

A Christian Response to the Humanitarian Crisis in the Mediterranean

By Thomas Albinson

Ambassador for Refugees, Displaced and Stateless People

World Evangelical Alliance

*Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in;
hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.
He led them by a straight way till they reached a city to dwell in.
Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love...*

Psalm 107:4-8

Background

The capsizing of a boat carrying an estimated 850 desperate men, women and children from Libya to the shores of Southern Europe has once again put the dangerous human migration route across the Mediterranean into the public spotlight. Only 28 lives were rescued.¹

Assuming that this devastating death toll is confirmed, a total of 1,600 lives will have been lost in the waters between 1 January and 20 April, 2015. During this same period, more than 36,000 people reached the shores of Southern Europe. In 2014, 219,000 migrants survived the voyage. 3,500 migrants died at sea.²

The United Nations, governments, humanitarian agencies and faith leaders are struggling to come up with a satisfactory response to this unprecedented crisis in the region.

Perspective – The Global Backdrop

The Mediterranean is one of the great crossroads of the Refugee Highway – the well-worn routes forcibly displaced people travel in search of safety, peace and a normal life. The map below documents such routes to and across the Sea.³



Some voices frame the Mediterranean crisis as a threat to the security and economy of Europe. Such a perspective identifies the flow of migrants as a problem to be stopped. They fear that rescuing migrants at sea will only serve to

¹ "UNHCR welcomes EU Mediterranean plans, but says more needs to be done", 22 April 2015. Source: <http://www.unhcr.org/553623109.html>

² "UNHCR calls for urgent action as hundreds feared lost in Mediterranean boat sinking", 20 April 2015. Source: <http://www.unhcr.org/5534dd539.html>

³ Map from BBC, "Mapping Mediterranean Migration", 15 September 2014. Source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-24521614>

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embolden others to attempt the crossing and further escalate the crisis. Perhaps they believe that the people boarding the boats in Libya have other options from which to choose. But do they?

Why people board the boats

People board the boats because they do not believe they have any other viable option.

There are presently over 51 million forcibly displaced people on the planet to whom the world offers only three possible “solutions”.

1. Solution 1: *Return to your country of origin*. But refugee producing conflicts are increasingly protracted. Many go on for decades. 21 nations are presently engaged in such violence with no end in sight.⁴
2. Solution 2: *Integrate into your country of refuge*. The trouble is that 86% of the world’s uprooted people are hosted by developing countries.⁵ These countries cannot possibly absorb and integrate all of the people seeking refuge within their borders.
3. Solution 3: *Be resettled to another country*. In any given year, less than 1% of the global refugee population is resettled.

It is clear that these “solutions” fall far short of offering any real hope to the majority of uprooted people in the world. The lack of effective solutions has led to the average time of forced displacement to now be 17 years.⁶

That is why hundreds of thousands of forcibly displaced people come up with a forth solution – risk everything to try and reach a stable country in which they can find refuge and rebuild their lives. It is this dangerous hope that fills boats headed to Europe with human cargo.

Who is on the boats?

At risk of oversimplification, we can imagine people pay smuggler’s fees and board overcrowded boats headed to Europe’s shores for 1 or more of the following 3 reasons.

1. Many of those found on the boats are refugees – people forced to flee their countries. The majority of the 850 who were on the capsized boat last weekend were refugees from Eritrea (fleeing persecution), Syria (fleeing war) and Somalia (fleeing a failed state).⁷
2. Many sub-Saharan Africans migrated to Libya looking for work. But violence between political factions has erupted once again and ISIS is gaining a foothold in the country, where they have begun executing Christians from sub-Saharan Africa. It is no wonder that many of these migrants now feel compelled to flee Libya. They are faced with the option of a dangerous desert crossing back south, or a dangerous sea crossing to Europe. Many choose the sea in hope that Europeans will understand their predicament and give them refuge.
3. There are likely others who make their way to the Mediterranean with the aim of reaching Europe in order to improve their lives. They were not uprooted by war or persecution, but rather by economic despair. Unable to imagine a better future in their impoverished homeland, they risk everything to try and reach Europe. Often their families wait back home hoping to receive remittances to improve their lives.

How should Christians see this migration drama in the Mediterranean?

