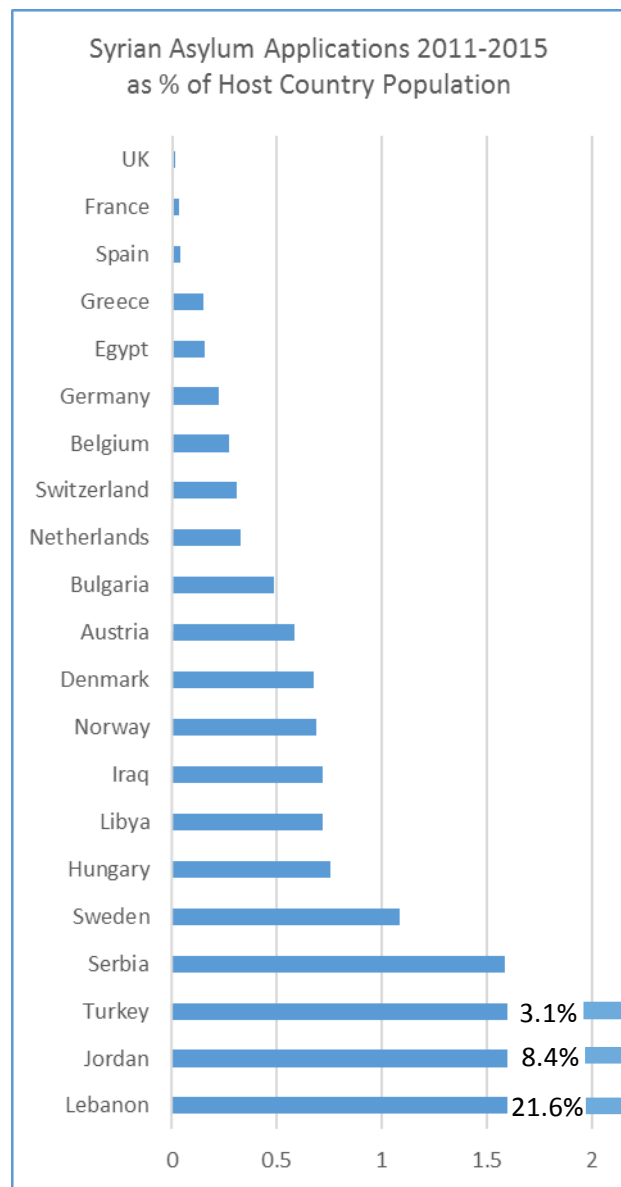
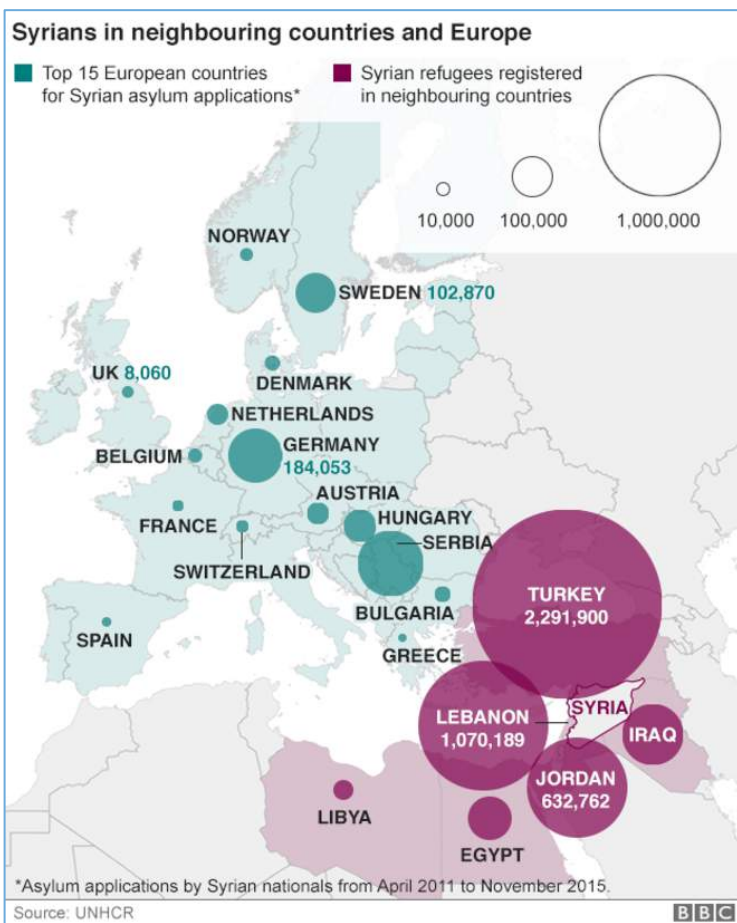


