

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

May 2017

**Commemorate Persons who lost their lives on their way to seek safety –
Recommended date: 18 June 2017**

Esteemed church leaders,
Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
Dear Friends,

Tragedies in the Mediterranean region unfortunately continue to rise: 5,098 persons are recorded to have lost their lives in 2016, and during the first four months of 2017 1,309 were counted. In the last three years alone, more than 10,000 persons 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, suffocated in containers on trucks or ships. Due to higher number of arrivals, the attention is currently focused on Italy. The situation at the Greek and Spanish borders however requires attention, too.

Search and rescue operations have been increased, particularly by non-governmental organisations over the past years – Médecins sans frontières, SOS Méditerranée, Sea Watch and many others have deployed ships, experts and volunteers to rescue persons at distress. They have been criticised by some politicians in Europe for “providing a ferry service” to Europe, or for aiding smugglers. Neither of these statements is based on evidence. To the contrary, there is evidence that if search and rescue operations are reduced, more persons are left to die. Until early May 2017, more than 52,100 persons arrived in Southern European countries, the vast majority in Italy.

Churches in Europe have responded to the ongoing loss of life in the Mediterranean by offering practical solidarity, but also by advocating for safe and legal ways for refugees and migrants to enter Europe. To this effect, CCME together with partners launched the “Safe Passage” project. Projects for sponsoring safe refugee arrivals through resettlement and humanitarian visa have been undertaken by the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy and the Community of St. Egidio, similar pathways are now agreed in France.

The General 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 **18 June**, the Sunday before the International Refugee Day 20 June. In some countries, other dates during the course of the year may be appropriate.

The German Protestant Church Convention, Kirchentag, has resolved "to express our grief at these deaths, the Kirchentag will interrupt its programme on Friday (26 May 2017) at 12.00 noon to observe a minute's silence. We show our practical support through the offerings at the Festive Service to the SOS Méditerranée and Mediterranean Hope projects, which help refugees coming across the Mediterranean to Europe". A special commemoration event against the deaths in the Mediterranean Sea will take place on Friday 26 May 2017 from 11-12.30 h at Washingtonplatz at the Central Station (Hauptbahnhof) in Berlin.

We would like to reiterate the call of the CEC General Assembly and thus appeal to churches across Europe to commemorate the persons who have lost their lives on their way to Europe. We have only slightly updated the material 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), 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. 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.

In this period of Easter, Ascension and Pentecost filled with hope and light that are intended for all humankind, we are deeply saddened and disturbed that the way of the cross, of suffering, hopelessness and death, continues for thousands of our human brothers and sister on the outer borders of the European Union. We cannot escape the facts that reveal our - the European citizens' - guilt for this unending ordeal. As churches and Christians our divine calling is to be witnesses and servants of the resurrection and of a new life in justice and peace for all, regardless of their ethnicity, nationality or religion. 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,



Fr. Heikki Huttunen
General Secretary
Conference of European Churches



Doris Peschke
General Secretary
Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe

Encl.