


'Please Mister President, have mercy...': The Church's calling to reach out to refugees and migrants

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President Donald Trump's executive order to deport illegal migrants and refugees in the United States of America once again brought the plight of millions of migrants and asylum seekers worldwide to the attention of church leaders locally as well as within the ecumenical community. Revisiting the Old and New Testaments' message on the calling of God's people to reach out to the 'other' in the community, the article points to six perspectives on the church's calling to minister the migrants and refugees. The perspectives are: (1) all Christians are foreigners and sojourners in the world; (2) following in the footsteps of Jesus; (3) standing with the Lord against injustice; (4) welcoming migrants and refugees into the church; (5) praying for the harassed and helpless; (6) joining in journeys of hope. The circumstances of refugees and migrants, as well as the churches' calling to minister to them, are high on the agenda. In local churches, in the ecumenical community as well as institutions of theological training, much attention is given to the subject.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article offers a number of perspectives to reach out to the marginalised that may serve as guidelines in the fields of missiology, practical theology, ethics, church history and ecumenical studies to focus on the calling of the Church internationally as well as in South Africa. The article also offers a literature study of older and more recent publications on the subject, presenting several relevant perspectives.

Keywords: asylum seekers; migrants; refugees; the church's ministry to the 'other'; justice; prayer; journeys of hope; Confession of Belhar; Pope Francis; President Donald Trump; World Council of Churches; South Africa.

Introduction

To reach out to the 'other' in the community, to stand with the marginalised and the ostracised, to meet migrants and refugees in their need, does not come cheaply, it comes at a cost. In this article, I want to pay homage to Professor Nelus Niemandt who, over the years, has done just that. As moderator of the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church, he was involved in many initiatives to alleviate the plight and suffering of many in the South African community. He also presided over the groundbreaking decisions that were taken on the Dutch Reformed Church's stance on gay and lesbian believers, facing harsh criticism from many, inside and outside the ranks of the church. He stood his ground, researching, writing and speaking on the responsibility of the church – if it sees itself as a truly missional community – to stand behind the weak and the suffering, and in the South African context, the refugees and the migrants in our midst. During the past years, Nelus Niemandt, appointed as rector of the Huguenot College in Wellington, was in a unique position to train community workers and pastors, conscientising and equipping them for their role as guardians of the marginalised.

'Please, Mister President, have mercy...'

The new president glared at the bishop and, according to *Time* magazine, shifted uncomfortably as she spoke. At the traditional service held at the National Cathedral in Washington, the morning after President Donald Trump's inauguration on 20 January 2025, the Episcopal Bishop of Washington, Mariann Edgar Budde, in a soft voice but with strong conviction, referred to two executive orders signed by the president on his first night in the Oval Office. Firstly, he had recognised only 'two sexes, male and female', declaring 'that those are set at birth and cannot be changed'. Secondly, as promised on his campaign trail, Trump ordered immigration officers to immediately start ramping up deportations of people in the country without authorisation (Bennet 2025).

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Festschrift Nelus Niemandt' under the expert guidance of guest editors Prof. Johannes J. Knoetze and Dr Yolande Steenkamp.

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Bishop Budde implored the new president:

[T]o have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now. There are gay, lesbian and transgender children in Democratic, Republican, and Independent families, some who fear for their lives. (n.p.)

Those being targeted for deportation, she said,

[M]ay not be citizens or have the proper documentation, but the vast majority of immigrants are not criminals. They pay taxes and are good neighbours. They are faithful members of our churches and mosques, synagogues, gurudwaras and temples. (n.p.)

She added, 'I ask you to have mercy, Mr. President, on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away'.

Donald Trump was not amused, denouncing Marian Budde on social media as a 'radical Left hard line Trump hater' who is 'not very good at her job'. He said she 'brought her church into the world of politics in a very ungracious way' and demanded an apology.

Her sermon immediately drew attention, in the United States of America (US) as well as abroad. In an interview with TIME, Budde said she has 'heard from many people who are grateful that someone was willing to speak on their behalf' as well as those who 'have said they do wish me dead, and that's a little heartbreaking' (Bennet 2025).

Support came from many sides. Church leaders across the US declared that they were ready to launch a legal challenge if the new government enacts its threats against immigrants, especially to allow raids against foreigners in churches and other places of worship (Anonymous 2025; Peacock 2025). Referring to the stance taken by the American Catholic bishops, clergy and religious leaders, Pope Francis sent a special letter (dated 10 February 2025) to his brothers in the episcopate acknowledging their commitment in standing alongside migrants and refugees. He expressed his support for their efforts to uphold the fundamental dignity of every human person, and he highlighted the importance of pastoral accompaniment for those facing displacement.

