



EUROPE'S
REFUGEE
CRISIS:

WHAT TO THINK ABOUT IT

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

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SOCIO-POLITICAL TEAM & AUTHORISATION TEAM



UPDATING THE EEA POSITION PAPER ON REFUGEES

In 2016 the European Evangelical Alliance (EEA) published a position paper on refugees. So much has happened since then.

All over Europe, nations and citizens, Evangelicals included, have risen to the challenge of reaching out in various ways to refugees. Some of these efforts continue. But many have moved on from the issue for various reasons.

We believe that Evangelicals must not forget the refugee situation. As the EU attempts to try to break the political deadlock this year, we believe EEA should make its position clear again. These are difficult questions to grapple with. But they need to be discussed. They will not go away by themselves.

As Evangelicals we should not be driven by fear and avoidance but by love, compassion, justice and perspective for a good future of all. This will not only benefit Europe. This will benefit the countries where these people come from. And through this, many will not have to or want to leave their country.

Let's pray for the migrants and refugees and for those involved in the conflict in Syria and elsewhere.

Let's pray for all those seeking to bring care to desperate people in Turkey, Greece and all along Europe's southern coast.

Let's pray for all of us to remember the human beings at the heart of this crisis.

Let's pray for peace and political courage to find fair and compassionate solutions.

Thomas Bucher
General Secretary EEA



FOREWORD

In recent years, Europe has been profoundly marked by migrants and refugees. At times, numbers have felt overwhelming, and they still do in places where borders have closed and 1000s of people are held in limbo. Communities have been turned upside down. Many have sacrificially offered hospitality and support for people to integrate well. Countless refugees have started to build new and better lives. Churches have welcomed huge numbers of new refugee believers.

But other refugees' stories have ended in tragedy. Multitudes have been divided from family, have disappeared into a world of exploitation or have drowned. Criminals and politicians have manipulated the crisis for their own ends. Christians have been deported back to countries where they have immediately been arrested. Hearts have hardened, backs have turned. Solidarity between EU nations has been proven to be a sham.

The European Evangelical Alliance (EEA) knows there are no simple answers to the humanitarian needs, societal challenges or political realities. Many countries are exhausted by the efforts they have made to receive refugees. However, it is deeply worried about what some of 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. It is often said that we must uphold European values and not allow foreigners to change us. But what has happened to our European values of hospitality, solidarity and compassion? Every human life is sacred. We cannot allow this belief to be downgraded in importance. We cannot allow the suffering of people to become the accepted norm and for the refugee situation only to be featured in the news when our nations perceive a new threat.

We call upon Christians to pray, consider their country's response and then speak up graciously and boldly.

POSITION 1: TOO OFTEN 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 in Europe 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, barbarity or natural disaster 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 unacceptable how European nations, all signatories of the Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees [1] have failed to uphold every aspect of it. Nations committed themselves to offer protection to all in fear of persecution without any discrimination and not to return any to danger. They committed themselves to international cooperation in order to avoid tensions between nations. Too often, they have failed in these commitments.

[1] See <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/1951-refugee-convention.html>

1.4. It is tragic 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 in a dignified way.

1.5. 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 Italy to be overburdened by the new arrivals, and the asylum seekers to receive unfair treatment [2]. Other 'protection' measures have also meant that efforts to 'search and rescue' persons or boats of migrants in distress have been largely insufficient. Thousands 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 been and should be criticised and even condemned for this. They must change their philosophy from protection measures against unwanted migration to protection measures and fair treatment for all migration candidates.

1.6. As European nations have sought to limit the numbers of potential refugees reaching their shores, they have caused suffering and injustice elsewhere. For example, the policy of forcibly returning migrants to Libya has led indirectly to a modern slavery crisis there [3].

1.7. It is therefore wrong that some nations have sought to avoid welcoming people entitled to and in need of protection, especially refugees. Whether these people are refugees, with a legal right to be given protection, or economic migrants, all deserve to be treated compassionately, with their immediate physical needs tended and then to have their legal status processed efficiently.

1.8. We must challenge nations that do not have a fair and efficient 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.

1.9. One of the weaknesses in the systems of many nations is the treatment of those claiming asylum on the grounds of faith. Procedures can be unfair, or immigration staff poorly trained. It is common for impossible questions to be asked of Christians who have converted from Islam, expecting detailed theological knowledge. Or staff have not understood that the interviewee is part of a different Christian denomination to what they know more about, for example, failing to understand the differences between Roman Catholic and Pentecostal church practice. Such errors, based often on a pattern of indifference, ignorance of spiritual matters or mistrust, lead to converts not being believed. Too often, testimony of local pastors who know the individual or evidence of danger in home countries is ignored [4]. This leads to countless Christians returned to places like Afghanistan or Iran where persecution is acute. Many have been arrested, or have disappeared. No communication from a returnee does not necessarily mean disaster but we simply do not know.

