

Fiona Kendall - Italy

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Dear friends

Now back in Rome after a welcome week with family in Scotland over Christmas, it is good to take time to correspond with you again.



The ongoing tragedy in the land of Christ's birth brought for me – and, I suspect, many others - a sharper edge to Christmas. Four years ago, I visited the Holy Land for the first time, as a participant in a Church of Scotland study pilgrimage which I hoped would help me to understand better the fissures between the communities resident there, something of the reality of daily life and how diverse actors are working to ease suffering and bring about peace. The visit did all of those things but, in doing so, opened my eyes much wider to just how embedded the fissures are, just how significant the suffering is and just how treacherous the road towards peace. And yet those

working to bring about change, even in the present circumstances, do not give up. Nor, then, should we.

The theme of dogged resilience has been very present for me during the last six months, not only in the context of work but in wider Italian society. This year thousands took to the streets to express collective anger at ongoing violence against women. Wider issues of women's rights have been thrown into relief by the growing incidence here of *femicidio*, a word used to describe misogynistic murder, typically by a former or current partner. Historic tolerance of a spectrum of behaviour, such as coercive control, of which *femicidio* may be considered the most extreme example, is steadily being replaced by outrage and a determination to alter that mindset. Protesters at the march I attended in Rome in November numbered 500,000 and included people of every age and gender. "Don't protect your daughters; teach your sons respect", one banner read, whilst the numbers sent a message of their own. For many reasons, this road will be long. Yet those working to bring about change, even those whose daughters have been killed, do not give up. Nor, then, should we.

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The MH team based on Lampedusa was tested more than ever this summer, as calm seas and an increasingly desperate situation in Tunisia combined to drive up Mediterranean migrant crossings. In one week alone over 8,000 disembarked on Lampedusa, many arriving on boats which were little more than iron shells. The island's hotspot (detention centre), to which all are taken on arrival, officially has capacity for 400. Whilst numbers regularly exceed capacity, this was on such a scale that it was deemed unsafe to attempt to hold everyone there. Instead, in a temporary return to the approach which prevailed until only a few years ago, those arriving were not confined to the hotspot. MH, together with the local parish, helped to coordinate an astonishing effort by islanders and organisations to feed and shelter the newcomers pending their removal to the mainland. Such solidarity provides welcome evidence of the latent generosity which some policy-makers would have us replace with fear. It does not, however, alter the fundamental reality that the provision currently in place to manage arrivals on Lampedusa remains woefully inadequate, nor the fact that people still arrive in their thousands, despite this being one of the world's most dangerous migratory routes. Without addressing or mitigating the root causes of migration, that seems to me to be unlikely to change. Meantime, despite the febrile political atmosphere, MH remains committed to supporting those who do make it across the sea and to working to foster welcoming communities in Italy and beyond.

In December I was in Geneva, at the start of the second Global Refugee Forum (GRF). There, government and civil society representatives together pledged to increase refugee admissions, to establish and support infrastructure for legal migration pathways and to foster integration between newcomers and host communities. As anticipated, admissions pledges¹ fell woefully short of the number of places needed², a reminder of just how much pressure is required to persuade governments globally to make policy which does not pander to increasingly hostile narratives regarding both regular and irregular migration. It can be tempting, in these circumstances, to question the value of such events. However, the counter-argument is that, without them, global pledges would be even fewer, links between like-minded organisations still weaker. And so those working to bring about change do not give up on them. Nor, then, should we.

I was in Geneva, in part, to represent the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) at the inter-religious service which opened the GRF. It was the first time that I had visited the Ecumenical Centre, home to the World Council of Churches (WCC), housing a fine chapel reflecting the diversity of global traditions which meet there. The need to create space and time for inter-religious worship has, arguably, never been

¹ By way of example, collectively, the 27 EU member states pledged an additional 61,000 places.

² The number of persons currently forcibly displaced is estimated, globally, to be 110 million ([unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/](https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/)).

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greater, the symbolism of breaching dogmatic divides to focus on common values never more significant. It was moving to participate in the multi-faith service and to hear voices from all of the world's major religions. Moving, too, that a high-level representative from UNHCR took the trouble to attend and address those gathered, to pay tribute to the work of faith-based organisations (FBOs) in supporting people on the move.



My primary task, was, however, to moderate a panel at a side-event running parallel to the GRF. Organized jointly by FCEI, Caritas and ICMC, it highlighted Italian humanitarian corridors, the good practice which has evolved since their establishment by FBOs in 2016 and how that is now feeding academic and labour pathways in Europe. The event reflected the rich diversity of actors involved in creating a successful legal pathway: the local community, academic institutions, employers, agencies, professional caseworkers, psychologists, referring partners and government are all needed. As FBOs often have informal links to all, they can be well-placed to mobilise those needed to get a legal pathway off the ground.

Inspiring, then, to hear from many such actors during our event but perhaps most inspiring to hear from Maher, a refugee who came to Italy with his brother via one of FCEI's earliest corridors. He described immense challenges faced, both as a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon and then on arrival in Italy. First identified by FCEI's Medical Hope project in Beirut as a bone marrow donor for his terminally-ill brother, his initial focus was a transplant process which, sadly, proved unsuccessful, compounding Maher's suffering still further. Undaunted, Maher sought to build a life for himself in Italy, completing his studies in engineering and, eventually, finding employment. Then confronted with the reality that many landlords will not rent to migrants, undaunted, Maher saved hard, bought his own home, married, and supports two other family members. Whilst his gratitude for the support given by the programme is clear, the driver was Maher himself, never ceasing to believe that he could make a success of things.

Stories such as these inspire FCEI's Mediterranean Hope team in its amazing work, and experience of building a pathway to support people such as Maher positions generates confidence. In recent weeks the team has been delighted to learn that twin bids made in May for EU AMIF funding to promote community sponsorship and to pilot a labour pathway for Italy have been successful. Without that kind of backing, innovation could not continue. Although bigger than ever, the MH team is tiny compared with many of those competing for such funding. A combination of tenacity, creativity and credibility helped, however, to beat the odds.

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In other news, it was a delight to support the visit this autumn of Rt Rev Sally Foster-Fulton, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, to Rome. Her passions for social justice and ecumenism were fed into a programme which included encounters with organisations such as FCEI which support migrants, and different faith leaders, including Pope Francis. Coinciding with her visit were the services of introduction for Rev Tara Curlewis, now serving as minister at St Andrew's Church of Scotland in Rome and as Ecumenical Liaison Officer for the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). Both the St Andrew's community and WCRC are excited about the long-awaited dual appointment – and so too is the wider ecumenical community. Attendance at those services and the welcome enjoyed by Tara are testament to the value placed by many denominations on strengthening ecumenism within Rome and beyond. That we can achieve more when we work together is clear.



Good leaders prepared to work together are invaluable – but so too are engaged and active grass roots communities. Ultimately, collective action is made up of the acts of individuals and, to that end, all of us can potentially contribute to change. *To close, I can do no better than repeat Filippo Grandi, UNHCR's High Commissioner, as he addressed the GRF:*

"Let's pledge to think about and reflect on the plight of refugees; to empathize with and welcome the exiled; those torn from their homes and homeland; and let us pledge – together, all of us – to do whatever we can, as individuals with a shared humanity, and as institutions, states, or otherwise to protect, help, include, and ultimately solve their plight and help them return – voluntarily, safely and with dignity – to their homes. And let's do this today and every day."

Every blessing to you and yours in 2024.

Fiona Kendall

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