

To CEC and CCME Member Churches,
Councils of Churches
and Organisations in Partnership

May 2015

**Commemorate Persons who lost their lives on their way to seek safety –
Recommended date: 21 June 2015**

Your Eminences,
Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
Dear Friends,

The tragedy off the Libyan coast in April 2015 has once more brought the fate of persons crossing the Mediterranean Sea and seeking safety to the attention of European societies and governments. Yet, many more tragedies occur almost daily on the Southern European borders: this year has already seen tragedies on Rhodes, Greece, several incidents at the fence between Morocco and the Spanish exclave of Ceuta and Melilla in addition to Lampedusa, Italy, and Malta, plus a number of disasters off the Libyan coast.

The civil war in Syria has already displaced millions of people. The number of Syrian refugees registered by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees is now close to 4 million persons. The majority live in neighbouring countries Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. In Europe, Sweden and Germany have the highest numbers of Syrian refugees. The situation in Eritrea, particularly the forced and lengthy conscription into the armed forces, leads many young persons to flee the country. Fighting and conflict in Libya adds hardship to already complicated flight routes.

Due to strict border controls at the EU external borders and with hardly any legal option to enter, refugees and migrants are forced to opt for extremely high risks and resort to using smugglers hoping to find a way towards safety. Since the termination of the Italian Mare Nostrum operation end of 2014, it has taken several months – and more than 1.500 lost lives in the first 4 months of 2015 alone – to enhance and undertake some search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea between Italy, Malta and Libya.

Between 2000 and 2014 more than 22.400 people are reported to have lost their lives on their way to Europe, drowning at sea or in rivers, suffocated in containers on trucks or ships. Due to higher number of arrivals, the media attention is currently focused on Italy. The situation at the Greek and Spanish borders however requires attention, too. These countries and their people face immense challenges following the financial crisis. At the same time, as the Syrian conflict is in the

neighbourhood, Greece remains an important entry point for refugees and asylum applicants. While with great efforts, reception and asylum capacities have improved and further improvements are expected, the asylum and refugee system in Greece is still not meeting protection needs. In the first months of 2015, the number of arrivals in Greece has rapidly increased.

Churches in Europe have responded to the ongoing loss of life in the Mediterranean by offering practical solidarity, but also by arguing for safe and legal ways for refugees and migrants to enter Europe. To this effect, CCME together with partners launched the "Safe Passage" project.

The Assembly of the Conference of European Churches held in Budapest in July 2013 renewed the call on churches to *"to commemorate those who have died on their journey to find a dignified life in Europe through an annual day of prayer."* In the past years, many churches and parishes across Europe have taken up this call and held commemoration services around 20 June, International Refugee Day. This year we wish to recommend holding services of commemoration on **21 June**, the Sunday after the International Refugee Day 20 June. In some countries, other dates during the course of the year may be appropriate.

We are pleased to note that the African Union Commission will hold an official commemoration service on 27 May 2015 in Addis Ababa.

We would like to reiterate the call of the CEC Assembly and thus appeal to churches across Europe to commemorate the persons who have lost their lives on their way to Europe. Together with the German Ecumenical Committee on Church Asylum, supported by the Evangelical Church in Berlin, Brandenburg and Silesian Oberlausitz and the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), CCME has published material which can be used for worship or intercessions during a service. This is available in English and German and can be found on the CCME website:

http://www.ccme.be/fileadmin/filer/ccme/70_DOWNLOADS/20_Publications/2014-06-11-Remembrance_2014_Resource_Guide_EN_FIN.pdf. Please find a copy attached.

We would like to request that you share this material as widely as possible in your constituency. If you were able to inform us about your activities, we would be most grateful.

Let us jointly remember the documented as well as the undocumented persons who have died at European borders, let us share our sorrow in prayer.

With our best wishes and greetings,



Rev. Dr. Guy Liagre
General Secretary
Conference of European Churches



Doris Peschke
General Secretary
Churches' Commission for
Migrants in Europe

Encl.