**Report for AUGUST 2014 from the Methodist Ecumenical Office Rome**

Friends, Romans, and countrymen (and women). We greet you from the top floor of my study overlooking the Ponte Sant` Angelo with the sounds of passing traffic, vendors on the bridge plying their wares to the throng of tourists, the musicians strumming in the evenings, and the gentle hum of planes flying in and out of Fiumicino and Ciampino airports. Rome never sleeps? Well it does as we are now in the aftermath of the major religious festival which marks the shut down of much of the city from mid to the end of August. Only essential food shops and those selling gelati and souvenirs to the tourists seem now to be open. Thank goodness we bought the extra picture hooks and bits and pieces needed for the kitchen from the hardware shop across the road before they shut down for a fortnight!

The move went smoothly. We arrived one day and Piero our cat the next. We have adjusted to the daytime and night time temperatures which have hovered around 30 degrees for most of the month. It’s mercifully cooler at night now. We`ve learned always to walk on the shady side of the street and avoid being out too much in the pomeriggio (afternoon). The evening is the best time of day having a coffee on the roof terrace watching the sun set over St. Peter`s as the cooler breeze comes off the river.

**PSA**

We`ve had a very good welcome from the local church (those that have not been away for the summer) with about 60 at each of the services so far, including some visitors from around the world. The world is indeed our parish as the church’s publicity proclaims proudly. Folk from the Americas and other parts of Europe and the rest of the world. We were delighted to see a couple who recently got married at Wesley Cambridge, in the congregation one Sunday at the end of their honeymoon week in Rome! We joined with some of the church members for a pot luck lunch out at Ostia at the home of our church treasurer Marcello who, with his wife Margaret, have been so kind in helping us settle in. We came home with some Roman remains, a piece of an amphora and an ancient coin! It was good to get to know them better.

The second Sunday’s readings featured the story of Abraham setting off for goodness knows where at the ripe old age of 75 only trusting in God for what lay ahead. We feel like that. There must have been regrets for him as he set off from Ur and packed what little he could on his camel train. We miss Cambridge and our friends in the UK in so many ways. But we are challenged to move on and have new experiences of working for God in new and challenging ways. So we “thank him for all that is past and trust him for that`s to come”, with particular thanks for all the cards and messages and the gifts which came to us.

Ecumnenical

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Not many people have been around in August to make significant ecumenical contacts but we did visit the Anglican Centre soon after moving and met with Archbishop David Moxon. The conversation encouraged me to believe that closer relationships are possible. Meetings in early September with Roman Catholic (Tony Currer at PCPCU) and Baptist (David Hodgdon) colleagues have been set up. I have been invited to participate in a Christian Law symposium in place of Ken Howcroft meeting at the Venerable English College on 1st October when I am to present a short position paper on behalf of Methodists. We have visited All Saints for a Bible Study as a result of which their associate minister, Rev Mary Styles, agreed to take the service for us at PSA while I was away at Synod.

Which brings me to the major part of this report, focussing on the week’s meeting in North Italy, from 23rd to 29th August.

**Annual Synod 2014:**

I was delighted this year to be invited to be the official representative of the British Methodist Church, and also informally to represent the English Waldensian Church Missions Committee of which I had been a member, bringing greetings to the annual Synod meeting at Torre Pellice (see below for text). But I was also recognized by Synod as a pastor amongst them, sent by the British Methodist Conference to be its mission partner at the Ponte Sant’ Angelo Church Rome, working alongside colleagues in OPCEMI and the Waldensian Church as partners together evangelical missions in Italy. At the opening service at the beginning of the Synod 1,500 people crowded into the church to ask God’s blessing on the Synod’s business. And so began five busy days of meetings, punctuated by morning prayers using a variety of hymns and songs from around the world and with a variety of preaching styles, as well as the coffee and lunch breaks, to mingle with representatives, ecumenical guests and other visitors and to visit the many stalls in the tents around the Casa Valdese.

There was a familiar ring to the business as we heard of the falling numbers of members and declining resources and referred to the ‘Italian Crises’, of unemployment especially among young people, and the challenge of changing patterns of migration. The projects ‘Mediterranean hope’ and other such projects funded in part from Otto Per Mille (OPM) and the commitment of those serving in diaconal ministries in centres throughout Italy in response to the needs of those who are sick and the marginalized (eg. the victims of domestic violence) indicated the practical action of the churches in taking up the challenge of the gospel. The Week of Evangelisation (before Pentecost) was to be repeated. Churches were urged to make use of this to train themselves for work In society. Churches were urged to be *Chiesa Insieme* (Being Church Together), recognizing the richness of the diversity of different ethnic groups and their gifts. Similarly the richness of the resources of the Facolta were recognized, especially in their programmes in distance learning for the wider church as well as training pastors. The preparation of churches as well as the Faculty to commemorate 2017 as the Year of the Protestant Reformation was highlighted, as was the need to celebrate other aspects of our heritage as Protestant churches, in buildings and artefacts, in archives and libraries.

