Churches vary in response to refugees

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Europe's refugee crisis has inspired faith communities across the continent to open their doors to the newcomers and advocate for more state and private help, but the urgency of their calls and the depth of the response varies from country to country.

Germany has been the most generous toward the refugees, many of them Syrian Muslims fleeing war and jihadist threats in their homeland. Christian leaders and others have welcomed refugees arriving by train in Munich, and churches around the country have joined local officials in feeding and housing them.

Hungary, where the government has built a fence along its southern border to keep refugees out, wants Christian refugees only. Catholic bishop Laszlo Kiss-Rigo was quoted as saying his country faced a Muslim invasion: "They come here with cries of 'Allahu Akbar.' They want to take over."

In between are a wide range of conflicting views, ranging from selfless willingness to help to extreme wariness about immigrants from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya.

Prosperous and peaceful Europe has for years been a magnet for Middle Easterners and Africans fleeing oppression and poverty.

In countries where elections loom and far-right parties are gaining support, many politicians are worried about whether the European Union can maintain its openness and tolerance. Religious leaders are also worried.

"This is a test of our human values and Christian legacy," said Olav Fykse Tveit, general secretary of the Geneva-based World Council of Churches.

About 380,000 people have reached Europe by sea this year, according to the International Organization for Migration. More than 250,000 arrived in Greece from Turkey, a short route that has claimed approximately 100 lives so far, while the rest took the more dangerous route from Libya to Italy in which some 2,600 drowned.

Nearly 4 million Syrian refugees have stayed behind in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan.

German chancellor Angela Merkel, the daughter of a Lutheran pastor, defended a policy that should quadruple arrivals of asylum seekers to about 800,000 this year.

“Germany is doing what is morally and legally necessary—no more and no less,” she said.

Germany’s Catholic and Protestant churches have cared for refugees for years, and their leaders began calling this spring for extra efforts in response to the boatloads arriving in Italy and Greece on their way north.

Reinhard Marx, a Catholic cardinal, and Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, bishop of the Evangelical Church in Germany, ended a lunch appointment in Munich in early September with a spontaneous stop at the train station to greet refugees after learning that a trainload was due to arrive from Hungary.

“Nothing moves us more than the fate of the refugees who have made it this far after a long and dangerous journey,” Bedford-Strohm said.

With their solid budgets, German churches have long been able to donate millions of euros to finance special relief projects. Even before Pope Francis’s recent appeal to parishes to take in families, Cologne’s Catholic archdiocese was housing refugees in more than 130 of its buildings, and it launched the “new neighbor network” to coordinate donations from parishioners.

Tens of thousands of volunteers help the newcomers with language courses, babysitting needs, and the local bureaucracy. In Bavaria, where many refugees first enter Germany by train, the Lutheran Church has more than 3,000 volunteers. Munich’s Catholic archdiocese has more than 3,600.

As Muslim refugees have begun appearing in their mosques, German Muslims have also stepped up to help.

“We show them they can be Muslim and German,” said Aiman Mazyek, chairman of the Central Council of Muslims.

In neighboring Austria, where 71 refugees suffocated in a locked truck in August, Cardinal Christoph Schöborn said Austrians could no longer ignore the drama spilling over into their country and hoped it could shelter about 70,000 refugees.

Sweden has taken in more asylum seekers per capita than any other European country, although the growing influence of nationalist groups has made immigration a controversial issue.

The atmosphere is quite different in Eastern Europe, where four decades of isolation during the communist period left societies less open to outsiders and less guarded about expressing disdain for them.

Poland and Slovakia said they wanted to take in only Christian refugees. Czech Catholic bishops offered to welcome persecuted Christians, but the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, the country's largest Protestant denomination, faulted politicians for not helping all refugees more. Hungary's Christians have provided food, clothes, and blankets to refugees blocked for days at Budapest's Keleti train station, but churches have taken a low profile. Catholic cardinal Peter Erdo has refrained from criticizing Hungary's anti-immigrant stand and has said the church cannot house refugees because that would amount to people smuggling.

Migrants who reached France described how they escaped police in Hungary, where the treatment of refugees has drawn sharp criticism from human rights groups.

"They insulted people and kicked them and hit them with electric prods," said Leila Karaa from Iraq, speaking through a translator. She and her family hid in a Hungarian field for three days before crossing the border to Austria.

"In France, people have shown us great humanity, great mercy, and hospitality," she said. "A French woman gave us a hug when we arrived."

The British and French governments, both concerned about cost and potential political backlash, pledged to receive more than 20,000 migrants each after a recent swell of calls from faith leaders to show more compassion.

Prime Minister David Cameron of Britain had said in June that London would take in only "a few hundred more" Syrians than usual. That prompted Lord George Weidenfeld, 95, an Austrian Jew who fled his Nazi-occupied homeland for Britain in 1938, to say: "This mood of indifference is reminiscent of the worst phases of appeasement." —Religion News Service

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