

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

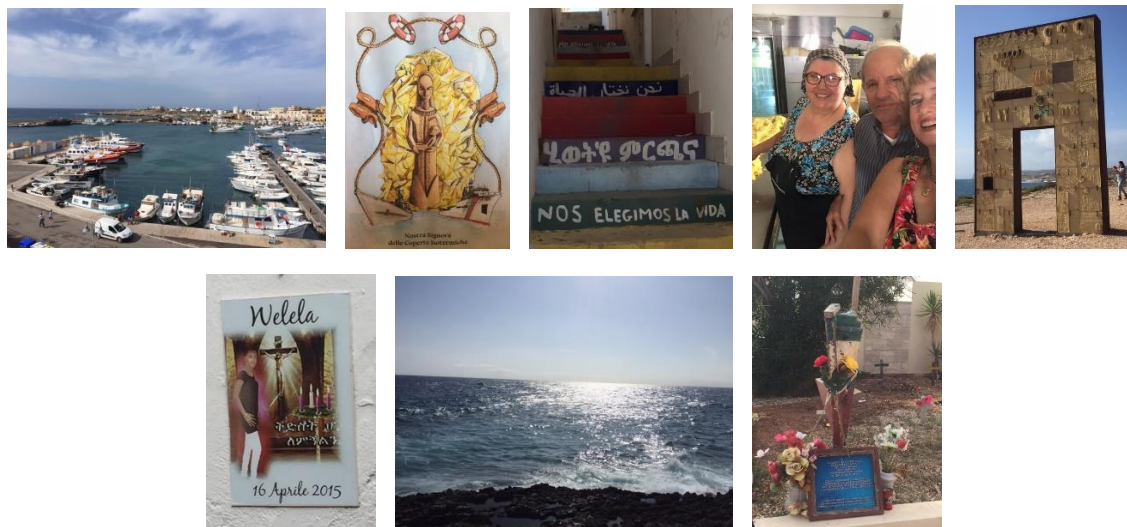
Promoted by the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy (FCEI) and its Mediterranean Hope Ministries

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)



DAY 6: WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 4—Lampedusa Tour, Learnings, and Migrant Challenges Ahead

In addition to the Humanitarian Corridors program in Italy, HC is seeking a future opening in Eritrea. Meanwhile Jean Fontanieu, General Secretary of the French Protestant network called “Federation Entraide Protestante” (FEP), is continuing to expand the recent launch of a HC program in France, where they have visited and signed with the Prime Minister to welcome an initial 500 migrants within 18 months, with individual families hosting the migrants in their homes for free, for up to a year. The goal of the FEP is to grow to welcome 1,500 migrants per year. The project is linking with and encouraging additional citizen welcoming expressions that have recently included a postcard campaign, a “Hospitality is a Chance to Encounter” relationship building opportunity, and an “Exiles Welcome First” sign/banner campaign proclaiming commitment to hospitality outside faith centers and homes.

Yet as Monsignor Francesco Montenegro, Archbishop of Agrigento (which covers the island of Lampedusa) and President of Italian CARITAS, told conference participants just days ago in Palermo, “It is easy to treat migration as an emergency, but this is an ongoing reality--for migrants come here to get back what has been taken from them. We are now in a stage of tolerance, but we have not yet accomplished full integration. We must remember that welcoming a person is a reward in itself, and leaves a clear mark on society.” Even touting the importance of Humanitarian Corridors, he and others recognize it as but one part of solution building needed by faith communities going forward. Pope Francis has announced a challenging “Sharing our Resources” program that encourages every family and parish to engage in offering hospitality. “But we must also be ambassadors that share with all we know the impossibilities with which migrants live every day, as they try to survive on just two dollars a day.” Though 30,000 migrants have officially been declared drowned at sea, in likelihood the number is probably double. “And many who died in Lampedusa” said Monsignor, “were found with a crucifix in their mouth, dead with their hands folded in a posture of prayer.”

