

Churches in Europe act to shield migrants from deportation

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by [Anna Mulrine](#) in the [June 19, 2019](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Taara, a young mother from Afghanistan, kneads her newborn's feet as she recalls how she and her husband, Zemar, fled the Taliban and left those they love in search of safety in Europe. They have slept in the woods, gone hungry for days, endured tear gas in refugee camps where security officials "used the stuff like water," and, tightly holding hands, fought their way onto trains at stations that felt like *Hunger Games* sets.

Now the migrants (whose names have been changed to protect their identities) have received sanctuary from a German church and, for the past year, they have been living together with another family on church grounds.

"I can imagine telling these stories to our grandchildren," Zemar said. "They won't believe it. Sometimes we ourselves don't believe it. . . . And now we're here. Thank God."

But there is potential danger beyond these walls, which is evident in the rules tacked up beside a schedule for German language lessons: Keep the address secret. No guests. No barbecuing. And if you step outside, it is at your own risk.

In several nations, churches have opened their doors to asylum seekers as leaders have hardened policies toward the influx of refugees and migrants. The movement has been the most pronounced in Germany. One year ago, churches were sheltering 543 people. Today, the number has jumped to 855 people, including 190 children.

The demand for sanctuary spaces in Germany outstrips supply by roughly 20 times, estimates Dietlind Jochims, commissioner for migration, asylum, and human rights for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Northern Germany.

Some in the government argue that church officials are putting themselves above the law of a democratic state and, in the words of one German state governor, subordinating it to an unelected moral authority.

Clergy push back against this characterization. “A democratic state is exactly one that lets itself be questioned,” Jochims said. “We aren’t doing any more or any less than coming to the government and asking them to please take a second look—because we think there might be a violation of human rights here.”

The tension between church and state has spurred congregations to take dramatic steps to shield migrants. In the Hague, Netherlands, Bethel Church recently drew worldwide attention when it kept a service going nonstop for 96 days. It was taking advantage of a centuries-old law under which Dutch authorities can’t enter a church while a service is under way.

Nearly 1,000 ministers and 12,000 attendees from around the world joined the round-the-clock service to help protect the Tamrazyan family from being deported to Armenia, where they faced violence. The government agreed to reconsider not only the family’s case, but hundreds of others. In late March, the Tamrazyans were granted a Dutch residency permit.

The Tamrazyan family had been living 12 miles north of the Hague, in the small town of Katwijk, where they had been members of a Protestant church for three years.

“We knew them well, and what had happened to them in Armenia,” said Folkert Rinkema, the pastor. “The family had been in the Netherlands for nine years, and we considered the children Dutch.”

When the family learned of their failed immigration petition and impending deportation, they asked for sanctuary. After some deliberation, the church council granted it. Soon after, “the authorities came to us and said, ‘We will come into the church and take them out—that’s an order,’” Rinkema said.

Rinkema reached out to colleagues at Bethel. In considering whether to take in the Tamrazyan family, members of the Bethel church council weighed many questions and looked to the Bible for guidance. Some pointed to the instruction to obey the government, said Theo Hettema, chairman of the General Council of Protestant Ministers.

“Church asylum is a means of reminding the government of its job,” he said. “Its job is to make sure children aren’t hurt.”

They also explored whether they could talk to the government, Hettema said: “We decided no. We see government policies becoming intentionally harsher, increasingly influenced by populist parties, to send the message, ‘It’s dangerous here, it’s hard here.’”

Hettema estimates that in the beginning 60 percent of the congregation supported the move; that rose to 80 percent during the course of the 96-day service. Church leaders mobilized nearly 100 volunteers to welcome worshipers, clean toilets, buy groceries, and manage media outreach.

They also told the family that if federal authorities entered the church despite the ongoing service, the church would acquiesce.

“We did not want to fight the government, but to plead for a discussion, a dialogue, a means of cooperation,” Hettema said.

In Germany, “there has been a shift in atmosphere,” Jochims said. “They write us long bureaucratic emails, but there’s no real dialogue anymore, no willingness to find good solutions to the cases we bring to them.”

For their part, Taara and Zemar expect to be in sanctuary for roughly a year and a half. Until recently, German law required cases under the Dublin Regulation, the main framework governing asylum applications in Europe, to be settled within six months. If it took longer than that, people could not be deported. Churches, aware of the backlog of asylum cases in German courts, took advantage of this law to help run out the clock for those in sanctuary.

Aware of this tactic, German lawmakers voted last August to raise the length of time for Dublin Regulation cases to be resolved to 18 months. As a result, the time families spend living in churches has been steadily rising.

The state is moving toward toughening immigration laws in other ways as well. Authorities have questioned more than 150 church pastors in more-conservative German states and threatened some with jail time.

“The police came to me and asked, ‘Who is living here? When did they arrive, and when are they leaving?’” said Doris Otminghaus, a Protestant pastor in Bavaria,

whom colleagues describe as “ringing the church bells against the state.”

“They told me, ‘This first time we come, you will not be punished, but if you do it again, you will go to prison,’” she said. She does not plan to stop.

Churches aren’t the only target of hardening policies. Until recently, health-care facilities were considered unofficial safe zones, but when Taara went to a local hospital last year to deliver her baby, she learned this was no longer the case: “They asked me for documents, and when I said, ‘I don’t have any,’ the nurse said, ‘Maybe we have to call the police.’ It was stressful.”

A further shift in immigration policies may include requiring immigrants to request asylum in the first European Union country in which they arrive. This places an unfair burden, critics say, on southern countries such as Greece and Italy, now grappling with packed refugee camps and migrants living on the streets.

“People coming into the EU are making an educated and, I think, well-informed decision in searching for a place with some infrastructure and some means of receiving them,” said Torsten Moritz, director of the Churches’ Commission for Migrants in Europe. But it “can only work well if the reception conditions and asylum procedures are the same.”

European countries have different deportation policies. While Germany won’t deport women and children to Afghanistan, for example, other European countries will. If Taara, Zemar, or their housemates were detained by police, they could be sent back to Sweden, the first country where they registered with authorities, and be deported from there.

The influx of asylum seekers in Germany has prompted some church officials to change their own policies. Hannah Hosseini, head of the department of migration and asylum for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of East Hamburg, said that the church used to weigh the relative merits of each case to determine who got the scarce sanctuary spots. Now, the church takes a first come, first served approach.

“If we have a free place, the next person who comes gets it,” she said. “We don’t want to—and can’t—decide who is more deserving.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Churches in Europe act to shield migrants from deportation.”