

The PF IPL: An account of a still unfolding experience

1. Beginnings

The PF IPL was born as an attempt to respond to a number of needs. We needed to equip ourselves to face the reality of the changing composition of our church communities, and to recognize those gifts of leadership present in our brothers and sisters from a variety of national origins who make up part of our mixed-culture communities here in Italy. We needed to be able to provide them with the tools they required to prepare themselves for taking on a variety of responsibilities: not only preaching but also leading bible studies, creating Sunday school programs and animating youth groups. Such a preparation, we reasoned, must take into account the multicultural nature of our communities and therefore we needed to create a programme of reflection upon and elaboration of those processes of encounter between and among cultures which are in fact on going today, thanks in great part to the dynamics created and facilitated by a long-established project of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy, “Essere Chiesa Insieme” or “Being a Church Together”. Part of the task was to render more visible and give official recognition to the non-Italian leaders who have emerged over the years in a great number of our Waldensian and Methodist congregations. Many of these leaders come from Africa, principally Ghana, while others are from Nigeria and from some francophone African countries. Filipinos also make up a part of some of our communities.

Two main objectives emerged: our non Italian brothers and sisters wished to arrive at an official recognition from our Church in the form of a diploma or certification and we felt that this diploma should be gained after the completion of a programme of intercultural reflection, training and exchange among the various groups involved.

The project started off in a highly pragmatic fashion as a process of collective reflection. The first meeting, called in June 2009, provided the opportunity to verify our starting point, identify the questions to be addressed, the existing ecclesiastic structures which needed to be contacted and involved and the individuals willing and able to put their various talents and expertise to work in this project. All of the pastors working in areas with a significant immigrant presence were invited to attend, as were representatives of the various institutional bodies whose remit touched upon some aspect of this initiative (The Union of Lay Preachers, the councils of the circuits, the Waldensian Board, the Theological Faculty and the Commission on Ministries). An initial draft programme was prepared in the summer of 2009 and in August 2009 the annual national Synod expressed its agreement in a motion voted upon and approved.

2. A few of the underlying principles of the project

As our discussions progressed, a few priorities and key principles became clear and it was on the basis of these that the project began to take shape. They include:

- **giving priority to the bible.** The bible provides an ideal space and context for approaching and reflecting upon a number of delicate problems and questions of an ethical, spiritual or political nature. The bible provides those of us from different cultures with a common starting point and it is an inexhaustible source of topics for reflection and debate, while at the same time guaranteeing us a context in which differing ideas can be safely and comfortably mediated. Consequently, we began to envisage a programme of training and exchange which took its point of departure from the nexus of intertwining strands of the

bible and multiculturalism. We could valorise the fact that not all of us read the bible according to the same criteria or on the basis of the same kind of life experience. Thus, creating an intercultural reading of bible texts which, however, have their own specific cultural contexts and then trying to bring to light the points of view specific to those biblical contexts was the initial challenge we faced. Yet we found that the Bible lent itself to the process we envisaged of intercultural re-reading, on the basis of various traditions, and of dialogue between different texts and sometimes within a given text itself. Helping readers become increasingly aware of this kind of process can also help them become more aware of what is happening in the world today. In other words, for all of us, reading the Bible together can make us more intelligent and more aware of what is going on around us in our world.

- **Start with who and what we really have to work with.** We set a number of objectives for the composition of the group of participants. We wanted a mixture of Italians and non-Italians, a mix of generations, a significant proportion of women, people who were already active in their church communities, both Methodists and Waldensians, etc. As we came to grips with actual conditions, we gave priority to two aspects:

a) We needed to start with the initial group in the autumn of 2009, in part so as not to keep eager prospective participants waiting any longer and in part because of an availability of two key figures, someone to coordinate the group and a professor of our Theological faculty presently on a six-month sabbatical,

b) and we needed to give priority to individuals who already had assumed de facto leadership roles and were already acting as informal cultural mediators in their communities. Once we accepted these priorities, we had to accept that three of our objectives for group composition could not be achieved, specifically, high percentage of women, a significant percentage of younger people, and a significant Italian presence. Our choices on admission to the programme reflect the actual leadership situations in our communities and thus present valuable indicators of questions which still remain to be addressed in the future. We decided to admit participants who spoke English or Italian to this first edition of the programme, thus not including, for the moment, the Spanish speaking members of Latin American members of our churches.

