

General Secretariat
World Council of Churches
150 route de Ferney, PO Box 2100
CH-1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland
Direct phone: +41 22 791 6285
Direct e-mail: dcb@wcc-coe.org

Geneva, 20 February 2014

M. François Longchamp
Président du Conseil d'État
République et Canton de Genève

Dear M. Longchamp,

We write in our capacities as leaders of the three major international Christian ecumenical organizations still based in Geneva. We are deeply concerned about the February 9 vote on the Swiss federal "Immigration massive" referendum.

We fully share the apprehension expressed by the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches that the initiative was discriminatory and incompatible both with Switzerland's long humanitarian tradition and the Christian idea of humanity. Fundamental humanitarian principles, European norms and Christian values are being seriously challenged by the results of the vote.

We are also directly concerned about what the implications of this referendum might be for our organizations. We write to ask what you and the other Geneva authorities can do to help make it possible for us to continue to carry out our work and our mission here in Geneva and in Switzerland.

The World Council of Churches is the broadest and most inclusive expression of the ecumenical movement, a fellowship of 345 member churches in more than 110 countries around the world. The members of the WCC represent more than 500 million Christians. Since its founding in 1948, the WCC has had its headquarters in Geneva. In fact, the office of the WCC-in-formation was located here already in 1939. Currently, the WCC employs 116 persons in Geneva and at nearby Bossey.

The Lutheran World Federation is the global communion of Christian churches in the Lutheran tradition. Its 142 member churches in 79 countries represent more than 70 million Christians. The LWF is the largest faith-based implementing partner of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and currently provides support for some 1.4 million refugees around the world. Since its founding in 1947, the LWF has had its headquarters in Geneva, co-located with the WCC. Currently, the LWF employs 65 persons in Geneva.

The ACT Alliance (Action by Churches Together) is a coalition of more than 140 churches and affiliated organizations working together to create positive and sustainable change in the lives of poor and marginalized people regardless of their religion, politics, gender, sexual orientation, race or nationality. The work of the ACT Alliance is supported by 25,000 staff from member organizations and mobilizes US\$1.5 billion for its work each year, carried out through humanitarian aid, development, and advocacy. Currently, ACT employs 22 persons in Geneva.

Over the past years, our organizations have experienced an increasingly difficult environment to hire international staff, with increasingly cumbersome and slow authorization processes to obtain work permits. Most all permits are eventually granted, but the delays can go on for a long time. Some of the required showings do not reflect the reality of our international organizations. For example, when we are recruiting a member of one of our African churches to relate to our work in that region, we have to demonstrate that there is no qualified Swiss for that job.

In addition, our organizations bring thousands of persons to Geneva each year for conferences and consultations. For those coming from Europe and the Global North, entry to Switzerland is easy. But for many from the Global South, it is increasingly difficult and expensive. It is not unusual for some of our church representatives to be denied a Schengen visa, especially if they are young, single, and of modest economic means. And even when the visa is eventually granted, it can be expensive and time-consuming. For example, an LWF governing board member from Liberia must travel to the nearest Swiss consulate in Abidjan and stay there several days while the visa is being processed.

These difficulties are on top of other burdens that make it more expensive and challenging for us to operate in Geneva, such as the shortage of affordable housing (especially for families with children), the high cost of living, and the adverse currency exchange rates due to the strong Swiss franc. Indeed, two of our sister ecumenical organizations, the World Communion of Reformed Churches and the Conference of European Churches, have recently taken the difficult decision to move their headquarters away from the City of Calvin.

We are committed to staying in Geneva. Indeed, the WCC is investing in a major redevelopment of the Ecumenical Center where we each have our offices. But we are concerned that the Swiss immigration vote will add additional burdensome constraints for us as we seek to hire international staff and continue our operations in Geneva. We respectfully request a meeting with you to discuss these questions:

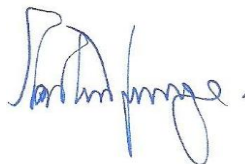
- How do you interpret the outcome of this vote and the implications for international organizations like ours?
- What measures can you take within the Canton of Geneva to see that the implementation of this law does not prevent organizations like ours from recruiting the international staff that we need, to be representative of our international membership?
- In more general terms, how do you envisage safeguarding the framework conditions for the Canton of Geneva to retain its ability to offer a viable home to international non-governmental organizations like ours?

Thank you for your consideration of our concerns. We look forward to meeting with you.

Sincerely,



Rev. Olav Fykse Tveit
General Secretary
World Council of Churches



Rev. Martin Junge
General Secretary
The Lutheran World
Federation



John Nduna
General Secretary
ACT Alliance