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## **CHRISTIAN MINISTRY TO REFUGEES IN THE CONTRASTING SETTINGS OF GREECE AND GERMANY**

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### ***Abstract***

The refugee crisis in Europe may be one of the most significant opportunities for the spread of the gospel on that continent since the fall of the Iron Curtain. Many churches in Western Europe are engaging these newcomers in holistic ministry. From February to May 2018, seventeen leaders were interviewed from fourteen ministries engaged in refugee ministry in Greece and Germany to explore refugee ministry realities and practices in these two nations with contrasting policies. The research describes the shifting refugee situation, the shifting context, the relationship between these ministries and government, refugee ministry approaches, spiritual openness among refugees, and observations from frontline practitioners.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Refugees from the Middle East have flooded into parts of Western Europe from 2015 to the present. The world watched Europe struggle with

the influx of refugees from the Middle East fleeing war, ISIS, and instability. This migration brought millions of Muslims in need into many Western European cities and villages. Europeans have felt both compassion and fear, and they have responded with both generosity and hostility. In this environment, European Christians encounter a tremendous opportunity to love these new strangers now on their doorsteps and to witness for Christ to these primarily non-Christian immigrants. Many Christian communities have displayed sacrificial generosity and love toward refugees. This phenomenological study explored the experience of refugee ministry by Christian ministries and local churches in Greece and Germany. The study sought to discover how Christian ministries were responding to needs and sharing Christ with refugees, as well as church and state dynamics, the spiritual impact of the ministries on refugees, and what these frontline practitioners had learned about refugee ministry.<sup>1</sup>

Greece and Germany provide unique contexts for exploring ministry to refugees. Greece is now in its tenth year of the Greek economic crisis and does not have the resources internally to deal with the refugee crisis. Though Greeks have a culture marked by hospitality, they have had to depend on outside funding and resources to provide services to refugees. In contrast, Germany has a robust economy and can provide for the material needs of these new immigrants.

According to those interviewed in Greece, the Protestant believers are doing most of the service to refugees today in that nation. The Orthodox Church is the official state religion and often carries with it nationalistic interests. Consequently, it is more concerned about Greeks than Muslim foreigners. Furthermore, Protestant believers in Greece are ostracized by the Orthodox majority and considered to be members of a sect.

In contrast, Protestants are part of the general culture in Germany. Though evangelicals and mainline Protestants differ theologically, they both are serving refugees with the caveat that evangelicals are interested in both meeting needs and sharing Christ, whereas mainline Protestants (the state-funded Protestant Church in Germany) are primarily interested in

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<sup>1</sup> The original version of this paper was presented at the 2018 Scholars Consultation of Empowered21 held in Johannesburg, South Africa, in May 2018.

meeting the humanitarian and social needs of refugees.

Greece is an entry country for refugees coming to Europe, whereas Germany is a destination country. As a destination country, Germany has received more refugees than any other European nation, recording 44% of three million first-time asylum seeker applications in Europe between 2015 and 2017 (1,356,644).<sup>2</sup> Germany opened its doors to refugees for humanitarian reasons and also to bolster its strong economic engine so that future workers would be available for an aging society with a low birth rate. Until recently, Greece has primarily been a transition country as people entered Europe and headed on to the strong economies in northern Europe.

Greece had 71,200 refugees and migrants as of December 31, 2018; 14,600 were still on the islands (where sea arrivals land), and 56,600 were on the mainland. In 2018 alone, there were 50,508 new arrivals (32,494 by sea and 18,014 by land).<sup>3</sup> While refugees in Greece hope to transition on to other countries, many are now beginning to settle into life in Greece recognizing that it will likely be a multi-year process if it happens at all. Furthermore, the Greek government is recognizing that money is available from the European Union (EU) to take care of refugees, creating opportunities for Greek employment. However, political tension exists. If the government leaders do more for the refugees than for their own people who have suffered for the last decade from austerity measures imposed by the European Union and Germany, they will get voted out of power.

