

August 2010

Dear Friends,

First I would like to apologise for not getting this edition to you sooner. I have had a series of setbacks, including the complete failure of my hard drive, which meant I lost everything on my computer: a hard lesson to learn, but a salutary one.

My problems are slight in comparison with those of Riesi. Early in June a letter from the Director of Servizio Cristiano went out to all the foreign organisations which offer them support, including the Fellowship, explaining their current difficulties. A translation appears in this edition.

This year the summer school for ministers in the North Western Synod was held in Italy with the Waldensians. My minister, Revd Ruth Dillon, gives her impressions. Margaret Neil brings thoughts on a stay at Borgio Verezzi and a young German woman shares her experience of working in the Valleys.

In May I attended the ecumenical Kirchentag in Munich and visited one of the Waldensian colonies in Baden-Württemberg. Yvonne Jones was to have accompanied me but unfortunately had a fall the week before departure and broke her ankle. Some of you may know she had to have a second operation as screws holding the plate in position had worked loose. Though home again, she is only now beginning to make a little progress, a source of frustration with which she is coping admirably, though I am sure she would welcome your prayers for her recovery.

Please bear in mind that articles or ideas for the Newsletter are always welcome. The more people contribute, the wider the range of topics we can cover.

I hope you have all had a pleasant and refreshing break over the summer.

Kate Grand

## Letter from Riesi

June 2010

Dear Friends,

We hope to find you in good health and ready for the summer break, which is fast approaching.

The reason for writing to you, and with some urgency, is not a happy one. We live in unfavourable times and despite the Italian government's frequent assertions that it wants only the best for us and that the international crisis has 'barely touched' Italy, for us in Riesi the effects are both tangible and worrying. At the last meeting of the General Committee and the Gathering of the Friends of Riesi Servizio Cristiano's balance sheet was already showing there would be difficulties over the summer. However that forecast was based on the way the project's finances have been managed for some time, especially as regards suppliers and services.

This year, faced with the 'stabilisation' of the Region's contributions to the primary school, in line with an agreement signed last year, we have suffered a significant reduction in funding for the infant school. Besides this, whereas in times of relative economic stability our suppliers allowed us to spread payments and thereby maintain a certain peace of mind over the summer, that is now no longer possible. Our suppliers, companies and small traders, are ever more exposed to credit companies and banks and rightly need to recoup what is owing to them as quickly as possible. We run the risk that this may have structural consequences for our bank balance, making it impossible to pay suppliers and wages from July onwards.

Unfortunately summer is a period when Servizio Cristiano has no significant income. Contributions such as Otto per Mille have already been drawn on and most donations will not come in until October. The shortfall we are heading for risks exceeding €100,000 in two years because updated forecasts give us little hope for next year either, when Servizio Cristiano will be 50 years old.

The Executive Committee has been keeping tight control of the accounts and has made considerable savings through rational-

isation. Thinking of making further savings on what has already been cut to the bone is not possible. The one front on which we are still working is contracts and wages. But room for manoeuvre is very limited. Firstly, because working hours and rates of pay are regulated by contracts, which though amongst the lowest in the category, still allow us to maintain parity with state schools and access public funding for the schools. Secondly, because the contracts are periodically subject to modification which means rises are not within our control.

The Executive Committee has already decided to adjust the workload of some employees, with their agreement, to improve the overall situation. With the same aim, all the staff have been invited to attend an extraordinary meeting on 21<sup>st</sup> June. After giving a clear account of the situation, the Executive intends, together with all the workforce, to look at either the possibility of introducing further rationalisation of the services offered or consider one or more concrete initiatives to take on shared responsibility, such as a willingness to make a 'loan' or accept a 'deduction' from wages from now until October. We know that most of our workers have responsibilities and family commitments but it also seems important to us that the first gesture, even if it is little more than symbolic, should come from us here at Riesi.

We are also aware of the difficulties others are going through, you too, however, we come to share with you today the hope in each of us that together we may find a solution, in times that unfortunately are not on our side.

Please get in touch if you require further information or clarification.

