

Relocation as a Response to Persecution

RLP Policy and Commitment

Initially adopted by the Religious Liberty Partnership in March 2011; modified and reaffirmed in March 2013; modified and reaffirmed, April 2017, with the counsel and support of the Refugee Highway Partnership.

Context

- Christians in many parts of the world face continuing or increasing persecution – whether by State authorities, extremist groups, communities or families.
- In Scripture we see three main responses to pressure and persecution: to accept and endure (e.g. 2 Timothy 3:10-13), to challenge or resist (e.g. Acts 22:25-29), and to flee (e.g. Acts 9:23-25).
- Especially within the Middle East, those facing religious persecution, and those supporting them, are often quick to assume that relocation (i.e. fleeing or extraction) is the only viable option, or that it is the most appropriate response.
- Amongst church leaders across the Middle East there is a strong consensus that indigenous Christians should stay in their countries wherever possible, and where that is not possible, that they should stay within the region. Alongside their passionate pleas is the expressed desire to not be judgemental of those who choose to leave the region.
- Based on the testimony of Christians who have relocated from the Middle East, and on our experience of supporting those facing persecution, it is our firm conviction that hasty relocation outside of the region can be problematic both for the individual(s), families and communities concerned as well as for the wider church.
- As members of the **Religious Liberty Partnership** (RLP), we recognise the need to work collaboratively to meet the many support needs of those Christians persecuted because of their religious belief or practices and to nurture the continued presence and witness of the church where it is enduring persecution. We seek to follow the RLP Best Practices for Ministry to and with the Persecuted Church.¹

Policy

We advise and assist Christians under persecution to relocate out of their country/region only as a matter of last resort, where no other viable options are available.

¹ Available at www.rlppartnership.org/downloads/RLP_Best_Practices_March_2014.pdf (accessed 16th June 2016)

Commitment

In considering relocation as a response to religious persecution:

- We seek to understand and verify the nature of the situation before determining a response.
- We give due consideration to the advice of local church and ministry leaders and respond, where possible, with their authorisation.
- We acknowledge that some situations arise where people are obliged to make decisions on relocation in very short time frames; we will provide support as soon as we are able.
- We take account of medium- and long-term implications – both for the individuals, families and communities involved and for the church – as far as we are able.
- We consider in-country and in-region relocation options before pursuing out-of-region options.
- We collaborate with others to meet the many support needs of those facing persecution, whether they remain within their communities or are forced to relocate.
- We will contribute to the management of expectations regarding relocation by promoting a realistic understanding of the challenges involved so that those considering fleeing, together with those providing support, can make well-informed decisions.
- We will participate in analysis of the underlying causes of religious persecution and work with local Church leaders to identify and implement actions to mitigate the effects in the short term and address the causes in the longer term.

Rationale

Supporting healthy churches. We seek to support and foster the building up, not the depletion, of national churches in the Middle East – whether historical/recognised churches or the more recent church movements. In many countries in which the church is facing persecution, national church leaders have urged their Christian compatriots to remain in the country and not to emigrate. They recognise that, whenever possible, indigenous Christians should remain so that the church will continue as a witness to Christ and as a recognised part of a diverse society. The challenge to remain is especially great for the emerging communities of believers from non-Christian backgrounds who lack official recognition. The cycle of conversion-persecution-relocation must be broken if these communities are to flourish. The hasty relocation of Christians without realistic expectations or adequate planning also places a strain on the receiving church communities.

Promoting biblical perspectives. We seek to maintain and foster biblical perspectives on suffering and persecution within the worldwide church – including those supporting persecuted Christians. We may need to rethink our theology, recognising that being faithful followers of Jesus is not about avoiding persecution. We need to understand the different Biblical responses to persecution and depend on the Holy Spirit as we seek to discern the appropriate response in each situation.

Maintaining local witness. For some who face persecution, there may be appropriate ways in which they can manage relationships and adapt behaviour, work or patterns of religious meetings so that they can maintain a faithful witness while remaining in their location. Families and friends of those

from non-Christian backgrounds are unlikely to be convinced of the relevance of a faith that divides and alienates family members.

Avoiding unintentional messages. By too readily or too hastily advising/assisting persecuted Christians to relocate to “the West,” we can inadvertently send a signal that “the West” is in some way superior. This is an unhelpful attitude within the global church, and is sometimes promoted by those who have successfully settled in the West as well as by Westerners. We can also encourage spurious claims of religious persecution among those who may primarily be attracted by the lure of opportunity and material benefit they perceive elsewhere.

Prioritising local options. For those forced to flee because of threats to life or family, local (in-country or in-region) relocation options, where available, are typically more straightforward logistically, can be implemented more rapidly, are less costly financially, and involve less cultural adjustment than out-of-region relocation. It needs to be acknowledged that in-region options may be challenging to sustain in the longer term.

Advocating freedom of religion and belief. We believe that Christians together with all other religious communities should be afforded religious freedom. Such rights are described in the international covenants derived from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). We summarise religious freedom as the right to practice a religion of one’s choosing alone or with others in private or public. Religious freedom should apply equally in communities of refugees and IDPs. We acknowledge that similar rights apply to adherents of non-religious belief systems and that such freedoms are derived from a number of basic rights including those of conscience, belief and assembly. We commit to advocating for freedom of religion and belief for all.

