

Rome, 13th January 2021

Dear all

What a difference a year makes. Few of us could have realised this time last year what would lie ahead for us in 2020. Whilst we are similarly unaware of what 2021 will bring, let us hope that we can build on the lessons learned in the last twelve months and keep moving forward.

This time last year I was in Arizona with my colleagues, Francesco and Hannah. It was a great chance to spend time at a different border, namely, US/Mexico, to connect with churches and organisations engaged with migration issues and to share our respective experiences. I find it interesting that, in the dying days of the current US presidency, one of the few outings made by the outgoing president was to Alamo, Texas, to view part of the additional 47 miles of border wall built during his term in office. It is my unashamed hope that the next administration will be able to leave a significantly more positive legacy than that and that its focus will be one of building bridges rather than walls, to the benefit of the global community.



Here in Italy, as everywhere else, the pandemic has changed the political and social agenda in so many ways. Media space once devoted to migration issues has, unsurprisingly, been filled with Covid-related items and, as a result, the toxic rhetoric so prevalent in previous years has been less in evidence. The positive contribution made by migrants to Italian society has been better recognised. So often, it is migrants who have continued to clean houses, deliver meals and harvest produce which finds its way onto Italian tables, not to mention those who are part of the front-line workforce in hospitals and care-homes who have kept us going in the most difficult of circumstances.

The parlous conditions in which those on the margins, including migrants, live have become more noticeable. The nation-wide restrictions imposed to combat the pandemic highlighted social inequality, the impossibility of compliance for people living in crowded, insanitary conditions or, indeed, without any home at all. Significant efforts have been made by those in the voluntary and third sectors to continue supporting those on the fringes but I also sense a greater willingness on the part of society at large to support structural and legislative changes which will improve the lives of the marginalised. This, I think, is a mood worth harnessing.

The necessary shift to remote working – known here as “lo smartworking” – has neither dampened MH’s resolve to continue its work nor its creativity. Adaptations to existing projects have of course been required. Most significantly, the humanitarian corridors project was suspended for much of the year due to travel restrictions. However, the team in Lebanon has continued to identify and interview candidates for future corridors and to prepare participants for life in a new culture whilst developing a suite of digital resources to support that work. Staff have also provided significant support to the local community in Beirut following the terrible explosions at the port this summer.

The team in Calabria has widened the scope of its work with exploited migrant farm labourers. Initially providing legal, linguistic and practical support, at the start of lockdown it turned its attention to provision of health information, masks, hand sanitiser and basic supplies to those living in inadequate accommodation. Staff are now delivering rapid (lateral flow) tests to those who cannot afford them. The “Lights on Rosarno” project has gone well beyond the provision of bike lights and reflective jackets to those pedalling along dark streets to the fields where migrants work: solar-powered lighting has been installed near migrant camps and a large-scale programme to illuminate the unlit streets is envisaged. The Etika “ethical orange” project, a fair-trade initiative to benefit workers and producers alike, is truly bearing fruit and helping to fund some of the other initiatives in that region.



It has not been an easy year for Lampedusa. Interesting to note that neither the lack of search and rescue ships nor the very high incidence of Covid 19 in Italy in the first six months of this year put a stop to migrant arrivals. Indeed, over the course of this year, arrivals rose from approximately 11,500 to 34,000. Lampedusa is tiny and reception facilities extremely limited. The “hotspot” detention centre has 192 places. This summer, almost 1,500 people were housed there, many sleeping on bare mattresses, at a time when personal space could be a matter of life or death. The Italian government’s response was not to transport these asylum seekers to mainland reception centres but instead to send “quarantine” ships to be moored off the island in which these people could be temporarily detained. Some placed there, already traumatised by experiences suffered en route to Lampedusa and, in some cases, in a dreadful physical condition, did not survive. Others have jumped into the sea and attempted to swim ashore. Doubtless, governments across the world have had difficult choices to make this year. This policy, however, seems particularly harsh.

In Rome, we continue to develop ideas, transform them into concrete applications for funding, communicate with donors and the public at large, engage church communities and lobby for change at a national, European and global level. Despite travelling much less this year, I have still been able to participate in small- and large-scale meetings via various digital platforms, arguably more efficiently and certainly with less impact on the environment. Networking via the “Chat” function during these meetings has taken a bit of getting used to but is no less useful than heading off for a coffee! One benefit of meeting digitally is that attendance is now within the reach of organisations which might otherwise have found it financially or logistically prohibitive. The global conversation is arguably the richer for that. As a result, whilst I look forward to having more opportunities to meet people in person in future, I have no wish for things to be exactly as they were.

Fresh from co-writing a policy paper on the benefits and challenges of humanitarian corridors programmes, I am currently working with my colleague, Giulia Gori on funding bids. We are also working together on an Italian pilot project being sponsored by the Church of England. This will build on the excellent work done through its Clewer Initiative to raise awareness of modern slavery issues amongst congregations. This marries well with MH’s own work on exploitation and presents a welcome opportunity to engage English- and Italian-speaking congregations here in a project adapted for our own context.

As I reflect on the year, I remain incredibly grateful to be part of a team which is so agile and open-minded. The projects in which we are involved are diverse, often in run in collaboration with other organisations, and

seek to tackle migration issues on a number of levels. Yet, fundamentally, they are all about welcoming the stranger, a call which is close to all our hearts.

On a personal note, travel restrictions obliged me to spend my first Christmas in Rome – hardly something to complain about! Rome was festooned with Christmas lights and the national penchant for Nativity scenes was fed by the appearance of several outdoor “presepi” in different parts of the city. It was a joy to take in all of that on my trusty folding bike.



The nation-wide “red zone” imposed still permitted attendance – masked and socially distanced - at local churches. As I live only a few steps away from two of Rome’s most beautiful basilicas, Santa Prassede and Santa Maria Maggiore, I took the chance to attend the former on Christmas Eve and the latter on Christmas Day, something of a sensory and spiritual feast.



Zoom permitted participation in a watchnight service shared by St Andrew’s, Rome and St Columba’s, Budapest, as well as a Hogmanay Vigil from Iona Abbey focusing on Europe. I loved connecting with people from home throughout the whole festive period, as well as some “in person” encounters with good friends here. This last year has really highlighted the importance of ongoing connection, however that is made.


So here’s to maintaining those vital connections with each other and with the things that matter. This year, I intend to offer those who are interested an opportunity for more direct interaction in a series of quarterly Zoom meetings. More information to follow via the Church of Scotland website and Facebook pages...

Thank you, as always, to everyone who continues to support MH, and sustain me, in fellowship and prayer. If you are able, I would be grateful if you would keep the following people and situations in mind:

- Exploited workers everywhere in urgent need of decent housing and a fair wage;
- Policy-makers faced with competing interests and difficult choices;
- Those who, as a result of Covid 19, are “stuck” in impossible situations and desperate to escape.

Every blessing

Fiona

 @FionaKMedhope