

***International Conference on Church and Migration  
Villigst, 18-19 June 2019.***

***Reflection of Bishop Dr. István Szabó, Reformed Church in Hungary***

I thank the Evangelical Church of Westphalia for looking at the issue of migration and the church from various aspects, and for inviting partner churches for common discussion and reflection on the issue as well. It is good to see the humbleness of the document stating, "This keynote paper of the Evangelical Church of Westphalia is not a message from heaven." However, the whole paper is an honest invitation to discuss one of the most serious challenges of our time in a true Christian manner.

The Keynote paper of the Synod offered a deep and thoughtful Biblical and theological reflection for discussion which reminds us, "The faith stories in the Bible are mostly also stories of movement, wandering and foreignness." The dynamics and the truths of the Biblical stories challenge us, not only as "well-established and deeply-rooted" mainline churches, but also for churches of all kinds, to be open to renewal as always reforming churches. As Presiding Bishop of the Reformed Church in Hungary, I recently challenged our Synod saying, "Without the renewal of hearts and reformation of our lives, every tradition fades away and new initiatives turns out to be empty." The changing landscape within Europe and beyond, including the challenges of migration, war, economic problems and weakening identities, reminds all of us that this is one of the basic tasks of the church.

The paper also provided valuable insight into the German context, reminding us of how much German society has been shaped through the challenges of migration and the various programs of integration within the past decades. As the Hungarian Reformed community, we have a deep understanding of what it means to be God's wandering people in this world. The Biblical image of the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness is deeply linked in our self-awareness; we see ourselves in the dynamic stories of God's faithfulness and Israel's unfaithfulness and it has shaped our identity as covenanted people of God. Throughout the tumultuous history of the Hungarian people, closely linked to that of the Hungarian Reformed community, this self-awareness kept hope alive, during wars, foreign occupations, changing borders, and coerced migration (including waves of deportations and even population exchange) within Central and Eastern Europe.

For centuries, the nations living in this part of Europe have been exposed to a mixture of similar values and religions. Their cultures are deeply intertwined, and yet cultural diversity, which is a productive value in everyday life, could be misused as a destructive force in politics, culture and even everyday life. As part of the church's contribution to the Hungarian EU Presidency in 2011, we stressed that multiculturalism is a historic characteristic of this region that we have forgotten.

We recognized that “despite the fact that we share the same historical experiences as all of us have been both victims and perpetrators of historical injustice, this common path hardly ever enhances reconciliation, but it heightens fear and mistrust instead.”

After the political changes in 1989, Hungarians are gaining a new awareness of what it means to stand on our own feet. We are a learning community. Today, thirty years after the collapse of the atheist Communist regime, anxiety, frustration, mistrust, and economic and social insecurity are still present in society. This is one of the reasons why Hungarians are hesitant on the issue of global migration, despite the historical characteristics of the region. Still, as for welcoming and helping refugees concretely, Hungarians have proved that they are open and ready to help at their best.

Unlike the German context described in the Keynote paper, we do not see ourselves as a society shaped by cultural immigration, and diverse multiculturalism, as seen in the Western European context, is not in our reality. Historically, the countries in Central and Eastern Europe have no experience in colonization, neither have they been destinations for economic migration in the past decades. However, in our context, migration takes on a different meaning.

Specifically due to migration within Europe, countries in this region are losing many of their people. For us, not only in Hungary, but also ethnic Hungarians, especially those living in Romania and Ukraine. We feel the pain of migration as our skilled young people emigrate to Germany and Austria, while those with a university degree continue their studies in the UK. As we reflect on the causes of Hungarians leaving Central and Eastern Europe, we must also address the root causes of migration, political and economic.

In 2015, when the refugee crisis hit Hungary and made it one of the most affected countries in Europe, we had already emphasized the necessity of humane, just, and holistic approach to migration. Together, as Hungarian-speaking Reformed churches, we issued a statement saying, “A proper solution to the crisis can only be achieved if the causes of forced migration end and each person can live in peace and be given the chance to lead a better life in their country of origin. Therefore we call upon the governments who are responsible, the leaders of the European Union, and those who are in power to do everything possible to achieve this end” ([\*Statement of the Presidium of the General Convent of the Hungarian Reformed Church regarding the European Refugee Crisis, November 2015\*](#)).

