

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

18 June 2018

**Commemorate people who lost their lives on their way to seek safety –
International Refugee Day 20 June 2018**

Esteemed Church Leaders,
Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
Dear Friends,

Tragedies in the Mediterranean region unfortunately continue on a significant scale: 3,111 people were recorded to have lost their lives in 2017, and as of 12 June, 792 deaths were already counted in 2018 (Source: IOM "Missing migrants" website). In the last three years alone, more than 10,000 people lost their lives.

Since 2000 more than 30,000 people are reported to have lost their lives on their way to Europe, drowning at sea or in rivers, suffocating in containers on trucks or ships. Due to higher number of arrivals, the political attention in Europe is currently focused on Italy. The situation at the Greek and Spanish borders, however, requires attention, too. The situation at the eastern borders of the EU is even less known. Reports from other world regions also point to alarming developments, for example at the Horn of Africa.

In response, non-governmental organisations continued their search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean – Proactiva Open Arms, SOS Méditerranée, Sea Watch, Jugend Rettet, and other organisations have deployed ships, experts and volunteers to rescue people in distress. Churches in Europe have supported these operations through a variety of means. Some politicians in Europe have heavily attacked these operations for "providing a ferry service" to Europe, for aiding smugglers or even accusing them of being traffickers. Libya has unilaterally extended its search and rescue zone and Libyan coastguards have on various occasions harassed non-governmental search and rescue crews, threatening staff and rescued migrants.

Some of the organisations offering search and rescue have, therefore, been forced to stop their essential services. Reports of slave markets in Libya highlight the growing concern for the lives of those on their way to Europe, even before their departure, or after having been returned to Libya.

Events and statements of the last week around the search and rescue ship "Aquarius" show that some policy makers are prioritising their electoral chances over the life and wellbeing of those stranded at sea. They rather shift the responsibility for protection on to others.

Churches in Europe have responded to the ongoing loss of life in the Mediterranean by offering practical solidarity, supporting search and rescue, but also by advocating for safe and regular ways for refugees and migrants to enter Europe. To this effect, CCME together with partners launched the "Safe Passage" project. CCME and CEC members in Belgium, France, and Italy, in ecumenical cooperation with Roman Catholic partners, have undertaken projects for sponsoring safe refugee arrivals through resettlement and humanitarian visas.

The 2018 Novi Sad General Assembly of the Conference of European Churches held earlier this month recommitted CEC to *"Stand against the model of closing borders, which make crossing the Mediterranean Sea one of the most dangerous ways of migration in the world (more than 5,000 people lost their lives in 2016); we will continue to commemorate such loss of life."* (Public issues statement CEC General Assembly 2018)

Many churches 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 the Sunday after, **24 June**. In some countries, other dates throughout the year may be appropriate.

We would like to reiterate the call of the CEC General Assembly and thus appeal to churches across Europe to commemorate the people who have lost their lives on their way to Europe. We have updated the material initially produced 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), which can be used for worship or intercessions during a service. This is available in English and can be found on the CCME website. Please find a copy attached.

We would like to request that you share this material as widely as possible in your constituency. We would be most grateful to learn more about your activities.

In offering a broader reflection on hospitality and migration, the CEC General Assembly 2018 expressed:

"The protection of the rights of people who have abandoned their homes due to war, and driven to Europe in hope of a better life forces Europe to look at itself and reflect on its future, but also its responsibility and place in the world.

The theology of holistic hospitality is based on the juxtaposition of the people of Chios, in that they see the refugee as a full and complete icon of Christ. It is through the lens of the Word of God that human existence is truly valued collectively and individually. It is a fact that the first true stranger is none other than Christ himself." (Public issues statement)

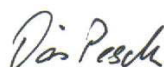
Let us in this spirit jointly remember the documented as well as the undocumented people who have died at European borders, let us share our sorrow in prayer.

With our best wishes and greetings,



Fr. Heikki Huttunen
General Secretary
Conference of European Churches

Encl.



Doris Peschke
General Secretary
Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe