

Europe's refugee crisis: What to think about it

The European Evangelical Alliance's policy positions on the asylum crisis

European Evangelical Alliance Socio-political Team & Authorisation Team

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Dear EEA Friends,

We are thrilled to see so much brilliant ministry happening across Europe to reach out to refugees.

We share your joy at the news of lives being changed, including many refugees becoming Christians and some Evangelical churches growing amazingly.

But we are increasingly concerned by the socio-political response in many places. Fear has grown, backs have turned, hearts have hardened. National populists have profited.

Criminals have used gaps in legislation and made the most of the chaotic situation. Therefore, people have suffered and Europe's stability is under strain. It could well worsen in future years.

We must not ignore this.

We are deeply worried about what many parts of Europe's response to the refugee crisis says about the societies that we have become and where we, as well as the refugees themselves, could end up.

Therefore, we are sending you political positions which have been approved by the EEA's Public Policy Authorisation Team and state our agreed thinking.

Could I please ask you to read the positions carefully and consider which parts are most relevant for your context? And then could I encourage you to consider what prayer or advocacy response is appropriate? The EEA team would be happy to help you. Alternatively, if you would like to discuss the content, just get in touch.

Europe is being turned upside down. May the Lord help us to play our part in praying, speaking and acting for His glory.

Yours for the EEA team,

Thomas Bucher
General Secretary

Foreword

Across Europe as well as in countries of origin and transit, we have witnessed wonderful actions of generosity, solidarity and tremendous hard work. The so-called refugee crisis in Europe is a disaster for so many individual refugees. It has also turned much of Europe upside down, as well as perceptions and policies on asylum. Numbers have felt overwhelming. Some politicians and media have focused too much on the political and economic issues and not the humanitarian needs. Solidarity between nations has often been a sham. Fear has grown, backs have turned, hearts have hardened. Criminals and populists have profited, people have suffered.

The European Evangelical Alliance (EEA) has studied the issues, pressures, political realities and biblical imperatives. It knows there are no simple answers.

However, it is deeply worried about what Europe's response to the asylum crisis says about the societies that we have become and where we, as well as the refugees themselves, could end up.

The following positions are purposefully expressed as general principles. They seek to express a simple, balanced and representative expression of Europe's Evangelicals' approach to the crisis. They have been approved by the EEA's Public Policy Authorisation Team and state our agreed thinking. We call upon Christians to pray, consider their country's response and then speak up graciously and boldly.

Julia Doxat-Purser

Socio-Political Representative & Religious Liberty Coordinator

European Evangelical Alliance

Who is EEA?

The EEA, originally created in 1846, is an Alliance of more than 50 European grassroots national and transnational evangelical movements from all Protestant traditions present in 36 European countries. The EEA serves as a platform for common action and a voice **representing Europe's 20 million Evangelicals**. The Brussels office of the EEA promotes active citizenship of its constituency and represents it to the European Institutions.

www.europeanea.org

Position 1: National and international reactions

Position 1 General national and international responses have been insufficient or shamefully unethical

Some countries, regions or individual politicians and officials have done so much to try to help practically or by proposing workable solutions. This good work has been done in the context of economic difficulties and weak support from many other nations, both European and around the world. Nevertheless, EEA believes that, judging by biblical, legal and good governance standards, there has been moral, legal and political failure. This shames us all, and has led to avoidable suffering and unfairness.

We call upon Christians in every nation to consider their country's response, to pray and to speak up graciously but boldly.

The EEA believes:

1.1. Every human being is made in the image of God, has infinite worth and dignity and innate rights. Our attitudes, policies and actions must be shaped by these truths as we consider an individual refugee wherever they are in the process of moving from war or barbarity to Europe, whether they are on the road, having their status decided or are now learning to integrate.

1.2. Looking at European political and societal attitudes and (in)action through this filter (see 1.1) shows up our inadequacies. But it also shows up the failings of other nations and, of course, the people who have caused the horror that refugees are fleeing from.

1.3. It is a tragic failure that EU Member States have failed to find a way to work together in order to fairly and efficiently respond to the refugee crisis. If there was a fairer sharing of the task, then the strain on some countries would be less and more refugees could be cared for.

