

People on the Move – Refugees

The initial question: Who is a stranger?

Who is a stranger? When is someone a stranger? How do you become a stranger? A journalist from the Lutheran World Federation asked me these questions during an interview. I must admit that she completely unsettled me. A familiar concept lost its contours. Being foreign is not self-determined. On the contrary, you are given the title. Even worse: you can't change the title yourself. Others decide on the foreigners, on when they are accepted as native members. The concept of foreigner is exclusive. People still feel this generations later. People with a Turkish migration background have been living in our country for three generations. Most of them claim to be German. That corresponds to all objective facts. Nevertheless, there are social groups that still refer to German citizens as 'Turks' because they equate their migration background with 'foreign'. In all absurdity, they decide when they cease to be foreign. Despite all efforts to clarify the facts - the others pass judgement on their foreignness. (Fritz Blanz, Miteinander als Chance, p. 98)

This contradicts the right to self-determination as emphasised in the Marks of Conviviality. It states: 'Convivial living in diversity recognises the right of people to define themselves as they are and not to be pigeonholed into categories imposed by authorities or a church or organisation' (Tony Addy, Marks of Conviviality 2024)

Facts

Number of displaced people rises to over 122 million

According to the latest UNHCR Mid-Year Trends Report, 122.6 million people worldwide were displaced in June 2024 - 5.3 million people (or 5 per cent) more than at the end of 2023. Unfortunately, there is no improvement in sight.

On the contrary:

By mid-2024, there are already as many forcibly displaced people as in the populations of Germany, Austria, Switzerland and the Netherlands combined. (UNHCR, from the internet 2024-11-24, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics>)

European Union

In 2022, there were almost one million (965,665) asylum applications in the EU, 52.1 per cent more than in 2021 and the highest level since 2016. At the peak of the migration crisis between 2015 and 2016, the number of applicants was 1,221,690.

The number of first-time applicants in the EU in 2022 was 881,220, an increase of 64 per cent compared to the previous year (537,355). A first-time applicant for international protection is a person who has applied for asylum for the first time in a particular EU member state. The countries that recorded the largest relative increase in first-time applicants in 2022 were Ireland (+421.8 per cent), Croatia (+367.9 per cent) and Austria (+181.4 per cent). The country that registered the most first-time applicants in 2022 was Germany, which accounted for 24.7 per cent of all first-time applicants in the EU. This was followed by France (15.6 per cent), Spain (13.2 per cent) and Austria (12.1 per cent). The lowest numbers of first-time asylum applicants were observed in

Hungary (45 applicants), Slovakia (500) and Latvia (545). Syrians, Afghans, Venezuelans and Turks submitted the most asylum applications - together almost 40 per cent of all first-time asylum applicants. The number of first-time asylum applicants from Syria rose from just under 100,000 in 2021 to 131,970. However, their share of the total number fell from 18.4 per cent in 2021 to 15 per cent. Afghans accounted for 12.9 per cent of the EU total. Applicants from Venezuela and Turkey accounted for 50,050 (5.7 per cent) and 49,720 (5.6 per cent) applications respectively, almost 6 per cent each.

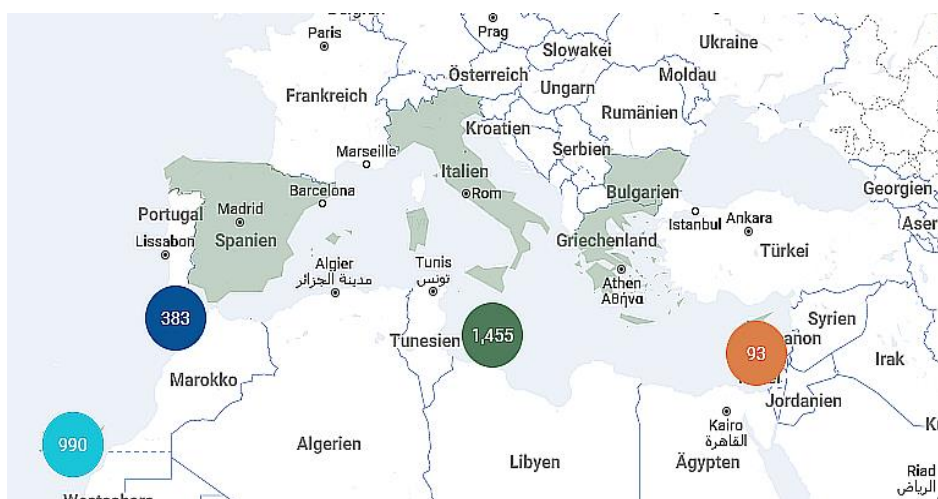
The EU member states approved a total of 384,245 applications in 2022, which is 40 per cent more than in 2021. Around 44 per cent were granted refugee status (22 per cent more than in 2021), 31 per cent subsidiary protection (48 per cent more) and 25 per cent humanitarian protection (72 per cent more).

