

PARTNERPLAN

Fiona Kendall - Italy June 2023

FCEI - Mediterranean Hope
Via Firenze 38
00184 Roma, Italy
fkendall@churchofscotland.org.uk



Dear friends

I write a few days after a boat estimated to be carrying over 700 people on the move sank in Greek waters. A tragedy such as this triggers a complex mix of emotions: grief for those whose lives were so needlessly lost and for the family and friends who mourn them most keenly; despair at how many boats are disappearing beneath the Mediterranean waves; anger at the failed policies which lead to such events.

The sheer scale of this tragedy assured it a prominent place in newsfeeds, bulletins and social media posts. Yet the reality is that people are losing their lives in the Mediterranean on a near-daily basis, the majority of sinkings going unreported by the world's media, the identity of those involved often unknown. IOM's Missing Migrants project (<https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>) estimates that, this year alone, 1,289 have drowned in the attempt to cross. The true number can never be known. These recurring tragedies have become normalized. It is easy to forget that statistics are made up of individuals daring to hope, risking all to realise the dream of a better life.

Mediterranean Hope (MH) is present at the dock on Lampedusa at almost every disembarkation there. Its commitment to those whose only hope of seeking asylum lies in attempting a crossing is evidenced by its continued presence on that island and its advocacy efforts to re-establish formalized search and rescue in the region. Mediterranean Hope did not opt to join in the national day of mourning announced for Italy in memory of Silvio Berlusconi last Wednesday. It did, however, post the following notice on Twitter following the tragedy in Greece:



It reads "People are dying at sea...today we are in mourning". Mourning ordinary lives, I would argue, matters all the more when we are complicit in collective indifference and in failing to think

121 George Street, Edinburgh, EH2 4YN
T: +44 (0)131 225 5722 E: FaithAction@churchofscotland.org.uk
Scottish Charity Number: SCO11353

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through the consequences of policies which slow or halt rescue operations. We all agree that people-smugglers should be stopped. However, it seems that policies which ultimately lead to people drowning are neither stopping this unscrupulous practice nor deterring more than a handful of people from making the journey. Some rigorous and creative thinking is therefore urgently required.

“Border management” is one of the two elements (out of seven) on which EU leaders finally reached agreement earlier this month. After years of wrangling over proposals to reform the Common European Asylum System, the most remarkable aspect of this news is, perhaps, that there has been any agreement at all. The deal achieved by the will of a qualified majority – Hungary and Poland having voted against - is complicated. It is based on a slippery concept known as mandatory (but flexible) solidarity which allows member states to decide how to do their part in terms of receiving migrants. Those who are ready to welcome people on the move will take a share; others will instead fund reception in other member states. Even this unhappy compromise for a fixed quota of people will not, however, cover the numbers actually arriving, far less the number actually in need of a new home. Arguably, the need for other initiatives – and for an increased number of safe and legal pathways – has never been greater.

In this area, MH can offer much in terms of its own experience but is always keen to learn. This year, my advocacy role has led me to visit Ireland on a couple of occasions. The Republic has been forging ahead in developing community sponsorship to support those who are resettled and there is every reason for us to import good practice developed there. Ireland is also co-chairing this year’s ATCR, the large-scale talks on legal pathways hosted each year in Geneva by UNHCR which bring together thousands of representatives from states and organisations – including ours - across the globe. It was therefore useful to participate in Cork in March with others from around Europe preparing for the ATCR and to join meetings in Dublin in May of the EU Asylum Agency’s working group on community sponsorship.

Significant discussions are also taking place in Italy, this time with a focus on how to improve the employment prospects of people on the move by finding a way to match their skills with the needs of Italian employers. How can we do this in a way which acknowledges the that these skills often sit alongside trauma, and which ensures that employers are properly equipped to widen their workforce in this way? A “labour mobility pathway” (as migration jargon puts it) has appeal on all sides but its set-up requires careful and comprehensive planning by government, civil society and the private sector. It’s important for MH to be part of that discussion.

MH has long looked at those in need of international protection as individuals, first and foremost. In addition to the most fundamental services, MH offers a range of “wrap around” support, from organizing football matches between visiting US students and Afghan refugee athletes, to celebrating along with Fadi, a Syrian refugee, as he defends his thesis, to facilitating attendance at a mass audience with the Pope for participants in the humanitarian corridors programme. Each person MH supports, despite the hardships endured, still dares to dream, still dares to live. It’s something for those of us who work on advocacy should never forget.

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I've mentioned before that our efforts to advocate for migrants have led us to partner with CCME (the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe) whose members are drawn from Protestant, Orthodox and Anglican churches. Being part of CCME allows MH (through its parent organization, the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy) to keep a close connection with other faith-based organisations working directly on migration. It also strengthens our ability to reach the EU institutions. CCME's last ExCom meeting took place in May in Estonia, a country which borders Russia and which has its own long history of occupation. As such, it has its own experience of receiving and sending migrants, and heightened sensitivity to the implications of the invasion of Ukraine. Our deliberations were much enhanced by input from local partners offering a unique insight into the situation there. We similarly benefited from local input when we met jointly with the All Africa Conference of Churches in March in Hamburg. Faith-based and secular organisations are doing innovative and important work there to support the many migrants who settle in that city. The meeting offered new perspectives, both in terms of participants and content. As CCME's next meeting will be hosted by FCEI in Rome, we hope to be able to offer similar insights as to the Italian context to the CCME network then. As a multi-confessional group of churches, we value these opportunities to learn, think and act collectively, beginning from the common theological imperative to welcome the stranger.



And so, my work as part of FCEI's Mediterranean Hope team goes on, thanks to support from the Church of Scotland, the Methodist Church in Britain and Global Ministries. It remains a privilege to be part of this partnership of denominations, united by shared values and determination. Speaking with a common voice matters greatly in these fractured times – and to that end, I'd commend you to watch this short film created by Together With Refugees for Refugee Week:

<https://twitter.com/WithRefugees/status/1670700477552508930?s=20>

Let me end, as I started, by remembering the tragedy in Greece, this time in words of prayer.

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Loving God

You weep with us for the lives of those lost at sea in Greece
And we ask that those bereaved may know your presence in their grief.

You rage with us at the failed policies which lead to tragedy
And we ask you to inspire those with the power to bring about change.

You despair with us at the indifference of a society habituated to death
And we ask you to stir people to compassion and action.

Comfort us, move us and inspire us, O Lord.
In Christ's name
Amen

Every blessing

Fiona



@FionaKMedhope