

Good afternoon,

I would like to begin by thanking the organizers for inviting me.

I will bring to the discussion the experiences of Protestant churches in Italy and in particular of the Waldensian Church (Union of Waldensian and Methodist Churches) analyzing their project “Being Church Together-Uniting in Diversity”.

For the Waldensian Church **creating intercultural congregations is the Mission**. Since the first arrival of migrants in Italy (end of the 1980s), the church decided to worship together with the newcomers and this was something new, different from what other countries had experienced. Currently, 20% of the membership within the Waldensian Church has a migrant background and the percentage is more than double in the North of the country. Changes began in the 1980s in a few local congregations that were faced with the challenges of including migrant worshippers, mostly from Africa, as well as addressing their specific needs. The establishment of Being Church Together – Uniting in diversity (ECI), first as a working group and then as a commission within the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy (FCEI) represented the first joint attempt of Protestant churches to reflect and act on the consequences of migration. Deliberately the mission was not to create a separate development of churches, based on “ethnicity”, but to include fellow migrants belonging to the same denominations within the existing local congregations.

Within the framework of the Waldensian Church - two patterns of interaction between migrants and Protestant churches have emerged:

a) migrants who worship together with the indigenous population

b) migrants who have their own place of worship, constituting a local congregation which is a member of the national church. The Waldensian Church tried to avoid the latter as it did not wish to encourage the development of separate churches. However, in recent years, due to the size of particular ethnic/national groups, the Church began to acknowledge membership of some ethnic minority churches.

The overall mission of the church is to go towards the creation of **integrated churches**, inclusive places of worship where members of all backgrounds and nationalities feel “*at home*”. This mission, however, needs specific tools and brings some challenges:

- a) Recognition that good will is not enough. Both ministers and churchgoers need to reflect on what typology of congregation they want to develop: from the liturgy, to the music, to the languages used, to the church activities and mission in society.
- b) Recognition of the need of addressing and disentangling what is cultural and what is religious in church practices and teachings. Leading to the importance of intercultural training at various levels.

Looking specifically at some of the challenges faced, I would like to mention three areas: empowerment, representation and young people. In relation to empowerment, there is the need to address the power dynamics (also hidden ones) within the congregations. Remembering that very often migrants, due to their regular or irregular status, are confronted with discriminations and often do not have access to the same rights as the others. Representation and visibility in church is related to empowerment. It is important to have a leadership reflecting the diversity

of the church composition. Importance of having policies encouraging active participation of churchgoers with migrant backgrounds and their representation at local, regional and national level. In working towards the creation of integrated churches a crucial place is occupied by young people, present and future of the churches. Currently the joint activities of young people of different cultural backgrounds are still limited but growing an intercultural new generation of churchgoers beyond nationalities is at the same time a challenge and a mission.

I will stop here; I did not mention the benefits of being part of an integrated church but I do hope that in the discussion there will be time to further elaborate on some of the points raised or missed. Thank you very much for your attention.