1.4. According to the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR), the rules of 'Dublin III' (the EU's framework migration regulation which focuses on *protection measures against unwanted migration*) have indirectly caused countries like Greece and Hungary to be overburdened by the new arrivals, and the asylum seekers to receive unfair treatment (i). Other 'protection' measures have also meant that efforts to 'search and rescue' persons or boats of migrants in distress have been largely insufficient. In 2015, compared to 2014 when efforts were better, more than 10 times as many people, victims of smugglers and other criminals, have drowned in the Mediterranean Sea trying to cross over to Europe from the southern and eastern shores. The EU and its Member States have and should be criticised and even condemned for this(ii). They must revise this policy and change the philosophy from *protection measures against unwanted migration* to *protection measures and fair treatment for all migration candidates*.

1.5. It is therefore wrong that some nations have sought to avoid welcoming people in need

of protection, especially refugees. Whether these people are refugee or economic migrants, all deserve to be treated compassionately, with their immediate physical needs tended and then to have their legal status processed efficiently.

1.6. We must challenge nations that do not have a fair system for processing whether someone should be granted refugee status and allowed to remain, or not. Rules are laid down in international law. Urgent assistance should be offered to bring systems up to international standards.

1.7. It is wrong that unaccompanied children and other especially vulnerable refugees have been ignored by the authorities in several cases. They must all have good care and protection.

1.8. It is wrong that some nations have wanted to welcome only Christian refugees. It is ironic that some have done this in order to protect their “Christian nation.” The Bible makes it completely clear that Christians are called to respond compassionately to all in immediate need. Nations are also called to welcome the foreigner, provided that the foreigner cooperates in integrating. Most Syrian Christian leaders deplore any favouritism towards Christian refugees.

1.9. Every act of scapegoating, abuse, violence or exploitation is to be condemned and never to be ignored. That refugees have been attacked, their accommodation burned, their possessions stolen, that they have been left at the mercy of human traffickers luring them into exploitation or have faced corruption and inhuman treatment even by a small minority of officials is shameful.

1.10. Compared to non-European nations like Jordan and Lebanon, European nations have small numbers of refugees to worry about. Nevertheless, especially at a time of economic difficulty, it is not surprising that Europeans are worrying about the numbers of refugees coming, the cost and potential impact on jobs and public services. It is also natural for local people to worry about large numbers of foreigners coming into their community. These concerns must be taken seriously but without inciting prejudice against all refugees. Economic factors cannot be ignored but they do not trump the human dignity of every refugee, nor our international obligations to assist.

i Comment from the UNHCR <<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/49c0ca922.html>>

ii Criticism (Human Rights Watch) <<http://www.hrw.org/en/node/76791/section/1>>, Criticism (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights) <http://commissioner.cws.coe.int/tiki-view_blog_post.php?postId=80>, 2011 European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) condemnation (press article <<http://euobserver.com/9/31681>>, ECHR Press Release <<http://cmiskp.echr.coe.int/tkp197/view.asp?action=open&documentId=879929&portal=hbkm&source=externalbydocnumber&table=F69A27FD8FB86142BF01C1166DEA398649>>, ECHR Grand Chamber ruling <<http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng-press?i=001-103050>>).

Position 2: Limits to generosity

Position 2 We must actively recognise a limit to the generosity of host countries

It may be kind to argue that all migrants should be welcomed. Perhaps if we allowed our lifestyles and economies to be utterly transformed, we could do so. But it is simply not possible politically. Politicians and local authorities have a difficult job. However, the biggest failure has been where nations have expected others to take the burden and hearts have hardened. If we fail to change this situation, we risk more inappropriate nationalism, serious tensions between nations and societal breakdown, in both the generous and less generous countries.

We call upon Christians in every nation to consider their country's response, to pray and to speak up graciously but boldly.

The EEA believes:

2.1. It is wrong when people in general, and notably here refugees, adopt an attitude of entitlement, demanding help ungratefully and forgetting that they are benefitting from the goodwill of countless people. As soon as possible, refugees should be encouraged to contribute to the wellbeing of their new country. This should be done not in an atmosphere of compulsion but rebuilding self-respect, avoiding dependency and encouraging partnership, goodwill as well as successful recovery and integration.

2.2. There are many millions more people living in horrendous conditions, in danger of war or barbarity or unable to survive physically. In future years, the numbers of desperate people could easily increase. It is naïve to think that Europe could welcome them all. We cannot ignore the root causes of this refugee crisis. This implies far more investment in diplomatic and aid efforts. We also need to work in partnership with other nations. This is a global crisis and other nations should participate in the response.

