

Conference explores Christian approach to borders



Church service, commemorating 500 migrants whose ship capsized off the coast of Lampedusa. © Sara Speicher/WCC

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Borders – physical, political, attitudinal – which deny people their human rights, dignity and life are counter to the gospel which calls us to protect and welcome migrants and refugees. This was the recurring theme of an international conference on migration and reception, “Living and Witnessing the Border”, held 30 September – 2 October in Palermo.

Welcoming over 100 participants from Europe and the United States, Rev. Luca M. Negro, President of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy (FCEI), which organized the conference, emphasized that the issue of refugees and migration is at the heart of Christian witness. He noted that borders are becoming increasingly impenetrable: “instead of being a meeting point between cultures, they are becoming more and more hostile.”

Speaking on the first day, Diamando Vlassi, a member of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and representing the World Council of Churches (WCC), highlighted the 2016 WCC Central Committee statement on forced displacement that affirmed sovereign states can control borders, but also emphasized they must follow international humanitarian law. Sharing her experience in working with asylum requests in Greece, at a time of increased restriction of movement in Europe, she said that when it is safe, most migrants want to return home.

“It is [one thing] to travel willingly to other places to know the people and the culture and totally different to be abused, persecuted, wounded and forcibly uprooted from their homeland, without dignity and hope,” she said. “The pain of being deprived of a homeland cannot be measured.”

According to the UNHCR, in 2016 there were over 65 million people globally who have been forcibly displaced; however most have stayed in their country or sought refuge in a neighbouring country. The number of people seeking refuge in Europe have increased over the last several years, largely due to the war in Syria and Iraq. Many refugees and migrants risk crossing the Mediterranean Sea to reach sanctuary, with thousands perishing in the attempt.

Doris Peschke, general secretary of the Churches’ Commission for Migrants in Europe, said that pictures in the media portraying “floods of people” and the use of global statistics showing unprecedented migration “feeds the mood for restrictive policies.”

Referring to a recent CCME statement, “Have no fear – but hope!”, Peschke said, “We don’t deny that fears are there, but we should not be led by fear.” She highlighted the need for critical analysis, and political and ecumenical signs of hope.

One sign of hope highlighted at the conference was “humanitarian corridors”, a cooperation between FCEI, Community of Sant’Egidio, Waldensian and Methodist Churches and the Italian government in which 1000 refugees over a two-year period are identified and supported in applying for humanitarian visas and integrated into local communities accompanied by congregations and parishes.

The collaboration for these “humanitarian corridors” is a model which the organizers hope other countries, especially in Europe, can replicate.

As Cesare Zucconi from the Community of Sant’Egidio said in a conference workshop, “When Christians face challenges together, they can do very creative, innovative things that can be replicated by others. We must also work in synergy with other institutions. With the complexity we are facing, churches cannot deal with it alone.”

Conference participants attended a commemoration in Lampedusa of the 3 October 2013 tragedy when a ship carrying over 500 desperate migrants capsized a few sea miles off the coast of the island and 368 people died.

Throughout the conference, speakers highlighted that desperation because of war, persecution and hunger drives people from their homes, while closed and closing borders fuels ever more dangerous attempts to reach a place of safety and the possibility of new life.

The hope of rebuilding lives and contributing to communities also was expressed.

Jean Fontanieu, general secretary of Federation Entraide Protestant in France noted that while, politically, the country does not want migrants, culturally, the citizens are much more open as they all recognize the experience of migration in their own backgrounds.

A number of participants spoke of the contribution migrants have made to their own local churches in bringing new members – local and foreign – and new energy and commitment. But, they acknowledged, challenges also have to be met, as people grapple with change.

Speaking in Italian, Rev. Eugenio Bernardini, moderator of the Waldensian Board, challenged everyone: “We should work together as a multicultural community. This will be the basis for future generations. This is the church of the future.”

[“Have no fear – but hope!”, statement by the CCME](#)

The international conference was organized by [Mediterranean Hope – the Refugees and Migrants Program](#) of the **Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy** (FCEI)

[Ecumenical Statement from the International conference on “Living and Witnessing the Border”](#)

[2016 WCC Central Committee statement on the forced displacement crisis](#)