

Lessons from the European Refugee Response

EBF Mission Conference
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Types of services provided for the refugees by Baptist Churches and Lessons Learnt

VIENNA, AUSTRIA - Project: Gemeinde, Baptist Union of Austria

The church is called Projekt:Gemeinde (it translates as Project:Church) as is split across two districts of central Vienna. We were formed around 15 years out of the Baptist Union of Austria's student work. We try to be a church which reaches demographics who would not traditionally be interested in church - students, those who have no background with church, those who have been burned out with experiences of church in the past. We have over 150 members and attendance of around 200 each Sunday across four services (Spanish, German, Farsi and Mongolian). Once a month we have a joint service where all the congregations come together for communion and to worship together.

Our name is also our program. We try to be a church which is high on permission-giving and building people up to follow their passions. So the church has always had many related projects associated with it as people have felt a calling to start new things: an intern school, the refugee work, a summer camp for young adults called Burning: Church, and now developing a new church center which will have a co-working space, cafe, children's group etc. This will hopefully develop further links with the community and allow join in on conversations (for example, with millennials) where the church hasn't always been hugely well represented

I'm not sure if it's helpful for the case study, but we've just made a video about our refugee work, which you can find here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tg4CFcQNEFQ>

Question 1 - How did the church start helping refugees - just describe the history.

We have been working in the area of refugee relief and integration for around 15 years now, mainly but not exclusively with people from Iranian and Afghan backgrounds.

The church's refugee work started as a concrete response to one refugee who ended up being deported back to Vienna under the Dublin regulations. The church was asked to provide help and support to this individual, which we were glad to do. Gradually, this individual started inviting friends along to the church and a regular group developed out of this process. This was the

foundation for what we do now.

Question 2 - What kind of programs and services for refugees do you have now? How do you pay for it? How do you run it - volunteers, paid staff, etc.?

Over the years, we have added more facets to our refugee work - we offer weekly language Farsi services, faith courses, German courses, first-response trauma counselling, legal accompaniment and help with asylum processes, integration courses and help developing cross-cultural understanding. We also offer a weekly coffee and conversation course for women, which is aimed at language development, providing a safe space for fellowship, and offering opportunities for integration.

We have one part-time employee within the refugee work - Cesar Sotomayor, who is responsible both for overseeing the social work aspect and also functioning as the main pastor for the refugee group. Alongside him is a large team of volunteers, who help out with some of the legal advice, help running the services and teach in the German courses. We are also looking at expanding our volunteer base for the area of theological education and catechism in order to spread this work over a broader team.

We are funded through a variety of grants from Baptist organizations, including the EBF and German Baptist Aid. We are also reliant on the donations of countless individuals. This is then administered under the umbrella of Austrian Baptist Aid, which allows us some legal advantages in terms of VAT taxation and tax-deductible donations. Finances are one of the biggest bottlenecks of our refugee work - whilst it is amazing to see what God has provided and how generous people are, financial constraints prevent us from offering the service we would like to at some instances. For instance, we would like to be able to employ Cesar Sotomayor full time (to match the number of hours he works in reality), and offer other urgently needed services such as trauma counselling. However, we are unable to do this on the current level of income. We are currently exploring other funding opportunities, especially from the United States, and hope to be able to do something to resolve this situation as soon as possible.

Question 3 - As you look back, what would be some key lessons you have learnt which could be of value to others?

I think there are a few key lessons which I would draw out:

1. Be flexible and willing to respond to the needs that are actually present, not the needs we assume might be present.
2. Realize that some needs can be better served by other groups and organizations - for example, there are a lot of groups working in Austria offering immediate aid (blankets, emergency food, bottled water). It would be a waste of our resources to try and duplicate that effort. However, there are very few groups working with longer term integration.

3. Be aware that even within language groups, cultural and educational differences between different regions can be sharp dividing lines and cause tensions that need to be addressed. For example, the difference between a University-educated Iranian from Tehran and an illiterate refugee from Afghanistan is enormous, and this needs to be carefully considered when thinking about questions of indigenous leadership, integration, group dynamics etc.
4. Take time to hear people's stories - a lot of people who end up as refugees bring huge stories of trauma and loss with them. It's important to hear these stories and realize what is bubbling below the service.
5. Stay relationship based - one of the most frequent comments coming from people goes along the following lines: "When I left my home country, I lost all my friends and family. And now in this church, I have discovered a new family". Again, this is a dynamic which the church can provide that state actors and non-profits generally can't.
6. Sometimes responding to need means having to pivot strategy *very* quickly - for example, protesting the deportation of an at-risk refugee in our congregation meant having to come up with a peaceful vigil and accompanying media & legal strategy in a matter of hours.
7. Cover everything in prayer - when the Kingdom is expanding, and where people are giving their lives to Christ, then it is important to cover everything in prayer and stand against the destructive work of the enemy.

