



# CICARWS ISSUES

## **CHRISTIAN CHURCHES' RESPONSE TO MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES**

*The changing and expanding nature of the movement of people in the world is presenting the churches with new challenges of understanding and response.*

The increasing number of refugees, internally displaced persons and international migrants has become a major feature of the world today. Despite the prevalence of mass migrations of people in history, attention to migration as a major social and political issue has not been prominent until recently.

## **NUMBER 5**

Over past decades, even the ministry of the churches has focussed primarily on one grouping of "people on the move" - those recognized by the international community as "refugees" fleeing political or religious persecution or civil warfare. Church activities with migrants have been more localized and much less international than refugee ministries. Much of that ministry has been local, church-supported agencies providing medical, family counselling, and social services to migrant workers.

Now, awareness is growing that the migration, for a variety of reasons, of many millions of people in all regions of the world constitutes a major concern for the churches. For example, "guest workers" are vital and vulnerable components in societies world-wide as the Gulf crisis and war graphically illustrated (1991).

As the increasing inter-regional refugee and migration flows bring more and more people of different faiths together in the same communities, this expanded contact, such as between Christians and Muslims, gives rise to new tensions and to new opportunities for understanding.

Churches and international church agencies did play an important and visible role in responding to the huge displacement of migrant workers during the Gulf crisis (1991). The Middle East Conference of Churches set up an Emergency Relief Service in Jordan which provided direct food, clothing, temporary shelter and social services to thousands of the migrant workers from many different countries forced to flee Iraq and Kuwait. WCC/CICARWS (Sharing and Service) channelled over one million dollars in resources from national churches and agencies to the MECC. The Lutheran World Federation organized several repatriation flights to Asian countries.

Christian and Muslim leaders have recognised that the increasing contact of peoples through migration compels dialogue and cooperation among the two faith communities. The Gulf War heightened the urgency to begin a process of discussion between Christians and Muslims to address refugee and migration issues.



*A three day International Seminar on Migration and Refugees: Christian and Moslem Perspectives and Practices was held in Valletta, Malta, April 22-24, 1991.*

*The seminar was convened by an interfaith planning group of international Christian and Moslem organizations. These included the World Council of Churches, the International Catholic Migration Commission, the Islamic Call Society, the Islamic Call Foundation, the Lutheran World Federation and the World Moslem Congress.*

*This seminar was an acknowledgement that concerns for migrants and refugees are major - and growing - pre-occupations for people of Christian and Islamic faiths.*

*For the seminar, Patrick Taran, Secretary for Migration at CICARWS (Sharing and Service) prepared one of the two papers presented on behalf of the Christian participants. It provided some historical perspective on the work of Christian Churches for migrants and refugees. This paper was presented as a "work in progress" recognising that assessments and information on the work of churches and ecumenical agencies in the "North" are more readily accessible than those from elsewhere.*

#### **HISTORICAL EFFORTS**

From the time of Christ, those who professed Christian faith have often followed the example of the Good Samaritan. Most often this has been expressed in countless individual acts of hospitality and aid to strangers or foreigners. Such practice continues today in the expectations of communities in Eastern Europe or Central Africa or the Andean highlands that one opens one's doors and homes and eating tables to the stranger or foreigner or the refugee who may arrive from other places.

The institutions of Christian Faith - Christian churches, monasteries and communities have served as refuges and places of assistance to people 'on the move' and in need of support.

#### **IN NORTHERN COUNTRIES.....**

Experiences with massive displacements of people, resulting from World Wars I and II, gave major impetus to the establishment of local, national and international church structures aiding refugees and displaced peoples. The situation of millions across Europe - destitute and homeless - became a compelling, immediate mission for the Christian churches in Australia, Europe and the Americas. The International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) came into being with refugee resettlement as an important component of their initial service programs. Early emphasis was on the large-scale resettlement of Europeans uprooted by war who went to Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States. Then for two dec-

ades, major attention was on the hundreds of thousands of Eastern Europeans (uprooted, this time, by political changes) who were resettled also in Western Europe.

