

Synod Report

The 2018 Synod of the Tavola Valdese and OPCEMI (the Methodist Church in Italy) was attended by approximately 170 voting members and 30 guests from countries including France, Germany, the UK, Italy, Switzerland and the US. Also in attendance were interested members of the public and members of the press, who produced press releases twice daily and assured a focus in broadcast, print and social media. On this occasion, I attended as the Church of Scotland's representative whilst Tim MacQuiban attended on behalf of MEOR.

The daily rhythm traditionally begins with worship in the synod hall at 8:30am, followed by a first sitting from 9:00am until 12:45pm and a second sitting from 3:00pm until around 6:45pm. A third sitting from 9:00pm until 11:00pm also takes place on two evenings, to allow a discussion on elections to take place *in camera*, and to allow all of the business not attended to earlier in the week to be dealt with ("*i recuperi*"). None of this is, however, revealed to participants in advance since the business of the Synod is deemed to be within the gift of the moderator, who can pronounce the programme only after the Synod has been formally opened.

The programme is less of a mystery to those who attend annually. Sunday is always the day on which the Synod is opened; there is always an associated public meeting on the Monday evening and Tuesday is always a day on which the international delegates have a separate programme. It was a joy to participate in each of these aspects. On 26th August, the current moderator, Eugenio Bernardini, hosted a reception for guests before the formal opening in the Casa Valdese, where the Synod hall is located. We were then invited to process to *tempio* (church) for the opening service. Both the procession and opening worship are clearly significant moments in the life of the local community, which turned out in force. The *tempio* was packed (in contrast to the position at the morning service) and Rev. Emanuele Fiume (Methodist minister at Via IV Novembre, Rome) pulled no punches in his sermon based on Isaiah 59. The relationship between church and state is in delicate balance in Italy and the struggle for society's values was an undercurrent which ran through the sermon:

"...from the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ there flow certain fundamental decisions, which have value not only for the church but for every human community. The church, which believes in the incarnation of Christ, has both a right and a duty to remind the state of the dignity of the humanity which Christ took upon himself. The church, which believes in Christian liberty must also tell the state about the value of civil and political liberty. The church, which is a communion of the redeemed, must adopt a position...which rejects a patent denial of human solidarity...[T]he church can and must remind society that the kingdom of God is the supreme model which earthly states must strive to emulate, for Christ is lord of this too...The proclamation of the Gospel, the true proclamation of the Kingdom, was not silenced by Caesar's Rome, and neither shall it be by governments in China or North Korea. It is undefeated, and will remain so, despite the compromises and mistakes made by the church. Why? Because the true temple remains the resurrection body of Christ..."

On 27th August, the Moderator's opening remarks took as their theme the twin needs to "take care" (of others and self) and to "listen". Although the church is going through difficult times, we are still here, and grateful for that. With an exhortation from the Moderator to avoid internal conflict, the Synod's decision-making function burst into life, its first task being to appraise the churches' overall position in a session entitled *Vita della Chiesa*. Building on this, there was a presentation of the first phase of detailed sociological research carried out via questionnaires and focus groups to establish what is really going wrong - and what is being done well.

The 2017 World Methodist Peace Award was then presented to OPCEMI for work dating back decades in relation to migration, work which had served to underpin and inspire those involved in creating the much more recent project of the FCEI, namely, Mediterranean Hope.

Another session on 27th August was used to commemorate the lives of all church members who had passed away in the preceding twelve months. That there was a snapshot of the lives not only of past office bearers or ministers but also lay members reinforced an already strong sense that the Waldensian/Methodist community in Italy is a very close knit family.

Two public meetings, one over lunch and one at 9:00pm turned up the heat on the issue of migration. The first, organised by Mediterranean Hope, saw a panel tackle the vexed topic of solidarity in the context of the Italian government's approach to the work of search and rescue in the Mediterranean. The second was a forum for presentations by Paolo Naso, Co-ordinator of Mediterranean Hope, and Emanuela del Re, currently a junior minister in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The second meeting proved to be fairly controversial, and was the subject of some discussion in Synod the following day.

On 28th August, guests were treated to their own programme. For us, the day opened with presentations by Luca Anziani (vice-Moderator) and Luca Barrato (press officer, FCEI) on the rise of populism in Italy. For those who do not live in Italy, these provided a valuable context for the discussions underway in Synod and at the public meetings. The group was then whisked off to visit Agape, the ecumenical centre in the next valley founded by Waldensians in 1947 and built by volunteers as a centre for reconciliation, theological and political formation following WWII. It continues that mission today. There was then an opportunity to visit the Waldensian museum in Prali.