The humanitarian crisis over the past three years for these new arrivals on European soil has been acute. In 2015 alone, over one million refugees arrived in Europe by sea, and 80% of these were in Greece and 15% in Italy. By the end of December 2015, an estimated 3,700 people had died in the perilous water crossing with a higher percentage dying in the longer passage from North Africa to Italy. Though the number of water crossings

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2 First Time Applicant Table, Eurostat, European Commission, accessed January 21, 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/refreshTableAction.do?tab=table&plugin=1&pcode=tps00191&language=en>.

3 Refugees Operation Portal, UNHCR, accessed January 24, 2019, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/67711>.

dropped significantly in 2016 and 2017, the number of dead and missing remained high (5,096 in 2016; 3,139 in 2017).<sup>4</sup> In 2015, half of those crossing the Mediterranean were from Syria, fleeing from the war back home. A quarter of a million were Afghan and Iraqi, fleeing conflicts at home as well.<sup>5</sup> At the height of the crisis in October 2015, more than 7,000 refugees arrived each day after weeks of difficult journeys from their country of origin.

Thousands of people a day landed on Greek islands in the summer and fall of 2015, were transported to Athens by ferry, made their way to the city center, and took buses north into central and northern Europe through the Balkan route. In late 2015, however, many countries began to close their borders to refugees causing thousands to get stuck in Greece. Camps sprang up across Greece as well in other parts of Europe. Camp conditions in many locations have been difficult. The material, financial, social, and psychological needs of the refugees (given some of the traumatic events they have experienced) can be overwhelming for people trying to help.

### **The Shifting Refugee Situation**

A dramatic shift has occurred in the refugee situation in both Germany and Greece regarding humanitarian assistance. Germany has moved from a humanitarian crisis to the need for assistance in integration. The German government is meeting the humanitarian needs of refugees in most places throughout the country. The German national government desires to integrate refugees into society and the workforce. In much of Germany, camps have been closed, and refugee housing has been disbursed among the German population. However, in the far south, resistance by governing authorities has grown due to anti-immigrant sentiment and the desire to see immigrants return to their country of origin one day.

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4 Refugees Operational Portal, UNHCR, accessed January 18, 2019, <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean?id=83>.

5 Statistics are from Jonathan Clayton and Hereward Holland in an article called *Over One Million Sea Arrivals Reach Europe in 2015* and published online by the UNHRC at <http://www.unhcr.org/afr/news/latest/2015/12/5683d0b56/million-sea-arrivals-reach-europe-2015.html>.

Throughout the country, government programs have been set up to provide language acquisition followed by job training and placement. However, for refugees to integrate into society, they need friendships with Germans. The government cannot provide friendships. Though the government official in one city has matched German families with refugee families, this is where churches can and are playing a very significant role in some places. Unfortunately, many Germans are not willing to build friendships with refugees and often struggle with fear and political concerns that may prevent friendship engagement.

At the beginning of the crisis, churches and ministries focused on humanitarian assistance, but much of that assistance is now being facilitated by government agencies, while churches and ministries in Germany that are now engaged in refugee ministry see developing friendships and inviting people into their homes and lives at the heart of their ministry to refugees. The days of large gatherings to meet needs have been replaced in many places by small-group gatherings in homes. Because government agencies were meeting the physical needs, attendance at large gatherings dropped significantly, causing churches and ministries to shift to small-group meetings that focused more on friendship and spiritual needs. One ministry leader summarized the current situation: "It's really about opening two doors: the front door and the door of your heart."

Greece still has some camps, but others have been closed. Much less provision is available from governmental agencies for refugees in Greece than in Germany, which means the needs of refugees are still acute and often are overwhelming for ministries and churches. Some international NGOs are beginning to close and leave, though the needs of refugees are still pressing in many places in Greece. One organization, for example, no longer operates its centers on the islands, and the center it ran in Athens closed in September 2018.

The material needs can be overwhelming to local ministries and churches serving refugees. Many local Christian ministries are still providing humanitarian assistance. They are often careful not to be the primary supplier; rather, they try to help connect refugees with agencies that can provide some material support. Those agencies giving weekly groceries have developed databases to ensure a fair distribution. Volunteers

and ministries are learning to pace themselves. They often refer to the challenge of burnout and attrition with local volunteers.

