

**Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference 2014**

**‘Fear Not Little Flock’  
The Vocation of Minority Churches Today**

**Session Five : Ecumenism**

**Island or Impulse?  
Chances and challenges for a tiny Lutheran Church  
in the “Pope-dom” of Italy**

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**I - Introduction**



“Oh! There are also Lutherans in Italy?” - is a question I often get when I present myself abroad as a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Italy. The answer is of course: “Yes, there are!” However, the question should not be taken lightly. True, ELCI is a little flock, a very little one and also

a very young one, but this cannot serve as an excuse to forego any responsibility in public life and ecumenical contexts. On the third floor of this building in Rome is the Deanery of our Church.

The question we have to face today, is: To what extent are we involved in ecumenical dialogue? What are our chances to be heard? Can we improve them?

The Lutheran Church in Italy has gone a long way to find its identity. Shedding some light on the chances and challenges that have shaped my church into what it presents today will allow me – I hope – to find an answer to the question whether we are an island in the Roman-Catholic Sea or rather an impulse in the Ecumenical Ocean.

I would like to thank the organizers, and Bishop Fabiny in particular, for the invitation to this conference. I would otherwise not have taken the time to reflect about the place and vocation of my church in the country that welcomed me many years ago. And I probably would have continued to live my considerable ignorance about the Anglican-Lutheran Society.

## **II – From congregations to church : 500 years of Lutherans in Italy**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Italy is a relatively young church, almost as young (or old) as the Italian Republic. The Italian constitution entered into force on January 1, 1948. Only a few months later, on October 10, 1948, 19 representatives (6 pastors and 13 lay persons, among them 2 women) of the German speaking protestant congregations of Genova, Milan, Bolzano, the Lake of Garda, Venice, Trieste,<sup>1</sup> Florence, Rome, Naples and Capri convened for a pre-synod in Rome and resolved:

“driven by the wish to strengthen their congregations which have been saved through the help of God from the up to now most difficult years of their history and to prepare them for the further fulfilment of their tasks and the intensification of their church life, these designated representatives unanimously consider it to be necessary to unite their congregations into an Evangelical Lutheran Church in Italy.”<sup>2</sup>

### *The founding members*

The first Lutheran German speaking congregation was born in Venice about 1650. Due to its extended trade and commercial connections Venice had become very early the entrance gate for disseminating the thoughts of the Reformation. In fact, Luther’s publications started to circulate in Venice in 1520 and groups of followers began to form also in the Hinterland.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1947 (treaty of Paris) Trieste was declared “Free Territory of Trieste”, a neutral nation under the protection of the UN. Only in 1954 it became part of Italy.

<sup>2</sup> “Urkunde”, Rom, 10. Oktober 1948, 1 p., typescript with signatures. ELKI Archives.

Members even corresponded with Luther and Melanchthon, asking for encouragement and protection. It seems almost a miracle that the German Lutheran congregation survived for centuries, albeit in uttermost secrecy, in the *Fondaco dei Tedeschi*, the Venice trading post for



German merchants, until the opening of their church on May 27, 1813 in the *Scuola dell'Angelo Custode* (School of the Guardian Angel), a building formerly owned by a fraternity of the same name. Here it is.

The other founding member churches of the ELCI had similar biographies although not as complex as that of Venice. Trieste (1778), Merano (1861) and Bolzano (1889) were founded under the Habsburg monarchy; Rome (1819), Naples (1826) and Florence (1826/1899) under the protection of the Prussian Embassies, Milan (1850) by reformed and Lutheran immigrants from Switzerland while San Remo (1870) and Genova (1896) owed their foundation to their significance as long term tourist resort the former and as a most significant port for international commerce the latter. Some founded hospitals (Naples, Rome) and schools (Naples, Trieste 1835-1938), some also had their own cemeteries (Meran, Trieste, Bolzano).

At the turn to the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a lively presence in Italy<sup>3</sup> of congregations and related institutions where protestants could find assistance or a spiritual home, be they residents, tourists, sailors, craftsmen, maids or servants.