[FINLAND – Baptist Union of Finland \(Swedish\)](#)

Since 1991, when there was a reception center for refugees established in Oravais, the local Baptist church has been actively working with refugees and asylum seekers. They have during these years been in contact with hundreds of people from different parts of the world. Many have also come to the church and experienced a warm fellowship. No one really knows how many have been brought to Christ during these years, but at least 34 people have been baptized. Many are the times they have also tried to comfort people in despair.

From 1950's until 1990's the BU of Finland had mission work in Rwanda and Burundi. After the massacre in Rwanda we had some Rwandese people coming to Finland. They were Baptists and therefore came to us. They are now most of them very well integrated into the Finnish society. Our churches in Jakobstad, Vasa, Närpes and Helsinki have been of great help in this process.

The Baptist church in Jakobstad supports a group from Bulgaria and another from Afghanistan, both financially and with assisting them in contacts with the authorities and with the Bulgarians also trying to find work for them. They also allow both groups to have their services in the Baptist church free of charge.

Many Karen refugees came to Finland some 10-15 years ago and some of the families came to Oravais. Most of them being Baptists already, they found their spiritual home in the Baptist Church in Oravais, which since then has grown from 10-15 people to more than 70.

Present Crisis

Today 6 out of their 15 churches are helping between 200-250 refugees from the present crisis. At the early stages they provide night shelter for one night for refugees coming with late transport to a town. They collect clothes and other things needed, and some church donated money to the local Red Cross. They also provide food help for both migrants and native people and assistance with things that the refugees need help with. They cooperate with the local refugee coordinator and with the reception centers. In Oravais there is an organization called "Flyktingvännerna" (Refugees' Friends). It works on an ecumenical basis and the local Baptists are actively involved with it.

GERMANY: Union of Evangelical Free Churches (Baptists) In Germany

Type of Assistance That has been Provided till Date: Activities in refugee camps, with children, intercultural events and meals, distribution of clothes, sewing projects, sports programs, language courses, legal advice, practical help and support, renting rooms, "church asylum", Bible study groups, translation of worship services.

Example: The Baptist Church in Berlin – Tempelhof

Question 1 - A little background to the church

As a Baptist Church in Berlin we have a long history. Our vicinity is a part of Berlin that has a growing migrant population. In summer 2015 we were confronted with the suffering of the refugees. In August 2015 about 40 members of our church came together with Ralf Schilcher for brainstorming: We discussed the question, how we as a church should react to the visible need. After this 90-minute meeting we had a clear consensus that we want and have to help.

Question 2 - How did the church start helping refugees - just describe the history.

We then worked on specific plans, how we could reach out to the refugees in our vicinity. We asked ourselves, in which condition these people were physically and emotionally after their strenuous journey. What is their cultural background? How are they doing at the refugee camps and homes? How can we make contact with them - would they be receiving us well?

It was clear to us that their religion was different from ours. We decided not to make evangelism or conversion our first priority. We wanted to help them with their basic needs. We wanted to support them with their every-day burdens. We wanted to give them place and time to rest. We wanted them to be our guests and relax. We wanted to create a positive atmosphere.

Question 3 - What kind of programs and services for refugees do you have now? How do you pay for it? How do you run it - volunteers, paid staff, etc.?

Considering the needs of our guests and the potential of our church, we decided to offer a German language course and a clothes distribution center.

Very close to our church two refugee homes were opened, and we made contact there. We approached the managers there and got permission to present invitations to the refugees there. We produced posters also in Arabic and Farsi language. And we also contacted the huge refugee center at the Tempelhof Airport buildings, where several thousand refugees were accommodated.

Since October 2015 we have a group of volunteers who offer a language course for refugees every week. They work in small groups and are well accepted by our guests. From there they also developed private contacts. Several of the course attendants also visited our church services.

Also in October 2015 we opened the clothes distribution center. There we collect used clothes from our members and offer them to our guests. We also offer coffee/tea and biscuits and a place to sit and relax. They fill their bag with clothes and then meet with us for coffee and have time to talk with each other or with one of our volunteers. Sometimes these contacts continue during the week.

In this context we have met an Arabic-speaking pastor, his family and some other Arabic Christians. They now have Arabic Bible study once a week at our church. People from at least five different language groups have shown interest in the Christian faith. We have started Bible study groups in those languages and try to offer translation of our Sunday worship in three languages (with the help of “churchvox”-technology)

The financial expenses are not very high, so that for now it can be covered by donations from members. We had to buy material for the language courses, and have to cover the expenses for coffee and biscuits.

