

## 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

#### *Reflections and Photos by Rev. Dr. Sharon Stanley-Rea*

*Disciples Refugee & Immigration Ministries Director &*

*Representative for Global Ministries, Disciples of Christ, at the Conference*

*(For more information, contact: [ssstanley@dhm.disciples.org](mailto:ssstanley@dhm.disciples.org))*



#### **DAY 2: SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2017—Palermo Conference, “We Crossed the Border”**

While navigating multiple airports through the night before my morning’s arrival here in Palermo, Italy—the capital of Sicily in southern Italy, I have been considering how differently refugees themselves travel than myself and others on our airplane journeys. I continue to be deeply bothered that our government this week is refusing to welcome at LEAST 75,000 refugees for resettlement in the coming year; as even this number would be less than the average of 90,000 welcomed annually in recent years into the U.S. Yet the ache that our faith communities feel from not being allowed to welcome and embrace more refugees is yet nothing like the ache of refugee mothers and fathers who have been separated from daily contact with their sons and daughters after making the agonizing decision to allow their departure in hope of saving their lives, and perhaps encountering a new life that might eventually help support more in their family, as well.

As I observe travelers in the airports of Washington, D.C., New York, and Rome each searching for “must buy” items before our short departures, I am struck by how different a refugee’s journey is from my own; as refugees departing their country instead are forced to leave behind nearly all possessions, and even then face dangers of storms, traffickers, pirates, and other dangers en route that continue to strip them of both dignity and the few possessions they were able to carry upon departure. To be a refugee is to experience constant separations from relationships of trust, anxieties of uncertainties ahead, and ongoing threats to security. And, while Jesus’ promise in Matthew 7:7-8 was clear that “to the one who knocks, the door will be opened,” nonetheless to be a migrant is to take steps requiring courage and resilience despite never knowing whether the door will be opened either along the path or at its end.

Yet for myself on entrance to Palermo, Italy, the doorway opened with great hospitality and welcome by the Diaconal Center of the FCEI. The Waldensian community in Italy is an especially appropriate host to discuss hospitality for current refugees, as in their own tradition they have frequently prioritized care for rejected communities, as they were persecuted upon arrival in Sicily—itsself a region with a heritage of diverse conquerors and population movements over the centuries. Upon arrival, our conference commenced with a first night of NINETEEN lectures from among the dozens of global conference participants (including Rev. Randy Mayer from Good Shepherd U.C.C. Church; likewise a representative of Global Ministries!) Others were from ecumenical communities such as the Christian Commission of Migrants in Europe, the World Association of Christian Communications, the Evangelical Church of Germany, the Catholic Diocese of Palermo, Lutheran Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy, the Methodist Churches from both Britain and Germany, the Church of Scotland, and many, many others.

Highlighted were the contexts of refugee welcoming and advocacy in Europe—particularly over the past three years, stories of migrant experiences, as well as reflections on migrant border dynamics and faith responses in both the Mediterranean region and along the U.S./Mexico border. “Only 10 days after beginning work in Palermo,” spoke the Archbishop of Palermo, “I saw the landing of 1000 migrants.” Among them was a 15 year old clearly in shock and unable to be soothed. Her brother had been killed in route. “So I just went to stand beside her...because humans like to have someone next to us with a heart that is open.” As with Jesus’ humility and focus upon the identities of others rather than upon his own, ministries with refugees allow us the opportunity to remain open to lessons from others, and so to gain learnings from valuing others beyond ourselves. Migrants likewise teach hope to us all, as their courageous journeys express a moment by moment living in hope that new life is possible.