

International Update (no.1)

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A year has passed since our flagship conference “Living and Witnessing the Border” in Palermo. It seemed to us that there was a strong sense of shared values and a joint commitment to action amongst those who attended. With that in mind, we felt that this would be an appropriate time to bring you up to date with some of Mediterranean Hope’s current campaigns and concerns, which we know to be relevant beyond Italy’s shores. More to follow in a few months’ time...

Humanitarian Corridors



The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) which initiated our humanitarian corridors project came to an end last autumn. Over 1,000 participants benefited from the two-year pilot phase. Each beneficiary arrived in Rome via an Alitalia flight and, on arrival, received a warm welcome to Italy. Thanks to the government’s willingness to grant interim humanitarian visas for each, all participants have been able to access health and other benefits whilst their formal applications for international protection have been processed. The vast majority have had their applications granted and we are confident that the remainder will ultimately succeed. All participants have received intensive language tuition, children in the programme have been offered school places and adults have received support in finding employment,

training for employment or accessing further education. Most fundamentally, all have been provided with appropriate accommodation and practical support from the point of their arrival, not only in Rome but throughout Italy.

We are pleased to report that a further MoU was entered into with the Italian government at the end of last year. Once again, this provides for one thousand participants to benefit from the programme over a two year period. So far, participants in our programme have been drawn from refugee camps in Lebanon, having fled the war in Syria. Whilst the majority have been Syrian, there have also been some from Iraq, Jordan, Morocco and Palestine. The first MoU also envisaged a direct route from Morocco and we remain hopeful that the Moroccan government will enable this to proceed in due course. Whilst the programme is not without its challenges, it is being held up as an example of best practice by our European neighbours and it is encouraging to see that this pioneering initiative is now being replicated in other countries, such as France, Belgium and Andorra, whose governments are collaborating with churches and humanitarian organisations at work there. The numbers permitted to access the programme, however, remain tiny in comparison with the numbers of asylum seekers desperate to find safe and legal pathways to migrate. Our primary challenge is therefore closing that gap.

Europe



It's well-known that, for reasons of geography, the largest numbers of migrants arriving in Europe by sea land in Greece, Italy or Spain. It's equally well-known that European Union policy ("the Dublin Regulation") currently requires applications for asylum to be processed in the European country in which migrants first land. The inevitable consequence of these physical and political factors is that a disproportionate burden is shouldered by these countries.

There is currently no agreement about how to deal with this this among Europe's member-states. Other aspects of European migration policy which require change may, however, be less controversial, and the FCEI has not been slow to become involved in canvassing for these changes to be implemented.

The European Union (EU) has introduced a means of direct democratic participation in its law-making function. The European Citizens Initiative (ECI) is a means by which proposals for change can be brought by EU citizens rather than their representatives. *We Are A Welcoming Europe, Let Us Help!* is one such initiative. It seeks to develop EU policy in three ways:

- Assuring provision of direct financial support from the EU for local groups offering help to those with humanitarian visas;
- Implementing concrete measures to defend victims of labour exploitation, crime and human rights abuses at our borders;
- Bringing an end to criminalisation of humanitarian aid.

For an ECI to progress, it requires the support of at least one million European citizens across at least seven European member-states. If those signatures can be collected, the European Parliament (legislature) will

be obliged to give the proposal a public hearing and the European Commission (executive) will be obliged to consider it. For obvious reasons, the FCEI is right behind the ECI, and proud to be part of the steering group actively engaged in promoting this.

Search and Rescue



The Mediterranean Sea has become the most dangerous route for reaching Europe. Whilst the numbers coming have dropped to approximately 20% of those last year, the rate of dead and missing has dropped to only 64% of last year's figures. In short, the death rate is significantly higher than previously. It does not seem to be a coincidence that the increased death rate has occurred in the same period as the NGOs involved in search and rescue (SAR) missions in the Mediterranean Sea have effectively been choked out of existence.

The present government seems determined that the only boats left patrolling the Mediterranean Sea for migrants will be those of the Libyan coastguard, who will inevitably return anyone picked up to Libya. Much has been written about conditions in Libya which we shall not rehearse here. However, it would be fair to assume from reports such as that by Daniel Howden and Nancy Porsia¹ that this is not a place to which any migrant would choose to go. Despite this, current Italian government policy is that SAR should be delegated to the Libyan coastguard.