Some ministries depend on short-term teams coming to serve refugees. These teams come from other parts of Europe, the United States, or Egypt. The Egyptian volunteers have been very helpful with the language barrier for Arabic speakers. Some are mobilizing immigrants themselves to assist in running programs to serve refugees. More and more though, ministries in Greece are shifting from the primary focus on humanitarian needs to focus on the social and spiritual needs of refugees.

### **The Shifting Context**

General attitudes toward refugees have shifted. A great groundswell of hospitality by Greeks and Germans occurred in the early days of the crisis as desperate refugees flooded through or into their countries. People gave their belongings to help refugees who had lost everything and fled their home country. At first, people were very concerned about the refugees, gave many donated items to help, and felt very empathetic toward the plight of these new immigrants. Unfortunately, over time, feelings have generally changed in both countries toward their new guests. Of course, from the beginning, both countries had minority anti-immigrant constituencies. But it appears that the attitude of the general population began to shift from empathy to fear and even hostility.

In Greece, the general feeling shifted as other countries closed their borders, which caused refugees to be stuck in Greece. Greece had endured its own economic crisis since 2008, and the crisis was in its seventh year and continuing to deepen. The rest of the world did not seem to help but rather through forced austerity measures caused the economic pain to be even more profound. When the refugees flooded in, the world took notice and sent resources to help, though they had not helped the suffering Greeks during the previous seven years.

Furthermore, there is an historic root of enmity between Greece and its Muslim neighbors to the east. For eight hundred years, the Byzantine Empire held back the Muslim advance into Europe. But after the fall of Constantinople, Greeks endured life under Ottoman Muslim rule for four

hundred years. The Greek Orthodox Church held the Greek language and religion together under this foreign domination and championed liberation. It is the official state church and is very nationalistic. Consequently, the Orthodox Church generally has not done a lot to support the work of caring for Muslim refugees.

Even more importantly, in the twentieth century, the Greek and Armenian genocides occurred in Turkey, and the invasion and occupation of northern Greek Cyprus by Turkey happened in the 1970s. Thus, the history of the Greek people contributes to a feeling of being invaded by Islam and the need to resist a growing presence of Muslims in their land. This feeling is exasperated by the Greek economic crisis and the consequential exodus of Greek youth when they graduate from college and go to other countries to find jobs. Meanwhile, Muslim young people are immigrating into Greece and have a much higher birth rate than Greeks. These factors foster fear that the culture and country demographics will rapidly change.

In Germany, the crimes committed by some refugees in 2016 had a galvanizing effect on many Germans, creating fear and deep concern. Like Greeks, Germans also naturally feel concerned about the long-term impact on German culture. Concern has grown concerning an increase in Islam in Germany that might threaten the historic Christian underpinning or the growing secularism of the German culture. Immigrants represent a significant birthrate differential. Whereas the German birthrate is below population sustainability, immigrant populations will continue to grow if their birth rates remain high and do not adjust to the German norm. Germans sometimes worry about their children possibly marrying these non-Germans from a non-European culture.

The German government is working hard to integrate refugees into society. Unemployment is extremely low, and as Germans retire in the next five years, there will be a growing need for workers. According to one interviewee, 300,000 skilled workers will be needed to replace people retiring in the next five years. Germany saw the refugee situation as an opportunity to fill the growing need for workers in Germany. The country has a robust system for preparing workers for the workplace with apprenticeships and other educational systems to provide technical training and development

for the incoming workforce, thus preparing a new generation of workers. However, Germany's economic system works because of the cultural norms wherein people possess an internal orientation to diligence, detail, and precision. The state provides protection to the worker, making it extremely difficult to fire an employee after six months of hire.

Furthermore, the country provides national healthcare and a very generous number of vacation days. This generosity works because the culture contains a deep passion for productivity. Those coming from outside the culture, however, may not have this cultural perspective and may abuse the system. Given these cultural differences, policies designed to provide a safety net and protection to the worker may foster a welfare mentality in those who do not possess the cultural underpinnings that make the system work in Germany. Therefore, the perception is growing among Germans that refugees have come for the money, not the work, and that they are taking excessive advantage of the system designed to help them.