2.3. When they have already welcomed large numbers of refugees, it is understandable that some countries or regions feel that they cannot accept many more. Politicians need to have the support of the host community or successful integration will be made more difficult. But, where nations have accepted disproportionately low numbers of refugees, often because of hostile attitudes among the population, this should be challenged. Hard-heartedness and national populism are wrong. Doing nothing or very little and, instead, expecting other nations to take on the task is wrong. Ignoring countless desperate people is wrong. Refugees cannot be thrown back into the sea.

2.4. It is naïve to think that all the people coming to Europe are necessarily refugees. Some migrate to seek relief from extreme hardship, improve their skills, find or create a job, join family members or simply improve their living standards. Appropriate rules need to be applied to decide whether each candidate for migration may be entitled to stay. However, it is not always easy to make decisions: some do migrate because, for a myriad of possible reasons,

they (individually or their community) have lost their home country's protection, and are therefore refugees. Even as we monitor how decisions are made, we should refrain from labelling failed asylum seekers as liars or the authorities as uncaring and unfair. And, with the present crisis, when resources are strained, when the authorities must keep the general population on board, it is important to grant refugee status to those people who are seriously believed to be in danger because their home country will not protect them.

2.5. Many other migrants have also been through tremendous trauma and lost everything in their journey to Europe, often due to European nations' self-protecting migration policies. Many have not chosen migration and/or their former lives were intolerable—they are called forced migrants or forcibly displaced people. If the authorities decide to return them home, they should only be returned home once they have recovered and with some assistance to help them as they return. No one must be returned to danger.

“ ‘Genuine’ refugee?”

“We have to acknowledge that the definition of need of asylum according to the Geneva Convention 1951 is subject to interpretation. Nobody is clearly a genuine or ‘ungenuine’ refugee; it is always a matter of evaluation. The need of protection is always based on a scenario about what would happen if the asylum seeker returned to his / her home country. This is a scenario that has never happened, since the asylum seeker is still alive and in Europe. This means that we must approach with compassion and understanding those asylum seekers that have received a negative decision, and should not label them as liars. We should also behave respectfully towards the authorities who make those decisions. Even if we can be critical of certain decisions or policies, we must understand the nature of asylum definition as a vague concept based on the opinion of the decision maker.”

Ville Hoikkala,

Asylum Law Barrister, Finland

Position 3: How we portray migrants

Position 3 Portraying migrants as *de facto* threatening or dangerous people, is untrue and morally condemnable. Only justice should prevail.

It is so important what politicians and the media say about migrants and refugees, both the language and the facts. History clearly teaches us where demonization of minorities can take us. But pretending that there are no societal challenges plays into the hands of populists. EEA calls for balance and truth in words and in policy.

We call upon Christians in every nation to consider how migrants and refugees are portrayed and treated in their country, to pray and to speak up graciously but boldly.

The EEA believes:

3.1. It is wrong for anyone to imply through careless or deliberately chosen words that all migrants or Muslims are dangerous or do not know how to behave.

3.2. The 1930s teach us to be wary of those who blame religious and ethnic minorities for a country's ills in the name of the nation, often backed up by supposed support for Christianity.

3.3. It is wrong when refugees behave badly. Illegal behaviour should be investigated thoroughly, with due legal process and then punished appropriately. For serious offences, this could include deportation but only to safe locations. However, care should be taken to assess whether there were mitigating factors e.g. psychological trauma, extreme poverty or cultural misunderstanding.

3.4. When tensions and prejudice abound, when populists long for evidence that the foreigner is as bad as they say, it is vital that two errors are avoided. Keeping quiet at problems is deceitful and prevents examination of the challenges. But discussing migrant misbehaviour or problems within Islam or culture must always be done carefully and never in a way which strengthens negative stereotyping.

Position 4: Religious freedom

Position 4 Principles of religious freedom should prevail

The European Evangelical Alliance is alarmed wherever religious freedom for all is not being respected and made possible. We realise that religious freedom may not seem to be a priority for a busy official running a refugee hostel. We understand that it may seem frightening for a town to accommodate many people of another faith. However, religious freedom is too important. It is a foundational human right and must be guaranteed for refugees, those who serve them and for society as a whole.