-Priority to the local and involvement of existing structures: We decided it was important to work with the processes and structures already in place, even if some of those involved in those structures did not completely share our ideas or priorities. This meant moving more slowly in order to achieve the broad consensus we needed for our project to be a success. The plus side was that it brought us into direct contact with people in our churches who were facing up to the real frustrations and problems involved in creating multicultural church communities and we were able to present ourselves as possible facilitators in the difficult questions of intercultural, interdenominational dialogue. We decided not to create a new diploma or certificate but to adopt an already existing one, the certificate given to Lay Preachers. Our new diploma for Lay Preachers with an intercultural orientation places our programme and our participants within a pre-existing category within our churches.

- **to listen and to build the programme as we go along,** on the basis of emerging needs: at the start, we drew up a very concise programme document, indicating our major guidelines but leaving us many possibilities to re-evaluate and change topics and themes on the basis of the dynamics which came out as the group evolved. This choice increased the pressure on trainers and docents because it shortened the timeframes necessary to prepare course material. On the plus side, we could calibrate and direct our didactic emphasis for each of

the plenary meetings in accordance with the evolution of previous discussions, thus maximizing relevance for the participants. We believe that a true intercultural dialogue is a goal to be pursued, an horizon toward which we direct our steps rather than a well-defined starting point. Logically, therefore, no one can have a priori certainties, prefabricated solutions or sure fire recipes as to what must be done and how to proceed.

- **Don't judge theologies but rather provide the instruments for understanding what theology is being practiced:** this question was the subject of an interesting debate within the group of the tutors whose role it is to follow a small number of participants at the local level. As they listened to some of the participants' practice sermons, a number of doubts and questions emerged in their minds. A methodological choice was made: the tutors would listen to entire sermons and then try to help participants understand which were the various theological approaches underlying their sermons and the group discussions, on which arguments those theological lines were based and what might be the tools necessary to improve their competency in theological argument, how to explain their own positions and how to listen attentively to the positions of others.

3. Some information on organization and practical questions

a) selection: In keeping with the practice already in place for candidates to the role of lay preacher, the candidatures of our participants were presented by their local communities and by the circuit in which those communities are located. Both the local church council and the circuit council submitted letters attesting to the candidate's activity within the community, his present and past experience in roles of church leadership, sensitivity to intercultural issues, personal motivations, etc.

We had initially thought of restricting the total number of participants in this pilot project to 20-25 but given the enormous amount of interest, we decided to increase that number to 40.

b) modalities of training: we decided on a two year programme, and for each year:

- three plenary meetings of one full day and one of 2 days' duration
- in the 8-9 week period between plenary sessions, participants meet twice with their local tutors in order to re-work and elaborate upon themes and techniques presented in the plenary sessions. During these encounters, the tutor also assists the participant in setting up their practice activities in their communities (preaching, bible study, a Sunday School session, a youth group session, etc.)
- each participant carries out one of the activities noted above, wherever possible on the basis of the biblical texts discussed in the previous plenary session.
- Participation in additional training activities on an optional basis

Each participant is asked to pay a 30 euro fee annually.

A week before each plenary session, the group of tutors met with course organizers to report on the work being done at the local level and share ideas, approaches, difficulties, problems and solutions. In addition, the tutor's group can develop collectively a number of evaluation tools, a list of urgent questions to be addressed and the points which need to be further emphasized in the next plenary. We have found that these sessions provide the tutors' group with a highly valuable opportunity to train themselves. At present, both the plenary sessions and the tutors' meetings are being held at the Methodist Church in Milan.

c. Programme: the programme to date has been as follows:

1st meeting: November 21 on the Bible: the stories of Jesus' birth (a plurality of stories and of cultural contexts, the importance of names and genealogies, the NT as a re-reading of the OT).

2nd meeting: January 23, centred on the Bible: stories of miracles and healings. The debates within and between texts of the OT and NT. Use of instruments for reading the bible (tables, comparisons, notes, maps, etc.) plus a brief lecture on healing in Ghana today.

3rd meeting: 12-14 March: along with the Miracles project of the FCEI (Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy). The two day encounter in Brescia touched on dynamics for resolving conflicts. Biblical texts included Judges 11, Jephthah's daughter and the question of inter-generational conflict. Then the parable of the vineyard worker of the 11th hour and the question of conflicts in the working environment.

