

Mediterranean Grave: The German Experience of the Refugee Crisis

Sponsored by the Network for Peace through Dialogue and The Migrant Center of the Church of St. Francis of Assisi

A discussion of the refugee crisis in Europe with a response about what the U.S. is doing, could do, and should do.

May 25, 2016

Speakers:

Monika Treber, PhD in Sociology, Goethe University Frankfurt/Main, Prof. and Rector of Catholic University of Applied Social Sciences in Berlin during 1999-2013. Member of the lay council of the archdiocese of Berlin, commission on Refugees and Migrants

Ute Wannig, Sociologist, International Coordinator of Christian Initiative International Learning since 1985.

Donald Kerwin, Director of the Center for Migration Studies of New York (CMS) since September 2011. Directed CLINIC – the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc., in Washington, D.C. – from December 1993 to October 2008.

Virginia Dorgan, Director of Network for Peace through Dialogue welcomed the speakers and introduced the program.

Monika Treber gave an overview of the arrival of a million refugees in Germany, coming by way of the Balkan route from Turkey, through Greece, Macedonia, Hungary and Austria. There was a sudden increase in their numbers in 2015 due to the collapse of overcrowded and under-funded UN refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon, Isis attacks in Iraq and Syria, the bombing of Syrian cities and a highly profitable smuggling industry that developed at the borders. She described German efforts at settlement of the refugees in the country.

Ute Wannig said that in her opinion there was a “Europe crisis,” not a “refugee crisis.” The acceptance of refugees in the whole European Union as was done in Germany did not come to pass as Chancellor Angela Merkel expected with the 28 other countries in the EU. Instead of welcome, the rest of Europe ended the policy of open borders within the EU and are making efforts to send the refugees back to Turkey and to return them to their own countries. Nevertheless in Germany Ute said that a whole economy of making money by providing tents, shelters, emergency food, personnel, etc. had developed. In Germany, the national economy became stronger in 2015. The economic system thrives “on the backs of the refugees”.

Donald Kerwin presented a statistical overview of the situation of refugees, who are mainly driven by conflict, violence and persecution. States have failed to reduce armed conflict. Although the U.S. provides substantial funds in aid for refugees, its response to the global refugee crisis has not been commensurate with the need. For example, the US has accepted only 3,600 Syrian refugees since the start of the Syrian civil war, and has granted temporary protected status and political asylum to perhaps 7,000 more Syrians, a very small percentage of the nearly 5 million Syrian refugees. The greatest needs are to stem the crises that displace persons, allow imperiled persons to reach protection, to provide humanitarian aid and to invest in communities that accept them, and to expand third-country resettlement opportunities. To increase acceptance, churches and civic groups must create more opportunities to serve and know refugees. Politicization of the issue, stoking fears of terrorism, should be avoided. Compassion and empathy are needed.

The people attending the event were seated around tables. After the presentations, these participants were given two questions to consider within their groups. First, as usual in the Network's dialogue events, there was a quick reading of the guidelines for Dialogue Practices, briefly: Listen for understanding; Speak from your heart as well as your mind; Suspend judgment; Hold space for differences; Remain open to all outcomes; Slow down – let there be spaces, silence in the dialogue.

The questions were:

1. How important is the issue of migration?
2. Where do you see this being discussed and with whom?

Following these discussions, a reporter from each table summarized the comments of people at their table for the whole group. The panel then responded to the comments reported.

Group 1 Reporter: There is a lack of information here at all levels. What is the truth? What are the threats to the current economy? The situation is different in Europe than here—there they have a negative birth rate and can integrate the refugees into the economy. In the U.S. we have a soap opera. Some Americans feel they are losing their country and scapegoat immigrants. When there are discussions in churches and other responsible places, there will be disagreements.

Group 2 Reporter: In the U.S. we went from a situation where we needed immigrant workers to one where there are not so many opportunities for them. Change must come from the population receiving immigrants. Discussions in parishes are not enough. There must be interfaith collaboration in order to overcome the fear of people we don't know.

Group 3 Reporter: Why don't we talk about other refugees – it's happening all over the world. When you bring in large numbers, what impact does it have on the resources of the country? Citizens are asked to pay expenses they were never asked to share. We have

that here. We need to disseminate information that refugees are not trying to suck out our life blood but just trying to preserve life. “I need to take care of my child.”

Group 4 Reporter: There are refugee communities in Connecticut. It requires a multi-faceted project to assist their socialization and it is a lot of work. The money – where is it coming from? The UN is losing funding. Thousands stranded in UN camps in Jordan and Lebanon are being abandoned. We are human beings and need to take care of one another.

Group 5 Reporter: We are all migrants from somewhere. Now there are parallel streams and causes of conflict: From Peru, the north of Brazil, Bangladesh, and Mexico – How much energy it takes for people to survive. There is too much individualism and not enough community-based solidarity. The UN depends on member states and there is no political will to do anything about conflict.

There was a break in the group reports in order to give members of the panel an opportunity to respond to the comments.

Monika: It would be nice to think that Germany can quickly assimilate the refugees as workers because of the demographics (Germany is an aging society). However, most of them are uneducated in their own countries and do not have the skills needed in Germany’s highly technological economy. They would need a lot of education and training. Maybe in the long term it could work. The U.S. has a lot of experience with immigrants and we look to your country for research in how to do it. We have had people staying as guest workers for 60 years.

Donald: We are all migrants. This is ultimately a “person” issue and it’s about empathy. Migration is a timeless phenomenon, seen over and over in Biblical stories. We need to be more welcoming and less afraid. I live in a suburb where people come from 95 nations and speak many languages. In my experience, people who live in places where they don’t have the opportunity to interact with different types of people are the ones who are most fearful and angry about newcomers. Once you have an opportunity to be in contact, the fear of others is not so acute.

There is perhaps a commonality between some anti-immigrant persons and refugees. Refugees have been displaced. Persons who oppose generous immigration and refugee protection policies often feel economically and socially displaced (and with some cause), and immigrants/refugees can be a convenient scapegoat.

A lot of good will in the country is not being tapped. We have seen great generosity in many US communities to the Central American children and families fleeing gang violence. It need not always be the government which addresses a problem.

Group 6 Reporter: In our group we focused a lot on underlying causes –economic disparities between the economic South and the economic North and wars were the current major reasons. What we see in the newspapers is a focus on people’s fear of terrorists arriving. A person in our group informed us that there will be a conference of heads of state at the UN in November to address the issues.

Group 7 Reporter: This issue includes everyone and needs to be discussed everywhere. Understanding and compassion are needed. We should become aware of the reasons for the crisis and the political implications. We all come from somewhere.

Group 8 Reporter: Migration is being forced because of the powers that be. There is an effect on each country. The land is being destroyed by war. We don’t see this being discussed in large forums. Good to start small and looking at the impact of migration on this country. We will all benefit from their input as well as receiving them.

As Monika and Donald responded to the previous group of reports, Ute made the final response from the panel.

The underlying cause is the crisis of capitalism. We have hunger, despair, and destruction of land. The system is in the hands of a few multinational corporations. Private profit goes into the pockets of certain elites. There is a growing right-wing movement. Some are like the Trump people who feel displaced. Many of these are from East Germany. They say “no.” The right wing manipulates these people.

Virginia Dorgan thanked the panelists and all the participants to conclude the evening.