In contrast, Greece is not seeking to integrate refugees into society like Germany is. Greece's economic situation is in stark contrast to that of its northern counterpart. With high unemployment and young Greeks moving to other countries to find jobs, employment opportunities for refugees in Greece do not exist. Resources are lacking in the country to support refugees, and the Greeks rely on funding from the EU to provide services to the refugee population. Refugees are typically housed in camps with no hope for employment and integration into Greek society. Because the humanitarian need is still acute for refugees in Greece, churches and ministries continue to provide some humanitarian help to refugees. However, their overall impact is limited, and refugees are suffering. But in the midst of showing love in tangible ways to refugees, Christ is being seen amid an openness to the gospel.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative research was a phenomenological study of refugee ministry in Greece and Germany. The primary research question was how Christian ministries and local churches were responding to needs and sharing Christ with refugees. Additional research questions included:



What is the interplay between the ministries and the government given the political nature of the refugee situation? What is the spiritual impact of the ministries interviewed on the refugees? What have frontline practitioners learned about refugee ministry? How were Christians navigating the political environments of their respective countries in working with refugees? What were these frontline practitioners learning about refugee ministry?

The sample consisted of seventeen interviews with leaders engaged in refugee ministry in Greece or Germany. The leaders represented fourteen different Protestant evangelical ministries. Snowball sampling was used to identify ministry leaders engaged in refugee ministry.<sup>6</sup> Each interviewed leader completed a *Refugee Ministry Leader Questionnaire* to provide information about organizational details,<sup>7</sup> outreach activities to refugees, and refugee population in their city and their ministry. An interview with the leader was then conducted. Each interview was recorded, coded, and later transcribed. All interviews consisted of sixteen questions. Ten face-to-face interviews were conducted in Germany in February 2018, and seven interviews were conducted with ministries in Greece via Zoom between March and May 2018. The ministries in Germany were in six cities: Wiehl, Gummersbach, Koln, Heilbronn, Ludwigshafen, and Munich. The ministries in Greece were located in four cities: Athens, Thessaloniki, Serres, and Katerini. All quotes from interviews in this article are anonymous to protect confidentiality.

## RESULTS

### Christian Ministry and Government Relations

Both religious and governmental entities serve the poor and seek to protect the downtrodden. Their services to the poor can overlap, although

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6 The researcher began with personal contacts engaged in refugee ministry as well as those identifiable on the Internet. These potential participants were asked to identify other ministry leaders engaged in refugee ministry in their city or nation as well. This method was utilized to identify as many ministries as possible serving refugees.

7 Details consisted of ministry type, denomination, and theological orientation.

their primary purposes and motivations differ. How do Christian and government organizations interact with one another in the arena of refugee work? Three of the sixteen questions were asked in the interviews to explore this relationship between Christian ministries engaged with refugees and government, both with the national government and the European Union.<sup>8</sup> The relationship between church and state certainly varies among nations across Europe. The historical backdrop of Christendom and the intervening forces of secularism over the past few centuries create a diverse and complex relationship between church and state across the European continent. While Europe is becoming increasingly secular, Greece has an official state church, and in Germany, two national churches receive funds through the state from taxation of members.

The churches interviewed in this project were not state-funded in either of these countries. The non-Greek Orthodox churches in Greece and the free churches in Germany typically have a stronger desire to engage in evangelism, and often this impulse is absent in churches receiving funding from the state. Though not always expressed in church life, the tenets of the Christian religion embrace both serving the needs of the poor (charity) and sharing the message of Christ (evangelism). So, what is the relationship between government entities and those church and ministry representatives who were interviewed?

