



Dear friends

Like all of you, I had been so looking forward to the opportunity to gather, share and worship together at Swanwick. Whilst sorry that we cannot do this, I think this remains an opportunity for reflection and reaffirmation. Almost three weeks into lockdown in Rome, I can honestly say that, despite the seeming darkness of recent days, there have been many sparks of light. As I write, the daily figures released here by the Italian government suggest that we are on the right path. The number of new cases has been dropping almost daily. Whilst the numbers are still significant, this is an encouragement to us all to continue to abide by the severe restrictions in place.

For many, the enforced isolation is a huge challenge. However, the fundamental human desire for social connection has brought a number of us to our windows each night and caused many to reach out to each other virtually. As a result, I now know more neighbours than ever before! I have become familiar with several apps which are enabling me to maintain a virtual professional and social life. It has been a joy to participate in Zoom worship with Waldensians each Sunday afternoon. Keeping in touch with other church members through the creation of a virtual “district” is strengthening relationships within the congregation, and our collective awareness of online spiritual resources is increasing. I have also been astonished to discover that I can “attend” a gig, concert or opera and “tour” many places of historic interest. These things do not replace the simple joy of sharing a hug with someone but they go a long way to enabling us to manage this unusual situation. Daily prayer and reflection have never felt more important. Some things, after all, do not change.

Some of you will be familiar with Mediterranean Hope, the project belonging to the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy (FCEI) to which I am seconded. For those who are not, let me say simply that MH exists to support migrants. Founded as a direct response by Italian Protestant churches to the surge in numbers attempting to reach Europe by boat six years ago, and consisting then of a two-person mission to Lampedusa, MH now has teams working in several locations in Italy and beyond. The work is wide-ranging: rescue, welcome, reception, advice, practical and financial support all underpin the large-scale advocacy work and development of legal pathways for migration. In the absence of speaking to one another in person, I offer here an insight into the work of each team and how that work has been affected by the spread of Covid 19.

Rome and Palermo

Like other offices, shops and schools throughout Italy, the FCEI head office and La Noce Diaconal Centre are closed. Staff in Rome and Palermo are working remotely, keeping in regular contact through a variety of online apps and messaging services.

The regular contact which we have with asylum-seekers in our care now has to happen remotely. It is not a perfect solution but the team is working hard to ensure that needs continue to be met. Local

organisations providing psychological support have increased the availability of free online consultations for asylum-seekers (and, indeed, those who work with them). Many of those we work with are already fragile, so this offer is very welcome. Online language tuition continues. Where possible, Wifi is being made available along with online resources to support ongoing learning and communication.

Those of us involved in external communication, fund-raising and advocacy work continue to write and to progress whatever initiatives we can, aware, however, that the global focus is currently on health.

Beirut

Our team in Beirut works to identify and prepare participants for our Humanitarian Corridor (HC) project, which regularly brings asylum-seekers safely from Lebanese refugee camps to Italy. Here, they can be supported through the asylum process and in integrating into Italian society. Regrettably, the HC due to be opened at the end of March will remain closed, notwithstanding the final preparations for roll-out made by the teams in Beirut and Rome. We very much regret the impact that this will have on the intended beneficiaries but accept that this is the right decision for now.

Travel between Lebanon and Italy having now been suspended, our entire team has been recalled from Beirut. They too are adapting to remote working, using the time now available to improve systems and engage in strategic planning. Where possible, the team will interview and work with HC candidates remotely.

Scicli

Scicli is the location of the Casa delle Culture, our reception centre. It houses up to forty vulnerable migrants at any one time. Fortunately, our guests have their own apartments within the centre and can remain there. However, given the emergency measures, staff cannot interact directly with guests and communal activities can no longer take place.

Wifi is available. However, the majority of our guests do not have computers and are reliant, at best, on mobile phones for information and connecting with the rest of the world. This is very hard on children, in particular. With all schools shut, the emphasis is now on online learning. However, in a household where there is no computer, doing schoolwork is very difficult. After-school groups to support homework are currently suspended. The everyday interaction which encouraged language learning and cultural integration simply cannot take place. Staff are maintaining what contact they can by way of telephone and video calls, disseminating links to information about the outbreak in a variety of languages and providing guidelines for how to comply with the current measures. Blank self-certification forms – and information about how to complete them - are being supplied to residents, none of whom have access to a printer, so that these can be completed before any outing is made.