Worldwide challenge

Migrants and refugees are not solely an American phenomenon. Across the world, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, and people displaced are crossing borders in search of a better life – according to the United Nations Refugee Agency, nearly 120 million. In Europe, there are 7 million migrants living in Germany, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy and other countries. Hundreds of thousands of migrants make their way, annually, to the United Kingdom. In Africa, there is an estimated 1.5 million refugees and asylum seekers, the most popular host countries being Uganda, Ethiopia and Sudan.

The South African context

During the past years, more than 250 000 refugees and asylum seekers have made their way to South Africa, most of them coming from South Sudan, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Mfutu 2024:2). Refugees and migrants in South Africa face many difficulties: socio-economic challenges, poor living conditions, xenophobia and systemic challenges including bureaucratic delays. The balance between maintaining national stability and supporting the refugee population remains a central issue in South African politics and society. New laws leading to stricter border controls and regulations make it harder for refugees to enter the country or gain permanent residency (Gordon 2024:486–502). Sporadic xenophobic violence remains a serious problem. Tensions between locals and foreigners often are strong, especially when housing and employment opportunities are at stake (Mfutu 2024:2).

Xenophobia in South Africa is of an extremely violent nature. Between 1994 and August 2024, xenophobic violence resulted in 669 deaths, 5310 shops looted and 127 572 displacements. The violence is often fuelled by the perception that refugees and migrants are responsible for high unemployment and crime rates in South Africa – a theory which has never been confirmed with sound, statistical evidence. One of the most glaring examples of the crises migrant workers faced was the fate of the illegal miners at the Stilfontein Mine in the Northwest province. A large number of miners – many coming from neighbouring countries – started to rework abandoned gold mines, to find an income for themselves and their families. The South African Government with the help of the Police Services decided to put an end to the illegal operations. Officers were stationed at the shaft heads, and the flow of water and food to the underground workers was disrupted. After a long stand-off, more than 1000 emaciated and ill miners surfaced, bringing with them the bodies of 87 miners who perished underground. Harrowing stories were told by the miners of co-workers who resorted to eating cockroaches, even human flesh, to survive. Reports on the harsh treatment of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers in South Africa continue to sound alarm bells in the media.¹

Perspectives on the Church's calling regarding refugees and migrants

How are the churches in South Africa as well as in the rest of the world are to understand their calling regarding refugees and migrants? In the 1980s with the adoption of the *Confession of Belhar* by the Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa, and subsequently by many Protestant denominations worldwide, Article 4 was subjected to special scrutiny and often heated debate. It reads (*author's own emphasis*).²

1.Cf. current reports by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, HIAS, The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Journal of Refugee Studies and Africa Insight. Of particular interest are recent articles published by Goldberg (2024), Gordon (2024), Khan and Lee (2018) and Masiko-Mpaka (2023) (see Bibliography).

2.The full text of the Confession of Belhar is published on the official websites of the Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa, as well as the Dutch Reformed Church. Thought-provoking accounts of the history, context and content of the Confession are to be found in Durand (2016).

We believe that God:

- Has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people.
- *In a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged.*
- Calls the church to follow him in this, for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry.
- Frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind.
- Supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly.

Does the Bible really declare God to *be in a special way* the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged, and may I add, of migrants and refugees? Paging through the Old and New Testaments, the answer is in the affirmative. While the terms 'refugees' and 'migrants' are not to be found in Scripture, the Bible has much to say about 'strangers', 'foreigners' and 'sojourners', people living among the children of Israel, but were from another ethnic group.

In the *Old Testament*, special attention was given to the 'strangers' in the community.³ Isaac was an outsider when the Lord called him (Gn 26:3):

Live here as a foreigner in this land, and I will be with you and bless you. I hereby confirm that I will give all these lands to you and your descendants, just as I solemnly promised Abraham, your father.

