



cec Conference of European Churches

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ccme Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe

Member churches and partner organisations of the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe and the Conference of European Churches

25 May 2021

World Refugee Day: Call to commemorate refugees who lost lives in the Mediterranean

Esteemed church leaders, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, dear friends,

Tragedies in the Mediterranean region unfortunately continue. Thousands have lost their lives on their way to Europe, drowning at sea or in rivers, suffocated in containers on trucks or ships. While total figures have decreased in the last years, the likelihood of dying, crossing the Mediterranean as a refuge, has once again increased.

In this period of Ascension and Pentecost, filled with hope and light for all humankind, we are deeply saddened and disturbed by the suffering, hopelessness and death, which continues for thousands of our human brothers and sisters on the outer borders of the European Union.

We therefore appeal to the churches across Europe to commemorate the persons who lost their lives on their way to Europe. We encourage churches to hold commemoration services, prayers or vigils around World Refugee Day on **20 June 2021**. In some countries, other dates may be appropriate.

The invitation affirms a call from the CEC 2013 General Assembly in Budapest inviting churches "to commemorate those who have died on their journey to find a dignified life in Europe through an annual day of prayer." In past years, many churches and parishes across Europe have taken up this call, holding commemoration events, bringing into light the situation of refugees.

CCME has [published resource materials](#) which can be used for worship or intercessions during a service, which are available in English and German on the CCME website. The materials were updated in 2018 and were 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).

The way we commemorate the call this year will be impacted by COVID-19. While many churches have successfully worked with virtual encounters in the last year, some elements central to commemoration, like the symbolic lightening of candles, may not be possible. At the

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same time, virtual encounters or open air activities, such as displaying names or symbols of those who died, outside your church buildings, might offer new possibilities of sharing the stories of those who are known to have died on their way to safety in Europe.

As churches and Christians, our divine calling is to be witnesses and servants of the resurrection and a new life in justice and peace for all, regardless of ethnicity, nationality or religion. We know that we are part of the global fellowship with Christians in remembering those affected and displaced in their regions.

Let us jointly remember the documented, as well as the undocumented, persons who have died at our European borders, seeking safety from violence war or economic desperation. Let us share our sorrow in prayer. We would be most grateful if you would inform us about your activities.

With our best wishes and greetings,

Dr Jørgen Skov Sørensen
General Secretary
Conference of European Churches

Dr Torsten Moritz
General Secretary
Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe

FACTSHEET:

Following facts and figures describes the background and context behind the joint CEC and CCME call to the churches to commemorate persons, who lost lives in the Mediterranean seeking safety, including responses from churches on the situation together with useful links.

- Tragedies in the Mediterranean region unfortunately continue – 1,417 persons are recorded to have lost their lives in 2020 - according to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM : <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>) and during the first four months of 2021, more than 600 deaths were counted. We learnt about the dramatic fate of around 130 persons in distress and gone missing in Lybian waters as recently as 22nd April.
- While total figures have decreased in the last years, the likelihood of dying has once again increased. Arrivals on the Canary Islands and Lampedusa also confirm that in addition to persons from Sub-Saharan Africa more and more citizens of Northern Africa countries are trying dangerous passages. While many of them might not meet the agreed international criteria of being refugees, the increase in passages signals the amount of growing desperation not least to the consequences of COVID 19 on livelihoods.
- Particularly painful is the fact that once again throughout 2020 several boats were known to be in distress in the Mediterranean. Yet, several Mediterranean states in Europe and their non-European partners delayed the deployment of rescue vessels and it is until today assumed that several of those on the boats in danger have drowned. (see the Council of Europe report “A Distress call for Human rights”: <https://rm.coe.int/a-distress-call-for-human-rights-the-widening-gap-in-migrant-protectio/1680a1abcc>)
- Since 2000 more than 30,000 people are reported by IOM and other sources 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 numbers of casualties, the attention had mainly focused on the Western Mediterranean - Italy and Malta. The situation of those rescued at sea in these countries was exacerbated by the decisions of both countries to declare their ports unsafe for disembarkation in spring – due to COVID 19. The situation at the Greek and Spanish borders, on Cyprus as well as the EU’s Eastern borders however requires attention, too.
- As the EU s fundamental rights agency and the Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner documented, Search and rescue operations by civil society have in recent years been systematically sabotaged and criminalised by EU member states. (cf. “A distree call...” see above and <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2019/2019-update-ngo-ships-involved-search-and-rescue-mediterranean-and-criminal>). A compromise between some EU member states had been reached in 2019 and clarified how to disembark and relocate those rescued at sea – a demand CCME and CEC had together with ACT formulated in an open letter in July 2019. In practice there are concerns that the system is not working. The coalition of the “Christian group” including CCME has therefore recently asked for a strong involvement of states in search and rescue as well as predictable disembarkation cooperation in the EU and an end to criminlisation of humanitarian assistance to migrants in distress (https://ccme.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/2021-04-13-ChristianGroup_EUPact_SAR_Criminalisation.pdf)

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- Churches in Europe have responded to the ongoing loss of life at the borders of Europe by offering practical solidarity, but also by advocating for safe and legal ways for refugees and migrants to enter Europe. Churches in several countries have concretely offered to host those rescued at sea or relocated in order to unblock political impasse and allow for disembarkation. Churches are in several places supporting or launching search and Rescue initiatives. Unfortunately many of these safe passageways came to a halt in 2020, which churches and others calling for them to restart as soon as possible https://ccme.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020-09-21-NGO-joint-statement-Sept-2020_RST-cannot-wait_final.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3dJuO83dUBn9Rj5fVz6qZHmpYiEG-ljQbe2rOF8p2DDwL2hh06YLOoqGI
 - Churches have noted with concern that elements of the EU pact on asylum and migration aim at keeping persons seeking protection at the borders or outside of the EU. In addition to undermining the rights of those seeking protection, there is a strong concern that such plans will drive even more people into the hands of smugglers and leave them only with dangerous routes to effectively enter Europe and the EU: https://ccme.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/2021-04-13-ChristianGroup_EUPact_Pre-entry-screening_border-procedures.pdf
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