



## **Introduction**

**by Archbishop Dr Stefan Heße (Hamburg),  
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**“Shaping Migration in a Humane Manner”: Presentation of the Joint  
Statement on Migration of the German Churches  
on 29 November 2022 at the EKD Office Brussels**

In October 2021, almost 25 years after the publication of their first Joint Migration Statement, the Catholic German Bishops' Conference and the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD), in cooperation with the Council of Christian Churches in Germany (ACK), presented a new ecumenical document: “Shaping Migration in a Humane Manner”. In July 2022, an English translation was published as well. A summary of the statement is available both in German and in English. I am very pleased that today we have the opportunity to engage in an exchange about the contents of this document. It is more than suitable that we do this in Brussels, the seat of several EU institutions. For when it comes to achieving a humane migration and asylum policy, the European level has become at least as important as the national level.

When the churches in Germany published their first Joint Migration Statement in 1997, the focus was on different issues than it is today: For a long time, the claim that Germany is not a “country of immigration” prevented a realistic migration policy; urgent questions of integration were largely ignored. The so-called “asylum compromise” led to a serious restriction of the right to asylum enshrined in Germany's Basic Law. And the European level was not nearly as significant in migration and asylum policy as it is in our days. With their new Migration Statement, the churches take into account the developments of the last decades. They aim at taking a differentiated look at the complex reality of migration: from the perspective of various disciplines (theology, history, social and economic sciences) as well as from the perspective of practical experiences in church and society.

The document was developed in a broad participatory process: The German Bishops' Conference and the Protestant Church in Germany formed an interdisciplinary working group, which I had the privilege of chairing together

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with Praeses Manfred Rekowski. Within the working group, smaller ecumenical teams were formed to deal with the various issues. The draft texts produced in this way were then submitted to experts from the field of practical migration work and to an external academic feedback group for critical reading. In addition, consultations took place at the different levels of church life in Germany. Not only the Catholic and Protestant churches were involved, but also the other Christian denominations.

The Migration Statement intends to provide orientation and guidance. The question connecting the different topics is: How can we shape migration under imperfect and contradictory conditions in ways that do justice to human dignity? In their preface, Bishop Georg Bätzing, Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm and Archpriest Radu Constantin Miron describe the approach of the document as follows: “The publication is made with the awareness that the churches themselves have a long history of dealing with migration. In doing so, we continue to be learners: we are learning anew how the Holy Scripture can be read and understood as a book of migration, how interculturality is lived in the everyday life of the Church, how living together in diversity can succeed and how the long-standing plurality can be valued in a new way. At the same time, the churches must learn to cope with the tasks ahead under changed conditions: that migrants are given their rights; that discrimination and racism are overcome; that binding basic values, which are particularly needed in a plural society, are protected and strengthened; that peace and justice grow and creation is preserved – in Germany and worldwide.” (*Shaping Migration in a Humane Manner*, p. 12)

Allow me to take a closer look at some parts of the Migration Statement. As the document is over 200 pages long, my outline does not aim to be exhaustive, but to give you a first impression; and to invite you to read the document yourself in a critical and fruitful manner.

The introduction to the Migration Statement is followed by a chapter that is already programmatic in its title: ***Living in a Migration Society (Chapter II)***.

It outlines how Germany has come to understand itself as a diverse migration society and identifies some significant political milestones along the way. More recent experiences are also discussed: Particularly in the wake of the refugee movements of 2015/2016, a great willingness to get actively involved in welcoming people who seek protection arose – with church and civil society playing a crucial role. However, controversial, sometimes even polemical debates on migration issues occur again and again. The chapter describes that public debates in this context are often related to the areas of “social cohesion”, “security” and “economy and welfare”. To draw the necessary distinctions, a constructive culture of debate is needed.

This chapter is succeeded by reflections on the history and sociology of religion: ***Church – Shaped by Migration (Chapter III)***.

How are different churches and faith communities characterized by migration and what does this mean for their pastoral ministry? Since its inception, Christian faith has crossed linguistic, cultural and political borders. As the development of Christianity progresses, migration proves to be a constitutive factor. Today, more than half of the people in Germany with a transnational migration history are Christians. Promoting a sense of belonging and community under the signs of plurality and diversity is an ever more important task for the churches.

In a next step, the Statement invites us to read the Bible as a “resonance chamber” of migrants’ experiences: ***Migration as a Central Theme of Christian Faith – Perspectives of Biblical Theology (Chapter IV)***.

In substantial parts, the Bible is migration literature. The migration experiences passed on from generation to generation are a vital source of biblical spirituality. They have found expression in psalms and prayers, but also in norms of living together. Migration is a biblical “place” where faith and theology are shaped.