As Christians, we need to avoid falling prey to those trying to manipulate public opinion by inciting fear. When we picture the women, children and men coming across the sea, we must not envision them as potential terrorists and

⁴ CBC News: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/three-reasons-the-number-of-refugees-is-as-high-as-it-is-today-1.2651327>

⁵ UNHCR Global Report, 2013, page 6

⁶ CBC News, “Three Reasons the Number of Refugees is as High as it is Today”, 23 May 2014. Source: CBC News: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/three-reasons-the-number-of-refugees-is-as-high-as-it-is-today-1.2651327>

⁷ “UNHCR welcomes EU Mediterranean plans, but says more needs to be done”, 22 April 2015. Source: <http://www.unhcr.org/553623109.html>

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criminals. The truth is that the majority are seeking refuge from terrorists, violence, war and persecution. They are the threatened ones.

Putting a face on the numbers

Alice⁸ is originally from Eritrea. Like many others, she fled her homeland because of political and religious persecution. She received asylum (i.e. refugee status) after arriving in Europe by sea. While in Malta, Alice told the story of her Mediterranean crossing to Paul Sydnor, Europe Regional Director of International Association for Refugees (IAFR).

I was on a boat in the Mediterranean with about 30 other people, both Christians and Muslims. After three days at sea, our motor failed. We were adrift. Some of those on the boat knew that I could sing and pray. So whenever the seas grew rough and we grew afraid, they held me up so that I could sing and pray for everyone to hear.

By God's grace, a rescue boat found us. I was standing at the front of our boat when it began to sink. I got stuck as the boat filled with water. I was pulled under. Everything went black. I knew that I would die. I called out Jesus' name from under the water. I looked and saw a light. I swam to it as fast as I could. That is how I was saved. I know that it was God's strong arm that saved me.

Thank God that Alice was rescued at sea and that Europe formally recognized her as a bonafide refugee. Human life was saved. Human dignity was preserved. Human rights were honoured.

Divine Mandate

As Christians, we need to prayerfully seek God's perspective concerning this crisis. God's Word is filled with perspective that can help us.

Christians carry a divine mandate to love the alien⁹ and to welcome the stranger¹⁰. Our response to human desperation and migration is not to be fear, but love. The default posture of our hearts is to be open, not closed.

Jesus laid out some of the marks that identify those who are of his kingdom in Matthew 25:35-36.

"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat,
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,
I was a stranger and you invited me in,
I needed clothes and you clothed me,
I was sick and you looked after me,
I was in prison and you came to visit me."

As uncomfortable as it may make us today, his words make for a good description of the people trying to reach Europe's shores.

Antonio Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, has asked church leaders to play an important role in the global refugee crisis – that of "creating humanitarian space in the hearts and minds" of people for refugees.¹¹ He made this plea after hearing Christian leaders unanimously confirm our divine mandate to love and welcome the stranger.¹² The

⁸ Her name is changed to protect her identity. Alice was ultimately resettled from Malta to Australia.

⁹ Leviticus 19:34

¹⁰ Matthew 25:35-36

¹¹ "Closing remarks as delivered", High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges, Theme: Faith and Protection (12-13 December 2012), Antonio Guterres, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

¹² At the request of UNHCR, faith leaders (including representatives from WEA) later drafted "Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders". Download the document at: <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendocPDFViewer.html?docid=51b6de419&query=welcome%20the%20stranger>.

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United Nations is hoping that we will prove ourselves to be true to our calling and play an important part in assisting with the present crisis.

Biblical perspective on forced migration

“From the divine banishment of Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:23,24) to the final book of the Bible penned by John while in exile on the island of Patmos, stories of forced displacement run throughout Scripture. Sometimes the causes are simple and other times complex. Some people were forcibly displaced as a result of their own choices and actions (Adam and Eve, Cain, Moses, etc.), while others were driven from their homes in response to climate change/natural disaster (Noah, Lot), conflict (Hagar, Joseph), famine (Jacob, Abraham, Naomi), war/exile (the nation of Israel, Esther, Nehemiah, Daniel) or persecution (David, Jesus, Philip, Aquila and Priscilla, Peter, the early church).”¹³

Because the refugee narrative flows from cover to cover through the Bible, we can see that God is often powerfully at work in and through the lives of forcibly displaced people. It is this truth that can help us not become overwhelmed and paralyzed in the face of this present crisis. We need to assume that God is at work along the Refugee Highway. And we need to make ourselves available to God, should he call us to join him.

For a list of many refugees in the Bible, see the related resource available at www.iafr.org/toolbox/articles-handouts.

What is Europe’s responsibility regarding the death of so many people?

The Mediterranean has become a giant reflecting pool, exposing the unrelenting evil and despair that is loose in our world. Trace the steps of those on the boats and you will find your way back to wars, failed states, persecution, oppression and hopelessness.