In many places in Germany, a positive relationship appears to exist between churches and the government in serving refugees. Churches and ministries typically do not feel antagonism from the state. It should be noted that there are two types of churches in Germany, the state churches (both Catholic and Protestant) that receive funding from the state and the free churches that do not receive funds from the government. State-funded churches work with refugees from a social services perspective and do not incorporate teaching about Jesus in their activities. Social service is considered to be an important contribution of these state-funded churches to society. They receive funds for services that they provide to refugees and

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8 Questions included the following: Describe the relationship between government and religious organizations regarding the refugee situation. How are ministries and churches navigating the political aspect of refugee work? How are EU and German/Greek laws shaping Christian involvement with refugees?

consequently are prohibited from teaching Christianity in their refugee programs.

Free churches in Germany typically incorporate sharing their faith into their ministry to refugees, whether formally through spiritual programs or informally through friendships. Consequently, they do not receive funding from the state for the work they do with refugees. But because this witness is not forced, they are not prevented from working with refugees in the community, and most of those interviewed saw no conflict between their work with refugees and the government.

German courts often show preference to refugees who have a certificate of Christian baptism. One immigrant congregation reported that they have a solid relationship with the government and work with the judges in their jurisdiction. They provide church attendance records on an asylum seeker to the court to verify the validity of a baptism certificate. This preference to give asylum to those who are Christian has made most ministries wary of the motives of refugees seeking baptism both in Germany and in Greece. Some ministries wait long enough to ensure that a real transformation of the heart exists before they baptize.

The huge humanitarian need has contributed to cooperation. Churches and ministries responded to the needs of refugees, and government agencies recognized the good work taking place in the community. For example, the local government in one German town provided the local church with phone numbers for refugees so that the church could contact them to invite them to the programs being offered.

In a northern town in Greece, a local church provided housing for 33 refugees. The United Nations (UN) observed their efforts and proposed that they establish a non-governmental organization (NGO) so that the UN could work with them and provide funding for the housing work to increase its capacity. The church established the NGO, provided housing for 550 refugees in 110 apartments funded by the UN, and served 1,650 refugees through this NGO over the past two years.

Sometimes churches or ministries, such as the church in northern Greece, chose to limit their verbal witness to provide a particular service. One free church in Germany was teaching language courses to refugees, but for the refugees to receive an official certificate from the course, the

law required it to be a certified course, and thus the church could not share Christ in their language program. This church decided to proceed and be a certified language program, believing that their behavior and the fact that it was housed in the church building would provide a witness. In all of these situations, witness still happens informally through relationships but not formally within the particular program.

Because of the freedom of religion in Europe, “in general, the European Union has no problem when it comes to Christian activities, and the German government generally is favorable to church work among refugees,” according to one interviewee. If the ministry is too evangelistic, the government will likely withdraw funding. However, the ministry is not prohibited from being evangelistic if it does not receive public funding.

One interviewee pointed out that state churches sometimes are critical of the free churches based on a different theological perspective. In the early days of the crisis, free churches were mischaracterized as just wanting to share Jesus with people. However, over time other organizations could see that these ministries were helping refugees in their need and showing them love. This idea surfaced in several interviews. Though there was some criticism in the early stages of the crisis, over time those criticisms faded away as ministries sacrificially served refugees.

Of the six cities in Germany where interviews were conducted, only in Munich did the interviewee report that animosity exists between churches and government regarding serving refugees. Refugees were still in camps in this region, and access was not allowed to those who do anything religious in nature. The negative view expressed in the interview in Munich was the exception to the generally positive views in all the other interviews regarding church or ministry relationships with government entities. The Munich interviewee stated, “Hostile. Overtly hostile.”

An example was provided of a group picking up refugees with buses for a barbeque. The workers at the camp yelled at the buses and volunteers demanding that they leave. An interviewee mentioned that each state in Germany sets its own regulations for the refugees, and in the Munich region, refugees are left in the camps with the hope of sending them back to their home counties. In Munich, there seems to be antagonism toward Christian groups working with refugees. This feeling in Munich contrasts

sharply with the feeling in the other locales in Germany where interviews were conducted. A stronger anti-immigrant sentiment is apparent in southern and eastern Germany.