European Refugee Crisis

Anyone who has watched the news over the past 6 months has to be aware that there is a refugee crisis in Europe. Over 1 million persons mostly Syrians, Iraqis, Afghans and Eritreans fleeing war and violent oppression, entered Europe in 2015. The vast majority are entering irregularly and dangerously, ie using people smugglers to take them by often un-seaworthy boats to Greek and Italian islands. A small proportion apply for asylum in Greece and Italy, but most hope to travel onwards to other parts of Europe where employment prospects are better. While colder winter weather has slowed the movement of refugees, most observers believe this temporary and numbers will increase again in the spring. Under the 1951 International Refugee Convention, states have an obligation to provide asylum for refugees fleeing for fear for their lives. The crisis is how to manage the flow of refugees in a fair and equitable manner. So far, European countries have not been able to agree an equitable and fair sharing of the burden of care to which they are committed by international law. The graphics below show that so far burden sharing for Syrian refugees is anything but fair and equitable:



Christians are exhorted to “welcome the stranger” and a recent WCC/UN Conference on the refugee crisis identified how people of faith in Europe can contribute to mitigating the current crisis. The full statement coming out of the Conference can be found online at: www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/wcc-un-conference-calls-for-coordinated-action-

The main points in the conference statement are:

- greatly strengthened engagement by the international community in seeking political solutions for conflicts driving forced displacement of people
- more shared responsibility for alleviating the suffering of people affected by displacement
- better coordination and cooperation of Europe’s response to the refugee and migrant crisis
- actions that take the voices and views of refugees and migrants into account

What Can We Do?

The specific actions that individual Christians and Christian communities in Europe can take to help mitigate the current crisis includes:

- **Counter the xenophobic, racist and Islamophobic discourse around refugees and migrants, locally and nationally.** In addition to promoting the Christian values that see refugees and migrants created in the image of God, and having intrinsic rights and dignity, Christians need to emphasize that the vast majority of refugees and migrants are simply seeking a place of safety and opportunity for them and their families, something every person aspires to. Those highly-publicized cases of individual criminals and terrorists amongst the displaced are a small minority, no larger than the criminal population found in any community, anywhere. The fact is that refugees and migrants will be the salvation of European states with their low birth rates and declining populations. More workers are needed to support an ageing population and maintain quality of life, and refugees and migrants bring the skills and a hard-working attitude. Developed countries with high rates of inward migration are generally economically successful. These are the messages to communicate to our friends, neighbours, and colleagues.
- **Write to your political representative demanding that your country fulfils its obligations under international refugee law, taking its fair and proportionate share of the European burden.** If all EU states accepted refugees in the numbers that Sweden has (1% of Sweden's population are now Syrian refugees), the EU could absorb 5 million refugees. Instead, only 3 EU member states so far (Hungary, Greece and Italy – those standing to benefit from a reduced burden!) are ready to implement the September 2015 EU agreement for emergency relocation of 120,000 refugees. Switzerland has agreed to participate, but so far no relocations have taken place. Many EU Schengen states continue to hide behind the so-called Dublin agreement which says refugees must claim asylum in the first EU country of entry. This is clearly unfair given the geography of the EU, and we should lobby political representatives to call for the revision of the Dublin agreement to explicitly include emergency relocation measures. A glance at the above table of Syrian refugee asylum applications received as a percentage of national population underlines the inequity of the current situation. The names and party affiliation of Vaudoise Swiss National Assembly members can be found at <http://www.parlament.ch/e/organe-mitglieder/nationalrat/mitglieder-kanton/mitglieder-nr-kanton-vd/Pages/default.aspx> and addresses: http://www.parlament.ch/Poly/Adressen_RM/raete.pdf European expatriates should write to their home country political representatives. A sample letter is downloadable here.
- **Get engaged on a personal level with asylum seekers and migrants living in our local area.** Volunteer with church-based or other organizations providing services to asylum seekers and migrants – legal aid, French/English tuition, collecting needed clothing, etc. Get to know and make friends with asylum seekers and migrants, invite them into your home for a meal, take them on an outing, invite to events at our church, include them in sports activities, hire them to do odd jobs or work around your home. While the Swiss state does a good job in ensuring that asylum seekers physical needs are met, many asylum seekers are lonely and depressed over the ambiguity of their situation and the slow process of status determination. Personal contact goes a long way to mitigating these psychological stresses and will also assist in eventual successful integration in the local community. Canton Vaud has started a pilot program for hosting asylum seekers in private homes – there may be future opportunities for people with extra rooms in their homes. For more information on getting involved in the above opportunities contact: Joy Poppe jpoppestephens@gmail.com or see the separate document with a list of opportunities up and running.