*Future needs cohesion : The synods of Rome (1948) and Florence (1949)*

The lack of peer contact and interaction led to the foundation of a pastors' conference in 1880 and of a "Federation of evangelical congregations of German language in Italy" in 1926 and the publication of a monthly journal, *Evangelisches Gemeindeblatt* (1923-1941).

Disaster came after WWII. Infrastructures had broken down, no news from Germany, no support either. The period 1945-47 was a daily battle for survival on all levels. Assistance to

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<sup>3</sup> There had also been congregations in Bari and Messina, the latter destroyed by the 1908 earthquake.

refugees and prisoners became the pastors' priority. In August 1946 there were still about 82.000 POWs, among them 80 evangelical pastors, in English and American camps all over Italy.

Friedrich Wabnitz (1908-1972), pastor in Milan, established first contacts to the "World Council of Churches" (1938) in Geneva and to the Lutheran World Convention.<sup>4</sup> The awareness that much needed help could be given by LWF only to churches, not to congregations led the pastors to seriously consider the foundation of a church in Italy. Shortly after the declaration of intent of the Pre-Synod (1948) and even before the constitution and the official name were approved the newborn church in Italy was accepted on July 28, 1949 as a member of the LWF family.

During the first regular, "constitution giving" synod of the young Church held in Florence on October 16-17, 1949, 21 delegates from 8 congregations, 1 region (Southern Italy) and 2 works (diaconia and refugee relief organisation) discussed and voted the constitution and by-laws of the "Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche in Italien (Chiesa Evangelica Luterana in Italia)".

The unanimous vote was to found a Church and not a federation and the Augsburg confession was accepted also for congregations that were not nominally Lutheran. An interesting discussion concerned the title to be given to the new spiritual leader of the Church, i.e. Bishop or Dean. To avoid allusions or comparisons to the Roman Catholic Church the vote went in favour of "Dean". Erich Dahlgrün (1895-1978), Pastor in Rome since 1939, was elected Dean of the new Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Italy. Here he is.



Self-understanding was no longer identified through national (German congregation) or linguistic (of German language) criteria, but only through confession (Evangelical Lutheran).

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<sup>4</sup> Became Lutheran World Federation in July 1947 in Lund

### III - We need to become a “duck” : ELCI and Italy

*1961 - Ente morale*

The following part has to be seen on the background of the fact that from 1848 to 1984 the official state religion of Italy was Roman Catholic.

The Lateran Pacts (1929) established the separation between Church and State and also admitted confessions other than the Roman Catholic one as long as law and order were respected. This was taken up and confirmed in Article 7 of the Italian constitution of 1948.

The question for the new Lutheran Church was therefore how to get recognition by the Italian Government as one of the “admitted confessions”. “We have to become a ‘duck’”, Dean Dahlgrün insisted with his colleagues. (This is a pun that works only in German. ELCI wanted recognition as an incorporated body. The Italian term is “ente morale”, and the Italian word “ente” in German means “duck”.) Dahlgrün was well advised to involve from the beginning an Italian friend and member of his congregation, the lawyer count Carlo Piola Caselli (1897-1992). Piola Caselli attended both synods and was essential in formulating the constitution in a way that would find approval from the Ministry of the Interior. This challenged not only his professional experience but also his linguistic skills when translating evangelical technical terms correctly into Italian. The definition of ELCI as a federation of independent congregations (par 1) was of particular importance to him. His efforts bore fruit in 1961 when recognition as a legal personality was given to ELCI.

*1995 – Intesa*

Article 8 of the Italian Constitution establishes religious freedom for all confessions and that their relations to the State are based on agreements (*intese*) between the State and the respective confessions. These agreements regulated, among others, spiritual assistance to military forces, in prisons and hospitals; instruction; civil and church marriage; taxes and protection for church property; religious festivities.