In both Greece and Germany, the camps are off limits for any religious activity by groups. One large USA-based Christian NGO was very active serving on the Greek islands in the registration centers and the camps during the humanitarian crisis. However, workers for that NGO were not allowed to speak about matters of faith in order to serve in that capacity. One interviewee reported that the military controlled the camp he visited in Greece and was opposed to any religious presence. Another interviewee pointed out that often the Greeks employed in the camps are anarchists who are philosophically opposed to religion.

While some Christians face resistance from camp leadership, in some places they have experienced God-given favor in camps. In Greece, one of the church interviewees serves in a camp providing humanitarian aid and friendships. Church members transport refugees from the camp to their spiritually oriented programs. The situation is changing in both countries as people continue to move out of camps and into local communities. This movement allows freedom and openness for distinctly religious work.

In Greece, the general perspective presented in the interviews was that there is freedom to minister to refugees outside of the camps. The greatest opposition seems to come indirectly through the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Church is called the “prevailing religion” of Greece in the Greek constitution with salaries paid by the government, and it is connected to the Ministry of Education and Religion. The Orthodox Church sometimes appears to leverage its position in the government to make permits difficult for non-Orthodox organizations to obtain.

Furthermore, the Orthodox Church is very concerned with heresy and has an anti-heresy department that sometimes opposes Protestant groups at work in Greece. Protestants, however, are allowed to work with refugees even though the Orthodox Church often makes it difficult for any ministry in Greece that is not Orthodox. Several interviewees noted that the Greek Orthodox Church, apart from a few exceptions, has a nationalistic orientation, is not very welcoming to refugees, has little direct engagement with them, and generally feels refugees should be discouraged

from coming to Greece.

According to the Protestant leaders interviewed, most of their interactions are not with the Greek Orthodox Church but rather with governmental refugee agencies. One ministry interviewee serves as an NGO worker on a daily basis at the refugee registration center because the government does not have the staff needed. There is a strong relationship of trust between this group of volunteers and the government. Because they love and serve refugees without a religious agenda, the door is wide open for them. Others note that it is often easier to work with the EU than with the Greek government because the EU is looking for solutions to help refugees whereas the Greek government is more conflicted in its view of the situation.

### **Ministry to Refugees**

All of the churches and ministries represented in the interviews are engaged in holistic ministry to refugees, serving tangible and spiritual needs. The humanitarian assistance is evidenced in feeding programs (five of the fourteen), food and clothing distribution (six of the fourteen), language classes (eight of the fourteen), housing programs (three of the fourteen), and other specialized services such as legal help, job training, and medical clinics. Every Christian organization interviewed engaged in at least one of these activities, and most of them engaged in multiple services.

Christian organizations also made a strong emphasis on meeting relationship needs. Eight out of fourteen have a café ministry or community center. These spaces provide opportunities to spend time with refugees and also provide a place for activities and a place to hold some of the services such as language classes. A number of the interviewees spoke of the importance of friendships with refugees. Without relationships with locals, there will be no integration into the community. Many spoke of friendship being essential for witness. Some spoke of the importance of personal hospitality such as inviting people into one's home to eat together.

Every leader interviewed expressed a desire to serve the spiritual needs of refugees as well. This service could be structured or organic through

friendship. Eleven of the fourteen churches and ministries reported hosting Bible studies for refugees. Some of these are using *Al Massira*, a twelve-week video series designed for people from Muslim backgrounds, starting in the Old Testament and concluding in the Gospels with Jesus. The Christians who use this resource find it very effective in sharing the gospel. The evening format each week includes a meal together, the video, and discussion.

Seven of the fourteen churches and ministries reported having a regular church service for refugees. Some included refugees in their usual church service with translation for refugees, while others developed separate congregations. In some instances, the number of refugees exceeded the number of members in the existing congregation. Unfortunately, when refugees began attending church services, some members left to go to a different church. This loss of some congregants has been one of the costs churches faced when they opened their doors to these foreigners.

