his word and show his love to refugees in need!

BEFG (C.Stiba, J.Gnep, T.Klammt)