

‘We Cannot Look Away’ From Syrian Refugees

For decades, OM has prayed for Syria. Since civil war began in the country four years ago, Syrians have fled en masse, first to neighboring countries in the Near East and now to Europe and elsewhere. Although the need for food, blankets and shelter cannot be neglected, OM also uses these dire circumstances to share the good news of God’s love.

According to Robert Strong*, leader of OM Netherlands who is coordinating OM Europe’s refugee response, this is an open window to reach out to Syrians.

“In these months, when people are coming and crying out, having lost everything and searching for purpose, this is a time when God gives us an opportunity to share,” he stated. “We cannot look away when these things happen on our doorstep.”

Europe

Reports of the refugees arriving in Europe have crescendoed in the past weeks—thousands of people crowding into a Hungarian train station, spilling onto Grecian shores, crawling through Macedonian and Serbian processing points. OM teams on site, like the rest of the world, have been surprised by the sheer number of refugees, as well as their sudden visibility. They’ve also seen it as an opportunity to share God’s love.

“With those things happening right at the borders and places where OM members are, we cannot look away,” Robert reiterated.

The international news spotlight on refugees demands present action; however, many OM workers in Europe simply seek to continue long-term initiatives, both official and unofficial, among refugees and asylum seekers. Of course, a handful of OM

teams, including those in Hungary, Macedonia and Montenegro, have catalysed immediate responses to the current crisis. And a developing project, OM Europe's Safe Passage, will focus on meeting refugees at their initial entry points, providing information as well as water, food and essentials.

"They all want to move on," Robert explained. "We can give them love, some basic needs, a listening ear, some attention We want to make their entry a little bit softer and more pleasant than it is now."

Hungary

For seven years, OM Hungary has been visiting Bicske refugee camp, near a train station where scuffles broke out between police officers and Syrian refugees at the beginning of September.

"As long as we have been visiting the refugee camp we have encountered Syrian refugees," said Jill Hitchcock, communications facilitator for OM Hungary. When the situation in Hungary escalated, OM team members took Bus4Life, OM's Central and Eastern Europe ministry bus still in country after a summer outreach, to Budapest's Keleti railway station. After seeing the level of aid already being distributed there, the OM group moved Bus4Life to a nearby park, where they gave out hot drinks and hygiene bags to hundreds of individuals. They also talked to and prayed with those they encountered.

"Each and every person we served coffee (to) was very grateful for the love we showed in the midst of their very difficult situation," she said.

Going forward, OM Hungary will resume bimonthly visits to the Bicske camp on Sept. 24, reaching out not only to Syrians but also to "all those who are in need of help, the love of Christ and the message of salvation through Jesus," Jill added.

In addition, OM Hungary will continue to collaborate with

other church and mission group leaders regarding upcoming winterization needs and a more permanent response to the situation.

Greece, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia

During the past four years, OM Greece has worked with two churches in Athens, participating in feeding programs for arriving refugees, including Syrians. Now, due to the increased numbers of Syrians arriving in Greece, the OM team, newly restructured, is looking for ways to increase capacity of the feeding programmes and to provide clothes as well as other practical forms of relief.

Gabby Markus, field leader of OM Greece, is leading a new core group formed mid-September to coordinate the relief effort among the churches and different Christian organizations in Greece, including OM. Also, Hein van der Merve, training facilitator for OM Greece, has committed to being project manager for planned relief work on the island of Lesbos, where many Syrians, and others, enter Europe.

“Christianity’s not just a head-knowledge religion. It’s a practical lifestyle,” Gabby said, talking about the importance of OM Greece responding to the situation. “It helps us to fulfill what the Bible has called us to.” Churches in Greece have been mobilized to work together; “unity has been fostered in the midst of this crisis.”

So far, in Macedonia some believers have partnered with other formal relief organisations. Future suggestions include importing blankets and clothing to distribute at entry points. According to one long-term resident on site, “any response is going to need to remain flexible and creative.”

These efforts will likely expand with the implantation of OM Europe’s Safe Passage project. Currently, several OM workers are assessing the situation in both Greece and Macedonia,

looking for ways to bring hope to a dismal situation further complicated by changing weather conditions and political factors.

Volker Sachse, OM country leader for Montenegro and Serbia, said the team in Montenegro feels called to help.

“Serving in a region where people had to flee 20 years ago because of the war, we believe that we have to win the local church to participate and to respond to this crisis,” he stated.