The agreement with ELCI became law in 1995. This agreement is a benchmark in ELCI’s biography, mainly for 2 reasons

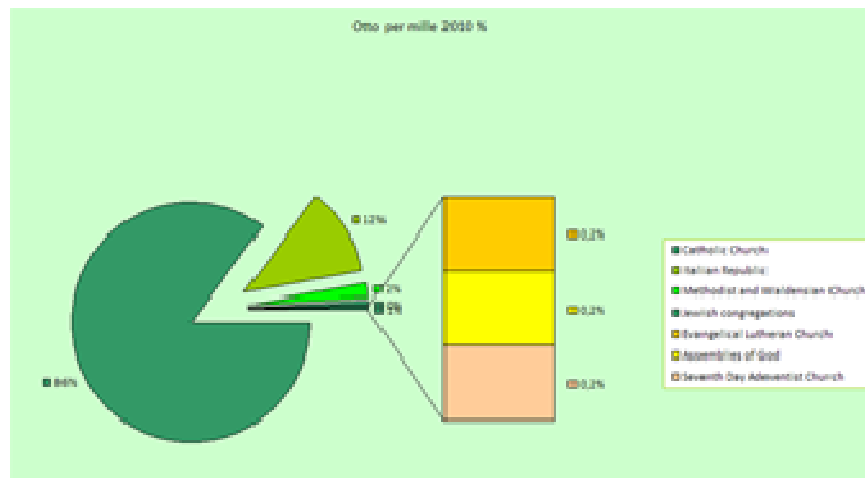
1. recognition of equal rights as a church in Italy
2. access to tax revenues or “otto-per-mille”, a term by now quite well known also outside Italy.

### Manna from earth - Otto per mille



Otto-per-mille or “eight per thousand” means that each tax payer can decide to whom eight thousandths of his tax money shall be given. All the churches or confessions that have signed an agreement with the State have the right to receive *otto-per-mille*. At the moment the *otto-per-mille* cake is split into 7 pieces.<sup>5</sup> To determine the size of one’s piece it is, first of all, important to express a choice, i.e. to sign the form, because the number of signatures ELCI gets in relation to the total of signatures determines the percentage of the cake due to ELCI.

ELCI decided that *otto-per-mille* was to be used for projects in the fields of diaconia, mission, culture, evangelisation and for our pastors.



The first money came in

1999, i.e. 50 years after ELCI was born. During that period ELCI had already grown: three Italian congregations (Torre Annunziata, Torre del Greco and Santa Maria La Bruna, 1952; 1957), and Ispra-Varese (1999) had joined the church, a new congregation had formed in Sicily (1996) and two elementary Schools and Kindergarten in the Gulf of Naples had opened in the 1960s (1965 TA, 1969 SMLB). The work in the Gulf of Naples had been generously supported by the LWF, Martin-Luther-Bund and Gustav Adolf Werk, whereas the Church

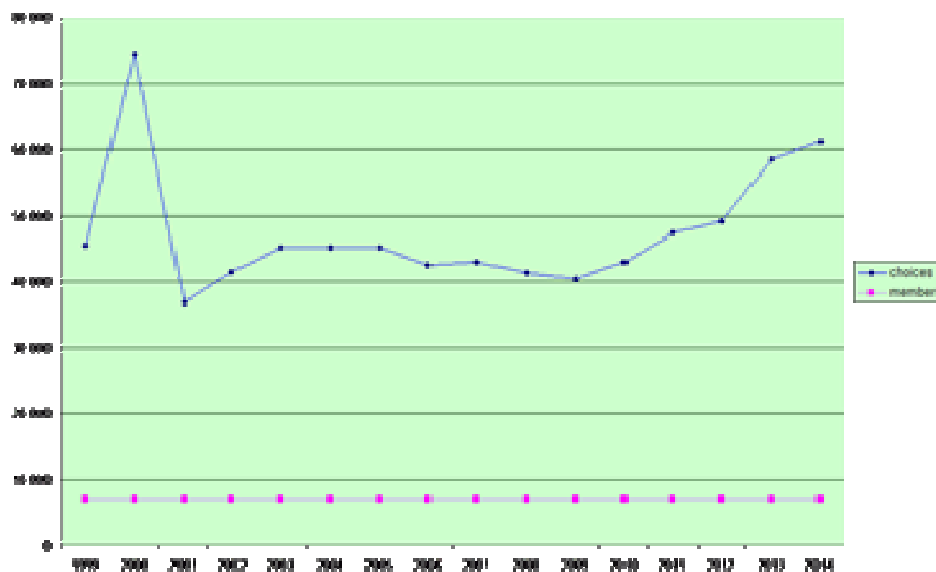
<sup>5</sup> Referred to opm received in 2014 (declarations presented in 2011 for 2010); declarations of 2014 offer 12 choices.