The WCC and ICMC established international networks of refugee reception with processing and resettlement service offices across Europe. Working in cooperation with governments of countries willing to resettle refugees, they received and registered resettlers, assisting with entry visas and travel arrangements. These offices also compiled information on the individuals and families to be shared with church counterparts in the countries of destination.

In this same period, important local and national church agencies for refugees were developed in numerous western countries. Refugee and migration services, under either Protestant or Catholic auspices were set up in Australia, Canada, the United States. These focused primarily on reception and integration. Their work involved providing direct assistance and orientation to people as they arrived, promoting and securing local church involvement in providing food, clothing, shelter and social services as well as counselling refugees in their new communities. They also helped by ensuring language instruction and job training and placement.

For three decades, such work was carried out primarily from a perspective of charitable church service to the immediate needs of uprooted people. The national and international church refugee agencies worked in relatively uncritical cooperation with western governments. They received some financial reimbursement for costs incurred in providing reception, processing and placement services.

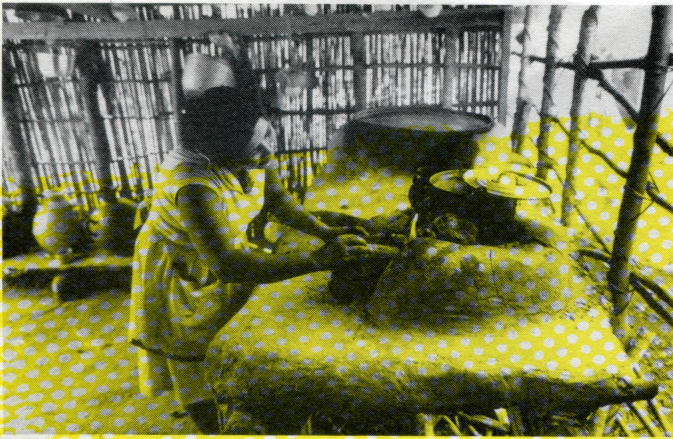
The international church agencies also developed close cooperation with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) as it emerged in 1951.

#### **IN THE SOUTH AND EAST.....**

In the last 30 years, assistance and protection activities for refugees and displaced persons in Africa, Asia and Latin America have expanded tremendously. Christian understanding of the complexity of refugee and migration concerns has increased.

Since the 1960's, refugee displacement has been a growing phenomenon in Africa. Throughout the struggles for independence from European colonial domination, the Christian churches in the region have played an important role in receiving, assisting, protecting and integrating refugees in countries and communities of asylum. Refugee ministry was an integral and vital component in the creation of the All Africa Conference of Churches and of the work of major national church service programs across the continent.

Similarly, the political upheavals in Latin America and the consequent displacement of people in the 1970's



LESTER WILLIAMS '82

were accompanied by the organization of ecumenical church refugee service projects in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay. Later other countries followed suit. Efforts to provide humanitarian assistance and to advocate and assure protection for the millions of refugees and displaced persons have been a major feature of national and international church work in Central America in the last decade.

In the early 1980's, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan forced the involuntary migration of millions of Afghans into Pakistan. The Catholic agency, Caritas Pakistan was one of the first voluntary relief organizations to provide emergency assistance to the predominantly Muslim refugees. Several other Christian agencies, particularly Church World Service in the United States and Migration and Refugee Services of the United States Catholic Conference, helped Afghan refugees resettle in the U.S.A. In one such program, the International Catholic Migration Commission helped resettle about 40,000 Afghans in the United States.

While helping the refugees resettle, church agencies were particularly sensitive to the religious and cultural identities of the predominantly Muslim populations. Some Christian organizations provided cross-cultural training for their field workers before they were sent to assist the refugees.

Christian agencies have also been receiving Iranian and Kurdish refugees in Turkey. Thousands of refugees have been resettled in the United States through the efforts of Christian organizations.



