

## Former Mission Partner returns to Italy.

It has been almost 19 years since I returned to Britain having served for 11 years as a Methodist Mission Partner with OPCEMI, the Italian Methodist Church. This summer, I had the privilege to return to Italy to represent the British Methodist Conference at the Annual Synod of the Italian Methodist and Waldensian Churches. Synod took place, as always, at Torre Pellice, at the heart of the Waldensian Valleys in the Piedmont Region of North West Italy. Synod ran from the opening service on Sunday August 20<sup>th</sup> to Friday August 25<sup>th</sup>. Like our own Methodist Conference, Synod is the big annual meeting of the faithful, as the Italian Protestant family gathers to confer, to share their joys and struggles and to consider plans for the year ahead.

180 representatives of the Pastors, local churches and the various church institutions joined the 30 overseas guests drawn from various sister churches all over the world. We were able to hear and take part in a wide variety of debates from ecumenism, theological training, Diaconal work in various institutions ran by the churches, and the upkeep of buildings, to the familiar challenges of stationing ministers in already over stretched appointments. Of particular interest to British readers will be the significant work Italian Protestants are engaged in aiding and assisting migrants and refugees arriving in Italy. This programme is known as 'Mediterranean Hope' and has been encouraging local churches throughout the Italian Peninsular to offer practical and spiritual support to the many vulnerable people who arrive in Italy in often desperate circumstances.

In the next couple of years, Italian Protestants are preparing to celebrate a couple of important milestones. Next year, 2024 will mark the 850<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Waldensian movement which traces its origins to the work of Pietro Valdo and his work with the poor of Lyon. The following year, 2025 will be the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Union between Methodists and Waldensians in Italy. These two churches have spent the past 50 years sharing a common Synod, as well as common Circuits and Districts. The success of this union has enriched and encouraged the lives of so many churches.

One of the highlights of Synod for overseas guests, is the Tuesday cultural visit to historic sites in the Waldensian valleys. I joined a coach trip to the valley of Angrogna where we visited the memorial at Chanforan, Tana caves where Waldensians were forced to worship clandestinely during periods of persecution. Also the groundbreaking Beckwith schools, supported by the famous British General Beckwith which did so much to advance educational standards amongst the Waldensians. The Tuesday evening dinner for overseas guests was another moment of joy, good food and sharing with our Italian hosts.

I left the Waldensian valleys with an overwhelming sense of respect and admiration for the work of our sister churches in Italy. These wonderful Christian people share a determination to sustain vitally important ministry and to contribute positively in so many ways to the life of the wider society to which they belong. May God continue to bless them in all that they do in his name.

Revd Richard Grocott, Superintendent Minister, Blackheath and Crystal Palace circuit.