

CCME General Assembly in Rome: ‘protect people, protect our humanity’

By: Joy Eva Bohol

OVER 40 delegates and observers, representing 39 member churches and Christian agencies in 20 countries convened at the CCME General Assembly in Rome, Italy, from November 6-8, 2023. The aim is to address the escalating violence and displacement caused by conflicts across Europe, the Middle East, and other regions. The assembly, in its joint message, urged churches and governments to “protect people, protect our humanity.”

In his opening remarks, outgoing CCME moderator, Prof Dr. Goos Minderman, from the Council of Churches Netherlands, said, "Europe is struggling with border issues, and it is clear that we have not invested enough in humane border procedures. Instead of swift decisions, valid appeals, and adequate shelter for the short periods that should suffice, we've [European governments] invested in repression, fences, and long-term detention facilities... As churches, we have always embodied the spirit of hospitality, and now our role is more critical than ever..."

From the opening greetings to the small groups' discussion, there is an urgent need for the churches to be more prophetic in the national and regional levels, including the CCME's focus on safe passage and asylum in Europe.

Assembly delegates noted that the European Union (EU) implements double standards in receiving migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. In the past 1.5 years, the EU has proven that safe passage and accessible integration for migrants and refugees are possible with the Ukrainian refugees. However, this is not true for non-Ukrainian refugees, where there are pushbacks of the EU and its border countries in handling cases for asylum seekers and refugees.

CCME GA listened to the migration trends in Italy

In Italy, “there is a growing political propaganda and xenophobia... there are also more cases of attacks on non-governmental organizations,” said Rev Prof. Daniele Garrone, president of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy (FCEI), during his address to the assembly.

He added that there is a need to change the narrative, “they (migrants and refugees) should not have left (their countries)” to “they (migrants and refugees) should not have had to leave,” speaking about the dangers of crossing the mediterranean sea to enter Europe.

During the thematic focus panel on Asylum and Migration in Italy, Mediterranean Hope (MH), the refugee and migrant programme of FCEI, shared about its impressions from Lampedusa, discussions on safe passage and a campaign against labor exploitation. The programme was founded in 2014 in the aftermath of the shipwreck near the Italian island Lampedusa, where 368 people drowned in their attempt to reach Italy across the Mediterranean Sea <insert hyperlink <https://www.mediterraneanhope.com/en/english/>>. CCME Moderator Ms Fiona Kendall is the legal operations head of MH.

“We try to humanize the arrival points of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers within a military system,” said Mr. Giovanni D’Ambrosio, MH Lampedusa team, speaking about coastal borders in the island of Lampedusa. MH has a social center and migration observatory, among others, in the island. He

added that as of 12 September 2023, more than 11,000 people arrived in more than 200 boats within three days.

Dr. Alessia Passarelli on Being Church Together also shared her insights on the current migration trends in Italy and the urgent need for churches to be more intentional in their collaboration to address the pressing issues.

“Listening to organizations working on the island of Lampedusa, we were reminded that so far this year, 2,563 people are estimated by UNHCR to have lost their lives in the Mediterranean Sea. At the same time, European borders are secured – or rather shut off – by several thousand kilometers of fence. We are shocked by reports of repeated violence by authorities at the borders, on sea and land. We are outraged by the apparent cases of racism, interpersonal and systematic, in European refugee laws, policies and law enforcement, especially in Southern Europe, targeting migrants from Africa, Asia and the Middle East,” states the CCME General Assembly 2023 Message: Protect people, Protect our humanity.

CCME 2023-2027

The General Assembly (GA) has approved and adopted a four-year term (2023-2027), from the previous three years, for its new executive committee, work programme, and budget plans and implementations. The new mandate instructs the executive committee to decide on behalf of the GA the date and venue of the next assembly in 2027. The continuity of the four-year term will be revisited in 2027.

In a move to strengthen its thematic focus for the next term, the GA has tasked the new executive committee to revise the CCME’s structure and budget, during their term. The proposed strategic parts are:

- Advocacy on a European level (including monitoring and analyzing processes and inform its member churches),
- Facilitating a network of European churches and organizations involved in issues of people on the move,
- Conducting research and reflection on relevant topics

The proposal came after looking at the actual budget of the organization, as it relates to the ongoing work of CCME and its mandate. “A limited budget shouldn’t paralyze us but encourage us to listen more deeply for the voices of the marginalized,” the proposal states.

CCME general secretariat and its executive committee are also requested to formulate a concise annual action plan for the membership and partner organizations, which would hopefully help facilitate further engagement and fundraising for CCME, moving forward.

The newly elected members of its executive committee, who will serve for the term 2023 to 2027 together with CCME General Secretary Dr. Torsten Moritz, are:

Ms. Fiona Kendall, Federation of Protestant Churches, Italy (Moderator)
Very Rev Archimandrite Fr. Iakovos Andriopoulos, Church of Greece, Greece (Vice Moderator)
Prof Dr. Goos Minderman, Council of Churches Netherlands (Vice Moderator)
Ms. Angila Candey, Reformed Church of Hungary, Hungary (Treasurer)
Rev. Maria Kjellsdotter-Ryding, Church of Sweden, Sweden
Ms. Johanna Stahlmann, Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), Germany

Dr. Theo Anjorin, Cherubim and Seraphim Church UK
Revd Dr. Masiwa Ragies Gunda, Representative of the World Council of Churches, Geneva
Ms. Katalin Zoltani AIDRom Romania (electoral reserve)
Ms. Dorritt Akinbobola, the Joint Council of Churches for All Nations, United Kingdom, (electoral reserve)

Following CCME Statute, The GA has also voted to exclude from CCME membership the following, ARCA Romania and the Czech Ecumenical Commission on Refugees after years of non-participation.

‘Protect people, protect our humanity’

The CCME General Assembly meeting concluded as a fruitful gathering, where important decisions were made regarding the worrying migration trends in Europe, and the future work and direction of the organization.

Dr. Moritz said, “Our assembly deliberations show that the protection of vulnerable refugees and migrants is under attack in Europe. As churches in Europe, we call to protect the most vulnerable – this is based on our Christian convictions and the experience of Europe welcoming refugees from Ukraine in recent years. As our assembly declaration underlines, this is about both – protecting people and protecting our humanity.”

The 29 CCME members present at the general assembly, said in a joint message, “We therefore call upon governments in Europe to increase their work on securing safe passage for those in need, to ensure sufficient search and rescue, and not to externalize their responsibility to other countries. People in need of international protection should never be part of a political trade-off, either internally or externally, especially not with authoritarian regimes... The idea of ‘zero migration’ is not only unrealistic but also deeply mis-guiding and leads to poor preparation and unnecessary suffering...” Read the full message here <insert hyperlink>.

A similar call to action and sentiment on the growing violence and injustice to migrants and refugees, especially those from Africa, is shared by All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) General Secretary Revd Dr. Fidon Mwombeki, who addressed the GA, saying that there is a need for churches in Africa and Europe to seek ways to complement each other’s efforts. He added that African churches need to put the question of migration and human dignity on their agenda.

“Triune God, keep our hearts vulnerable to people on the move. Keep us grieving over the loss of lives. Keep us determined to speak up and act for change. Grant courage and wisdom to those in power, letting justice and compassion guide our common future. May we be open to be shaped by you and by one another.

“God, protect those who are forced to flee their homes and countries. And help us protect our humanity from fear and mistrust. Amen.” Prayer from the CCME GA Message, Rome 2023.

(Also see CCME’s comment on the recent Italian-Albanian Memorandum of Understanding on disembarkation and processing of asylum applications.) Embed code below:

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