ANNALES '85

In the Far East, Vietnamese boat people continued to land throughout the 1980s in the Philippines, Indonesia, Hong Kong and parts of China. More than 180,000 Vietnamese have been resettled since 1980 in countries in the West after language and cultural orientation programs in the Philippines - sponsored in part by the International Catholic Migration Commission.

### **CHURCH MINISTRY**

Although Christian practices with refugees and migrants vary considerably from region to region, some common elements can be noted. In both North and South, church facilities often provide the locations for aid to individuals and families and the offices and centers for community assistance. Service projects, specialized offices or special programs at national and local levels operating as functions of church structures or agencies are prominent features of Christian ministry across the globe.

However, the involvement of individual Christians and church communities in this ministry varies widely within countries and between different world regions. In North America, there is widespread involvement of local churches in directly assisting refugees to resettle. This "congregational model" involves local church congregations in receiving, hosting and assisting the newcomers to become self-sufficient, productive participants in the new community. In Latin America and Europe more predominant expressions of service are the institutional church "projects" or programs providing professional social service and assistance to refugees. In some cases, organized community education is conducted and church views are advocated to government legislative and administrative bodies.

Except for the instances where government subsidies are provided for obtaining material goods or providing some services, church work from the local to the global levels depends on the material and other contributions of church members. Indeed, the primary source of funding support for the national and international church refugee agencies remains the contributions of local church members - primarily in the more affluent nations.

### **CHANGING CHURCH ROLES.....**

Over recent years, the churches' refugee and migrant ministry has also been undergoing changes. It has moved from being primarily service model to complementing service with witness and advocacy. In the face of more restrictive and less humanitarian government policies and practices, the churches find it imperative to provide education and interpretation of issues to their constituents and the public at large, to question government policies, to propose and advocate for alternative measures. This must be done even as they strive to continue cooperating with the positive elements in government programs.

These changes are taking place in all regions and are

reflected in the practices of the churches at local, national and international levels. In many countries local church efforts in resettlement and their asylum and migration ministries have had to challenge government policies detrimental to refugees and migrants as well as cooperate with them in providing services. In numerous national contexts, the church-state relationship has moved from one of unruffled cooperation to one often marked by tension.

The contrast between the huge numbers of people on the move and limited available resources has also compelled a shift of attention towards "putting out fires" as well as just treating the "burned out victims". "Addressing root causes" has become an increasingly prevalent theme in the education and advocacy work of churches over the last decade. Perhaps not coincidentally, similar perspectives are finally, now, being raised in the UN and inter-governmental systems.

Increasingly, within Churches, at both theological and practical levels, refugees and migrants are also being perceived as having their own identity and contributions to make, and as participants in the processes and programs affecting them, rather than as passive recipients of charity and assistance. The importance of respecting and supporting the cultural and religious identities of refugees and migrants is being acknowledged.

Overall, the church's practical perspective is moving from one of offering charity, with its implications of inequitable relationship between the "givers" and "receivers", to one of expressing solidarity between individuals and between communities. In this latter context, contributions and roles of mutual benefit and responsibility are recognized. The often differing identities and faiths and the common integrity are validated.

Some currents in Christian thought and practice have, historically, approached refugee and migration ministry, as other social ministries, from an emphasis on mission and evangelization. Such ministry relates the offering of material assistance and charity to the presentation of evangelizing or conversion agendas. In the context of human migration, with its devastating traumas of often forced uprooting from family, home, land, community, culture and country, such approaches may appear to offer an immediate new identity, role and purpose in life and may thus, easily make converts.