With fraternal greetings in Christ,  
On behalf of the Executive Committee,

Director Gianluca Fiusco

If you would like to make a donation and / or receive the bi-monthly newsletter 'News from Riesi', please contact:  
Donald Hood, 17 Cottage Road, Far Headingley LEEDS LS6 4DD  
Tel: 0113 275 5575

## **Waldensian Visit**

### **North Western Synod Ministers' Summer School June 2010**

A number of years ago, it was decided to hold the Ministers' Summer School in Italy, and to explore the relationship between the United Reformed Church and the Waldensian Church. The focus and purpose of our visit was to explore how the Waldensian Church undertakes Mission, as they are a minority Protestant Church in a Roman Catholic country.

Our North West Moderator, Revd Richard Church, George Morton our English guide, and another 16 ministers attended the Waldensian Summer School. The visit was in two parts: the first was in Torre Pellice, the home and centre of the Waldensian Church and the second was in Turin, exploring and learning about Waldensian Mission in an urban context.

#### **Torre Pellice**

We arrived at Torre Pellice and stayed at the Foresteria. Nestling under the Italian Alps, we learned about the origins of the Waldensian Church, its persecution, how it developed and grew over many centuries, and how it integrates its faith within its unique context in present times.

We visited the Waldensian Museum, where Luca our guide was passionate about his Waldensian History. We all commented how much we had learned from him, and it made us question our own Reformed heritage, our historical legacy, and the fact that we have no historical centre to tell the United Reformed Church 'Story'.

Stories played a large part of our visit, and we met people from the Waldensian Church congregations, together with two Waldensian ministers. We talked openly, (language was no barrier) and shared fellowship and it gave us the opportunity to explore certain aspects of mission with lay and ordained. All the URC ministers felt that hearing stories directly from the Waldensian people added a fresh and enriching dimension to the visit. It made us question our own involvement with national projects and see how the tax system in Italy benefits the Waldensian Church. It raised questions for us

about tithing and the whole financial structure of the URC; deep and pertinent questions indeed... yet necessary if we were to learn from the Waldensians.

After some sightseeing in Angrogna, visiting key places of pilgrimage for the Waldensians, and Sunday morning worship in Torre Pellice, we travelled to Turin.

## **Turin**

Turin bustled! It was noisy, a real city, and in the distance the snow-peaked mountains from where we had just travelled seemed a lifetime ago! A very different context from the rolling Italian mountains of Torre Pellice, nevertheless we encountered the Waldensians engaging in a different 'arena'.

We met a young Waldensian minister who described his frustration in engaging in ecumenical relationships with the Roman Catholic Church, and a retired Church of Scotland minister who ministers to English speaking Christians, in a room within the Waldensian Church. It was a different context yet the story seemed the same: they are still persecuted to some extent.

For me one of the most telling stories was walking through one of the piazzas in Turin. We walked over to a metal plaque, and on it was inscribed the death of a Waldensian pastor in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, refusing to relinquish his Protestant faith. What was so surprising to my colleagues, and me, is that the plaque and his recognition, was only acknowledged by the Italian Government in 2000. This confirmed to me a statement that one Waldensian minister said to us in Torre. Italy is like the BBC: Babes, Berlusconi, and Catholicism! The Catholic Church still has a hold on the Italian people and it is in this context that the Waldensian Church still survives.

For myself, it brought it home that, as a United Reformed Church minister, I live in a comfortable culture where I can openly practise my faith and live side by side with other faith and denominational communities. (Albeit frustrating and maybe challenging at times.) The Waldensian Church lives within the Catholic system which dominates the whole of Italian culture and society.

For many of us the visit raised questions about religious persecution, faith, challenge and mission, and it provoked an in depth theological discussion on our last night in Turin.

I knew very little about the Waldensian Church prior to my visit, but I do look forward to the day when I can return and learn more about them, to see how God is moving them and developing '*Missio Dei*'

Revd Ruth Dillon July 2010

### **Not All The Time, Not Every Time**

The Waldensian Church has always had, from 1532 onwards, a superb ecumenical record. Most readers will be familiar with the grim story of persecution, obstruction and sheer lack of understanding which makes the Church's history. The Waldensian psyche is remarkably unscathed, and the church is a source of forgiving community action. Here and there are examples of co-operation with the Roman Catholic Church, for example when the bishop of Pinerolo attends the Synod in August.