The draw of the Synod was, however, too great for some, as the next topics for discussion were the FCEI and its newly published "Welcome Manifesto", which sets out the theological foundation for the churches' position in relation to migration policy: specifically, its opposition to criminalisation of humanitarian aid efforts and its resolve to continue to welcome the stranger. Some of us therefore opted to continue observing the Synod rather than visit Agape. The work of the FCEI's Mediterranean Hope project continues to be applauded, and the Manifesto adopted by the FCEI was formally endorsed by the Tavola Valdese and OPCEMI. However, a lively and, at times, passionate debate on migration issues and the churches' position in relation to the current Italian government was triggered in this session, during which reference was made to the public meeting of the previous evening. Feelings about the attitudes currently on display in government and society at large are running high. The need for the church to invite dialogue and to provide a model for civilised debate was acknowledged!

Ecumenical matters were then placed under scrutiny. Tim Macquiban highlighted the work of the Methodist Ecumenical Office in Rome in the past year, focusing on education and hospitality as key features of the engagement of the work with Catholics and Protestants in Rome and in other parts of Italy. The commemoration of the Piggott centenary (of the death of the founder of Wesleyan missions in Italy) had highlighted the importance of Methodism in the missionary movement of the 19th and 20th centuries. Tim commended the work of the Baptist and Methodist international dialogue commission whose report, *Faith Working through Love*, was available online. A study guide was now available. He hoped that this might be a basis for discussions between Baptists and Methodists in Italy.

That evening a fine dinner and musical entertainment was provided for guests in the community centre at Villar Pellice, further up the valley.

On 29th August, Synod business was devoted to OPCEMI (significantly smaller in size than the Waldensian Church in Italy), Ecumene (another ecumenical centre), the Servizio Cristiano (an anti-Mafia group dedicated to creating an anti-Mafia culture in Sicily) and the Diaconia Valdese. Some tension had clearly developed in some circles about perceived autonomy developing within the Diaconia which, in contrast to the churches, benefits directly from the very significant *Otto per Mille* funding provided by the Italian tax-payer. A further heated debate ensued which ultimately resulted in a wordy order acknowledging (a) the joint roles of the churches and the diaconia to provide a form of witness, albeit that one may do so through preaching and the other through works and (b) the need for there to be ongoing and intentional dialogue between the two.

The churches' budget was dealt with at some length on 30th August, along with liturgical elements. That day was allocated for me to help out at the Mediterranean Hope stand, so I was unable to follow these debates closely. This did, however, provide me with an excellent opportunity to speak in more detail to members of the public (and some attending the Synod) about the work of Mediterranean Hope and to canvass signatures for the Welcoming Europe campaign.

The closing day of the Synod was used to approve various orders which had not been agreed earlier in the week, to elect office-bearers for the forthcoming year and to permit the Moderator formally to close proceedings.

It was very useful for me to attend this Synod (not simply to unravel the mysteries of its form and content)! From a personal perspective, it was extremely valuable for me to get to know this faith community. There were myriad opportunities for discussion over meals and in breaks from Synod business. The particular role that I have with Mediterranean Hope makes it important to get to know and be known by the faith community in Italy and beyond, and this was an intensive but effective immersion! I was also able to reinforce the link between the churches with which I have links, the Tavola Valdese and OPCEMI. Guests were invited to offer a greeting at different points during the week, usually lasting around three minutes. The Moderator, in his wisdom, decided that I should offer mine on behalf of the Church of Scotland in Italian and that I should speak for up to eight minutes. Although a little daunting, it was good to have the opportunity to confirm my joint appointment to Mediterranean Hope by the Church of Scotland and Methodist Church in Britain. I formally affirmed the Church of Scotland's commitment (both general and particular) to the work of these churches, and to highlight its approbation of the approach taken in relation to migration. The determination shown by these churches in facing up to this issue is impressive and echoes, to some extent, the early fearlessness of the Waldensians in carving out a different path for themselves, a point which I was keen to highlight. This was all appreciated and, following the speech, presiding officer Daniele Bouchard, was keen to emphasise reciprocal warmth and solidarity on the part of the Tavola and OPCEMI.