The political dimension of our life was not to be forgotten as we were reminded of the draft legislation coming before Parliament to remove restrictions on religious freedom. The need to encourage others to support the Tavola in its OPM allocation was urged. The necessity also of using modern forms of communication, in *Riforma -* now to be available online and in different formats - and through the publications of *Claudiana*, was highlighted.

Inevitably, some things caught the imagination of the press present, not least the first letter of greeting from a Pope, from Pope Francis, which, though couched in ways that Protestants sometimes find difficult to hear, indicated a new warmth in relationships. Mgr. Bianchi’s hint of movement towards an Italian Council of Churches and Roman Catholic and Protestant work together on Domestic Violence was good news, as was the presence of a variety of ecumenical guests from the Protestant family across Europe, reminding us of the ways small minority churches can work with others and draw support from others for their work of spreading the gospel. The role of the Young people in FGEI was highlighted in an uplifting report and discussion of their activities and desire for wider participation in the lives and witness of the churches.

All told, this was a good Synod to attend, with the cooler weather reminding us of Scotland in a good summer there, with plenty of conversations indicating a diverse church family working together to proclaim the gospel in new and exciting ways, engaging with society outside the walls of our churches.

I was privileged to be able to speak in two discussions, one on church heritage in which the example of the integration of work in the British Methodist Church was commended, and another on the diaconate, and deacons meeting as a distinct body (which some regarded as unhelpful). I was also called upon to give an official greeting which is appended:

**Tim’s Address to the Synod : August 2014**

I am very glad to be here amongst colleagues, ordained and lay, of the Waldensian and Methodist churches gathered at this annual synod. I am representing the British Methodist Church and bring the greetings of the President of the Methodist Conference, the Revd. Kenneth Howcroft. He, of course, was minister before me at Ponte Sant` Angelo Methodist Church in Rome until June of this year when he took up his new responsibilities. He served among you for three years. He has asked me to thank you for your friendship and support, and for your colleagueship in the work of the Gospel. He says that he has learnt a lot from you, and owes you a great deal.

And the Church has now sent me in his place, to fill the dual role, as mission partner working in and with OPCEMI, and as the Director of the Methodist Ecumenical Office Rome, which has recently been established to serve the world family of Methodist churches.

The British Methodist Church has been privileged to be in partnership with Protestant churches in Italy since the beginning of its mission to Italy in 1861, inspired by the *Tongues of Fire* that William Arthur at the Mission Headquarters had written of, as he urged the British Methodist Church to renew its commitment to world mission. I was privileged to participate in a conference at La Sapienza University three years ago when you commemorated the religious contribution to the stirrings for liberty and freedom in the Risorgimento. We must not lose sight of our heritage and the courageous and costly acts of Piggott and Green and Gavazzi with many other Protestants who took advantage of the new possibilities for mission from that time onwards.

The British Methodist Church values highly the life and mission of the Italian churches. At its recent Conference the President organised a workshop which the President of OPCEMI helped to lead about how the Italian churches were working with the British church and with the church in Haiti to help fund two mission partners doing medical and educational work in Haiti. The British Church is also developing new structures for its circuits to help them engage better in mission, and some of the fruits of this were shared at the recent Methodist consultation at Ecumene.

The British Methodist Church, along with others, has also been keen to develop new understandings and relationships with other churches, fostered by the Ecumenical Movement of the late twentieth century, not least with the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches. This has begun to bear fruit in many local ecumenical partnerships in Britain, many of them with the United Reformed Church, some focussing on joint activity in evangelism, in social action and in exploring fresh expressions of being church. Issues of ministry may still divide us but we acknowledge our part in God`s Mission which is One. God calls us to seek Unity. We continue to do so through our national and international dialogues as well as in our local cooperation such as the work we are engaged in with Churches Together in Rome.

As we prepare to commemorate the birth of the Protestant Reformation in 1517, we rejoice in our different traditions within the Protestant family of Christians, Waldensian, Methodist, Baptist and many others. But we also reach out from our evangelical heritage to those yet to be evangelised in partnership with others who seek to share the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ, with the poor and the marginalised, the lost and those without hope.

I look forward, with my wife Angela who is here also (she was here for the European Seminar of the Methodist Women at Pomezia in June) to meeting you, learning from you, sharing our experiences and seeking a way forward in making disciples for Christ and witnessing in God`s world today. May God richly bless this Synod, its deliberations and its worship together, that we may be inspired to go forward in hope with the light of his gospel shining in the world.

Vi ringrazio per l`attenzione (Thank you for your attention).