The organizational part is more demanding: we have to continually ask for donations for the clothes center. Men’s clothes and suitcases are most needed (as there are often now wardrobes in the refugee homes). The volunteer work has to be well organized and the clothes have to be sorted out and presented well. All work is done by volunteers from our church or friends for free.

Question 4 - As you look back, what would be some key lessons you have learnt which could be of value to others?

From the beginning our focus was on helping the refugees and showing them our welcoming spirit. This has also changed our own church people – they started to communicate much more with each other, as they had a common task to fulfil. Many have offered their help, given their

time or specific donations, many have helped as volunteers. The ministry for our foreign guests has definitely brought positive change to our church.

At our church services the guests are well visible, joining our worship and other meetings, eating with us, but also holding their own meetings in our facilities. And we find that it is not only us helping them, but also they enrich us through their presence. It is good for us to have these joyful people among us. It is good for us to share our wealth. Our guests bring new life into our old walls. We are grateful.

This ministry has developed its own dynamics: as above mentioned we have that Arabic group; now a Korean missionary has joined us, coming from an Arabic country and feeling called to minister to refugees in Berlin. He has heard of our ministry and wants to support it. Just like him, many others are coming and joining us.

We have experienced God's guidance in many ways. And also the support by other Christians, we had not known a few months ago. God has sent us people at the right time to support our work, otherwise we would not have made it.

The key lesson is: When a church starts a ministry like that, it has to know that change is happening. The church itself will change and a lot of change will come from outside. When a congregation is ready for that and not afraid, we recommend this ministry among refugees.

[CROATIA: Baptist Union of Croatia](#)

In Croatia: The trains transporting refugees arrived between 1:00 and 3:00 AM, and the volunteers working in those late hours needed a hot meal. Recognizing the need, CBA took over the responsibility of feeding 150 volunteers during the night shift. All activities in the camp in Slavonski Brod ran until the 15th of April 2016.

On April 15th CBA received a notification from the Croatian Ministry of Internal Affairs that the camp in Slavonski Brod will be closing and that the refugees that were in the camp at the moment will be moved to Porin, a hotel on the periphery of Zagreb. That hotel became the new asylum center.

The government expressed an interest in cooperation, and extended its gratitude to all organizations working in this refugee crisis, the biggest in Europe after WWII. In Porin, CBA is working hard on the integration of the refugees into society through humanitarian work and different projects. The local churches are giving lessons in Croatian language and culture on a daily basis. Many of the refugees expressed a desire to take part in regular worship services in those churches.

The Lord is providing many opportunities and ways for the refugees to be a part of those services and be in the fellowship with other believers around agape meals.

One of the new CBA projects in Croatia is setting up a safe house for children under the age of 18, where they can be cared for. The biggest need at this point is finding a house in Zagreb that would serve this purpose.

In Greece: Since the closing of the borders on the Balkan route, CBA activities spread internationally. After Macedonia closed its borders, CBA started working in Idomeni, Greece. Our humanitarian aid in Greece has been focused on the northern part of the country, which has more than 13 refugee camps. CBA is distributing food, hygienic supplies and building sports playgrounds in the camps. For more information about CBA's work in Greece see: "Hope Without Borders - CBA Refugee Respond" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCBJyTDzLuw>

FINLAND: Baptist Union of Finland (Swedish)

Type of Assistance That has been Provided till Date: At the early stages: providing night shelter for one night for refugees coming with late transport to a town. Collecting cloths and other things needed and some church donated money to the local Red Cross. Food help (for both migrants and native people). Assistance with thing that they need help with.

HUNGARY: Baptist Union of Hungary; Hungarian Baptist Aid

Assistance That has been Provided till Date: Food packages, hygiene kits, drinking water, sanitation facilities (W.A.S.H), medical assistance, warm clothing, sleeping bags, and blankets.

ITALY: Christian Evangelical Baptist Union of Italy

Response till Date: The Union is responding through a coalition of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy (FCEI) in the following projects - Mediterranean Hope, The Relocation Desk, and the Ecumenical Scholarship program.

Activities include:

Mediterranean Hope: Work is divided into four closely related units: analysis and information flows via the Mediterranean; reception and orientation of migrants and asylum seekers; integration programs; actions aimed at promoting effective migration policies that affect human rights.

The Relocation Desk: Activities at Fiumicino Airport in Rome

The Ecumenical Scholarship Program: Enables refugees to engage in postgraduate studies, vocational training, and Italian language studies. It also provides socio-legal counselling, on-the-job training, internships and vocational courses, career guidance seminars, internship programs in developing countries as a way of stemming the brain-drain effect, conferences and workshops.

NETHERLANDS: Union of Baptist Churches in the Netherlands

Type of Assistance Being Provided: Once the asylum seekers arrive at a permanent center, is contact with them possible. Many individuals have responded by providing clothing, sleeping bags, (stuffed) toys, and welcoming packages. Some eat and meet activities have been organized as well. Baptist churches are mostly joining these initiatives and not starting them themselves.