Remembering this, and having experienced many years in exile in Egypt, themselves, Israel had to take care of the outsiders in their midst:

Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners because you were foreigners in Egypt. (Ex 23:9)

The foreigners residing among you must be treated as native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God. (Lv 19:34)

Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. (Zch 7:9–10)

The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. (Ps 146:9)

In the Law of Moses, specific instructions were given on how foreigners should be treated, how they were to be included in festivals and celebrations, how they needed to be cared for and fed (Nm 35:15; Dt 14:28–29; 16:14, 26:11). Farmers were instructed to save gleanings from their field for the poor and the foreigner (Lv 23:22). The story of how Ruth, a widow from the tribe of Moab, was accepted in the tribe of Israel, serves as a poignant illustration. In Ruth 2:10, she asks Boaz in whose field she was gleaning, 'Why have I found such favour in your eyes that you notice me – a foreigner?'

3. All the texts from the Old Testament as well as the New Testament in this article are quoted from the New International Version (NIV).

The *New Testament* carries the same message. In Luke 4:16–30, Jesus read from Isaiah 61 – the classical Messianic text – to the people of Nazareth, his hometown:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because He has anointed me
To preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
And recovery of sight for the blind
To release the oppressed,
To proclaim the year of God's favor.

To the amazement and joy of the congregants Jesus added: 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing'. And to the anger and frustration of the scribes and Pharisees, who realised that Jesus omitted the latter part of Isaiah's text, where the prophet announced that the day of vengeance had come, that the enemies of the Lord would be judged (Is 61:2).

But Jesus' message was clear. God's vengeance had been superseded by grace, by the announcement of God's favour to all. Throughout his ministry Jesus demonstrated God's love and care to the outsiders, the 'other' in the community, crossing the border of Israel to heal the daughter of a Canaanite woman (Mt 15:21–28), making time to speak at length to a Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1–26), even rebuking his disciples when John and James wished to pray down fire on a Samaritan town which refused them hospitality (Lk 9:45; cf. Bosch 1991:108–113).

After Jesus' death and resurrection, his disciples understood that they were to follow in their Master's footsteps. They, too, were called to reach out to the 'other', to demonstrate God's grace by their everyday actions. 'Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it' (Heb 13:2). Moreover, they would soon learn that they had become foreigners themselves. 'Live out your time as foreigners here with reverent fear' (Pt 1:17).

Six perspectives

Taking into consideration the needs of millions of migrants and refugees world-wide, taking serious note of the above-stated Biblical injunctions, how should the Church define its role? Moreover, how should the Christian community act? Gleaning from the many statements made by ecumenical bodies and local churches during the past decades as well as from the experience of many in the field, I want to point to six perspectives that deserve our attention.⁴

Christians are foreigners and sojourners in the world

Christians, all of us, are sojourners, walking in the footsteps of Abraham, living in a foreign land. Jesus, with Joseph and Mary, spent his early years as a migrant in Egypt, a refugee from the wrath of King Herod. In his above-mentioned letter to the American bishops, Pope Francis drew a parallel

4. The texts of the quoted statements are available from the official websites of the World Council of Churches (WCC), the Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). I made use of a very comprehensive overview by Magezi (2021).

between the Holy Family's flight to Egypt and the experience of many migrants today. He reminded his fellow bishops of the words with which his predecessor Pope Pius XII began his Apostolic Constitution on the Care of Migrants, widely regarded as the 'Magna Carta' of the Church's thinking on migration (Bordoni 2025):

The family of Nazareth in exile, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, emigrants in Egypt and refugees there to escape the wrath of an ungodly king, are the model, the example and the consolation of emigrants and pilgrims of every age and country, of all refugees of every condition who, beset by persecution or necessity, are forced to leave their homeland, beloved family and dear friends for foreign land. (p. 2)

Living as foreigners in a foreign land is part and parcel of the Christian life. 'Our citizenship is in heaven', Paul reminded the Christians in Philippi, 'from where we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ' (Phlp 3:20). In the year 112 AD, Pliny the Younger, governor of the Roman province of Bithynia, wrote a report to the Roman emperor Trajan, expressing his bafflement at the behaviour of Christians⁵:

Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life.... And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labour under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country... They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven.... Christians love all men, but all men persecute them. Condemned because they are not understood, they are put to death but raised to life again. They live in poverty, but enrich many; they are totally destitute, but possess an abundance of everything. They suffer dishonour, but that is their glory. They are defamed, but vindicated. A blessing is their answer to abuse, deference their response to insult.

In contemplating our responsibility towards migrants and refugees in South Africa, in our time, it behoves us to join ranks with them, to identify with our sisters and brothers in their pain and suffering. Jesus shared in their plight, and so should we. We, too, are aliens in this world. 'For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking to the city that is to come' (Heb 13:14).

