

## REFLECTIONS FROM PARTICIPATION IN “LIVING AND WITNESSING THE BORDER”

An International Conference on Migration, Borders and Reception

Palermo and Lampedusa, Italy

September 29-October 4, 2017

Promoted by the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy (FCEI) and its Mediterranean Hope Ministries

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### DAY 1: FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 29—Travel to Palermo, Italy for “Living and Witnessing the Border” Conference

I am deeply grateful to represent Global Ministries for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) at one of the first and broadest gatherings of European and North American faith partners who will share and discuss challenges, roles and best practices in global refugee assistance. The conference is titled “Living and Witnessing the Border: An International Conference on Migration, Borders and Reception;” sponsored by our denomination’s ministry partners of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy (FCEI) and the Mediterranean Hope project which they have partnered to develop in response to the migrant crisis publicized around the world in recent years. The event will be hosted at “La Noce,” the facility of the Diaconal Centre of the Waldensian churches in Italy. As our Disciples Director for Refugee & Immigration Ministries, and as a director of a refugee ministry in California for over two decades previously, I can imagine few topics that more deeply claim my soul, interest, and practice.

It is always my prayer to begin an international journey hope filled, rested, content. Yet I confess that instead I board today’s flights exhausted by yet more changes in policies this week that harmfully impact refugees and immigrants seeking to enter the U.S. For the past month, we have worked daily as Disciples and other faith communities around the country to multiply voices in support of a legislative solution for our country’s 800,000+ “dreamers”—recipients of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program—following the elimination by the Administration on September 5<sup>th</sup> of their protections offered the past five years through an Executive Action.

Although already the U.S. has paid over 18 billion dollars per year in enforcement practices against immigrants, I am departing at a time when new legislation is being perpetually introduced to propose over 4.6 billion additional support for internal enforcement, and more billions still to build a wall at our Southern border despite the presence already of multiple barriers already damaging the economies and way of life of communities. My travel is a departure in the midst of efforts to help congregations learn how they might support another group of 325,000 immigrants at risk of soon potentially losing “Temporary Protective Status” (TPS) and facing deportation; even though most have contributed strongly to the U.S. economy for fifteen years.

As I settle onto my flight, I am accompanied, too, by awareness of how vastly other policies are marching against the rights of refugees and immigrants, as just four days ago, an additional Travel Ban was issued-- this time adding another primarily Muslim nation of Chad to the list of vulnerable communities to be denied entrance into the U.S., along with select residents from two other countries of N. Korea and Venezuela. The day before my departure, the lowest in history “Presidential Determination” of refugee resettlement numbers was announced; literally indicating that—in the

midst of the largest refugee crisis in the history of the world--our nation's leadership is willing to commit to resettlement of only 45,000 for fiscal year 2018, which begins October 1st.

These are only limited examples of efforts that are leaving immigrant communities within our Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) "feeling often too afraid to even leave their homes," according to our Hispanic National Pastor Rev. Lori Tapia. Behind each systematic and consistent policy change currently being considered are eyes and hearts souls of families and communities that themselves also made departures on journeys—recently or many decades ago—to enter the U.S. with their own prayers to find lives that could be hope filled, rested, and content.

And so, I seek to carry the faces of immigrants and refugees I know with me now too—as we enter these international discussions of how faith communities might learn about and offer to migrants entering today the same types of overwhelming hospitality such as Abraham and Sarah showed the visitors at the doorway of their tent by the Oaks of Mamre in Genesis 18:1-16.