Four of the sixteen interview questions were asked to draw out the wisdom and insights these practitioners have gained about ministry to refugees.<sup>9</sup> A prominent theme was the need for patience and longevity in working with refugees. This work is emotionally exhausting. The needs can be overwhelming. Furthermore, building friendships means opening one's life and inviting others in. Germans and Greeks are busy with their jobs, families, and life responsibilities, leaving little time in their lives for the all-consuming work with refugees. One ministry utilizes university students in their city because young people have more time for relationships. Many use teams from other countries, and many are learning to utilize refugees themselves to serve their own community.

Partnering together with other ministries has been an important practice. Out of necessity, churches have teamed up to facilitate a refugee center. Often there are just a handful of people in each church who have the commitment to serve refugees. Working with other churches enables a center to be staffed and programs to be offered. Sometimes the partnership is within a city, sometimes it is within a denomination, and sometimes

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9 Questions seven to eleven asked the following: What have you learned about working with refugees? How do you measure successful ministry to refugees? What are keys to successful ministry to refugees? What are the challenges to refugee ministry, and how have you dealt with those challenges?

the partnership is facilitated by an international mission organization. The partnership allows both shared programs and individual programs among member churches or ministries. One non-profit ministry has a community center with daily Bible studies and a weekly discipleship gathering. However, that ministry does not baptize refugees who come to faith in Christ; rather, when they are ready, it funnels them into local churches that then facilitate the baptisms.

Language has been a significant challenge. In Germany, refugees are learning German. Patience is again needed. In Greece, refugees have been reluctant to learn Greek because they are hoping to move to other parts of Europe. In both countries, translators have been important for the work of the ministry.

The need for translation limits what volunteer teams coming from other Western nations can do. However, this translation need has also opened a door of opportunity. Some missionaries serving in Middle Eastern countries who know the language and culture of these refugee populations have returned to Europe for fruitful engagement with refugees. Other missionaries desiring to go to the Middle East have come to work in Germany or Greece as preparation to serve elsewhere.

This crisis seems significant for Egyptian Christians who used to be closed to evangelism because of centuries of persecution in Egypt. But now some of these believers are coming to Greece to help engage, translate, and share Christ with refugees. One interviewee talked about an Egyptian Orthodox family who came to their church. The family had been opposed to the work they were doing with Muslim refugees. But now the wife is meeting with Muslim women and is requesting that *Al Massira* be offered for them. Several groups in Greece mentioned that teams from Egypt are coming to serve the refugees for extended periods.

### **Spiritual Openness of Refugees**

Three interview questions addressed the spiritual openness and responsiveness of refugees to Christian witness.<sup>10</sup> The responses were

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10 Questions twelve to fifteen asked the following: Describe the spiritual openness of refugees. How are refugees coming to faith in Christ? How do refugee demographics (country of origin,



mixed. Contextual factors influence each local setting as to the degree of receptivity to the message of Christ. According to this sample of interviews, the least receptive group seems to be the Yazidis. One organization works with a camp established just for the Yazidis. Because this is a persecuted religious minority in the Middle East, the camp contains many relatives and retains the social networks from their country of origin. For the Yazidis and sometimes for other refugees, religion is one of the few things they still have left in their lives, and therefore their religion provides an anchor in difficult times.

For many refugees, though, arrival in Europe provides an opportunity for a new life and the freedom to explore a new religion. The loving care given by Christians to refugees has been a powerful witness. Refugees often told their new European friends that in their home country they were told that Christians are bad people. But when they met Christians in Europe and experienced their compassion, it opened their minds to exploring Christianity. Interviewees in Greece often remarked that they are sowing seeds that might be harvested by others when refugees settle in their destination cities. Stories have been told of refugees arriving in northern Europe and seeking out a church because of the kindness of Christians encountered earlier in their journey.

One key to the increased receptivity of refugees to the gospel has been the supernatural. Some refugees had dreams, visions, or some other supernatural experience on their journey that spurred them to seek out Christianity. One interviewee estimated that probably two-thirds of his new, Arabic-speaking congregation had experienced a vision or dream. Often the refugees themselves ask about the Christian faith.