Following the example of Jesus

Jesus, as stated precedingly, not only devoted Himself to the needs of the people around Him – the poor, the marginalised the sick, non-Jews and Samaritans, alike – He also called on his disciples to follow Him. Matthew, one of them, remembered how Jesus when he saw the crowds, 'had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' (Mt 36). He recorded how the Lord invited the men and women around Him: 'Come to Me, all you are weary and

burdened, and I will give you rest' (Mt 11:28). Jesus called his followers to journey with Him, to share his love and concern, to meet Him among the suffering (Mt 25:35):

For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink. I was a stranger, and you invited Me in.

Doing so, comes at a cost. Jesus, to serve the people, to demonstrate God's love for the world, put his life on the line. And he expects from us to take up our own cross, to follow Him.

What does this mean in our world, in our time, confronting the needs of migrants and refugees? 'Jesus Christ', Pope Francis reminded his American colleagues (Bordoni 2025):

[I]s the true Emmanuel. He did not live apart from the difficult experience of being expelled from his own land because of an imminent risk to his life, and from the experience of having to take refuge in a society and a culture foreign to his own. (n.p.)

The implication to us is breathtaking. In the US, it means standing behind Bishop Budde, confronting an angry president, calling for mercy to the fearful. In the United Kingdom (UK) and in Europe, it asks of church leaders standing – with Christ – on the beaches where boats are offloading cold and desperate migrants seeking a new beginning, opening their arms and their churches to them. In South Africa, we are called to fall in line with frustrated Zimbabweans trying to renew their permits and documents, facing angry xenophobic crowds around spaza shops, standing at the open shafts of the Stilfontein mine with food and medicine, pleading with government officials and police officers to show for mercy migrants whose only hope for finding work and sustenance for their families was illegal mining.

What is asked of us, is not easy. It does come at a cost. But it carries its own rewards and surprises. 'The encounter with the migrant, as with every brother and sister in need', Francis reminds us 'is also an encounter with Christ' (Bordoni 2025).

Standing with the Lord against injustice

When the Belhar Confession was adopted in the 1980s, it was mainly directed at the scourge of apartheid, protesting the injustices and pain caused by the policy of Separate Development. It raised a strong voice against the theological argument offered by some in defence of the policies of the ruling party. Today, 40 years later, the context has changed. In 1994, the New South Africa was proclaimed; bringing an end to apartheid, to the atrocities of the past. The era of the Rainbow Nation had come. But South Africa is still a very fractured society, struggling with seemingly insurmountable problems, old and new. The need for reconciliation and justice is as pressing as before. What Belhar confessed in this regard is extremely relevant to us today, especially in our ministry to the refugees and migrants in our midst (Article 4):

⁵The full text of Pliny's letter, together with a comprehensive discussion, may be found on the Wikipedia Website. Cf. Bettenson (ed. 1950:3–6).

We believe that the church:

- Must ... stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
- As the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others (Article 4).

Standing against injustice, allowing righteousness to emerge like an ever-flowing stream, may take different forms in different situations. In Europe where the presence of refugees and migrants has reached crisis levels, where communities are divided on the issue and political parties are exploiting the crisis for their own selfish agendas, ecumenical bodies and church leaders are challenged 'to stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged'. Paging through many reports of meetings and conferences called by the World Council of Churches (WCC), the Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME), the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), et al., different facets of the churches' calling come to the fore.

At a meeting of the WCC at Lunteren (Netherlands) in 2016, the need for conscientising and advocacy was highlighted. To campaign for justice, proper information was needed. The circumstances of refugees and migrants, the factors that made them leave their home countries, the experiences in the host countries, were to be studied.

Sometime the focus was on the real needs of the migrants, challenging the churches to stand behind them. At the WCC's 10th Assembly held in 2013, the ecumenical churches were called to actively fight for justice and peace for migrants and refugees, to defend the vulnerable people's rights to education, health care, property ownership, travel and access to birth and death certificates. Without protection from any state because of their lack of identity, the Assembly noted, stateless people are vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and violence. Women and children are particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

Campaigning for justice implies speaking truth to power. There are many examples, like: Olaf Fykse Tveit, general secretary of the WCC confronting the World Economic Forum presenting his Ten Commandments of Food Aid; and Heinrich Bedford-Strom challenging the European Heads of State on their handling of the refugees arriving by boat. During his first presidency, in 2017, the WCC and the LWF released a joint statement against Donald Trump's executive order to ban migration to the US ostensibly to prevent foreign terrorist entry. In 2024, Pope Francis addressed the political leaders in the US and Europe: 'It needs to be said clearly: There are those who systematically work by all means to drive away migrants, and this, when done knowingly and deliberately is a grave

sin'. In his 2025 statement in support of Bishop Budde and the Anglican bishops in the US, Francis underscored the universal truth 'that the measure of a just society is how it treats its most vulnerable members' (Bordoni 2025:2).