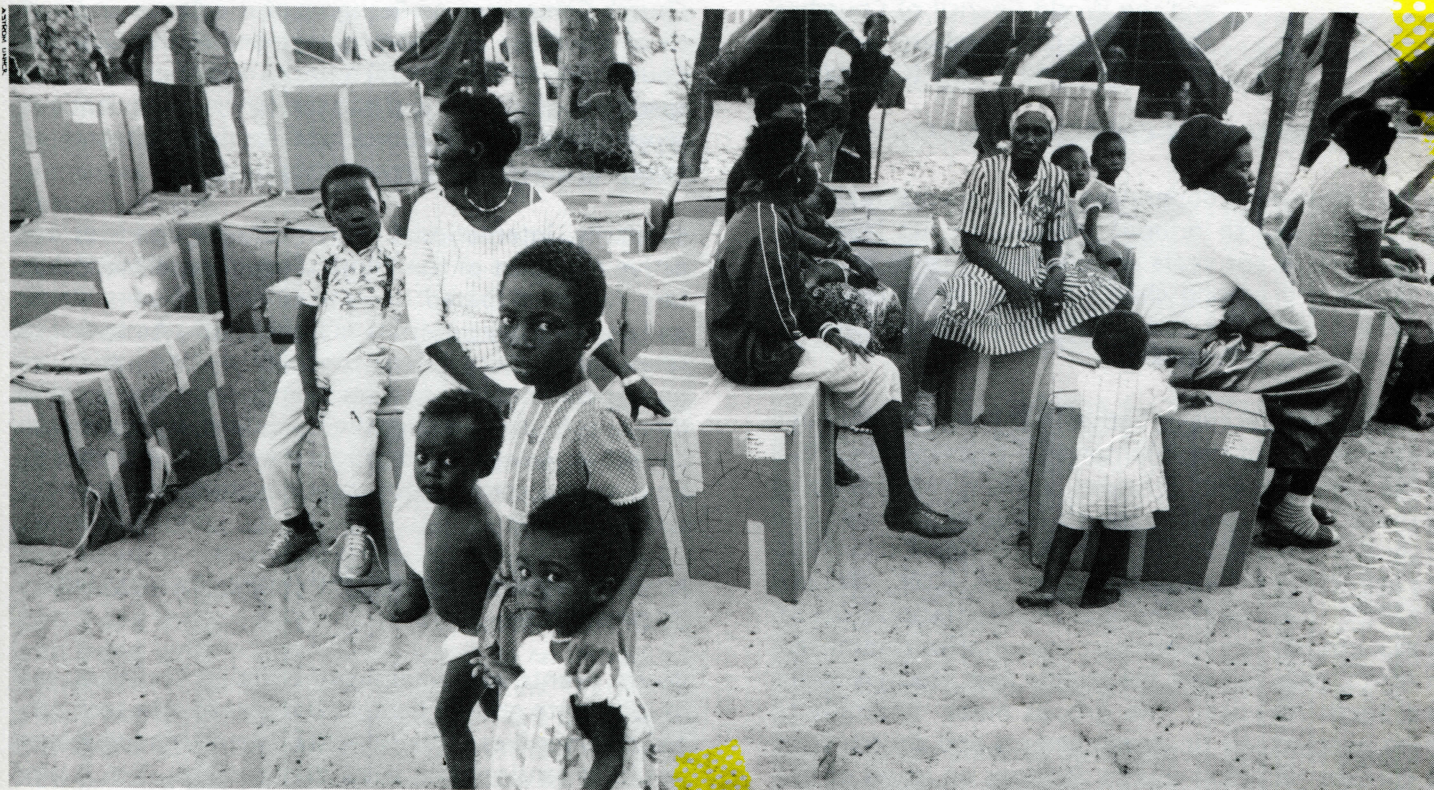
The practice of the churches is increasingly distant from such models.

### **REGIONAL, NATIONAL AND LOCAL PROGRAMS**

The major Christian churches have evolved an extensive array of national and international organizations to implement, coordinate and support their efforts on behalf of refugees and migrants. These organizations also have national counterparts or affiliated organizations.

Regional and national councils of churches in many parts of the world include major programmatic elements focusing on refugee service. The All Africa Conference of Churches, the Conference of European Churches and the Middle East Council of Churches all have specific refugee departments or activities.

In some countries, there are many national and local church projects. The variety and extent of such local ministries is immense. Some highlight experiences and opportunities for cooperation between Christians and Muslims.