administration was covered by support from the Evangelical Church in Germany and contributions from the congregations.

Since 1949, ELCI was independent as a Church with regard to administration, spiritual life, affiliations and presence at national and international levels, but for survival it still depended mostly on resources from outside.

This drastically changed with *otto-per-mille*! ELCI could now finance its daily needs, above all its pastors, and also invest in projects to form new congregations. As a first result, Verona-Gardone and Turin joined ELCI as members in 2008 and 2009 respectively.

The number of the members of our church is usually given as 7.000. The biggest congregation, Milan, has 650 members, the smallest, San Remo and Torre Annunziata, have 55 each. Records show that in recent years there has been an increase with an average of 180 new ELCI members every year.



It came as a huge surprise to learn that the ELCI receives many times the number of *otto-per-mille* signatures many times than it has people registered as members as this graph shows. The members are

the pink dots!

Moreover, these blue signatories often come from regions where no congregation is present, as you can see from the map on the following page. This shows that all over Italy there are people who know about us and want to invest their tax money in what we are doing. This is a tremendous challenge, but also a frustrating one because one gets only access to the number of signatures in any place, but of course not to names.



Red dots: where ELCI was present in 2009.



Figures where ELCI has "less"

#### IV - Protestants in Italy

If we want to find ELCI on the map of religions present in Italy we need a very strong magnifier. 2,5% (1.417.000 of 60.820.764) of the populace belong to minority churches the largest group of which are the protestants (30%; 435.000), followed by Jehovah's Witnesses (29,3%; 415.000).

The second largest group, after the Pentecostals (313.000 members), are the so-called "historical protestants", Waldensians, Lutherans, Reformed, Calvinists, Baptists and Methodists, with 65.000 (14,9%) members which is just 0,1% of the whole populace. And if we cut it still further down: 0.01% of the Italian population belongs to the Lutheran Church.

As to protestant presence at the service of the national community the two evangelical hospitals at Genova and Naples have to be mentioned. The International Evangelical Hospital at Genova was founded in 1856 by representatives of the Anglican, Scottish Presbyterian, Swiss Reformed and Waldensian Churches. The Lutherans joined in 1869. The Evangelical Hospital Villa Betania at Naples, 158 beds, opened in 1968 and is owned by ten evangelical



denominations, among them the two Lutheran congregations of Naples and Torre Annunziata.

### *FCEI*

In 1967 some protestant Churches, unions of churches and diaconal institutions “united by common calling to witness and service” (Art. 1) founded the “Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy” which today represents about 20% of Italian Protestants (65.000). ELCI was one of the founding members. The Federation is active in three departments, (1) Education and Training; (2) Department of Migrants and Refugees; (3) Communication with three essential platforms, the press agency NEV (Notizie evangeliche), a radio Sunday service (“Culto Evangelico”) and a TV programme on State Channel 2 “Protestantesimo”. The Sunday service, on air since 1967, is the most followed religious programme in State Radio with an average of 1.300.000 listeners. Since 1973 the TV programme informs about protestant culture and faith both in Italy and abroad as well as on ethical issues and inter-faith dialogue. In addition four church services are broadcast every year in Eurovision, among them, recently one from the ELCI congregation in Trieste.