While Montenegro has not been affected by asylum seekers to this point, Serbia has dealt with 1,200-3,000 refugees per day passing through the country (UNHCR, Aug. 28–Sept. 1, 2015). As a first step, Volker is visiting camps, pastors and churches in Serbia to ascertain what support is most critical. Secondly, in October, two teams from OM Lifehope in the U.K. will be redirected from Montenegro to the refugee path in Serbia in order to provide practical help in partnership with churches and other organizations.

Austria and Germany

Welcoming refugees is not a new concept for OM Austria. Part of that process involves connecting OM partner churches with other churches, NGOs and economic and political actors.

“We believe that OM is an important catalyst to (help) the Austrian church to get involved wherever they can, especially locally (like in local refugee homes) and through financial donations,” stated Philipp Eschbach, field leader of OM Austria.

Catalyzing involvement also means modelling it personally. OM Austria’s Building Bridges team reaches out to migrants with Muslim backgrounds. And for several years, individual OM workers in Austria have visited refugees in their temporary homes, conducted German language classes, and assisted with

practical tasks, like filling out official forms.

During the last three years, OM Austria raised more than 140,000 Euro for Syrian and Iraqi relief efforts in the Near East.

“Now, as there is a financial need for Syrian refugees in other countries, we would be very open to raise funds for that as well,” Eschbach said.

Germany, expecting to host 800,000 refugees this year, will undoubtedly be affected by the growing crisis. Some OM Germany teams, such as Xenos—which focuses primarily on discipling Muslim-background refugees and offers practical integration help, evangelistic services, children’s programs and German-language classes—already have contact with Syrians in their communities. Other individuals within OM Germany, as well as those in other western European countries, regularly volunteer with local church or government initiatives reaching out to refugees.

Near East and Turkey

While the response to the recent influx of refugees in Europe develops on a daily basis, OM in the Near East continues to pour funds and support into churches, projects and individuals involved with the four-year-old crisis. In the first half of 2015, OM in the Near East spent over \$1.5 million on relief, which benefits both Syrians and Iraqis.

Local and relationally-based assistance remains a top project value for the OM Near East relief program, in and outside of Syria.

“We’re committed to the preservation of the local church. We believe it is the hope for reaching Muslims in the region. Because the refugee crisis is important to the churches, it’s important to us,” explained OM’s Syrian and Iraqi relief project manager.

Additionally, the staggering number of Syrian refugees living in the Near East—1,113,941 in Lebanon (UNHCR, Aug. 25, 2015) and 629,266 in Jordan (UNHCR, Sept. 6, 2015)—makes it “the single biggest social, economical, political and spiritual issue in all four of our countries. To be relevant and reach people means we have to be responding in some way,” he added.

In Syria’s neighboring countries, OM’s response includes practical aid distribution, income-generating projects at refugee camps, education initiatives, and short- and long-term teams dedicated to loving and discipling Syrians. Inside Syria, OM continues to work with established local partners, offering training and funds to equip them to survive and serve their neighbours.

“Believers (in Syria) need courage and for God to open their eyes to see those around them who are open for the gospel,” stated one long-term worker who has discipled Arabs for decades. “Although we never thought that we would do relief in Syria for four years, because believers have a vision for their country and are willing to stay, we also should keep helping them. Some of these believers are a great example for us in their endurance and faith.”

Turkey too has experienced a flood of refugees across its border, with 1,938,999 Syrians living inside the country (UNCHR, Aug. 25, 2015). Although relief work has not traditionally been part of OM’s ministry there, “it was hard to sit back and watch when there was a huge need on our doorstep and others were asking for help from OM Turkey,” said the field leader. Aid requests began around two years ago, he reported.

More recently, OM Turkey has looked for ways to partner with local churches engaging with refugees and has formed a small team to be more involved in the future. In the last couple of months, workers have connected with a church in the capital, registering and distributing food to Syrian refugees, as well

as praying for them and answering questions of faith. Two women also assisted refugees living along the Syrian border by teaching them English.

And Beyond

With thousands of refugees immigrating around the world, and various governments accepting pleas to open their borders, OM seeks to respond, individually and corporately.

“Like us, these displaced people are created in the image of God,” said OM International Director Lawrence Tong. “As Christians, we have both a spiritual and moral obligation to help them. Their issues are our issues. I urge you to pray for them and their plight, and act with extraordinary courage and generosity to help these people settle into their new societies.”

To give to the OM ministries reaching out to refugees in Europe, or for information about how to get involved, please contact your local OM office.

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