

Christian coalition in Pittsburgh urges U.S. to accept more refugees

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By Peter Smith / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Leaders in the region's largest coalition of Christian churches have called on the United States to increase its intake of refugees from the war-torn Middle East and for local church members to help in refugee resettlement.

The statement comes from the executive committee of Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania, representing an array of regional Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant governing bodies. It also calls for passage of a pending U.S. House bill that would expedite refugee processes for religious minorities, including Christians, who are targeted by the Islamic State group.

The House last week passed a bill, now pending in the Senate, that would tighten security requirements before allowing in refugees from war-torn Syria or Iraq in the wake of the Paris terrorist attacks this month that claimed 130 lives. Most state governors and some Republican candidates for president have similarly called for restrictions on Syrian Muslim refugees, despite Obama administration assurances that security screening of refugees is far more rigorous than in Europe, which is facing the largest refugee influx since World War II.

The Christian Associates statement is full of biblical injunctions to care for the needy and cited a gospel account of the baby Jesus and his family fleeing to Egypt to escape a death threat.

"Today, as we watch millions of people escaping war, persecution and despair in the Middle East and Northern Africa, we recognize our Lord and Savior in their plight," the statement said. "Our faith compels us to ... respond with compassion to those who suffer, regardless of their faith or background."

Bishop Dorsey McConnell of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh said it's "important we be absolutely unambiguous about this" in the face of opposition to resettlement efforts. The refugees are "fleeing exactly the violence we are concerned about."

Several faith-based and other nonprofit refugee agencies help to place refugees from around the world in the Pittsburgh area.

The Rev. Liddy Barlow, executive minister for Christian Associates, said the group applauds Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf and Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto for their willingness to bring in refugees in the face of harsh criticism.

Christian Associates' full council will vote on the measure next month, but its executive committee chose to release its own stance now given recent events.

"The tone of the dialogue here in the United States regarding refugees within these past few weeks led us to believe we need to speak a particularly Christian voice into that conversation," Rev. Barlow said.

The goal is to "encourage our communities to remember our foundational values of hospitality and care for those who are in the greatest need."

The U.S. government conducts "a comprehensive system of screenings before refugees are admitted," she added. "We care a great deal about the safety of our communities, and we do not believe that welcoming the victims of this crisis will compromise our security."

The statement urges church members to pray for refugees, contribute to church groups working with refugees and volunteer to help with local resettlement.

It also urges political leaders to work to solve the underlying conflicts that refugees are fleeing, to expand the number of refugees the U.S. plans to receive from the Middle East and North Africa, and, in particular, to support the Protecting Religious Minorities Persecuted by ISIS Act, a pending federal bill that would speed the processing of minority groups endangered by the Islamic State group.

Christian Associates consists of 26 regional governing bodies in various Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant traditions in 10 counties around the region.

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