



A MOMENT TO CHOOSE:

**Risking to be with
Uprooted People**



A Resource Book
World Council of Churches
Unit IV: Sharing and Service
Refugee and Migration Service

Book Review

A moment to choose: risking to be with uprooted people: a resource book. Refugee and Migration Service of the World Council of Churches, 1996. Reviewer : Tony Culname

It is the very dimensions of the global issue of refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons and international migrants that make reading about them so compelling and disturbing. For example, this Resource Book notes that, today, nearly one in every 50 human beings can be regarded as having experienced forced displacement. In 1995, there were about 15 million conventional refugees, some 30 million persons internally displaced by political violence and human rights violations and, 85 million international migrants. The Book contends that many of these international migrants have been forced to leave their homelands because of the deterioration in political, economic and social circumstances at home. For example, many have

been displaced because of environmental degradation. However, the conditions which cause these people to leave their countries are separate from the persecution which is the basis of the definition of refugee. The Book also notes that women and children account for about 80% of recognised refugees and that unaccompanied children comprise a significant proportion of refugee and displaced populations. Almost half of all migrants today are female. At the time of preparing this review, I noted that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees had just published her biennial report on the state of the world's refugees. There is much in that report to be digested. For example, the UNHCR states that between 1991 and 1995, 2.4 million people had sought asylum in western Europe. Only 11% of these were accorded refugee status and a similar number were allowed to stay on a temporary basis, for humanitarian reasons. Compelling and disturbing statistics!

This Resource Book reminds us that throughout history people have always migrated from one country to another. But today's mass movement of people is quantitatively and qualitatively different. Many millions of people live, and are seeking to live, in countries that are not their own. Many people choose to migrate, for reasons such as better employment, better education and family needs and wishes. But many more people are victims of forced displacement and in the past few years, there has been a disturbing increase in this phenomenon both across and within borders worldwide.

It was this very concern that, in 1995, led to the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches unanimously adopting a comprehensive Policy Statement on uprooted people: "A Moment to Choose: Risking to be with Uprooted People". The Statement not only expressed the disquiet of the WCC's member churches worldwide about the plight of the victims of forced displacement but it sought to encourage action by the churches in response to their rights and needs. The "Call to Action," from that Policy Statement is presented as Chapter VI in the Resource Book.

The Book itself resulted from the lengthy consultative process and the contributions of more than 100 churches and concerned groups which produced the Central Committee Policy Statement. It is intended, firstly, to broaden the discussion between all those trying to understand the reasons for and the consequences of the forced displacement of people. To this end, the Resource Book details a wide range of economic, political, social and environmental factors that contribute to the forced migration of people.

Issues dealt with include: global militarisation; anti-personnel landmines; the militarisation of economies; violence in social and institutional relations; the consequences of globalisation; the legacy of colonialism; debt, structural adjustment and repression; technological change, globalisation of work and marginalisation; trade and investment; investment; the burden on women; the particular cost for children; the globalisation of culture and of powerlessness; ethnicity, religion and the nation-state; the population question; abuse of the earth; global warming; militarisation and land use; disasters; development-induced displacement; human rights violations; abuse of power and corruption; and, learning and living democracy.

The Book then discusses the various traumas and other issues faced by displaced people, including: consequences of war and persecution; consequences of forced migration; health concerns; survival in strange lands; threats to human dignity and soul; disparities between refugees and neighbouring communities; government restriction and rejection; racist and

xenophobic hostility; loss of human resources; gender differences; transfer of skills and knowledge; education and labour benefits; remittances; demographic considerations; organising for survival; and, growth in exile.

All these topics are dealt with in clear and well referenced sections and the text is sprinkled with relevant quotations from the Bible and from a wide variety of uprooted persons. In this regard, the Book certainly lives up to its claim to be a resource book.

Secondly, the Book calls on churches, and indeed all persons concerned about the rights and needs of displaced peoples, to undertake advocacy and practical action to enhance the dignity of and respect for all people and to encourage sustainable communities throughout the world. A comprehensive theological perspective deals with: membership in God's household; sharing in solidarity; who is my neighbour; and, to be Church together. Specific examples of the actions of religious institutions, grassroots groups, neighbourhood groups and even families are set out as "Signs of Hope". Included in this part of the Book are references to: awareness building in churches; peace making and peace building; resisting the culture of violence; countering the global economic market model; monitoring corruption; countering racism; promoting multiculturalism and interfaith dialogue; solidarity and networking with uprooted people; and, empowering refugees and migrants to return.

Yes, this Resource Book is compelling and disturbing; the topic mandates that. The content and style of the Book are in harmony with its purposes. This publication is well suited to providing excellent resource material for bible studies; sermons; awareness raising seminars and workshops; advocacy; and policy development.

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