

What is the difference between government and church responsibility?

The biblical role of government can be summed up as ensuring peace, justice and a society where the vulnerable are protected and can flourish. Of course, that does not give us all the details, especially on how the vulnerable might be helped. That's where politics and also circumstances influence the situation. People will also argue over what is the responsibility of local or national government or indeed the European Union or United Nations.

Christians have responsibilities too, with complementary but different roles between the local church and Christian aid/development agencies (who are committed to industry best quality standards such as the Red Cross Code of Conduct and SPHERE standards). We should all pray for our politicians, urge them to do the right thing and to speak up for justice and righteousness if they do wrong. We should pray for our neighbours who are afraid and for the refugees themselves. But we have other God-given tasks too. This FAQ looks at the role of the local church.

Churches are called to love the vulnerable and minister to their needs in a holistic way. This includes caring for physical, emotional and spiritual needs regardless of someone's faith or any other criteria. It is perfectly appropriate for church members to discuss faith where opportunity naturally arises, provided it is done sensitively and respectfully and the refugee does not feel compelled in any way. While Europeans tend to be reluctant to talk about faith, in Middle Eastern culture it is very normal to talk about religion. Many refugees expect and welcome the opportunity to talk about spiritual matters. The Church has a specific biblical mandate to share the good news that all can enter into relationship with God through Jesus Christ, whatever their religious background. This should of course always be done in a way that never exploits tragedy or vulnerability for proselytism purposes. We should minister to all the refugees' needs.

Politicians need to bring order out of chaos, to ensure fair, safe and compassionate systems to assess all the refugees' needs as well as their backgrounds. Politicians and public administration will decide who is allowed to transit through a territory or to stay temporarily or permanently. There are international laws to guide these decisions. It is not acceptable for refugees to be treated in inhumane ways, for unaccompanied children or the sick to be ignored or for all refugees to be seen as a threat.

It is not that simple. When the numbers of refugees are overwhelming and resources are totally inadequate, how are the authorities supposed to cope? But there is a huge difference between doing one's best to assist and only seeing the crowds as a problem to be gotten rid of as quickly as possible. Is this not just a political issue but a humanitarian crisis overwhelming our capacity, or more simply, purely a political problem to be dealt with as firmly as possible or ignored completely?

In the emergency phase, churches help to feed, clothe and simply show compassion to the refugees. We should also speak up where necessary to challenge unfair or inadequate treatment of the new arrivals. Once it becomes clear where refugees are likely to settle, our role can change. The State will do their best to offer basic housing, education, medical care and job opportunities. In many places, especially less prosperous regions, these are things

which churches can do in the name of Christ—and many other things too. For example, can Christians offer accommodation or language classes / support? Can we offer to help refugees understand forms or how the medical system works, find their way around the supermarket or understand the basics of the culture? Do we have counsellors who can help them process some of the trauma they have been through? Can we be their friends and commit for the long term, sharing lives together? Can we offer hope? If they need it, can we offer legal advice regarding their asylum application? And we need to continue to pray.

The Church can also help wider society as it reacts to the arrival of refugees. Some are fearful, others are resentful. We have a pastoral role, listening, providing opportunities for people to express their concerns and seek answers, being hope bringers and peace makers. And we have a prophetic role to speak out whenever hatred is fostered.

The government will organise and provide, and Christians can encourage them to do these tasks well. The Church's job is to love unconditionally and serve on behalf of Christ whom we love and serve, with our head, hearts and hands.