Have some migrant churches in the Union and contacts with new groups have increased over the years. A number of churches provide translation service for migrants, as well as working with asylum seeker centers in activities such as doing activities and eating together, as well as conducting Bible Studies.

There are some good interdenominational organizations that are specialized in different aspects of the work – for example www.gave.nl is an organization that tries to bring Christians and asylum seekers together. The Protestant Church of the Netherlands has a special representative for migrant-related issues, who is doing a lot in national coordination and political voicing.

SCOTLAND: Baptist Union of Scotland

Type of Assistance Being Provided: Food, clothing and money to local agencies, befriending scheme through Edinburgh Churches for Sanctuary, Christian Evangelism and discipleship, practical and pastoral help, help with Asylum claims, furniture and temporary housing for asylum seekers (Glasgow)

Many of our churches do not have any direct contact with refugees. Some of our churches will be in contact with migrant groups settling in different parts of Scotland. A couple of our churches are in contact with a Roma community in Glasgow. Our churches in Edinburgh will be working with Syrian refugees being relocated to Scotland.

Some of our Churches in Glasgow are directly involved in helping asylum seekers who have been displaced from East African countries following the Rwandan Genocide. Queen's Park Baptist Church runs International lunches and English classes for Iranian and Afghan refugees. There is a challenge to manage expectations and help them understand our justice processes. The church also translates their services into Farsi and through mission partners in Glasgow; they have experience in Turkish, Central Asian, Middle Eastern and some experience of Muslim cultures.

Another church in Glasgow has worked for many years with asylum seekers, in some cases offering temporary accommodation and help to furnish other accommodation. Another church in the East end of Glasgow runs English classes for Asylum seekers.

SERBIA

Union of Baptist Churches in Serbia (Serbia North)

Type of Assistance Already Being Provided: Food, water and personal hygiene items. Individuals in various churches have been helping small groups of migrants for the past three years. With the huge influx, they are providing assistance at the border with Hungary. The crisis worsened when Hungary closed the border to the refugees.

Union: Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists of Serbia (Serbia South)

Type of Assistance Already Being Provided: Food, waterproof jackets and mattresses, They are concentrating their work mostly on the camps at Miratovac and Presevo and also in the camps in Sid, towards the Croatian border.

SWEDEN

Union: Evangeliska Frikyrkan / InterAct

Type of Assistance Being Provided:

Asylum assistance, language cafe, material support, food and shelter. They have provided resources to help churches that want to engage with refugees in their local communities. They are also in the process of mapping and creating a network of churches involved in different ways ministering to refugees. So far 60 of their churches have responded telling about many different types of initiatives both of short term character but also ongoing longterm engagements.

Union: Ekumeniakyrkan/The Uniting Church in Sweden (UCS)

Types of services being provided: Language café with language training, advice, sports activities, information about Sweden etc., Cultural activities: Sharing cultures in festivals, music, dance, choir, painting etc. Training: Swimming, Sewing, bicycling, cooking. Invitations to church services and bible studies

UCS has been involved in assisting refugees and asylum seekers for many years. During the latter part of 2015 many new congregations became involved. They identified volunteers and opened their churches for temporary living quarters, provided food and psychosocial support etc. The government agencies responsible for refugees contacted all Swedish denominations, coordinated the civil society and provided some financial support.

The church has employed Arabic speaking pastors and additional staff with other backgrounds than Swedish to assist individuals and groups. Most activities have an interreligious approach. Four refugee coordinators have been assigned to assist congregations in different parts of Sweden.

A new interreligious project called “Accompaniment” has been developed to ensure peace and security at temporary refugee homes. Trained volunteers spend time at these homes, interact with refugees and create stability only by being present there.

The church is also active in working groups through the Christian Council of Sweden as well as other cooperating parties in the civil society who provide trainings and support. Pastors and deacons are trained in handling situations where people want to convert to another religion.

TURKEY: Turkish Baptist Alliance

Assistance that has been provided till date: packages of food (Rice, pasta, beans, potatoes, tea etc.), sanitary products, swaddling clothes, baby food/ milk and clothes, medical help, shoes, flat equipment.

Since 2014 we are helping refugees. We try to find out the poorest people (mostly mothers and children). Firstly, we contact the district manager for asking the needs and addresses of these peoples. Then we go to them and distribute handbills (coupon for the packages) and give them date and place where they can collect the packages. In Adana we screen the tents of the refugee camps and note the particular needs of the refugees and we give them according to their particular needs. In Izmir the Baptist church itself has become a shelter for Iranian Refugees. There is a community of sometimes 80 members gathering in the Baptist church. The Baptist church counts meanwhile 25 Iranian members.