While some Christian organizations are intentional about sharing their faith and structure ways to do so, others are more organically responsive. They serve, build friendships, and naturally share their faith as God opens doors of opportunity. The opportunities do come as Christians invest in the lives of others. Christians find that most refugees are open to prayer, and sometimes God's miraculous answer to those prayers opens hearts to considering Christ as well.

One of the three interview questions asked about the impact of refugee

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gender, and age) impact responsiveness and ministry approach?

demographics on receptivity to the gospel. Generally speaking, the Iranians seem to be the most receptive. There has been and continues to be a sovereign move of God among Iranians both inside Iran and among the diaspora. Some interviewees suggested the Syrians and Afghans are open to the gospel, and others felt they are not. Other mitigating factors were at work regarding individualized responses. Regarding gender, some interviewees felt that women are more open because of the freedom for women in Christianity, while others felt women are more closed.

Perhaps one of the most important observations suggested by both a ministry leader in Greece and a ministry leader in Germany is that the key to effective evangelism among refugees is the presence of indigenous believers who are telling their story of transformation through Christ to members of their people groups. Refugees are more open to responding to the gospel message when national believers from their particular groups, typically converts from Islam, share their faith. Without such believers, the work is very slow with little fruit. However, when Middle Easterners share their faith, there tends to be much fruit.

One European missionary previously lived in Syria, speaks Arabic, and now works in Germany at a refugee community center. He shared that over and over again he has observed that until the first person comes to faith in Christ, the work is very slow. But once the first one becomes a follower of Jesus and starts sharing the faith in the refugee community, then often many commit their lives to Christ. The German or Greek can share and witness, but when someone from the same culture shares about an encounter with Christ, people in that culture often begin to respond.

In Greece, a ministry that is reaching many immigrants and refugees for Christ puts a lot of emphasis on developing and discipling national workers (believers from the refugee population). The ministry has a whole Farsi team that serves at their Monday night meal. The ministry also has an Afghan believer who leads and preaches at their Wednesday program. Developing these believers to lead has enabled the ministry to grow significantly.

Another ministry in Greece has an Iranian leading daily Bible studies with attendance between twenty-five and fifty-five refugees as well as a weekly discipleship group of twenty persons. They do not baptize new

believers but instead introduce them to local churches who then baptize them. In just five months (January to May 2018), fifty-five were baptized in local churches who had come through those Bible studies.

## CONCLUSION

The last question asked interviewees was the following: “What would you say to ministries, churches, and individual followers of Jesus in Europe about refugee ministry?” The responses were statements of hope. Some expressed the hope and belief that when the crisis dissipates in the future in the Middle East, new refugee believers will return to their home countries to become Christian leaders establishing churches and leading others to Christ. The hope exists that new believers among refugees and immigrants will be witnesses in the future to the ever-growing immigrant populations in Europe. There is also hope that refugee children today will grow up and become followers of Jesus tomorrow. Over half of the ministries reported ministering to refugee children. This is long-term thinking. Loving children today will open doors to the gospel in their lives tomorrow.

Much of the work being done with refugees is planting seeds that will produce a harvest in the future. But harvest is happening right now as well. This current situation may be the most significant opportunity for the gospel in Europe since the fall of the Iron Curtain and the subsequent harvest in Eastern Europe in the first half of the 1990s. Now in Western Europe, God seems to be facilitating another harvest. One of the most memorable statements in the seventeen interviews was at the end of an interview with a Christian leader in Athens, Greece. In his final words, he declared, “I think this is the most effective place in the whole world to reach Muslims today.”

Donald McGavran encouraged practitioners to look for receptive people but warned that receptivity in individuals as well as societies “waned as often as it waxes. Like the tide, it comes in and goes out. Unlike the tide, no one can guarantee when it goes out that it will soon come back again.”<sup>11</sup> A window of opportunity is open to serve, bless, and share Christ

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11 Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*, rev. and ed. C. Peter Wagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 180-181.

with refugees in Europe. However, the window of receptivity will likely not remain open for a long period of time. As people settle into their new lives in a new land, their social structures will solidify again, and receptivity will likely wane. Now is the God-given season to live out the Great Commission with refugees in the West.

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