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European refugee aid goes beyond food

By Linda Bloom

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As migrants — many escaping conflict in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan — continue to flow into Europe in unprecedented numbers, United Methodists are among the local citizens providing aid.

Church leaders also are sensing the refugee crisis has created “Kairos” — an opportune moment — to pray and work for real change.

“The right of individuals from all countries to ask for asylum is under threat,” said United Methodist Bishop Rosemarie Wenner of Germany.

“We as people of faith have to make use of the fact that the reality proves the failure of the current regulations to work not only for humanitarian aid but also for more just procedures for those who come to Europe.”

More than 300,000 refugees and migrants have risked their lives this year crossing the Mediterranean Sea to get to Greece and Italy, nearly 100,000 more than in 2014, reports the U.N.’s refugee agency.

The dramatic mass movement of refugees from those landing points through other parts of Europe has attracted media attention, raised concerns and provoked political debate.

Grass-roots assistance

At the grass-roots level, many have offered basic supplies and practical assistance, along with a dose of compassion.

The United Methodist Committee on Relief is working with a local partner, Pellegrino della Terra, to provide emergency food vouchers in Sicily and with partner Global Medic to provide food packets and hygiene kits on the islands of Kos and Lesbos. Methodists in Italy have contributed funds for a migrant project of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy called "Mediterranean Hope."

In Hungary, The United Methodist Church is a member of the Hungarian Interchurch Aid, whose volunteers have been working at refugee camps and transit zones.

Part of the ACT Alliance, Hungarian Church Aid is providing psychosocial services for children ages 3 to 14 years in two temporary reception centers, along with children's clothes and toys, diapers, baby food, blankets, towels, non-perishable food and hygienic items at several reception centers.

United Methodists also are part of the Wesleyan Alliance in Hungary, which set up a baby-bath center at Keleti Railway station in Budapest, reported Éva Csernák, the wife of the Rev. Istvan Csernák, district superintendent. Other United Methodist congregations in Budapest have joined the volunteers in Christians for Migrants.

Many of the recent refugees have passed through Hungary to Germany. Wenner told United Methodist News Service that her country was well equipped to handle the influx through existing public services and programs offered by nongovernmental organizations.

Local churches already have programs in place for refugees.

"They offer language classes, fellowship groups where migrants and Germans talk and prepare meals and support one another or special programs for children," Wenner said. "And they offer legal and spiritual counsel to support the asylum seekers.

"Some individuals went to the train stations and the shelters in order to join the crowds who wanted to welcome the refugees," Wenner noted. "Those people demonstrated that a majority in the German society stands for an open country with high humanitarian standards."

The British Methodist Church has set up a fund to receive donations to support Methodist churches that work with refugees in Macedonia, Serbia, Germany and Italy. A refugee crisis page on its website also includes links to prayers, reflections and other resources.

Finding Kairos

A much broader connection is essential to deal with the crisis, Wenner said.

"We need to build up relationships between the different European countries and beyond in order to rewrite the narrative of the European Union," the bishop said. She added that this should be done in cooperation with Africa and the Middle East.

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker has announced plans calling for distributing 120,000 additional asylum seekers among members of the European Union, with binding quotas.

In a Sept. 10 letter, European church leaders backed the idea of a common asylum system that protects human dignity.

"We advocate for a Common European Asylum System including decent reception conditions as well as a Common European Resettlement Scheme that puts the human being and his/her dignity at the center of the processes," stated the letter, issued jointly by the World Council of Churches, the Conference of European Churches and the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe.

The Rev. Ivan Abrahams, top executive of the World Methodist Council, calls migration "one of the defining issues of the 21st century," and an opportunity for Methodism to honor its historic commitment to those on the margins.

"The current humanitarian crisis has forced the churches to translate their many conference statements and forums on

migration into grass-roots actions,” he noted.

United Methodists can pray, act

Supporting the relief efforts of UMCOR is one way for the denomination as a whole to respond to Europe’s refugee crisis, says Thomas Kemper, top executive of the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries.

“We are following the lead of United Methodist and ecumenical partners in Europe and will soon be hearing from the European Methodist Council, which is meeting in the coming days,” he noted.

Church members also can pray for a peaceful end to the violence “causing such widespread displacement of people,” for a welcoming hospitality for refugees and for support for those who provide asylum and refuge.

Building interfaith relationships with Muslim refugees in places where they are resettled among majority Christian populations is important. “This is an opportunity for the practice of Christian hospitality and efforts toward strong, respectful interfaith dialogue and community interaction,” Kemper pointed out.

United Methodists also need to encourage national governments “to provide asylum to refugees who likely cannot return to their homelands,” he said.

Kemper has endorsed the call of Church World Service to the U.S. Congress to admit 100,000 Syrian and Iraqi refugees and suggested that churches and individuals may want to join the CWS campaign.

The United Methodist Board of Church and Society is circulating a petition calling upon the Obama Administration to increase the number of Syrian refugees accepted for resettlement in the U.S. to at least 65,000. A White House spokesperson announced Sept. 10 that 10,000 Syrian refugees would be admitted next year.

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