Promoting pluralistic societies. We recognise that the presence of indigenous Christian communities is part of the rich heritage of Middle Eastern countries. We believe that the creative dynamism that is typical of multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies enriches communities and nations. We acknowledge that some senior political leaders in the Middle East have recognised this, implicitly if not explicitly. For example, on 24th September 2014 King Abdullah of Jordan in an address to the UN General Assembly stated: “Let me say once again: Arab Christians are an integral part of my region’s past, the present, and future.”² President Sisi of Egypt has articulated his support for Egyptian Christians and demonstrated it by attending a service on 6th January 2015, Christmas Eve for Egyptian Christians. Such leaders are acknowledging that indigenous Christians enrich and promote cohesion within the societies of which they are a part. Some Middle Eastern writers have made similar statements.³

Supporting through partnering. Through partnership and cooperation, in-country or in-region alternatives can often be found, for example through short-stay, employment or study visas. If in-

² King Abdullah’s English language website; 24th September 2014; http://kingabdullah.jo/index.php/en_US/speeches/view/id/546/videoDisplay/0.html (accessed 5th August 2015)

³ One example is Marwan Muasher’s book *The Second Arab Awakening – The Battle for Pluralism* (Yale University Press, 2014)

country or in-region options are not available, there may be viable options outside the region. Sometimes these may not be long-term options (e.g. studying at a seminary or other theological institution) – but they leave more open the possibility of return (see below).

Meeting the range of support needs. In any case of relocation, it is vital that adequate attention be given to the wide range of support needs that arise for the individuals and their families – including spiritual, emotional/psychological, financial, medical, logistical, educational, occupational, etc. Through partnership and cooperation many of these needs can be met locally or in-region – sometimes more fully or adequately than out-of-region.

Recognising immigration challenges. Visa, immigration and asylum rules mean that out-of-region relocation is often time-consuming and challenging, with significant rates of non-acceptance, though work or study visas may be available for those with suitable qualifications. In particular, asylum/refugee systems and procedures are typically time-consuming (sometimes taking years), challenging (in terms of the necessary burden of proof), restrictive (for example, with limitations on movement or employment while awaiting determination of refugee status), and uncertain (there is a high rejection rate, with those rejected often then facing more severe pressure). For those who convert to Christianity we acknowledge that identifying genuine converts can be problematic for the authorities. We will assist wherever possible, providing honest assessments of their claims to have converted and what difficulties they may face if they were to return to their own country.

Recognising the scale of refugee movements. We acknowledge that many refugee systems have faced overwhelming demands and that the international community’s long-standing failure to implement effective burden sharing mechanisms has strained the resources of those countries in the Middle East and elsewhere hosting large numbers of refugees. Consequently, we undertake to continue pressing for local and international action to address the causes and effects of forced migration. We remain supportive of all efforts to resolve armed conflicts. We will continue to press for humanitarian support to be provided to all in need and to be supportive of the efforts of Christians throughout the Middle East actively engaged in such activities.

Acknowledging challenges for those who leave the region. Those who relocate outside their region often face significant challenges in adjusting – for example, to a new climate, language, culture and society, new temptations and even new church environments. Experience shows that there can be increased risk of some individuals falling away from Christian faith. For example, anecdotal evidence suggests that a majority of Middle Eastern Christians from non-Christian backgrounds who flee from persecution by relocating to the “the West” end up losing their faith in their new location.

Maintaining the possibility of return. Relocation outside the region, especially if through asylum or refugee systems, is usually a long-term or permanent move. Even though some express a desire to return to their countries when the security situation allows, or are encouraged to do so, experience shows that very few in fact do so. Typically, viable in-country or in-region options leave more open the possibility of return. By leaving open the possibility of return for as long as possible, we also leave open to persecuted Christians the possibility for forgiveness and reconciliation with

perpetrators, for the encouragement and strengthening of the local church, and for positive impact within their societies and nations through the presence and witness of the church.

Relocating outside the region as a last resort. Although we advocate in-country or in-region relocation when it is necessary for Christians to flee, we recognise and affirm that it is sometimes appropriate and necessary for Christians to relocate outside their country or region, including through asylum/refugee systems. However, we affirm that out-of-region relocation should be the option of last resort. For those who have no option but to resort to asylum/refugee systems, these systems remain vital. We acknowledge that 'Western' countries have traditionally been the most generous in offering refugee resettlement and the best equipped to do so. We recognise that some countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America are involved in resettlement programmes. We commit to supporting those obliged to use asylum/refugee systems, and to seeking improvements to these systems.

Further analysis and information

More detailed analysis of the pressures facing those who relocate because of religious persecution is available from Middle East Concern (office@meconcern.org) and other members of the RLP. For more information, please contact the RLP at: info@RLPartnership.org.

The Religious Liberty Partnership (RLP) is a collaborative effort of Christian organisations from over 20 countries focused on religious liberty for all. The RLP seeks to more intentionally work together in addressing advocacy, research, assistance, and in raising the awareness of religious restrictions worldwide.