The war in Ukraine is causing a new influx of migrants to Europe

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has forced thousands of people to flee their homes. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees UNHCR, 20 million border crossings from Ukraine have been recorded since the start of the war. So far, Germany and Poland have taken in the most Ukrainian refugees.

Since 4 March 2022, Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion have been granted temporary protection. This became possible after the EU activated the Temporary Protection Directive. This is an exceptional measure in the event of a mass influx or imminent mass influx of displaced persons from non-EU countries who are unable to return to their country of origin.

Irregular border crossings and deaths of migrants on their way to Europe is a specific challenge. In 2015 and 2016, at the height of the migration crisis, more than 2.3 million irregular border crossings were recorded. The total number of illegal border crossings in 2022 was 330,000, the highest level since 2016. The number of detected crossings increased on all irregular migration routes. The Central Mediterranean route remains the deadliest of all four migration routes to Europe: around 1,400 people were reported dead or missing in 2022. In total, there were almost 3,000 registered(!) deaths and missing persons.



*Graphic:
Four Main routes of refugees and number of deaths or missing people*

(UNHCR, internet from 2024-10-24, <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends>)

Recent trends

IOM's [Missing Migrants Project](#), the only current effort to document migrant deaths worldwide, has recorded the **deaths and disappearances of more than 63,000 women, men and children** since beginning data collection in 2014:

- Between 2014 and 2023, one in three people who died during migration died while fleeing a country in conflict.
- Globally, drowning was the main cause of death during migration (60%) in the past decade.

The most up to date figures can be consulted in the Missing Migrants Project (website at <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/data>). To see how the figures are calculated, visit the Project's methodology page at <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/methodology>)

Story about an unaccompanied minor refugee

While I was working with unaccompanied minor refugees (1998-2005) - the Bosnian war had just ended, and the refugee movements were still in full swing - a Bosnian girl was brought to our home. The police had picked her up at a motorway service station. A cousin wanted to take her to Sweden because her mother was living in an asylum centre there. So, it was our job to find the mother and find a way to reunite daughter and mother. Because a 14-year-old girl belongs with her mother, there can be no law that forbids this. We were quickly proved wrong.

Family reunification is not automatically guaranteed for refugee families. In our case, discussions with the authorities were unsuccessful. We contacted the Swedish consulate - unfortunately without success. We contacted the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, but they were also unable to mediate. European policy dictated that every refugee had to stay where they were picked up. This was considered the highest right - the right of the child and her mother was subordinated to this.

Would we treat our own children like this? I imagine an authority denying a minor German child contact with their mother for weeks on end. Even worse, the authorities are unable to offer a way to solve the problem and referred to legal provisions that require separation. What a scandal! All it would take is a short public appeal and the entire press would jump on the scandal. Everyone in the country would agree: something like this cannot and must not happen. But why then with refugee children?

Because we deal differently with strangers than we do with people we know. The mere fact that it is a foreign person from abroad who is guilty of crossing the border without authorisation - nothing more - is enough to make us apply different values and standards. The hierarchy of values resembles chaos. (Fritz Blanz, *Miteinander als Chance*, p. 92)

A theological assessment

The Israelites knew their role as foreigners all too well. It is not for nothing that the memories of Egypt are recorded in over 120 passages in the Bible, from the books of Moses to the New Testament letters. The time is remembered above all in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy and most recently in the Acts of the Apostles. Like trauma and liberation, the experience of slavery and the associated

experiences of a God who led them out of slavery were ingrained. It is an experience that has been anchored in the religious calendar of the Jewish people to this day. Just think of Passover or the Feast of Tabernacles, Purim or Yom ha Sho'a as one of the cruellest experiences of bondage in German-Jewish history.