Embarrassingly, in 2015 the WCC deemed it necessary to address the xenophobic violence that had resulted in the killing of several, destruction of property and the displacement of thousands of individuals in our own country. 'The spasm of violence against migrants in South Africa has a special poignancy, considering South Africa's leadership in fighting against racial discrimination and exclusion' (Tveit 2015:1). In 2019, the WCC sent a delegation of 16 to meet with President Ramaphosa and his cabinet, to discuss their concerns. Recently, in 2025, the leadership of the South African Council of Churches strongly criticised the government's handling of migrants, especially about the migrant workers at Stilfontein mine.⁶

Campaigning for justice and exhorting governments and community organisations to provide in the everyday needs of migrants and refugees, forced the churches to turn to themselves as well. Over the years the ecumenical community, Protestant, Orthodox as well as Catholic, pledged material support: food parcels, financial help and shelter. Many South African Churches are following suit, providing succour, shelters, food, financial support and educational opportunities. At its recent General Synod, the Dutch Reformed church of Southern Africa reiterated its commitment to combating racism and xenophobia, and related intolerance. In many congregations nationwide, this commitment is honoured by numerous projects to help the poor and the marginalised, to feed and to shelter migrants and refugees in the cities as well as in rural areas (Dutch Reformed Church 2023).⁷

Welcoming migrants and refugees into the churches

In Old Testament times, we have noted earlier in the article, the call to Israel was to accept strangers in their midst. 'The foreigners residing among you must be treated as native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God' (Lv 19:34). In the New Testament, the obligation was not only to be hospitable to strangers (Heb 13:1), but to accept them as brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul's message to non-Jewish believers was clear: 'You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household' (Eph 2:14).⁸

Documents from the WCC as well as the CCME reflect the many attempts by churches in Europe and beyond to invite

6. Videos with the responses of the SACC and other churches to the Stilfontein crisis, are found on the ENCA website, 18 January 2025. A harrowing account by Bishop Victor Palan who visited the mine of the treatment of the miners, was published in the Crux Daily Newsletter (Chintom 2025:1).

7. General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church 2023: Comments on the issues of racism, discrimination, xenophobia and ethnicity

8. In a recent publication, Mishke and Caynor (2025:28–32, 111–112) elaborate on the importance of Ephesians 2, to understand Paul's views on the place of the foreigner in the Church, where strangers and aliens are accepted into the body of Christ. Cf. Kahnke's discussion of the different definitions of 'shalom' used by many in recent times (*op cit*, p. 129).

migrants and refugees into the local churches, to live up to the biblical injunctions, to make the outsiders feel at home, to accept them as brothers and sisters in Christ. This does not go without challenges: in areas where communities are polarised around migration issues, where the presence of foreigners in urban and rural areas at times evoke strong emotional, even xenophobic, responses, local churches are called to reach out, to love and to reconcile.

To encourage the formation of truly inclusive communities, where people from different countries, with varied backgrounds and with diverse cultural traditions, are united into one body, is not always easy; but the essence of the church, the heart of the gospel of reconciliation, is at stake. Many churches in Europe have opened their arms to migrants, accepting that their presence challenges the churches' identities and future. The churches realise that they need to have to consider new factors such as multicultural worship and the nature of migrants' participation in church. Migrants are encouraged to take up leadership positions to reflect the diversity and unity of the Church. Language is a perennial challenge, and both the WCC and the CCME are closely monitoring the ways in which churches all over the continent incorporate different languages in their liturgies and preaching (Magezi 2021:5–7).