### Ecumenical Committee for Social Action in Argentina

Thousands of very poor migrant workers from Bolivia, Chile and Paraguay come to the region of Mendoza province, in western Argentina, to work in agriculture. Many do not have proper legal papers and are subject to exploitation by farmers. This project assists migrants to obtain legal documentation, helps them organize community groups and training programs and seeks to educate the local authorities and populations about the situation and contributions of these migrant workers. The project is a joint effort of local Catholic and Protestant church leaders.

### Dar Al Amal Belgium

This cooperative association for migrant women assists the integration of women from Morocco, Turkey, Zaire and other countries in Brussels. Its philosophy is based on understanding women as the bearers of culture and recognising that women - with their community cultural values and traditions - need to be valued and respected. The cooperative comprises Christians and Muslims, Africans, Asians, Europeans, young and old. Its programs include workshops to teach and make pottery, textiles and educational toys, literacy training and a kitchen producing meals for homebound elderly Belgians. Organized by the women themselves, it is supported by the Belgian Protestant Church and the World Council of Churches' Commission on Interchurch Aid, Refugee and World Service (CICARWS)

## INTERNATIONAL INTER-CHURCH COOPERATION

Consultation and cooperation among several major international church refugee institutions has been expanding in recent years within regions (such as North America) and among church humanitarian relief efforts (such as in the Horn of Africa region and for Afghan refugees in Pakistan).

An important recent initiative in this regard has been the convening of the International Ecumenical Consultative Committee on Refugees, with representatives of Catholic and Protestant church refugee agencies and programs worldwide. Its four international coordinating agencies are Caritas Internationalis, ICMC, LWF and the WCC. It currently includes representation from regional entities or counterpart consultative committees in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, North America and South America. The groups meet annually to share perspectives on developments and church work to consider common church positions on issues of mu-

tual concern, and to prepare statements for presentation to the Executive Committee of UNHCR and to member governments.

In several areas, notably in Europe, there is growing inter-faith discussion, particularly at local levels, regarding issues of mutual concern. A particular manifestation of this in the Christian community is the "Islam in Europe Committee" established jointly by the Conference of European Churches and the Catholic Conference of European Bishops. Important functions of this committee are to seek better understanding of and with Muslims and to provide educational information to church leaders and members to ease relationships in everyday life.



Church refugee service agencies generally cooperate extensively with secular organizations engaged in similar work at local, national and international levels. In numerous western countries, church entities are active members of national refugee councils or fora, where considerable consultation and development of common perspectives take place. For example, the Inter-Church Committee on Refugees of the Canadian Council of Churches is a leading member of the Canadian Council for Refugees which brings together the entire spectrum of church and secular service organizations, representatives of national and local government offices and of refugee community groups.

Similarly, international church refugee agencies and active members of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (based in Geneva) also includes Islamic and Jewish agencies in its membership). As one of its roles, this Council brings together a wide variety of non-governmental agencies from around the world to discuss refugee and migration problems and to express collective viewpoints through statements and delegations to governments and inter-governmental agencies such as UNHCR.