Doris Peschke, General Secretary of the Churches’ Commission for Migrants in Europe (located in Brussels), voiced the commitment of the CCME to continue to generate faith statements in support of migrants, to seek EU policies that might eventually lead to the resettlement of up to 20,000 refugees in the region, and to vigorously promote through

member communions the values such as the dignity of every person, rights to shelter, food, and health care, the rights to leave a country (including one's own), the right to family life and reunification, and rights to international protection and to seek asylum. And Paolo Naso, Political Scientist at Sapienza University of Rome and Coordinator of Mediterranean Hope for FCEI, pointed all towards the need to urge full citizenship be granted to the nearly 800,000 migrants currently in Italy "who now eat pizza and not just couscous" and who can help Italy's economy grow in strength. Such full integration is essential, especially as flows of migrants are driven now far more by push factors than by pull factors. "With such a geopolitical collapse from Morocco to the Horn of Africa," he said, "we should be surprised by the relatively small number who have found their way here, no matter what borders have been closed." Faith communities, in creative partnerships with governments and civil society, must continue to help countries halt conflicts and promote development—along the while offering asylum when needed, shining light on the truth of migration, and underlining the faith and hope that our God offers, "for hope and faith are not naïve," that could allow for refugees in the future to potentially return to their homes.

And as these global solutions continue to be sought and encouraged through our faith partnerships, we will not forget the ways such hope is being offered to individual refugees day by day amid the sounds of the rolling shore along the rocks of Lampedusa; where hope is offered through the tea and smiles given to arrivals on the dock, in the efforts to hold accountable and fight against the too-long detention of migrants soon detained upon arrival, in the persistence of the NGOs who continue to join with villagers to offer rescues at sea, often arriving on the waters within only ten to fifteen minutes of receiving an urgent call of migrants in need.

On the windy cliffs of Lampedusa, our group visited the "Porta d'Europa" ("Door to Europe") on our final afternoon together. A nearly twenty-foot tall three dimensional artwork in concrete and limestone overlooking the water, the door was built in the first year of 2008 following the wreck of an initial African migrant boat. To the face of the door are attached images of telephones, crucial contact numbers, shoes, and cooking utensils often carried by migrants who seek a new life by crossing the sea. They recall the fullness of courage it takes for refugees to endure daily tasks and to sustain relationships they are forced to leave behind. As I look out at the water below the artwork given as a tribute to migrants, I pray for the individual lives of persons like Welela to never be forgotten. An 18 year old Eritrean migrant, Welela fled first on her journey-seeking-protection to Libya. There locked in a warehouse, she awaited again to embark for a next destination. Chosen weeks later by traffickers who come regularly to the warehouse to recruit new slaves, she was again placed on a ship, given rice, and forced to cook for those on board. Along the journey, the propane cooking stove erupted, burning 60% of her body. With such open wounds, the salt from the water and gases from the fuel combined to eat her skin like painful acids...until she, like 20 others on her boat, died on board. Upon arrival, the Mediterranean Hope project worked in partnership with a local lawyer to gather her story from other migrants and tediously locate her brother previously resettled in Sweden. Eventually, a prayer ceremony was held, a video recording was sent to her brother, and a gravesite was purchased for her in the local cemetery—where now her picture still gives testimony to her life and hopes. Other migrants are remembered in the same cemetery, marked without names by crosses made from wood of wrecked boats.

As an organizer at a migrant advocacy and freedom project in Lampedusa (which gathers and displays items remaining after migrant accidents) claims; "Only a small number of people are interested in others more than in money." Yet last year, another Eritrean migrant visited the shore and painted "We Choose Life" on the steps that lead toward the sea. That migrant's resilience—like Welela's, too—are encouragements that we who claim to believe in the God who breathed dust from the ground to make life (Genesis 2:7), who granted the preservation of life and spirit even to Job in his darkest days (Job 10:12), and who promised a sacred river where "everything will live where the river goes" (Ezekiel 47:9) should ourselves ALWAYS be committed to people and their lives more than to anything lesser. Today's global challenges—where one of every seven persons is being pushed or pulled from their homelands--give people of faith unending opportunities to demonstrate God's hope for life and welcome to ones who fear daily their lives might end. May our partnerships strengthened in this conference push us to welcome ever more boldly, as we seek to fulfill our "Ecumenical Statement of Lampedusa" to

“oppose any policy of closure or change in the borders to prevent or deny access to men and women who would be entitled to international protection....Ask those who are political decision makers to become aware of...factors that push people to flee...and ensure a wider and more inclusive interpretation of the right to international protection and asylum....(and, with God’s help) express our support for policies of stabilization and economic support to countries that today are unable to guarantee the survival and growth of many of their citizens” as we seek to serve neighbors “knocking on our borders.”