Most Italians have heard of the Waldensians through their tax forms where they elect to assign their share of the *Otto per Mille* (8 in 1000) to various charities, including the Waldensian Church, a choice which many make because they admire the Church's social commitment and wish to score a point against the peptones of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Many more Italians have hardly heard of the Waldensians at all, and confuse them with "Calvinisti" - supposedly a suspicious Swiss sect -- or else with "Pentecostali", of whom there are 200,000 in southern Italy alone, and whose emotional style fits some aspects of some Italians' characters.

But our friends in the Valleys would be the first to admit that they do not have a monopoly of the best ideas, still less a monopoly of the Holy Spirit.

Anthony Earl

Soon after receiving this from Anthony, I was looking at the Waldensian Church website and lo, there was a piece by Paolo

Naso analysing contributions to the Waldensian Church. It makes fascinating reading.

### **Giving through Otto per Mille to Waldensian Projects up again!**

This year overall giving through Opm is up 14.8% to €10,248,788, an increase of €2 million over 2009. There were 357,000 contributors, of whom about 100,000 are in Piedmont, as you might expect, followed by Lombardy (70,000) and Lazio (over 36,000), the latter reporting one of the largest increases over last year. Contributions from the South are also up this year: by 22% in Sicily, 24% in Calabria, 22% in Campania and amazingly by 20% in Le Marche where there is not a single Waldensian or Methodist church!

Between two thirds and three quarters of the total comes from Northern and Central Italy – Piedmont, Lombardy, Lazio, Emilia Romagna, Tuscany, Liguria and Friuli.

According to research commissioned by the Waldensian Church, contributors tend to be middle class: 34% have a degree, 49% have a diploma, 35% work in education or have white collar jobs, 11% are in business or freelance professionals. 25% are retired. 25% are the elite, who invest in culture, keeping up-to-date, travel, and are the most socially active.

25% define themselves as Catholic, only 2% Protestant, 1% Buddhist, 9% seeking faith, 31% non-believers and 15% agnostics. Only 23% claim to know well the church to which they dedicate their Opm; 15% have only a general idea of who the Waldensians and Methodists are; and 18% admit to not knowing who they are at all!

So why do they choose to allocate their contributions in this way? Most (90%) see Waldensians as working to defend the weakest in society, the most needy and minorities. 91% appreciate their work to welcome and help immigrants to integrate. 86% cite the Waldensians' tolerance of other denominations; 83% admire the courage with which Waldensians express their ideas. 97% like the

transparency with which they manage their funds: 57% know that the Tavola publishes how the money is spent.

From the profile of those who choose to allocate their Opm to the Waldensians and Methodists rather than others there emerges an Italy that is generally hidden from view, silenced by the media but which is thoughtful and hardworking. A beautiful Italy.

Kate Grand

### **On the Trail of Waldensians in Germany (1) Ecumenical Kirchentag**

Following the success of the first Ecumenical Kirchentag in Berlin in 2003, the second ecumenical gathering was held in Munich in May this year. Overall numbers were down on the previous year's Kirchentag – though over 130,000 stayed for the full period of Wednesday to Sunday, there were only an estimated 40,000 day visitors. Perhaps the economic crisis was to blame, perhaps in part the poor weather – at the closing service I was shivering in the rain and wind! – but many events were still full to overflowing and the Waldensians were there, as ever. This year I was particularly on the lookout for them as Yvonne could not be there.

Following his welcome appearance last year, Professor Daniele Garrone was to billed to preach at two evening services in the inner suburbs. The first was a German-Italian service focussing on Luther in Rome (five hundred years ago in 1510.) The lively young people's drama group from the Erlöserkirche, where the service was held, performed 3 scenes from Luther's journey to Rome, showing his growing disillusionment with that city. These were interspersed with songs from 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century Europe and a 20<sup>th</sup> century Brazilian Kyrie, sung by an ecumenical choir from Verona. The sermon, to my surprise, was given by a German member of the Lutheran Church in Rome and the intercessions by Past. Sergio Manna from Pomaretto, who also spoke about ecumenism in Italy, his words translated into German by Ulrich Eckert, whom some of us know from his time as pastor of Riesi. Sergio Manna spoke of 3 types of ecumenical relations: the Catholic Church seeing ecumenism as everyone else coming



round to their way of thinking; the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, when Waldensian ministers are very much in demand; and true ecumenism when Catholic and Protestant accept each other and work together for the good of others. Here he cited his own experience in Naples, where he worked with a Catholic priest to support prisoners, not just in jail but when they were released. Together they tried to set up a centre for ex-offenders but met with opposition from the government.