[2] See <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/49c0ca922.html>

[3] See, for example, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-42492687>

[4] See, for example, the poor situation in Germany https://www.opendoors.de/sites/default/files/Open_Doors_2019_Protecting_Converts_against_Deportation_where_Christians_are_persecuted_certified.pdf

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

1.11. Christians in the Middle East can be particularly vulnerable and efforts should be made to protect them. However, 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." While the Bible calls on Christians to have special concern for Christian brothers and sisters, it also 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 Middle Eastern Christian leaders deplore any special selection of Christians for removal to safety in Europe. They would prefer efforts to be focused on easing the crisis locally and supporting people to be able to stay in the region.

1.12. 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.

1.13. 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. This can be especially true when a nation's experience of foreign invasion and occupation in the past influences thinking. 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.



POSITION 2: WE MUST ACTIVELY REGOGNISE A LIMIT TO THE GENEROSITY OF HOST COUNTIRES

It may be kind to argue that all migrants, not just genuine refugees, 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, that does not justify nations simply expecting others to take the burden, especially within the European Union where each Member State has committed itself to work together in solidarity.



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 aid and information efforts where migrants come from and also along the routes they travel. We also need to work in partnership with other nations. This is a global phenomenon 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. While politicians should inspire good virtues in their nation, they need to have the support of the host community when they invite refugees to remain 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. Abusing the plight of refugees to foster a political agenda is 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. Separate rules need to be applied to decide whether each candidate for migration may be entitled to stay.

2.5. We should acknowledge that it is often not straightforward for immigration officials to differentiate between those who deserve refugee status or not. 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, when resources are strained, when the authorities must keep the general population on board, it is important to grant refugee status only to those people who are believed to be in danger because their home country will not protect them.

2.6. Many 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 did not feel they had a free choice over whether to migrate, 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 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."

VilleHoikkala,
Asylum Law Barrister,
Finland

POSITION 3: PORTAYING MIGRANTS AS DE FACTO THREATENING OR DANGEROUS PEOPLE, IS UNTRUE AND MORALLY WRONG

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 certain politicians who are weaponising refugees. 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.

3.4. However, care should be taken to assess whether there were mitigating factors e.g. psychological trauma, extreme poverty or cultural misunderstanding.

3.5. When tensions and prejudice abound, when politicians 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 must always be done carefully and never in a way which strengthens negative stereotyping.

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 a busy official running a refugee hostel has much to think about, not just religious freedom concerns. 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 is anathema to 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 difficult 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.

4.4. We repeat again the need for nations to improve the way they assess whether an asylum seeker has become a Christian and/or is likely to face persecution if deported home. See Position 1.7.



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. Refugee law grants rights of protection to a refugee, regardless of their commitment to integrate into their new community. However, from a biblical perspective, we can conclude that the principle that efforts to integrate are important and also that the host community has a duty to welcome. Any requirement on one must be balanced by a requirement on the other [5]. 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. Integration is also much harder where there is no clear sense of what a nation expects a refugee to integrate into.

5.2. 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.

[5] The Bible uses 2 terms for immigrants. The "ger" integrated fully into Israel so Israelites were commanded to love and include them as full members of society. (See Leviticus 19:34). The "nokri" made no effort to adapt into Jewish society. The Israelites were told to treat them with caution (e.g. 1 Kings 11:1-6).

Refugees should learn the language, how to behave in different social settings, about rights and responsibilities. This includes learning basic etiquette rules and how to interact in different settings. Refugees must also understand how attitudes may be different from what they are used to. These may include freedom of conscience for all and respect for women. 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 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 needs of other poor and/or vulnerable people in our nations.





WHO IS EEA?

The Evangelical Alliance was originally created in London in 1846. A number of founding members were representing European countries. The European Evangelical Alliance (EEA) was founded in 1951. The EEA exists to foster unity and evangelical identity and provide a voice and platform to 23 million European evangelical Christians. The mission of the EEA is to **CONNECT** for common purpose, **EQUIP** for integral mission and **REPRESENT** with a united voice. It is a grassroots movement from all Protestant traditions present in 36 European countries. The Brussels office of the EEA promotes active citizenship of its constituency and represents it to the European Institutions.

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