Whilst NGOs were previously willing to accept physical risk of SAR, the legal risk now presented by SAR operations has been too much for most. Rescue boats have been impounded and crew members subjected to criminal charges. The stated position of the Italian Minister of the Interior is that Italian ports are closed to the NGOs. As that policy became a reality, boats carrying out rescue operations spent days at sea awaiting a safe port, those aboard still suffering the physical and psychological effects of the journeys they had made. European leaders cannot agree on the right way forward and a bitter debate about the rights and wrongs of this policy plays out daily in the media and on social media.

¹ <http://issues.newsdeeply.com/central-mediterranean-european-priorities-libyan-realities>

The FCEI's reaction to the steady squeezing of NGO operations was to strengthen its support for SAR. Indeed, despite the climate of criminalisation, the FCEI entered into a formal collaboration with Spanish NGO Proactiva Open Arms. That commitment is being evidenced in a number of ways:

- Direct involvement by MH operatives in SAR missions;
- Joint press conferences and communications regarding SAR;
- Financial support

Although a reality for some months, the collaboration was formally launched at a press conference in the House of Deputies (Italian Parliament) on 24th May 2018. Speakers at the press conference included Italian Senator Luigi Manconi, Italian MP Riccardo Magi, ship's captain Riccardo Gatti and our own Paulo Naso, Luca Maria Negro, Eugenio Bernardini and Maria Bonafede. The FCEI's motive for entering into this collaboration was made clear, namely, the Gospel imperative to evidence concern for others in our actions. Paraphrasing the words of Jesus in Matthew 25:35, Luca continued the passage beginning with "I was hungry and you fed me," with his own paraphrase: "I was shipwrecked and you saved me." All of the speakers showed passion as they spoke of the obligation we share to rescue one another when rescue is needed, the role which each of us has in creating a just society and how this issue lies at the very heart, not only of our laws, but of sustaining community.



The press conference was followed by a public event that evening at the Methodist Church in Via Firenze, Rome. In addition to the speakers at the morning press conference was Francesco Piobicchi, artist and author of the book *Drawings from the Border*. Francesco is one of the MH operatives who has been directly involved in Open Arms SAR missions. It was therefore an excellent opportunity not only to broadcast our

collaboration with Proactiva Open Arms but also to launch Francesco's new book of drawings entitled *On the Barbed Sea*.

Scicli

The doors of the Casa delle Culture are now open to participants in the humanitarian corridors programme as well as to vulnerable migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea. We honour Italian government policy of dispersing asylum seekers throughout Italy, but are glad that a number of those coming from refugee camps in Lebanon can now be supported by our own reception centre in Sicily. This year 18 participants in the programme have come to Scicli, 11 of whom are children. They enjoy all of the support which the Casa offers, including language tuition, transport to school, assistance with accessing health benefits and pursuing asylum applications, as well as activities targeted to promote integration with the local community.

The primary concern of staff at the Casa is to support those who come to live there. However, the Casa has come to be a hub for migrants and locals to come together, discuss and be creative, and for women who live and work in the area to find solidarity. Cookery lessons, sewing classes, art exhibitions: the Casa is about empowerment. Staff frequently engage with local institutions such as the *Prefettura* and *Commissione Territoriale*, and shout when an issue needs to be drawn to the public's attention. Locals and staff have collected signatures for the #Welcoming Europe campaign and been involved in various protests, including the #EUSolidarity campaign to heighten public awareness of discussions on EU about migration policy. Permission was not given by the local authority for the protest to be held in public: instead, the protest was transferred to within the Casa, where paper boats symbolising those crossing the Mediterranean were laid out by staff, volunteers and asylum seekers. The same symbols could be seen in city squares across Europe.



Lampedusa

Some time ago Italy entered into accords with Libya in terms of which Italy supplies funding and practical support to Libya in return for assistance in patrolling the Mediterranean Sea. This, coupled with the prevailing legal position, has led to some changes in the situation on Lampedusa. Previously, the majority of migrants arriving on Lampedusa were sub-Saharan Africans who had set off from Libya; now the reduced numbers arriving have usually set off in small boats from Tunisia and many of those are themselves Tunisian.