After the service the large congregation was invited for refreshments in an adjoining room much too small to accommodate everyone. I did manage to work my way through the crowds to say a brief hello to Sergio Manna and get a glass of *prosecco*, but Ulrich Eckert had slipped away.

On Friday evening Daniele Garrone was preaching (on the sheep and goats parable) at a communion service. I arrived just after the start and needed all my powers of persuasion to be let in to join the throng in the vestibule. We had no view, but we could hear and take part in communion.

This ecumenical Kirchentag was different: the Orthodox church was also involved and interfaith dialogue played a larger role than I ever remember before. Sue Armitage, another member of the Fellowship, attended an excellent Bible study led by a Muslim woman. I attended one was led by a Christian and a rabbi; and another with contributions from the local bishop and the Patriarch of Antioch, who knew each other well from years of working together in Jerusalem. For one of the local newspapers at least the highlight of the whole event was the open-air Orthodox service on the Odeonsplatz in the city centre, where bread was shared. It was also good to see how well the event catered for the disabled, who were noticeably present.

For me personally, it was good to meet up with my German friend from the Hanover region, now 80 years young, and share with her a service creatively prepared by German members of the International Ecumenical Fellowship in the Cologne area, at which all were invited to remember their baptism through the pouring of

water over outstretched hands and receiving a white scarf with a blue dove, emblem of the Holy Spirit. We also enjoyed some of the riches of Munich's many art galleries together and a concert which included John Rutter's Children's Mass. Not to mention standing all evening outside the hall where Catholic and Protestant theologians, Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann, were in conversation. I was not alone: at least as many were outside as in.

This year's theme was 'So that you may have hope.' The programme showed two young people walking joyfully on water. Ecumenically we are nowhere near there yet, but there was at times a refreshing honesty which does give hope for the future.

Margot Käßmann, former Bishop of Hanover and Head of the EKD, who resigned from both posts following her arrest for drink driving earlier this year, received an amazing welcome at this, her first public engagement since then. I missed her appearances as I thought they had all been cancelled, but I did buy the little book she had published earlier in the year entitled '*Fantasie für den Frieden or Blessed are the Peacemakers*', in which she tackles the issue of troops in Afghanistan in a very clear and passionate way, with a plea for more creative ways of peaceful conflict resolution. With it comes her New Year sermon for 2010 on Jesus' words: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled, believe in God and believe in me.' At another event I got into conversation with my German neighbour who believed that, without the shackles of office, Margot Käßmann would be able to speak out and achieve more than as a bishop.

Next year the Kirchentag takes place in Dresden for the second time 1<sup>st</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> June with the theme '...there will your heart be also' (Matthew 21, 6)

Kate Grand

More about Waldensians in Germany in the next edition

### **Trip to England 3<sup>rd</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> July 2009**

Our journey begins with a really beautiful sunny day at Turin airport. Massimo, long an expert on trips to England to visit churches

linked to the URC Waldensian Fellowship, is with us. London awaits us, rather grey. At the airport Dorothy and Kathleen are waiting for us and, like two guardian angels, were with us throughout our stay in Oxford.

Having accommodation together at Oxford Brookes University was a real plus, we felt a bit like college students ourselves. With Dorothy and Kathleen's loving assistance we visited part of Oxford, which is always beautiful, always interesting. We met the congregation of Marston, where we dined well on fish and chips. On Sunday we attended the service in their church, spending the day with them and the congregation of Collingwood, where we had lunch. Afterwards a really lovely walk up the hill through the C.S. Lewis Nature Reserve with its pools and dense woodland. From the hill there is a beautiful view over all the surrounding countryside. Both adults and young people enjoyed themselves having a go at flying kites.

A lovely evening of songs and music brought the day to a close. On our return to the university a great big shining moon wished us good night.

On Monday departure for Leek.