Europe has no choice but to respond to this crisis. There are no easy choices to be made. Nevertheless, we will be responsible for the choices we make.

Perhaps the following European and International voices offer a helpful way forward that is both necessary and realistic.

Value human life above other agendas

During a recent radio interview, Hernan del Valle (Doctors Without Borders), pointed out that *“there is only hope if what we’re calling for is first and foremost politicians in Europe need to put the lives of human beings above other considerations at the moment.”*

Embrace solutions that include integration

During the same interview, Mark Micallef (Times of Malta), warned that we need to avoid believing that there is a quick fix to a crisis like this – *“...there isn’t one. This is a very, very, complex problem that we are going to be facing for the next couple of decades, possibly. The first thing we need to be doing is to stop knee-jerk reactions... This is a very complex problem that needs multidimensional solutions managing the integration of these people in our economies and in our societies.”*¹⁴

Create real alternatives for refugees – and increase burden sharing

The United Nations has welcomed the initial EU response, but challenges the EU to expand measures to include *“...developing a robust search-and-rescue operation which places an emphasis on saving thousands of lives; making a firm commitment to receive a significant number of refugees for resettlement in the EU; providing legal alternatives, such as enhanced family reunification, private sponsorship schemes, and work and study visas, so that people in need of international protection do not need to resort to such dangerous voyages; providing support for those countries receiving*

¹³ “5 Reasons Followers of Christ Seek the Protection and Welfare of Refugees”, by Thomas Albinson. Complete article available at www.iafr.org/toolbox/articles-handouts.

¹⁴ The Takeaway with John Hackenberry, 20 April 2015, “Mediterranean Becomes Mass Grave For Hundreds of Refugees”. Source: <http://www.thetakeaway.org/story/hundreds-feared-dead-in-mediterranean-shipwreck/>

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the most arrivals (Italy and Greece), and; greater intra-EU responsibility sharing to avoid the current situation where a few countries are receiving most asylum-seekers, mainly Germany and Sweden."¹⁵

What can local churches do?

Pray

The issues raised in this article offer many points for prayer concerning this crisis. We must pray concerning the root causes of forced migration. We must pray for those who have been forcibly displaced. We must pray for the governments and societies on the front line that have no choice but to respond to the boats in their waters and the people arriving on their shores. We must pray for the church in Europe – that our divine mandate to love the alien and welcome the stranger would demonstrate the love of God in the midst of this humanitarian crisis.

Perhaps God will use Scriptures like the following to help us as we pray.

- Psalm 107:1-8
- Psalm 142
- Psalm 146
- Psalm 5:11
- Matthew 25:34-40
- Exodus 2:15-22
- Acts 8:1-8
- Acts 18:1-4
- 1 Samuel 23:9-16
- Ruth 1:22 and 2:11-13

Get Informed

Many Christians are poorly informed concerning the refugee crisis. Local churches can play an important role in helping their faith communities better understand the realities and challenges related to the crisis. World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) has created a series of user-friendly resources and links to help.

See: www.worldevangelicals.org/refugees for more information.

Network together – The Refugee Highway Partnership

No single government or institution has all that is needed to respond to this crisis. As Christians, we need to work together and encourage one another. The Europe Region of the Refugee Highway Partnership is a network that brings together a wide variety of Christians with a burden to serve refugees. The annual European Roundtable of the RHP is an important opportunity to network together.

Learn more at www.refugeehighway.net/regions/europe.

Raise awareness – Demonstrate solidarity

World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) established World Refugee Sunday as a way for Christians worldwide to demonstrate our common concern for the welfare and protection of forcibly displaced people. The Refugee Highway Partnership (WEA Global Partner) offers many church-friendly resources to help observe this important day of the year.

You can find the resources at: www.refugeehighway.net/resources/world-refugee-sunday.

Hospitality and Integration

As has been mentioned already, the solution to this long-term crisis is going to include creating place within our societies for the wave of people arriving on our shores. Such place is created by welcoming the stranger and helping them integrate into our cities and neighborhoods. What community is better situated for this purpose than a local church?

Governments and social agencies have much needed expertise to provide helpful services to these new arrivals. But they do not offer community or relationship. That is to be a hallmark and strength of a local church.

More church-friendly resources at www.iafr.org/toolbox/articles-handouts.

¹⁵ "UNHCR welcomes EU Mediterranean plans, but says more needs to be done", 22 April 2015. Source: <http://www.unhcr.org/553623109.html>