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No longer strangers:

Conference of experts confirms churches' role in creating welcoming and integrating societies

The biblical imperative to welcome the stranger was at the heart of a Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) conference in Prague (Czech Republic) this week. The event brought together more than 70 representatives from Czech, Hungarian, Slovak, and Czech churches, governments, UNHCR, regional non-governmental organisations, and delegates to the CCME General Assembly, which follows on 23 and 24 June.

The opening session of the conference focussed on the Czech context and good practices emerging from church and diaconal efforts there. As Reverend Daniel Zenaty, Synodal Senior of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren said, the Czech Church tries "to support all those who have an open heart and help those in need". Ms Pavla Novotna, Deputy Director of the Section of Asylum and Migration Policy in the Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic, discussed integration from the Czech perspective. "The complex integration policy is an integral part of asylum and migration policy in the Czech Republic".

Thomas Huddleston of the Migration Policy Group based in Brussels presented insights into research and underlined that "Integration policies matter:" Others with a depth of experience on migrant and refugee issues from around Europe contributed to a panel on the opportunities and challenges for integration. Insights from Scotland, Romania, and Italy, as well as the European level, underscored different barriers to integration across Europe. Inputs highlighted the unique chances in community-based integration. Experts working in Central and Eastern Europe underlined churches' role in integration among difficult political circumstances in their national contexts. In any case sustainable integration needed welcoming societies as a precondition. Ms Olivera Vutokic of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Budapest office raised the issue of the difficult situations for the governments in Central Europe.

The day ended with prayer led by Mgr. Petr Jan Vins, general secretary of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Czech Republic. CCME Moderator Mrs Victoria Kamondji Johnston summed up: "Migration is here to stay. True integration needs efforts from both newcomers and host societies. In spite of achievements so far continued work is necessary."

For more information or an interview . . .

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