4th meeting: 15 May, focusing on the worship service: Analysis and discussion of the video taken of the worship service held in Brescia in March, along with other services videotaped at local churches.

Foreseen for Year 2

5th meeting: organization and governance of the churches (with the participation of our elected church leaders on various levels, including the national.)

6th meeting: today and yesterday: history of the Reformation, of Protestantism in Europe of protestant churches in Italy. Strong convictions plus the commitment to dialogue, faith in a pluralistic society.

7th meeting: today and yesterday: Evangelization and Missions- the African Churches, the CEVAA

8th meeting: citizenship, Being a Church Together- experiences, tasks, projects for the future.

4. An evaluation of our first 6 months

At this half way point of the first year, our evaluation is certainly positive. The enthusiasm shown by our participants, the lively debates, the quantity and quality of topics raised for discussion all support a positive evaluation. Equally positive signs are the regularity and punctuality of participation, the willingness of the individual church communities to offer moral and financial support to their participants and the constant flow of new requests from those who wish to take part in a second edition of the programme. While it is too soon to be able to make an overall evaluation, certain points are already very clear:

- **the role of the local tutors is fundamental.** They are the messengers who transmit information and act as coaches for the participants in their area, assisting them in their studies and helping them to set up their practice activities in the local churches. They also carry out a highly valuable role of mediators between the local churches and this new programme. They are precious intermediaries between participants and local communities in offering two-way feedback and in helping participants select timely and important themes to explore. Another important contribution from the group of tutors was their signalling of the fact that we needed to create a standard form and mechanism for tracking the progress of each participant. It is interesting to note that a number of the tutors are women and quite a few are non-Italians, although as women pastors they have served in Italian Waldensian and Methodist churches for many years. A profound and significant intercultural work is being

carried out during the meetings of the tutors' group. An important task for the future will be the expansion of this group of tutors and trying to find more qualified non-pastors willing to take on this task. Our current pastor-tutors are doing an excellent job, but they already have many calls upon their time and energy, particularly on Saturdays and Sundays when the participants' activities are generally taking place.

- **the special value of the weekend encounter:** We have been able to see that our two-day session in Brescia really facilitated inter-personal contacts and the growth of relationships. Participants noted that they really appreciated having more time to pray, share worship and song and just “hang out” together. Our plenary sessions in Milan are, of necessity, so packed with content that the kind of interpersonal moments we shared in Brescia are simply not possible. While a 2 day session, with an overnight stay, obviously implies not inconsiderable costs, we are convinced that this experience should be repeated.
- **The decision to base our meetings on studying the bible:** this choice seems to be bearing good fruit. Participants have understood the importance of coming to grips with a text, to look around for other sources of information about a passage, and are learning not to use a text as a pretext simply to project one's own ideas. Instead it is more useful to enter into a kind of respectful dialogue with each text, appreciating both its cultural distance from and occasionally nearness to our own reality. We will be following this same kind of approach as we come to address the question of liturgies, church organization, etc. The feedback we've been receiving from the churches on the practice sermons is generally positive although clearly work remains to be done. A few local churches have told us that the very fact of seeing an African or Philipino in the pulpit has increased the visibility of that portion of the community and encouraged that participant's fellow countrymen and women to feel themselves more a part of their church community.
- **Verifying the impact of the training:** while our plenary sessions have worked well as laboratories of intercultural dialogue, as well as moments for the transmission of knowledge, we still need to perfect instruments for measuring which messages participants have truly internalized and the degree to which their level of competence is rising.
- **Supplying additional documentation:** this remains a problem. We are searching for efficient, cost-savings ways of getting additional study materials (books, articles, internet sites) into our participants' hands so that they can further investigate topics like liturgies, spirituality, biblical commentary, etc. The question of documentation is also tied to a key decision we took at the outset: not to demand a medium-high level of linguistic competence in Italian at the start of the programme but rather to ask participants to work on perfecting their Italian by the end of the 2 year programme. Thus, for the present, we are not working with thick texts but rather on the basis of brief fact sheets and tables.
- **Topics for future reflection:** a number of issues have emerged in our discussions which we will treat in further sessions. Among these are:
 1. the phenomenon of Pentecostalization of Africa's main line denominations
 2. the figure of the pastor: who provides a good model?
 3. Inspiration of the Holy Spirit and responsibility for one's own words.
 4. baptism

For the Programme Organizing Committee,
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