

# Christmas Statement

*Signed by European church leaders – issued jointly by the Churches' Commission for Migrants and the Conference of European Churches:*

## **In the spirit of Christmas, we ask you to work and pray for a welcoming and inclusive community in Europe.**

As Christians prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ, they wait in hope and anticipation, remembering Isaiah's prophecy: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light". (Isaiah 9.2)

We call on the nations and the people of Europe, on the political leaders and on our Churches: Don't allow us to become indifferent to the suffering of others.

Let us rather cherish the dignity of those who need our help and recognise that welcoming the stranger is part of our Christian and European heritage.

May we be courageous and confident in the Son of God, the Light of the World, whose birth we celebrate.

Christ will show us the way for a future life together.

Today's world continues to experience the darkness of persecution, conflict and war. According to the UN almost 70 million people have been forced to flee their homes in search of sanctuary and livelihood. More than half of them are children.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees states: "No one becomes a refugee by choice; but the rest of us can have a choice about how we help." As Christians we are guided by biblical teaching and our following of Christ. In this season of preparation for Christmas we are reminded of our responsibility, along with God's promise of light and life for this world.

**Jesus became human:** Christmas is the celebration of Jesus incarnate. For Christians the Incarnation is an expression of God's unlimited love for humanity, the babe born in a manger was to be good news of joy for all people (Luke 2.10). Just as every person is created in the image of God (Genesis 1.27), so Jesus becoming human affirms the dignity of all people. No individual or group of people are 'problems' to be dealt with but they are deserving of dignity as people loved by God. We all share a common humanity devoid of distinction between strangers and inhabitants.

**Jesus the refugee:** He took refuge in Egypt as a child when Mary and Joseph fled Herod's threat to kill him. Jesus also experienced life under Roman occupation so knew measures that deprived people of their freedom and trampled upon their dignity. Jesus is born homeless and experiences tyranny and suffering. He identifies with the refugee and the oppressed and calls on us to similarly identify compassionately with the vulnerable.

**Jesus the stranger:** Jesus tells us that our response to the stranger is a response to Jesus himself (Matthew 25.40). When recognising Christ in the stranger's guise we begin to encounter the divine in the other. Not only do we then move from a situation of 'us' and 'them' to a new relationship of 'we', there is blessing in the encounter and we become human together.

With deep concern we observe current developments in Europe's response to new arrivals of people. Based on the biblical message and theological reflection and mindful of the statements made almost 20 years ago at the European Summit in Tampere 1999, we state that:

- It is unacceptable that policies of “managing migration” lead to situations where the massive loss of human life on the way to Europe has become normal and exploitation and violence an everyday reality. We need meaningful safe passages (e.g. resettlement, humanitarian visa, realistic labour migration policies) and search and rescue on the way to Europe.
- We reaffirm the notions of the Tampere summit, in particular the “absolute respect of the right to seek asylum” and “the full and inclusive application of the Geneva Convention” as guiding principles of asylum policy today. This would include effective access to a procedure for asylum seeking persons irrespective of how and through where they came to Europe.
- Protection in the region of origin and improvement of conditions in countries of origin remain important, so that people are not forced to move. However, as long as reasons for migration exist, Europe should accept its obligation to welcome and protect - as one of the richest and most developed regions of the globe; instead of coercing third countries into stopping migration into Europe.
- Solidarity should be the guiding aspect when governing migration and particularly refugee reception. Solidarity means that the stronger shoulders accept more responsibility than the weaker ones, but also that everyone contributes what they can.
- We renounce the notion that a welcome to newly arrived is at the detriment of those presently living in Europe. Policies should address the specific needs of new arrivals in Europe and encourage their potential to contribute, while at the same time honouring the traditions and needs of inhabitants alike.
- Discussions on migration and refugees should be characterised by dignity, respect, and where possible compassion. Spreading of inaccurate, unverifiable and divisive messages only makes the challenge of living together more difficult.
- Conflicts will inevitably arise where people of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds are living together, particularly under rapidly changing circumstances. Living together in diversity can be both enriching and challenging. We ask for a spirit of tolerance and goodwill and a commitment to constructive engagement.

We commit to more fervently articulating and working towards our vision of an inclusive and participatory society – for newly arrived and all inhabitants.

