

September 14th, 2015

Pastoral Letter on Displaced populations and Refugees

Dear Friends,

Our integrated and globalized world has given each of us a disturbing ring-side view of desperate peoples seeking refuge from war and violence. Turkey has taken in 1.9 million Syrian refugees, and tiny Lebanon plays host to 1.1 million in addition to the Palestinian refugees which Lebanon has hosted for decades. The influx to Europe is before us daily in news sources. The United Nations expects up to 3,000 arriving migrants to European shores each day in months ahead, which increasingly seems an inadequate estimation. The photo of three year old Aylin Kurdi washed up on a Turkish beach proved a searing icon of unfolding events, as do scenes of clashes between police and refugees in Macedonia and Hungary.

Episcopalians join Americans of good will in wondering what tangible response we might make, and my own reflections may join to your own as we strive toward constructive action.

THE NEW NORMAL: The political upheaval in the Middle East and swaths of Africa are likely to persist for decades before the establishment of stable forms of governance, rendering the maintenance of civil societies difficult, and insuring ongoing population displacement. The rapid acceleration of climate change suggests that flood, drought and famine will further destabilize fragile nations with insufficient emergency structures, driving the continued and unregulated movement of peoples across borders.

RELIEF AND STABILITY: The European Union is seeking ways to follow Germany's laudable offer to receive 800,000 refugees, distributing the burden fairly among member nations. The United States will probably soon offer to receive 65,000 displaced persons from the Syrian crisis. Yet, with 4 million Syrians languishing outside of the borders of Syria, and many more displaced within those current borders, these numbers will not fundamentally alter the present dynamic. Current political realities within Europe and the United States are unlikely to prove receptive to the absorption of millions of persons.

Hence, support for the front line nations of Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan is a priority for the alleviation of immediate suffering and impetus toward increased stability. Doyle McManus reports U.N. figures indicating that more than half of the money to help Syrian refugees this year has come from only three countries: the United States, Britain and Kuwait. The United States has provided 1.1 billion dollars, whereas Saudi Arabia has offered only \$18 million. Regional powers should be pressured to join the United States in stepping up to the plate to redress inadequate conditions in refugee camps, and to support hosting countries in their attempts to integrate displaced persons.

THE PLIGHT OF CHRISTIANS: The diminishing Christian communities of Syria, Turkey and Iraq were once an important part of the social weave in those cultures, present and influential for more than 2,000 years. These communities have long experienced pressure. Two decades ago, as part of a month long official delegation to the Assyrian Christians of the Tur Abdin along the Iraqi border initiated by the Archbishop of Canterbury, I witnessed first-hand the overt aggression toward Christians by both Kurds and Turks.

Almost a third of Syrians were Christian as recently as 1920, but only about 300,000 remain today, and of those more than 50% have been driven from their homes. The Christian presence in the Middle East is threatened with extinction, and, with Islamic fanaticism ascendant, the final demise of those communities seems nearly assured.

European and American Christians have been silent in the face of the plight of Assyrian, Maronite, Coptic and Armenian Christians, even while uncritically supportive of the State of Israel, presently defunding Christian schools and encouraging Christian emigration.

As we strive to address the moral crisis of displaced populations world-wide, I believe Episcopalians have a particular duty to advocate for Middle Eastern Christians, and to encourage Episcopal Migration Ministries and other specifically Christian groups to give special focus to these populations in resettlement efforts. Culturally and religiously, these groups are more easily assimilated into Western cultures, and have a moral claim on Western nations with a predominant number of Christian co-religionists.

THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE: The upheaval in Iraq and in Syria has been protracted, and refugees have been on the move for years. Had front-line countries received support sufficient to provide decent living conditions for people one day hoping to return to their countries of origin, fewer would have arrived at the desperation impelling them toward the perilous European trek with unreliable smugglers.

The failure to proactively address the unfolding crisis in the Middle East offers cautionary instruction to us and our own need to proceed proactively in this hemisphere.

We are witness to a relatively “local” crisis in Central America, and especially in El Salvador, with 290,000 people displaced by internal violence in 2014 in our hemisphere’s largest current humanitarian challenge. The murder rate in El Salvador is the highest of any nation in the world, and organized street gangs are the effective political control in many areas of that country (and also in Honduras and Guatemala), extorting business owners and forcing girls and young women into sexual slavery. Governing structures throughout the Northern Triangle of Central America are fragile, with human rights organizations and non-governmental agencies providing necessary pressure and legal support for accountability in governance and civil society, improving the chance of increasing stability and adherence to internationally established norms regarding rights and justice.

Foundation Cristosal, for which I serve as vice-president, advocates for proactive engagement within El Salvador and the stressed Northern Triangle of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, reducing levels of internal displacement and strengthening legal and civic recourse where it is most needed, rendering fewer families subject to the perils of migration. Our own local awareness of the ongoing crisis has been dampened since the summer of 2014 when Central

American children arrived in astonishing numbers to the United States, but the forces underlying that displacement very much continue.

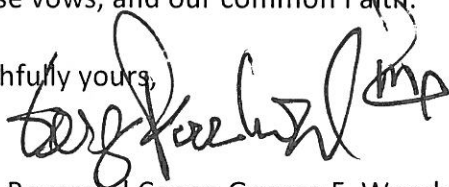
Many of the children and refugees arriving to this country from Central America in 2014 languish in unresolved legal status, and advocacy for the reunification of families, and the provision of work, legal status and a path to citizenship is, in my opinion, the most appropriate means of addressing an easily assimilated cultural group. Latin Americans have contributed an enormous and documented economic boon to American society in recent decades, and warm welcome remains in our own best interest.

CURRENT ACTION: It is challenging to know how to respond to the tragic plight of the millions of displaced persons languishing in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey and destined, at present, for Northern European climes.

- A sound repository for financial donations for the crisis may be International Rescue Committee (<https://engage.rescue.org>) with spokesman David Miliband, former British politician at helm, or, on the ground in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan may be the UN Refugee Agency at (<https://donate.unrefugees.org/>)
- Episcopal Migration Ministries (<http://www.episcopalmigrationministries.org/>) assists with the resettlement of migrants within the United States, and the United States will be making provision for an undefined number of Syrian refugees in months ahead. The Los Angeles Office, "Interfaith Refugee and Immigration Services" for the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, is housed at St. Francis Chapel in Atwater Village (<http://iris.ladiocese.org/>)
- For those who wish to know more about mitigating the crisis in El Salvador and the Northern Triangle of Central America, there is no better resource than Foundation Cristosal (www.cristosal.org) which includes information regarding our human-rights based approach.

It is important for Episcopalians to bear in mind that the surges of humanity we witness are comprised of individuals with a claim to dignity and respect, and with a spiritual claim on each one of us. ***"When was it we saw you a stranger and did not welcome you?"*** many ask the Lord at the judgment vision in Matthew 25. ***"Truly I tell you, as you did it to one of the least of these members of my family, you did it to me,"*** Christ responds. In our baptismal vows we make a profound commitment to neighbor-love, and it is for us to find practical application for those vows, and our common Faith.

Faithfully yours,



The Reverend Canon George F. Woodward III
Rector