It's our first visit to the Leek church. In Birmingham a heavy thunderstorm keeps us company for a good stretch of the way. We received a very warm welcome, the families treated us like old friends returning. Thank you for looking after us so well.

Leek is a fine town on hills at the edge of the Peak District National Park, part of which we were able to visit despite the inclement weather, a park of undulating hills with lots of farms where livestock is raised. Thanks to the coach driver we heard a lot about what goes on in the park, both now and in the past. We went to Chatsworth, the stately home of the Dukes of Devonshire, visiting part of the house and part of the huge estate.

In Leek we visit the exhibition of embroidery on silk, as Leek was an important centre for silk in the past, with about 60,000 families breeding silkworms at its height, and a school of embroidery was set up here which became known throughout the world. As Leek had plenty of water there were textile mills. Talking to the exhibition

organiser we learnt that Gütermann was one of their competitors in producing cotton.

On Thursday we say goodbye to the Leek church and continue on our journey to Sale where we are expected for lunch. In Sale we find the people we have known for a long time and it's like finding friends again, even if they do live a long way away from us.

Ruth Cowhig too wanted to come and greet us, doyenne of the church, even at her venerable age still present and active in the congregation and the link between church and the URC Waldensian Fellowship.

On Friday there's a trip to Southport, a large seaside town. The grey sky of Sale turns to blue over the sea, the air is rather cold. Southport is predominantly a holiday resort and tourist centre surrounded by beautiful gardens. It's a long walk to the seashore, even if the sea is rather distant because of the tides. [The tide was in and the sea closer than I'd ever seen it there before! -- Ed.]

On the way back we have a pleasant meeting with members of the [URC] church in Ormskirk over tea with lovely sandwiches and cakes. For dinner we are at George Morton's church. Some of the people from Sale join us, so we can exchange news and views.

You could say we have been able to dine and have lunch in different churches or families, enjoying and savouring excellent food and delicious desserts.

Saturday and departure for Barnes Close. We arrive in time for lunch. It's always lovely to come back to the Barnes Close centre, so restful in its green setting, with that really beautiful hill where you can walk, caressed by the wind, enveloped in a country landscape, with the city of Birmingham in the distance.

On Sunday various friends came to Barnes Close to spend the day with us, among them David Hadfield who had come up from the shores of the English Channel to meet us. We shared lunch, conversing on a variety of subjects, we also talked about the next trip the English would take to Italy, probably to Rome in October 2010.

Our journey came to an end on Monday 13<sup>th</sup> July with our flight from Birmingham to Milan. Thank you to all the friends in England who made our trip possible.

We discovered new things, new places, we met people along the way who gave us their time and attention and shared these days with us. Every journey is a new one, bringing new knowledge of people and places and this enriches our relationships with others.

Lilly Chiavia

### **Borgio Verezzi 2009**

The two of us decided to make an independent trip to Italy in the summer of 2009, staying for 10 days at Casa Balneare Borgio Verezzi, the Waldensian hotel on the Ligurian coast. [In the Indirizzario it appears under PIETRA LIGURE (Savona).] We had visited there briefly in 1986 during our first URC Waldensian Fellowship trip and thought it would suit us well in our less mobile years.

The building itself has an interesting history. When it first came into Waldensian hands it was a centre for rest and recuperation for adults and children with chest illnesses, caused by working in the talc mines of Piedmont. Now it is a fully appointed 3 star hotel, wonderfully situated right on the edge of the beach, and still providing rest and recuperation to people of all faiths and none

We shared the hotel with family groups of all ages, disabled adults with their carers and one big group of multi-disabled young people from Cuneo, many of whom were wheelchair-bound. Almost all of this group were without conventional speech. We had so much admiration for them and their carers, who seemed calm, efficient and highly trained. Carers were one-to-one for those in wheelchairs and one-to-two if the young folk were able to walk.

Who would dare to bring such disabled youngsters to meals when the sparkling white cloths were set for full service with water, soft drinks and wine? The Waldensians dare, of course. These young

charges were attended with every respect and any accidents at table were cleared up without fuss. All the group were kitted out with 'trendy' clothes and bathing suits and those wheelchairs went everywhere, even on the beach. Anyone who has ever pushed a wheelchair knows what they are like on sand. It's like wading through porridge. One day, two of the carers picked up a young man from his wheelchair and carried him down to the sea to sit him in the foam, much to his enjoyment and delight.