Migration serves as a “magnifying glass” for society as a whole, rendering visible more clearly strengths and weaknesses. Seeing the world from the perspective of the marginalized and excluded, the biblical texts enable insights that can be challenging – especially for people who themselves live in prosperity and security.

In order to make adequate decisions in the field of migration, one needs not only knowledge of facts, but also an ethical compass. On the basis of Christian social teaching, chapter five thus outlines some ***Socio-Ethical Orientations (Chapter V)***.

Which measures to manage migration are necessary and responsible, and which are not? How are decisions taken on who may stay – temporarily or permanently – and who has to leave? What are the consequences of certain decisions not only for the host society but also for the migrants’ countries of origin?

Important starting points to arrive at some guiding principles are again two biblical insights: the conviction that God created all people with equal dignity and the commandment to love not only one’s neighbour but also one’s stranger. No border can legitimize the disregard for human dignity and the denial of protection in the face of serious danger. When we look at the desperate situation of refugees in the Mediterranean, on the border with Belarus or in the Balkans, this principle has a clear political significance.

Furthermore, Christian social teaching upholds the principle of the “universal destination of earthly goods”; that is to say: the resources of creation are given to all people for their use. The

right of a person to have access to essential goods takes precedence over particular claims to ownership. Thus, any categorical limitation of the common good to the national or regional level would be an ethically problematic provincialism.

Pointing beyond the current framework of international law, the Joint Statement formulates two ethical principles for a global migration order. The second presupposes the first: (1) Nobody should be forced to emigrate from their homeland. And: (2) Everyone should be able to immigrate to a new homeland. As a regulative ideal, this pair of principles can provide guidance for striking a just balance. The problem is not migration as such, but migration driven by violence or suffering, by war and armed conflicts, climate change, hunger, poverty and lack of prospects. In view of the horrors of the Ukraine war and of the worsening climate crisis, these destructive dynamics become even more evident. Unresolved global problems must not be carried out on the backs of refugees and migrants.

The longest chapter of the Joint Statement deals with *Political and Legal Fields of Action (Chapter VI)*. In doing so, it addresses four major areas:

First of all, the chapter elaborates on ways in which states are bound by universal human rights. The political options of the democratically legitimized legislator are not insignificant, but find a limit when human rights standards and other norms of international law are affected.

Next, the relationship between migration, development and global justice is examined more closely. Contrary to what is sometimes suggested in political debates, development cooperation cannot be used as a simple means to reduce migration movements. Rather, the aim must be to create perspectives for people in their countries of origin and to allow for a rights-based approach of migration. At the same time, the relevance of multilateral agreements and exchange forums is emphasized, for example within the framework of the Global Compact for Migration or the Global Compact on Refugees.

Thirdly, the chapter discusses asylum as a European policy field. Acknowledging the fact that the EU has achieved a lot in the past decades, the document assesses that on the path towards a “common area of protection and solidarity” there have been some moments of deadlock or even steps backwards. A solidary-based common asylum system that would do justice to the concerns of the refugees, while guaranteeing a fair division of responsibility among member states, is still not in sight. In the course of this evening we will talk about this question in more detail. Already now, I would like to thank everyone taking part in this important debate.

Last but not least, the chapter addresses questions of integration. The churches in Germany call for an approach of participation and recognition. Integration is a reciprocal process which may include difficult deliberations on legal, political and cultural norms. While differentiated access rules to the welfare state are politically permissible, they must not lead to relativising human dignity. Furthermore, equal dignity in the long run must include a realistic option for equal

participation in the political community. As a country of immigration, Germany should actively strive for a “culture of naturalization”.

In the final chapter, a summary of important issues is presented in the form of 15 theses: ***Church Action in a Migration Society: Tasks and Orientation (Chapter VII)***.

These self-commitments of the churches comprise the following points:

- Racism denies the God-given dignity of every human being. The churches remain dedicated to the task of fighting all forms of xenophobia and enmity towards human beings.
- A religiously diverse society requires the protection of religious freedom for all and lively forms of interreligious dialogue. The churches' activities in this area need to be continued.
- The churches strongly advocate for overcoming undignified working conditions of migrants. They stand up for the end of exploitation and human trafficking.
- Undocumented migrants also have a right to education and to medical care. The churches call for protecting their human rights and for ways into legality.
- Furthermore, the churches continue to promote and defend the rights of refugees and asylum-seekers. These include: the right to family reunification, the special protection of vulnerable groups, safe and legal access routes to Europe, effective sea rescue missions in the Mediterranean, the prevention of push-backs at the external borders; and in general: the advocacy for a European refugee policy that is committed to human rights.

Dealing with refugees and migrants in a humane manner is a common task for the future – in Germany, Europe and worldwide. The churches in Germany intend to participate in this effort: with their Joint Migration Statement, but above all through practical commitment, together with partners from the realm of politics and civil society.

Thank you very much for your attention.