Lampedusa houses a “hot spot” to which migrants are taken on arrival before being repatriated or dispersed to other parts of Italy whilst their claims for international protection and asylum are processed. The maximum stay should be for 48 hours but many migrants have been forced to remain there for significantly longer, sometimes for months at a time. Photographs taken by fire-fighters called to attend the hotspot earlier this year demonstrate that conditions there are unacceptable. Frustration and tension have been building, evidenced in diverse protests made by migrants detained, and the local community feels the pressure strongly. The hotspot is notionally closed for refurbishment but the reality is that new arrivals continue to be housed there, albeit in smaller numbers. The Lampedusa team is therefore working with migrants and with the local community to help to maintain the delicate balance of interests.



Separately, the Lampedusa team has been working with other organisations on the island to open a shared “info point” which will be a first port of call for migrants seeking practical and legal information. Leaflets have been developed in a number of languages and, in collaboration with *Libraries Without Borders*, digital media resources are also being developed.

Call to Action

The support you already provide to us through prayer and in showing solidarity with our work is invaluable. There are, however, some other concrete ways in which, if willing, you could potentially support us further.

First, in relation to the *Welcoming Europe* campaign, we would be delighted if you would help to raise awareness of the ECI. The campaign website can be found at <https://www.weareawelcomingeurope.eu/> and its Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/WelcomingEurope/> . The campaign can also be followed on Twitter at @WelcomingEurope. Please do take time to learn more about the ECI, like, re-tweet, spread the word in your own circles and, if you are able, sign the petition. Every signature really does count.

Second, in relation to SAR and other political developments, we are conscious that, outside Italy, awareness of the difficulties experienced by NGOs and other humanitarian organisations is not high. We believe that there is an urgent need for the public at large to be made aware of the agenda to criminalise humanitarian aid and the consequences of that, not only for the organisations involved but, more importantly, for those who would otherwise be rescued.

Through our website, Facebook page, Twitter posts and newsletters we will keep you as informed as we can about developments in this area. These include:

@Medhope_FCEI <http://www.mediterraneanhope.com/>

<https://it-it.facebook.com/Mediterranean-hope-252231521632595/>

@fionakMedHope <http://www.nev.it> (“News from Italy”)

We would be so grateful if you would circulate the information we post on social media and in your own circles. Please talk about what is happening! If the trend towards criminalisation is to be reversed, we need to create a well-informed media storm.

Our website has a fresh new look. Later this year, we will be taking steps to present much more information in English but, for now, you can find English versions of some of the articles which appear there in *Storie/Sguardi della Frontiera* and *Comunicati Stampa Editoriali*. As you scroll through the articles look out for the words “English Version” in the summary. If there, there will be a link within that article to the English version.

Third, we are always on the lookout for volunteers at the Casa delle Culture in Scicli (Sicily) and with the team working on Lampedusa. Because these are sensitive roles, we ask that volunteers commit for no less than one month, and ideally for longer. Time is needed to train volunteers and for them to adjust to conditions which can be psychologically challenging. [Any Disciples or UCC member interested in volunteering should email their c.v. and expression of interest to Global Ministries’ Mission Personnel Office, at this email: cnichols@dom.disciples.org, ideally some months in advance of the period envisaged.]

In their own words...

We hope you’ve found the first of our quarterly international updates useful. Meantime, we’ll end with some quotes from those who regularly speak on the project’s behalf.

“We recognise those who undertake sea rescue missions as good Samaritans who, with the courage of a humanitarian vision, carry people to safety. As Christians, we want to recognise these humanitarian gestures as profoundly evangelical and to support them publicly. To paraphrase a famous saying of Jesus contained in Matthew 25: ‘I was ship-wrecked and you saved me.’”

Luca Maria Negro, President, FCEI 24th May 2018

“Criminalising immigrants and discrediting those who work with and for them, doesn’t require significant public investment. All you need are blunt comments which go straight to the gut, a chorus of headlines which jump on the bandwagon of political winners, a few effective slogans and it’s done and dusted.”

Paolo Naso, Co-ordinator, Mediterranean Hope, 25th July 2018