As far as we could tell, no member of staff had any time off throughout their stay. I know something about residential care of able-bodied children and it takes its toll. Time off is essential for mind and body. So, hats off to the Waldensian Church's social workers and hotel staff. We know they were good and this was a demonstration of just how good!

Margaret Neil

### **A Year Volunteering in Italy**

*Laura Elser reports on her experience in the Luserna San Giovanni nursing home.*

In the middle of last year I decided to spend a year as a volunteer in Italy. This decision led me via the GAW to the Waldensian home for the elderly in Luserna San Giovanni.

In the last 5 months here I have gained lots of new and valuable experience and I don't know whether the time has gone fast or slowly. First I had to get to know the Italians with their 'little foibles' such as their lack of punctuality. But in the end everything went really well.

The home cares for 105 elderly people, 87 of whom live in the nursing home, and 18 in a sort of sheltered housing (La Residence). Some can look after themselves, others need care. So it's a mixture of sheltered housing, day centre and nursing home. Some only come for meals.

The old people's home has been in existence since 1885. Thanks to a donation the church was able to buy a house. The first

residents moved in on 15<sup>th</sup> November 1895 with only a cook and three other people to look after them. Some 15 years later a new home was built on a little hill in the hamlet of San Giovanni, where it still stands today, and 25 residents moved in. In 1972 it was extended to house 60. Since then the home has been extended and modernised. The flats were added to the care home and equipped to the necessary standard of comfort. Adaptations for the handicapped are exemplary.

The home's constant aim is described in the brochure:

'In the 100 years of the care home in Luserna San Giovanni much has changed, the people, the way of life etc. but the guiding principle has remained the same: to offer elderly people a comfortable home where they may spend their twilight years in the best possible health with respect for their person. We want to give physical, moral, or spiritual help where it is needed. The basic idea is always witnessing to living together in Christian community closely linked to proclaiming the Gospel with the Waldensian Church in Luserna San Giovanni.'

In the nursing home there are no fixed visiting hours: visits are possible and welcome any time. So there is always something going on there and that is why many residents just sit in the lounge. It's like being at the cinema. At first I thought people were simply sitting there, getting bored and waiting, but whenever I asked someone if (s)he would like to go for a walk with me, they usually turned the offer down. Then I tried it for myself, sat down with them and it really was not as boring as I'd thought!

Before I set off for Italy I still kept thinking: Why do they have homes for the elderly in Italy? Don't families here stick together and look after their old and sick relatives at home? But I had to learn that often families just cannot do that any more. The elderly need round the clock care and often comprehensive medical care too. From practical experience I have learnt that the elderly have not been banished by their families, rather I have the feeling that the whole family moves in too.

I work with those who are still mobile but are no longer able to live alone. I also work in the day centre where the elderly only spend

the day with us and are taken back home to sleep. I also run many necessary errands.

For my stay here in Italy I had 3 weeks' training in language and culture. It was very good, for in this way I saw a lot of the area right at the beginning and got to know the history of this interesting valley, Val Pellice. I also learnt a lot from the language course and felt I was equipped for the work. But when I actually started my job I realised it was not so easy. The Italian itself was not the problem but the fact that the region has several dialects. The most important one is Piedmontese – a mixture, it seems to me, of funny Italian and French – at least, that's what it sounds like! Many of the old people speak nothing but this dialect, so holding a conversation with them is always difficult.

We enjoy seeing every visitor both here and in the Waldensian Valleys. The Valleys simply invite you to go walking, to learn about the Waldensians' history and/or visit the Waldensian Church's social projects.

Laura Elser

[Translated from the latest Waldenser Magazin]

**Going ahead in faith, Servizio Cristiano is preparing to celebrate 50 years of witness and service.**

Do you have any photographs of Servizio Cristiano from the last 50 years (1961-2010) that you would be willing to share?

You can send originals or copies to **Servizio Cristiano, Via Monte degli Ulivi 6, 93016 RIESI (CL) ITALY**

Please mark your envelope **Cinquantenario** and label each photo clearly with the event, year, people etc. if possible.

Photos will be returned afterwards, so make sure you give your name and address too.