At the same time, we also recognized that there is a growing fear of migration as there is a tendency for politics to instrumentalize migration for different and sometimes opposing purposes. In a press release, we called for solidarity and urged Hungarian authorities to fulfill their duties, saying, “However, we are sorry to witness that the refugee situation is being used for domestic political debate. We ask and caution everyone to maintain peace and we thank Hungarian citizens for acting with patience and understanding towards their fellow human beings in a difficult situation. We

also thank the Hungarian authorities for fulfilling their duties at the highest possible standard despite contradictory EU directives” ([\*Press Release of the Presidium of RCH, September 2015\*](#)).

In spite of all of this, we emphasized the Christian value of welcoming the stranger and our Christian responsibility toward those who seek refuge in Hungary. In the statement released in November 2015, we stated, “The Biblical commandment of solidarity is unconditional. ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ (Leviticus 19:18): this applies to everyone, because all human beings are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Jesus Christ regarded this commandment as the summary of God’s order and the law of life (Matthew 22:37–39) and teaches us that when we help those in need, such as strangers, the sick and prisoners, it mirrors our faith (Matthew 5:43, Matthew 24:31–46). *Therefore, our church’s inescapable task is to help people in need: those fleeing from direct threat to life and those coming simply in the hope of a better life. We must help those who are practicing Christianity and those of other faiths; those who have no qualifications and those who are graduates; those are simply travelling through our country and those would like to settle here permanently.*”

Since then, we, as a Church, have been doing what we can to support people in need of help. With the implementing partner of the Diaconal Office of the Reformed Church in Hungary, Kalunba Social Services Ltd., we provide integration support to recognized refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants. We spoke and negotiated with government officials and urged them to reconsider suspending the Asylum, Migration and Integration Funds (AMIF) last summer. We are also present at transit zones along the Hungarian-Serbian border as the Hungarian Reformed Church Aid. We are providing humanitarian and integration support even during the difficult political and social environment. In this regard, we are thankful for the partnership of the Evangelical Church of Westphalia. Since 2015, we have intensified our engagement in dialogue, exchange, and cooperation with our international partners.

Acknowledging the importance of our experience and responsibility as churches in Europe, we should not forget that the challenge of migration is a global issue which compels us to look at the bigger picture. We must consider the responsibility of our countries in the economic crises and political and armed conflicts which forces people to leave their homes. Once again, as mentioned in our statement, “We must recognize and declare that the root causes for this unprecedented rate of migration are social, economic, political and civilization crises as well as the persecution of Christians, which is not often considered by EU leaders. Their solution requires common coordinated steps by international organizations and the states which are affected.”

Again, recognizing the importance of promoting humane, just, and transparent immigration policies coordinated at the European level, we should also acknowledge the pain of the countries the people are leaving, and also consider their future. We must not misuse migration for any political aim, either to create fear and xenophobia or to solve national economic problems.

In the last few years, we have engaged in discussion with churches in the Middle East, specifically in Syria. We carefully listen to their stories regarding war, persecution, and forced migration, and we have seen the devastating consequences of massive emigration. We have heard their plea for support so that they may stay in their homeland to continue to serve the people. We have also understood that we must address the root causes together with them, as much as we can. And we welcomed the support of the Hungarian Government to empower the Christian communities to stay and serve in their homeland. Whenever we address the issue of migration, we must also keep in mind this aspect. This is what we have learned throughout our common journey with our Syrian partner churches in the past years which is captured in the memorandum of commitment which we signed with two Reformed churches in Lebanon and Syria, “As ‘Ambassadors for Christ’ in promoting peace and reconciliation, we strictly condemn and oppose any form of religious discrimination, oppression and persecution. In our cooperation with the churches in the Middle East, we give special attention to helping Christian communities to remain and serve God in their homelands and be witnesses to the Good News of Christ, and thus invite and encourage others to join and support our common mission.”

Without peace and justice for all, there is no real answer and sustainable solution to the pain of forced migration.