Encounters with God among strangers

How did Jesus himself treat strangers? On the one hand, he was not squeamish in his treatment of strangers and people of other faiths, as reported in the story of the Greek woman from Syro-Phoenicia: 'It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs' (Math. 15:26). The 'children' meant the people of Israel and the 'dogs' meant the Syro-Phoenicians and their ethnic community. The relevance of the story can be seen in the definition of the territories. Today, Syro-Phoenicia is the territory of Lebanon, where Hezbollah and the Israelis are waging a cruel war. In this respect, Jesus' behaviour has a parallel to today. The end of the story is even more astonishing: 'Woman, your faith is great' (loc. cit. verse 28), said Jesus, and his own people saw this as an affront. To accuse a woman of a different faith of having 'great faith' was probably the last thing the chosen people wanted to accept.

We experience a similar snub in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Although the central question is about the definition of 'neighbour', in the story Jesus again took a man of a different faith as a role model, a Samaritan, from the people with whom Israel had been in dispute for over 400 years about the right path in religion. How could a man who had taken the wrong path in their understanding of religion become a role model? Jesus showed in him the behaviour that he expected from his own people, namely that they should recognise their neighbour as a person whom God had placed in their path. Here, too, a reference to the current situation is permitted: the Samaritan area overlaps with the West Bank, a Palestinian area. And here, too, the tension between the Israelites and the Palestinians is still being visualised today. Jesus wants us to put aside our self-righteousness and recognise the right path without prejudice and for the sake of the faith.

The question of how to deal with people of other faiths is brought to a head in the story of the centurion of Capernaum. He did not even want help for his own sake but asked it for one of his servants. The story in Luke's Gospel ends with the incredibly provocative sentence: 'When Jesus heard this, he marvelled at him and turned round and said to the people who were following him: 'I tell you, I have not found such faith even in Israel'' (Luke 7:9). Matthew, who told the story in a similar way, took the statement even further: 'I have not found such faith in Israel' (Matthew 8:10). A man who was not only accused of having an erroneous faith, but who was not believed to have any faith at all, became a shining example of a believer for the whole of Israel. More provocation is not possible.

Why does Jesus use people from other cultures, other faiths and other religions as provocative examples? To hold up a mirror to his own people.

Caution is therefore required when dealing with strangers. For we do not know whether God himself will not reveal himself as the companion of the stranger, the refugee, the asylum seeker. The question leads us to the comprehensive conclusion of the parable of the Last Judgement: 'In as much as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me' (Matthew 25:40). Encounters with God in strangers is a perspective on life that can affect us every day. And the

thought is not so distant, because God himself, who in Jesus shares our fate as a refugee, will also encounter us with his strangeness throughout our lives. Discovering God is a lifelong process, and our recognition remains a work in progress. Encounters with strangers should therefore always be a search for God and his message, an engagement with the foreign and the strangers and a willingness to be moved and changed.

I believe in God,
...who sees strangers as members of the convivial community. In God's eyes, convivial community cannot be a closed society. Conviviality is always an open and permeable concept.

I believe that God
...challenges us with strangers. In the worldwide fellowship of churches, in encounters with other religions, in the migration of people to Europe, God's spirit is among us. His breath, his Ruach blows and brings a breath of fresh air into encrusted thinking. God's presence is always also a presence of a questioning and scrutinising God. We have no choice but to find credible answers that stand up to the Gospel and give our lives new directions.

Dom Hélder Câmara (1909-99) once put it like this:

'Say yes to the surprises that thwart your plans, shatter your dreams, give your day a completely different direction - indeed, perhaps your life. They are not a coincidence. Let the heavenly Father have the freedom to determine your days.' (Câmara, 1981)

A practical example

Yes, we are a country of refuge - the declaration of Diakonia Bavaria

A paradigm shift took place in Bavaria at the turn of the millennium. The Christian-social slogan 'Bavaria (or Germany) is not a country of immigration' developed into the motto 'Immigration yes, but managed and controlled'. This meant that the Free State had also arrived in the reality of migration movements. During the high level of immigration in 2014/2015 due to the conflict in Syria, the reorientation of migration policy began to falter again. Diakonie Bayern responded with a declaration from its general assembly 'Yes, we are a country of refuge' as one of many church positions in favour of protecting refugees. This 'yes' was justified sevenfold in the declaration:

- (1) 'Yes, it is right and good that we offer refuge.
- (2) Yes, we also see refugees as a source of hope.
- (3) Yes, we accept the challenge.
- (4) Yes, everyone must help together.
- (5) Yes, we need a welcome from the outset and the necessary framework conditions.
- (6) Yes, we can overcome these challenges.
- (7) Yes, in all these issues we see ourselves as a diaconal organisation and a church with a special responsibility, because helping those in need and those seeking protection is at the heart of Christian faith.'

(Diakonie Bayern, 2014)

Fritz Blanz, Deacon
fritz.blanz@online.de