

February 2018

Last year I was given responsibility for another intercultural Church in the circuit, called Novara. The circuit is big. It contains several regions of the country. The district is even bigger, with Churches from here right up to the coast. The distance between Novara (in Piemonte) and where we live (in Lombardy) is 33 miles. I am actually quite fortunate, as some pastors have to travel much further.

I am also fortunate that we live very near to one of the major train stations and it is only a five minute walk for me to catch a train direct to Novara. If I set off on a Sunday morning at about 9am, I can get to Novara before 10am - in good time for the service.

The other day I took the children with me. They very much enjoyed the train journey – especially the beautiful view through the window. You can see the mountains on a clear day and they are spectacular. “Daddy,” one of them asked, “Can we go up there?” He was gazing up at the Alps. As I looked out of the window I couldn’t help but notice that several people on the train were staring at me. I wasn’t sure why but many people kept looking at me disapprovingly. In the end I just ignored them and focused on the glorious sight of the snow crowned cliffs above.

When we reached Novara one of the Church members (a man from Sicily) was already waiting on the platform for us and gave us all a big hug. We then got in his car to take the 5 minute journey to the Church.

The Church is situated in a shopping complex and has a very open and warm vibe about it. While half the members of the Church are Italian the other half are mostly from Ghana. There are also some other African countries represented, like Madagascar and Cameroon. We hold the services in Italian and English and try to incorporate different cultural elements in the services so that everyone can feel at home. For example, during the taking of the collection, we have African drums and dancing. It’s not easy. In fact it’s like juggling several balls of language and culture in the air, but it is extremely rewarding. Despite the many cultural and linguistic obstacles, the Church really has a strong family feel about it. This is a real miracle when you think about how easily the cultural and linguistic differences could cause division.

After the service we had a *bring and share* lunch and were then taken to the station where we just managed to catch a train which could get us back home before 230pm. On the train, the children spent their time mostly climbing on or crawling under the seats. I once again noticed that I was getting some very funny looks. For the duration of the forty minute journey home I just couldn’t for the life of me figure out what it might be.

The following week we went to Novara again, this time with Grace and Anna too. The looks we got were even worse. I couldn’t make out why they were reacting like this. It wasn’t until I got home that night, and took off my dog collar, that the penny dropped. Protestant pastors in Italy do not generally wear dog-collars. So if someone sees you wearing one, they assume you are a Catholic Priest. My wearing a clerical collar on the train, while accompanied by a black woman and three mix-raced children, would

have certainly raised some questions. It would have seemed to them that a Catholic Priest had fathered children.

It is so easy for people from different cultures, not to mention languages, to misinterpret things in ways that can be very serious. I recently attended a conference of pastors and lay people from across Europe, working in various kinds of congregations (international, ethnic, multicultural etc). Many spoke of the joys and challenges they experienced. Many of them were asking me how, in Italy, we manage to all worship together inter-culturally as one (despite the language difficulties). In all honesty, it is really difficult. While Novara is a healthy example of different people being church together there are also churches trying to achieve this vision which have come seriously unstuck.

I have not been here long but I think the key is to ensure, constitutionally, that all the different voices are heard and all the different perspectives valued (if you leave this to chance, the dominant voices can easily drown out all the others). Everybody brings something. Everybody brings a perspective that is of value. Everybody has something to offer. Thus, being church together, I think it only really works if everybody makes decisions together – if everybody has a real concrete stake in the process of shaping the worship and the direction of the church. There are different ways of doing this but it's very important to ensure adequate representation at meetings (even if you have 20 nationalities it is important to ensure that no single ethnic group, no single voice, dominates all the others). After all, you can't really avoid assimilation in the long run unless you are willing to give genuine respect to the different components within the congregation. Being church together means leading the church together.

Please pray for us, that God will help us be one in faith, love and unity.