

Rome, 31<sup>st</sup> October 2022

Dear friends

The last six months have been something of a blur with a dizzying number of trips across Europe and beyond: Hungary, Germany, Canada, Greece, Switzerland, England, Sicily and Lampedusa.

I've had the sense that, for those who have found the extended period of meeting online a real challenge, it's been important to organize in person meetings again, particularly where there's a value in seeing a situation on the ground. I've appreciated these opportunities but I'm also conscious that such travel comes at a significant cost in terms of time, funding and environmental impact. There is definitely a balance to be struck in assessing whether a physical meeting is truly necessary.

The huge increase in refugee numbers generated by, respectively, the crises in Afghanistan and in Ukraine, has rightly been the focus of much the MH team's energy this year. The team has been directly involved in facilitating safe passage and reception for Afghans and Ukrainians alike, in the process harnessing the goodwill of community organisations and church members in responding to both of these acute crises.

The hosting programme for Ukrainians, developed in collaboration with partner churches in Poland receiving vast numbers of those fleeing over the border, has directly engaged Italian church members as hosts, many for the first time. Equally inspiring has been MH's work with a consortium to bring over 60 female Afghan athletes to Abruzzo, a mountainous region with a surplus of emergency housing constructed to accommodate those who, over a decade ago, were evacuated from their homes following a terrible earthquake in L'Aquila.

This type of initiative matters, not simply because it benefits those who are hosted but also because it directly benefits the communities involved. Aware of the power of this type of programme, MH is advocating for the development of a national framework for community sponsorship for Italy, keen to get away from *ad hoc* initiatives generated by crises and, instead, create a transparent and coherent legislative structure which provides effective support to those willing to take this step. Canada is a leader in the field of community sponsorship, hence the "look and learn" visit there this spring, a source of inspiration and information. European funding is supporting this initiative (under the ambit of the "SAFE" project) as well as our work leading the "COMET" project to develop a coordinated network of sponsorship pathways out of Africa into Europe. Programmes such as this are invaluable. Our ability to be credible advocates for change at meetings such as the ATRC which I attended in Geneva this year is underpinned by MH's operational experience. All of this gives us the scope to think creatively about how we can move things forward.



MH's parent organization, the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy (FCEI) is a member of the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME), a body which draws together churches and associations of churches from across the Protestant, Orthodox and Anglican spectrum to advocate for implementation and reform of well thought-out migration policy at a European level. In doing so, it draws on the knowledge and experience of its network of members to identify areas of greatest priority, call out challenges and propose appropriate responses. It was therefore as a member of CCME's Excom that I travelled to Greece and to

Hungary this year. Both countries have, in recent times, welcomed hundreds of thousands of refugees, a particularly radical situation for Hungary which, until the invasion of Ukraine, had effectively closed its borders. The whirlwind visit there saw us meet with representatives of the Reformed Church in Hungary, staff at Hungarian Church Aid, Kalunba, UNHCR, and the Bishop of Budapest. We were taken to visit emergency welcome centres at stations on the borders with Romania and Ukraine, as well as to the “Scottish Mission”, now known as St Columba’s Church of Scotland, which has been providing support to refugees in Budapest since the 1920s. To say that the position of the church in Hungary on issues of social justice is complex would be understatement. All the more reason, then, to seek to understand, to express solidarity and to advocate for change.



This year the relationship between FCEI and the World Council of Churches (WCC) has been strengthened, first, by the WCC’s Pilgrim Team Visit to Italy in May and then by the FCEI/MH delegations to the WCC Assembly in Karlsruhe in August. MH coordinator, Marta Bernardini, and I together developed a program for the PTV pilgrims and then accompanied them in their visits to Rome, Palermo and to Lampedusa. It was an enriching experience for all of us; an opportunity to see up close some of the outstanding work being done to help those on the margins, as well as to understand the context and challenges faced for the organisations and people concerned. Time, too, for thoughtful reflection and ecumenical exchange which left us with a strong sense of shared commitment and hope. A further visit to Lampedusa in September with representatives from Methodist Church in Ireland strengthened the sense of solidarity with communities of faith at large. MH deeply appreciates the encouragement – spiritual and practical – which it receives from them all.



For many of us, the WCC Assembly at Karlsruhe was our first: a truly inspirational event gathering representatives from around two hundred denominations in a single place. Arguably, there has never been a more important time for communities of faith to walk together, to focus on areas of common concern and to send a strong message of shared values and commitment. The panoply of workshops, worship opportunities, exhibitions and side events reminded me a little of the Edinburgh Fringe – so much choice and zero prospect of attending everything! As MH we were delighted to contribute directly. Together with our partners from the Church of Scotland and Evangelical Church of Westphalia we delivered “The Cost of An Orange”, a workshop on exploitation and the church’s response to it, featuring our own “Etika” project. Separately, we were delighted to bring the “Hear My Voice” exhibition (mentioned in my last letter and now a veteran of four Italian venues) to a new audience in Germany before it begins its tour of English Cathedrals later this month. Finally, we took part in an ecumenical service and community lunch featuring fairly-traded produce from our own project in Calabria, all of which, we hope served to raise awareness of important issues

and some of the resources available to raise awareness and engage those in our own churches. We know that, if we are to reach a wide range of people, we have to be creative – and I never cease to be amazed at the different ways in which MH achieves this! Most recently, we have collaborated in establishing the Rosarno Film Festival, a three-day community event featuring thirty short films providing a perspective on labour exploitation, the jury selecting the winning film consisting entirely of seasonal workers.




It continues to be a joy and a privilege to be part of the FCEI/MH team. Tricky times doubtless lie ahead, particularly in light of the changing political situation in Italy, but the team is undaunted and, if anything, all the more determined to continue its work. Thank you to all of you for your continued encouragement and support. Please do include the following in your prayers, if you would:

- Political leaders in Italy as they settle into ministerial posts and work on migration policy;
- Asylum seekers who have no prospect of accessing “safe passage” programs and turn to boats;
- Those who host refugees as they navigate the different challenges – and joys – hosting brings.

Every blessing

Fiona

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