The challenges are many, also to us in our South African context, but we may proceed in the knowledge that what we are attempting firmly rests upon our common faith in the Triune God. 'In God's grace', one report affirms (Magezi 2021):

[T]he love which enables the unity of the different persons of the Trinity also enables us to live in the differences of our cultural and individual particularity ... The Holy Spirit brings Christ's reconciliation to the human community in such a way that we are not reduced to a single type but enhanced in the richness of our diversity. (p. 6)

Pray for the harassed and helpless

When Jesus confronted the needs of the people who were harassed and helpless, He turned to his disciples. The harvest was plentiful, He told them, but the workers are few. Eventually He was to send them into the harvest, but before that his command was: Pray! 'Ask the Lord of the harvest... to send out workers into the harvest field' (Mt 9:38).

Confronted by the dire situation in which refugees and immigrants find themselves in Europe, the dangers of the journeys they undertake, the many who are drowning in their attempts to cross the Mediterranean Sea, the three general secretaries of the WCC, CCME and the Conference of European Churches (CEC) – following Jesus' example – called Christians to urgent prayer, prayers for the refugees and the coast guards, as well as for the churches to reach out and to embrace the migrants with the love of the Lord. Prayer, they declared, should be prioritised as an intervention, thus acknowledging God's ability to change people's attitudes to the refugee and migrant crises across the globe (Magezi 2021:9).

Prayer is crucial to the refugees because God is the primary defender of the vulnerable' through prayer we bring the migrants with the challenges they face before the throne of God, who is their protector and their provider. But prayer is equally important to the churches to remind them that they too must depend on God in their outreach to the vulnerable, and that through their urgent prayers, churches and congregants become co-workers in the harvest of the Lord (Magezi 2021:10–11).

Join in journeys of hope

In his Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees (24 September 2024), Pope Francis called upon all believers to show support to the millions of migrants across the world, and to join them on 'journeys of hope', recognising that the Lord is present in the millions of people who are forced to migrate because of conflict, persecution, poverty and the climate crisis. On our journeys of hope we are reminded 'that our citizenship is in heaven from where we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ' (Phlp 3:20).

'See in the migrants of our time, as in those of every age, a living image of God's people on their way to the eternal homeland' Francis wrote in his Message (Bordoni 2025). Like the people of Israel in the time of Moses, migrants flee from oppression, abuse, insecurity and discrimination. As was the case in the story of Exodus, migrants encounter many obstacles along the way: hunger and thirst, toil, disease. They too are tempted by despair. But God walks *with* his people. Even more, He walks *within* them. During the Exodus, God gave instructions for a tent to be erected, a place of worship, the symbol of his presence, that could be moved every time they changed location. We need to travel with the modern-day migrants, encouraging them on their journey, discovering that the Lord accompanies us on our mutual journeys of hope.

Every encounter along the way represents an opportunity to meet the Lord; it is an occasion charged with salvation, because Jesus is present in the sister or brother in need of our help. In this sense, the poor save us, because they enable us to encounter the face of the Lord. (Bordoni 2025)

Pope Francis concluded his message with a prayer:

God, Almighty Father,
we are Your pilgrim Church
journeying towards the Kingdom of heaven.
but as if we were foreigners.
Every foreign place is our home,
yet every native land is foreign to us.
Though we live on earth,
our true citizenship is in heaven.
Do not let us become possessive
of the portion of the world.
You have given us as a temporary home,
together with our migrant brothers and sisters,
toward the eternal dwelling you have prepared for us.
Open our eyes and our hearts
so that every encounter with those in need
becomes an encounter with Jesus, Your Son and our Lord.
Amen.

'Mister President, have mercy!' Bishop Mariann Budde pleaded with President Trump. With her, many churches and ecumenical organisations have taken the cause of refugees and migrants to heart. Rightly so, because (as the Belhar Confession has it):

We confess that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people; that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged; that God calls the church to follow Him in this, for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry...

The final question is: are we, confronted by the migrants and refugees, the 'other' in our communities, committed to transform our confession into action? Are we willing to take up the plea, no matter the cost, and to join our sisters and brothers on our journeys of hope?

Postscript. On Easter Monday, 21 April 2025, the sad news reverberated across the world: Pope Francis had passed away. His personal journey of hope reached its destination. His funeral mass at the Vatican was attended by 400 000 mourners. Among the many heads of state who came to pay their respect, sat President Donald Trump. In his funeral oration, Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re reiterated Francis' plea for mercy for the migrants and refugees across the globe. And in his first Sunday Mass, the newly elected Pope Leo XIV did the same; calling to attention the millions who are suffering, committing himself and the church 'to walk with you as a united church searching all together for peace and justice' (Bordoni 2025).

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Author's contribution

P.G.J.M. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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