We call upon Christians in every nation to consider how their country is respecting and promoting religious freedom in light of the refugee crisis, to pray and to speak up graciously but boldly. We also encourage them to offer to help officials and refugees themselves to understand religious freedom, to respect it and to find ways to live together in a civil public square.

The EEA believes:

4.1. The settled opinion of the Christian religious freedom community—certainly so in Evangelical circles—is that *religious freedom is for all*. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief (aka 'FoRB'), just like any universally recognised human right (including the right to be protected from persecution), should be respected for everyone everywhere. These rights and freedoms are tied to our recognition that, although fallen, all human beings are created in the likeness of God and possess inalienable dignity. As much as God is seeking and saving those who are lost, God calls people to seek him and find him; forced worship stinks to the nostrils of God.

4.2. It is wrong when any refugee is discriminated against, persecuted or not tolerated for their beliefs, or lack thereof. We have a duty to intervene, whether this pressure is coming from host communities in Europe or other migrants. We have a duty to ensure that refugees of all faiths and none have space to practise their faiths and express their beliefs while they are in camps. If a nation has not been used to having Muslim or Yazidi communities for example, it must accept that these believers will want to establish places of worship. Blocking free practice of faith or expression of non-faith is not only wrong, it is more likely to make integration strenuous and cause alienation. Refugees must also be taught about and to accept the importance of religious freedom, including the right to change one's religion or belief and to critique another's faith.

4.3. The vulnerability of refugees must never be exploited by those who wish to convert them to any cause or faith, including Christianity. However, we strongly reject the idea that sensitive discussing of faith, promotion of peaceful ideas based in faith or the faith itself, or offering

spiritual comfort is inappropriate. Refugees often welcome and want the freedom to talk about their faith and share/exchange views or experiences with those of different faiths. Those working with and befriending refugees have the right to express and share their faith, provided that this is always done appropriately and that support is generally offered without any faith requirement. Imposing of clumsy, supposed neutrality in the name of secularism is both unnecessary and intolerant.

Position 5: Integration

Position 5 Principles regarding integration

The Bible is very clear that there is a duty both on foreigners to integrate into their new society and on the host community to welcome the foreigner and assist newcomers to settle. Without both sides playing their part, the European Evangelical Alliance is very concerned that intolerance and tension will lead to serious societal problems.

We call upon Christians in every nation to consider their country's integration policies and rhetoric, to pray and to speak up graciously but boldly. We also urge them to play a key part in assisting integration and mutual understanding.

The EEA believes:

5.1. From a biblical perspective, refugees have a duty to integrate but the host community has a greater duty to welcome, which comes first. Any requirement on one must be balanced by a requirement on the other. Successful integration is impossible where one side feels despised or unfairly treated by the other. Both the host community and the refugee may feel insecure and under threat. This is understandable. But intolerance must be challenged. Politicians and journalists have a very important responsibility to choose their language carefully in order not to make matters worse.

5.2. *A duty to integrate?* Once a refugee has reached a place of safety, had his/her immediate needs cared for and knows where he/she will stay at least for a while, we should help them to learn about their new home. Much of this is best done in a supportive way through friendship. Churches can play a huge role. Refugees should learn the language, how to behave in different social settings, about rights and responsibilities. This includes basic etiquette rules, how to interact in different settings and how attitudes may be different from what they are used to. This includes freedom of conscience for all, gender equality and tolerance of diverse sexual behaviours. Refugee children should go to school as soon as possible and local children should be encouraged to befriend them.

5.3. It is important that the host community invites refugees to understand and participate in cultural, social and economic activities to help them feel part of their new country. This means moving from integration to inclusion. However, refugees must be allowed to preserve marks of their own cultural identity if they so wish. This does not have to mean dilution of host national identity. Where people feel more secure in their own cultural identity, they are more likely to feel able to live among those of a different culture and to participate in uniting activities. We need to avoid a sense of "them and us" but foster civic virtues so that all feel able to live as they choose, while respecting the other and the law of the land.

5.4. Given a supportive atmosphere around them, refugees can rebuild their own lives and integrate well. We should show them respect, support their psychological recovery,

encourage their integration into faith communities, and facilitate their search for work or adapting their professional skills. The challenge is to do all of this while *not neglecting the poor and vulnerable from other walks of life* in our nations.