

# Pittsburgh-area Christian groups call for tolerance in resettling refugees

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By Peter Smith / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

In a political climate in which Muslims are being tarred for the extremism of terrorists claiming to act in the name of Islam, growing numbers of Christian groups in the Pittsburgh area are issuing statements calling for tolerance across religious lines.

“Let us not be tempted by recent calls to turn thousands away from our shores solely on the basis of their religion,” said a statement Monday by Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania, a broad coalition of Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant leaders.

“We know many are rightly anxious about the security of our borders,” the statement said. “But the specter of fear will never protect us; only by steadfast confidence in our deepest values will our beloved country remain truly secure.”

After deadly attacks in San Bernardino, Calif., and Paris raised questions about how some extremists from Muslim lands immigrated to the West, numerous Republican governors, lawmakers and presidential candidates have opposed resettling refugees from Syria’s brutal civil war here. And GOP presidential candidate Donald Trump called for barring all Muslims from immigrating to the United States.

Church leaders said the United States has security-screening policies, but they said a wholesale ban on people of any religion should be rejected.

“Christian Associates has had a longstanding commitment to religious liberty,” said the Rev. Liddy Barlow, its executive minister. “We feel the need to reaffirm our commitment to that.”

The statement didn’t name any particular candidate or legislation, but Rev. Barlow said such sentiments have become part of everyday conversation and social media.

“Our call as Christians is not to be afraid, and we need to move forward with faith and with hope, especially at this time of year,” she said. “If we give in to fear, then we are really turning away from the kind of openness to our neighbor that Jesus calls us to.”

Also recently, the Pittsburgh Presbytery issued a statement recalling the gospel of Luke's account of the baby Jesus and his family fleeing to Egypt to escape persecution, and it cited the ideals inscribed at the Statue of Liberty of welcoming the freedom-seeking "huddled masses" to America.

"We want to remain loyal to Jesus as he was always kind and compassionate to troubled human beings," said the Dec. 10 statement from the presbytery, the Allegheny County branch of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). "... God's love conquers fear, and we call upon God's love to overcome any fears and fear-mongers now."

Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, also affiliated with the denomination, has offered housing space for refugees.

"This is a teaching/learning opportunity not only for students preparing for ministry but also for all of us in the seminary community," said president David Esterline.

Pittsburgh Roman Catholic Bishop David Zubik has repeatedly said the country can welcome refugees while also adequately screening them for security risks. He also has called for prayers for the victims of terrorist attacks and for peace in Syria so that its refugees can go home.

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