## POSSIBILITIES FOR INTERFAITH CONSULTATION AND COOPERATION

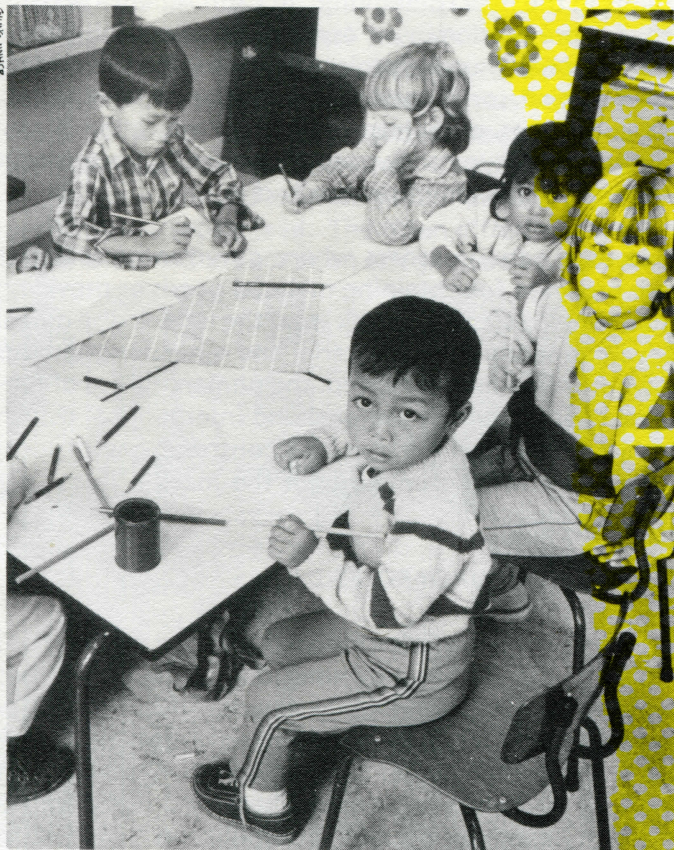
World events are increasingly bringing Christians and Muslims into greater contact and indeed into each others' communities. This increased interaction sometimes results in tensions and misunderstandings. Yet, it pro-

vides compelling opportunities for discussion and cooperation to respond to human needs and resolve conflicts.

There is already a foundation of experiences of inter-faith cooperation in refugee work.

A conference of Muslim-Christian dialogue was convened in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 1982 on the theme "Christians and Muslims Living and Working Together: Ethics and Practices of Humanitarian and Development Programmes". Initiated and organized cooperatively by the World Muslim Congress, Karachi, and the World Council of Churches, Geneva, the conference was attended by 33 representatives from the Muslim world and 30 from the Christian churches. Messages and observers were sent from the Secretariat for Non-Christians, Vatican City; the Organization of the Islamic Conference, Jeddah; and UNESCO, Paris. Among the topics addressed was the world refugee problem. Encounters such as this - and the converging interests of people of all faiths to meet the needs of migrants and refugees give hope for greater justice and humanity in our world.

Prepared by: Patrick A. Taran, Secretary for Migration  
World Council of Churches



Patrick A. Taran is the Secretary for Migration for CICARWS/WCC. Prior to 1990, he served for ten years with the Church World Service Immigration and Refugee Program in the U.S. National Council of Churches. He began ecumenical work in 1976 directing a program of the Church Council of Greater Seattle (USA) to assist South American refugees in local integration.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *The Declaration from the International Seminar on Migrants and Refugees - Christian and Moslem Perspectives and Practices includes the following:*

- a call to the member states of the United Nations to ratify and uphold existing international conventions, agreements and resolutions regarding the human rights of migrants and refugees.
- an urgent request to religious communities and institutions and world governments to respond to the plight of the Palestinian people, refugees from Iraq, the people of the Horn of Africa and all victims of national and international conflict.
- a recommendation for the establishment of an International Interfaith Working Group on Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons.

Copies of this Declaration and other information are available from WCC/CICARWS (Sharing and Service).

World Council of Churches  
CICARWS (Sharing and Service)

P.O. Box 2100  
1211 Geneva 2  
Switzerland

Tel: (022) 791 61 11  
Telex: 415 730 OIK CH  
Fax: (022) 791 03 61

*With contributions from:*

*Andre Van Chau, International Catholic Migration Commission*  
*David L. Johnson, Lutheran World Federation*  
*Melaku Kifle, World Council of Churches/ CICARWS*  
*Klaus Poser, World Council of Churches/ CICARWS*  
*Paul Rajashekar, Lutheran World Federation*  
*Robert Vitillo, Caritas Internationalis*

ISSUES papers are written by CICARWS (Sharing and Service) staff and/or related personnel in the hope of stimulating dialogue and increased awareness.

Edited by Brenda Fitzpatrick.

Future Issue Papers will include a summary of Global refugee and migration movements and trends, and further discussion of the challenges to the churches for ministry with "People on the Move".