

It's been another busy month for the Mediterranean Hope (MH) team. Last week saw the arrival of another two groups of migrants via our humanitarian corridors programme. Begun in 2015, this MH initiative provides an opportunity for the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy (FCEI) to work in collaboration with the Comunita di Sant'Egidio (a Roman Catholic charity) and the Italian government.

Those arriving at Fiumicino airport have all been living in refugee camps in Lebanon, having fled war-torn Syria for the relative safety of temporary shelter there. Conditions in the camps are, however, difficult and opportunities to move on very limited. The programme offers a simple but comprehensive package for its participants:

- Safe passage to Italy on a pre-paid commercial flight;
- A "humanitarian visa" which provides temporary legal status and access to services such as healthcare;
- Accommodation whilst applications for asylum/international protection are processed;
- Access to language tuition, skills training and support to find work.

The only Italian tax-payers involved in funding this project are those who have elected to allocate a proportion of the income tax they pay to projects such as this through a tax scheme known as "Otto per Mille", and those making direct donations to the charities involved. This is an important point given the delicate political and economic climate here.



Around 1,000 participants arrived in Italy in the first two years of the programme and another 1,000 are expected over the next two years. The programme is by no means a panacea either for those who come or for the migration issue at large. It is, however, working well for those involved, many of whom are suffering from medical conditions which could not be treated in Lebanon.

MH staff were at Fiumicino at the crack of dawn to welcome the participants. Also there were government officials overseeing formal identification of each person, a process familiar to anyone seeking any form of international protection in Europe. Were participants to "disappear" to another European member state, once identified, they would be returned to Italy in accordance with the "Dublin Regulation", for free movement does not apply to asylum seekers.



The Italian government is, however, keen to ensure that responsibility for participants should be shared across Italy. Participants are accordingly dispersed throughout the country on arrival, some families heading for the north of the country, others taking another plane to Sicily or travelling to a different part of Italy altogether.

The experience of the participants should be similar whichever part of the country is to be their home. Accommodation for each participant is organised in advance of arrival and participants will be supported by the charities involved wherever they are. We cannot wave a magic wand for participants but we can offer a secure base and a structure for moving forward - which is often as much as highly motivated people, such as those we meet, want and need.