*Following are the church leaders endorsing the Christmas statement:*

**(at moment of handover to EP Vice President Mairead McGuinness)**

**Austria:**

Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Austria: Bishop Dr Michael Bünker

**Belgium:**

United Protestant Church in Belgium (EPUB): Synod President Rev Steven Fuite

**Cyprus:**

Church of Cyprus: His Beatitude Chrysostomos II, Archbishop of New Justiniana and All Cyprus

**Czechia:**

Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren: Synodal Senior Daniel Ženatý and Synodal Curator Vladimír Zikmund

**Estonia:**

Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church: The Most Reverend Urmas Viilma, Archbishop of Tallinn and Primate of the EELC

Orthodox Church of Estonia: His Beatitude Stephanos, Metropolitan of Tallinn and All Estonia

**Finland:**

Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland: Archbishop of Turku and Finland Tapio Luoma

Orthodox Church of Finland: His Eminence Archbishop Leo of Helsinki and All Finland

**France**

French Protestant Federation: President Pastor François Clavairolly

**Germany:**

Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD): Council chairman Landesbischof Prof Dr Heinrich Bedford-Strohm & Bishop Petra Bosse-Huber

**Greece:**

Church of Greece: His Beatitude Ieronymos II, Archbishop of Athens and All Greece

Evangelical Church of Greece: Secretary of the Executive Committee Rev Dimitris Boukis

**Italy:**

Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy (FCEI) : President Pastor Luca Maria Negro

Opera for the Evangelical Methodist Churches in Italy (OPCEMI): President of the Executive Board (Comitato permanente), Pastor Ms Mirella Manocchio

Waldensian Church in Italy: Moderator of the Waldensian Board (Tavola Valdese) Pastor Eugenio Bernardini

**Netherlands:**

Protestant Church in the Netherlands: General Secretary Dr René de Reuver

**Norway:**

Church of Norway: Presiding Bishop The Right Rev Helga Haugland Byfuglien

**Romania:**

Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Romania: Bishop Reinhart Guib and Mrs Erika Klemm, Head of Refugee Desk

**Spain:**

Spanish Evangelical Church (IEE): President Pastor Alfredo Abad

**Sweden:**

Church of Sweden: Dr Antje Jackelén, Archbishop of Uppsala and Primate of the Church of Sweden

**UK:**

- Baptist Union of Great Britain : General Secretary Rev Lynn Green
- Church of Scotland: Moderator of the General Assembly The Right Rev Susan Brown
- Cherubim & Seraphim Churches: Chair of the Europe Chapter of the Unification Council Special Apostle Pastor John Adegoke
- Methodist Church in Britain: President of Conference Revd Michaela Youngson and Vice-President of Conference Mr Bala Gnanapragasam
- United Reformed Church in Britain: Moderators of the General Assembly Revd Nigel Uden and Mr Derek Estill

- Churches Together in Britain and Ireland: Bishop Jonathan Clark, Bishop of Croydon as Chair of the Churches' Refugee Network of CTBI

**International:**

**Ecumenical Organisations and Christian World Communions**

Anglican Communion: The Archbishop of Canterbury's Representative to the European Institutions, Bishop of Gibraltar in Europe The Right Reverend Dr Robert Innes

Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe: Moderator of CCME Mr Lemma Desta and Vice Moderators Ms Efthalia Pappa and Ms Dora Kanizsai-Nagy

Conference of European Churches: President of CEC Rev Christian Krieger and Vice Presidents Bishop Guli Francis-Dehqani and His Eminence Metropolitan Cleopas of Sweden and All Scandinavia

Ecumenical Patriarchate: His Eminence Metropolitan Cleopas of Sweden and All Scandinavia, on behalf of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

Ecumenical Youth Council in Europe: Chairperson Angelita Tomaselli

Lutheran World Federation:

Vice Presidents

- Central Eastern Europe: Archbishop Urmas Viilma, Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church
- Central Western Europe: Pröpstin Astrid Kleist, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Northern Germany
- Nordic Countries: Archbishop Dr Antje Jackelén, Church of Sweden

World Communion of Reformed Churches: President of the Europe Steering Committee, Dipl Pol Martina Wasserloos-Strunk

World Council of Churches: General Secretary Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit

**For signalling additional signatures, please contact: [Torsten.moritz@ccme.be](mailto:Torsten.moritz@ccme.be)**