For people who were already struggling to adjust to life in a new culture, it is particularly difficult to adapt to some of these changes, particularly in the absence of physical interaction. For some, their world is collapsing for a second time. However, staff are doing all that they can to maintain as much virtual contact as possible and to keep our guests as well-informed as the rest of us.

Lampedusa

Thankfully, no cases of Covid 19 have so far been identified on Lampedusa, a location which would be particularly tested by an outbreak given the lack of medical facilities there. Whilst the team's usual

activities have had to be suspended, migrants have not stopped coming to Lampedusa's shores. Notwithstanding the strict lockdown in Italy, the risk of contracting a fatal illness by coming here and the current absence of any search and rescue vessels, not many miles away, people face something worse. And so, still, they risk their lives to come. The Lampedusa team has asked us to reflect on that: *people are still fleeing; people are still migrating*. If, as seems clear, the crossing rate is linked not to the number of search and rescue vessels but, rather, to conditions at sea, what will happen when spring truly arrives and calmer seas invite desperate people to attempt the most dangerous journey of their lives?

The MH team, unable at present to offer a welcome at the jetty and legal information to those who come, is focusing on monitoring what is happening, disseminating accurate information locally and beyond to dissipate misplaced tension and anxiety. It is hard for the team not to be alongside the most vulnerable in a situation such as this but they continue to be eyes and ears for the rest of us. Like all of us, they are using any spare time to reflect, review and plan. This is a moment which can bring us fresh perspectives. For all of us are now being forced to experience limits on our freedom for ourselves.

Calabria

A small team has been based in Calabria for the last eight months or so, supporting the seasonal migrant workers who are so often exploited in the agricultural sector. The team has been working to improve conditions for them through provision of language tuition, legal information and practical support. MH has also been working with local farmers to build an ethical supply chain which guarantees rights for the workers concerned. A new label, "Etika", has been developed with a view to marketing this produce beyond Calabria and, indeed, Italy.

The measures imposed by the outbreak bring particular challenges for the migrants in Calabria. Although the south of Italy has so far been much less affected than the north by the virus itself, an outbreak there could be still more serious, given the reduced level of healthcare available in that region. Many of the seasonal workers are living in shanty towns. Conditions often do not exist to maintain social distancing nor hygiene measures. Access to running water, never mind hand sanitiser, is extremely limited.

The MH team is seeking to balance its commitment to the most vulnerable with the need to minimise the possibility of transmission. For that reason, one person only is now present in the camps where we work for up to two hours per day and social distancing measures are being strictly enforced.

Fundamental work has needed to be done in terms of educating those in the camps about the current situation. Unhelpful rumours, such as this being a "white man's illness", have had to be dispelled. The team has been teaching people when and how to wash hands using soap and water or sanitiser, the importance of maintaining at least a metre's distance at all times and what to do should someone develop symptoms. MH has been able to provide water butts and hand-sanitiser dispensers for some camps. However, a significant practical difficulty is that sanitiser solution is not readily available and stocks of masks have been exhausted. Outside help is therefore being mobilised.

Practical Action

MH, along with other NGOs, is calling for shanty towns in Calabria and beyond to be dismantled and for those living there to be found accommodation where they can follow the emergency measures. A specific call has been made meantime to restore the water supply to camps where that has been cut off.

FCEI has launched an appeal to support three initiatives to tackle the pandemic: provision of disinfectant kits to Italian care homes, healthcare facilities and reception centres; financial support for institutions monitoring the spread of the virus to enable proper planning; financial support for healthcare facilities directly engaged in preventing the pandemic from spreading.

Although we are consumed by news about Covid 19, we do not forget that just before the outbreak in Europe we were confronted by a migrant crisis on the Greek/Turkish border. MH is calling upon national and supra-national institutions urgently to address this situation. A working party from MH is engaging directly with NGOs and churches in Greece to assess how MH and other faith-based organisations within Europe can respond directly to this situation. Our intended mission to Greece is on hold for now but our engagement with those on the ground continues. We cannot forget the plight of these people, notwithstanding the crisis which surrounds us at home.

To conclude...

“Siamo tutti sulla stessa barca” (“we are all in the same boat”) is a phrase with a particularly poignant resonance at present. However, MH sees this global emergency an opportunity to pull together as a single community, to focus on the needs of the most vulnerable rather than ourselves and to stimulate a collective response to meet their needs. At present, a fragment of Romans 5:3-5 keeps coming to mind:

“We know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope [...]”

Stay well. You are all in my prayers.

Fiona

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