



Conference of European Churches

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Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe

Member churches and organisations
of the Churches' Commission for
Migrants in Europe and the
Conference of European Churches

23 April 2024

World Refugee Day: Call to commemorate refugees who lost their lives at European borders

Esteemed church leaders, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, dear friends,

In this period between the two Easters and Pentecost, filled with hope and light intended for all humankind, we continue to be deeply saddened that the suffering, hopelessness and death, continues for thousands of our brothers and sister on the outer borders of the European Union and wider Europe.

Considering this reality, and continuing with tradition from past years, we appeal to the churches across Europe to commemorate around World Refugee Day (20 June 2024) the persons who lost their lives at the different borders – may it be at the Eastern borders, in the (English) Channel , the Mediterranean or elsewhere. We encourage churches to hold dedicated services, prayers and vigils on **23 June 2024** . For some, commemorations on other dates or occasions in the year have become a tradition.

Our appeal is made in times when the war in Ukraine rages on. The direct consequences of the Ukraine war continue and force people to flee. While the displacement from Ukraine is still a terrible reminder of the horror of the war and long-term perspectives are unclear, reception of those fleeing from Ukraine, not least by churches, has set several impressive, good examples. The facilitated entry of Ukrainians into the EU and other European countries has shown that borders do not have to be deadly for those who are fleeing.

Recently adopted legislation on EU level , in the UK and elsewhere however continues the logic of closing borders and denying legal access to Europe for many in need of protection – a development we see with great concern, as it will force many more to seek risky pathways into safety and protection.

You will find a short factsheet attached. We are also offering resources that can be used as worship materials or intercessions during a service. In 2018, we updated these materials, which were initially produced together with the German Ecumenical Committee on Church Asylum, supported by the Evangelical Church in Berlin, Brandenburg and Silesian Oberlausitz and the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD). The resources are available in English and German and can be downloaded from ([https://ccme.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/2018-06-18 Commemoration Day June 2018_00000002 .pdf](https://ccme.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/2018-06-18_Commemoration_Day_June_2018_00000002_.pdf)).

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We will towards 2025 update the worship material. We very much invite you to share material, which you have been developing for or are using in commemoration activities, so we can include them in the update.

As churches and Christians, our calling is to be witnesses and servants of the Resurrection, as well as to be promoters of new life in justice and peace for all, regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or religion. We know that we are part of a global fellowship of Christians in remembering together those affected in their respective regions, and in reflecting on the causes of their displacement.

Let us remember the documented, as well as the undocumented, who died at the European borders; let us share our sorrow in prayer.

We would be grateful if you could inform us at info@ccme.eu about your activities and share any resources you have developed.

With our best wishes and greetings,

† Nikitas
Archbishop of Thyateira and Great
Britain
President
Conference of European Churches

Dr Torsten Moritz
General Secretary
Churches' Commission for Migrants in
Europe



FACTSHEET:

The following facts and figures describe the context behind the joint CEC and CCME call to the churches to commemorate persons seeking safety who lost their lives at European borders, including responses from churches on the situation, together with useful links.

- Around 3,100 persons lost their lives in 2023 on the borders of the Mediterranean alone, according to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM)¹. This once again represents an increase compared to the previous years. Deaths in the Mediterranean continue, and little-known places of emergency, like the borders of Belarus with the EU or in the (English) Channel last year, received more attention as deaths increased – with IOM documenting some 150 deaths here. Regions outside Europe such as the Sahel remain major dangers for many on the way to Europe. Globally, IOM calls 2023 the “Deadliest Year on Record for Migrants”.
- Since 2000, more than 30,000 people are reported by IOM and other sources to have lost their lives on their way to Europe, drowning at sea or in rivers, suffocated in containers on trucks or ships. The fate of those still in international waters or waters of North African countries is often unclear and their numbers increase as EU member states send boats back to Libyan waters.
- As in previous years, 2023-24 has not seen any systematic activity from states in search and rescue. An ongoing criminalisation of civil society actors in search and rescue or assistance at the land borders² or those rescued themselves have remained evident and a major concern for the churches.
- Churches in Europe have responded to the ongoing loss of life at the borders of and in Europe by offering practical solidarity, but also by advocating for safe and legal ways for refugees and migrants to enter Europe. Churches in several countries have concretely offered to host those rescued at sea or relocated to unblock the political impasse and allow for disembarkation. Churches in several places are supporting or launching search and rescue initiatives. Development and humanitarian organisations of churches are working on mitigating the consequences of the ongoing crisis. Churches are among those to have organised broad civil society assistance to those forced to flee within and from Ukraine.
- CCME, together with partners, launched the “Safe Passage” project a decade ago. An exchange between churches for safe passage has thus been facilitated. Projects for sponsoring safe refugee arrivals through resettlement, humanitarian visa/humanitarian corridors and other pathways have been undertaken by more and more churches in Europe. CCME in coalition with others in September called to “expand resettlement and safe pathways to Europe”³. However, the pledge of places for 2024 and beyond remains disappointing. Only 61,000 places for resettlement and humanitarian admission were

¹ <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/data>

² <https://picum.org/blog/at-least-117-people-criminalised-for-helping-migrants-in-europe-in-2023/>

³ https://ccme.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/JS_7-priorities-to-expand-resettlement-and-safe-pathways-to-Europe_FINAL_signatories_3.pdf

pledged by the EU's members states for the 2-year period of 2024-25⁴.at a time when the UN Refugee agency UNHCR estimates the global resettlement needs at 2,4 million⁵.

- The General Assembly of CEC, held in Budapest in July 2013, renewed the call on churches "to commemorate those who have died on their journey to find a dignified life in Europe through an annual day of prayer." In past years, many churches and parishes across Europe have taken up this call and held commemoration services, prayers or vigils around 20 June, International Refugee Day.

⁴ https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/2023-global-refugee-forum-eu-announces-resettlement-pledges-2023-12-15_en

⁵ <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press-releases/unhcr-global-refugee-resettlement-needs-grow-2024>