At the moment the wave of immigrants does not (yet) reach us directly; the major part being Muslims (over 1/3) and orthodox (29%), Roman catholic (19 %) and evangelical (4%) Christians. But, mindful of our own past as migrants, ELCI strongly supports the Federation’s activities aimed at making today’s immigrants feel welcome and to assist them in preparing for a new life away from their home. In the presence of so much tragedy the Federation has recently started the integrated humanitarian initiative “Mediterranean Hope” with an observation point on the Island of Lampedusa and a place of first welcome for 50 people in Scicli (Sicily).

The “Commission of the Evangelical churches for the relation with the State” is a permanent forum to watch over the right for religious freedom and to keep the member churches of the Federation informed about upcoming issues in this regard.

### *Waldensians*

Regular meetings take place between the ELCI consistory and the Waldensian governing body, the “tavola”, to discuss issues of common interest such as, e.g., the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. The Waldensian Church and ELCI share responsibility in two significant



knowledge and acceptance takes time.

Hospitality is extended to us in many places. For regular church service two congregations, Turin and Verona-Gardone, are welcome permanent guests in catholic churches. In many places Sunday services for tourists are held in Catholic Churches or Chapels.

In several cities and regions of Italy there exist Councils of Christian Churches and inter-confessional groups. Where there are ELCI congregations they are (founding) members. Regular meetings and conferences are creating better understanding and collaboration.

For all our congregations one important moment of sharing is the annual week of prayer for the unity of Christianity. The Dean of ELCI and/or the Pastor of Rome are regularly invited to take part in the closing ceremony celebrated by the Pope. On many other occasions, common worship and prayer takes already place, but many more such occasions are needed to render the unity from which we live more visible and more effective.

Many of our members live in inter-confessional families, but often they seem not to be aware of the fact that ecumene is not something abstract, but that they are living it at home.

What is needed today at all levels is what has been defined as “Diapraxis”,<sup>7</sup> a term coined by Danish pastor Lissi Rasmussen in her 1988 paper on Christian-Muslim relations. Rasmussen argues that “dialogue only becomes meaningful when rooted in a common praxis”, because “dialogue must take place from below (communities) and not from above (in conferences).” The “me” and “you” will thus become a “we”. This will create a platform where common concerns can be argued in a more powerful and more effective way.

A historic event took place on December 11, 1983 (500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther) when Pope John Paul II took part in a service at the Lutheran Church in Rome, giving also a sermon. This was repeated by Pope Benedict XVI on March 21, 2010 who expressed his regret that the ecumenical dialogue seemed to have come to a standstill, but – he added - there was reason for joy that Roman Catholics and Protestants on this occasion could pray and sing together – one form of diapraxis.

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<sup>7</sup> Lissi Rasmussen, "From Diapraxis to dialogue. Christian-Muslim Relations", in: L. Thunberg, M. L. Oandit and C. V. Fogh-Hansen, *Dialogue in action - in honour of Johannes Aargaard*, New Dehli, 1988.

Today couples are free to decide in which faith to raise their children; the non catholic partner has only to confirm that he or she is aware of the obligations the catholic partner has towards his or her church.

In Italy Roman Catholic marriages celebrated in Church have legal validity as long as civil requirements have previously been fulfilled. In Article 13 of our Agreement with the State the same right is granted to ECLI pastors of Italian nationality. However, apart from the civil aspect there still was no liturgy for getting married in church fully recognized by both the spouses' churches.

A commission with representatives of ELCI and the "National Office for ecumenism and interreligious dialogue" of the Italian Bishops' Conference has now elaborated such a liturgy that was approved in first reading this year by the ELCI Synod. This – for ELCI – remarkable result of patient and constructive collaboration is to be considered an example for true ecumenical service to interreligious couples and families.

## **VI - Island or impulse**

Let me now briefly come back to the title of my presentation. Is ELCI an Island? My answer is: yes, it is. We are still considered an island because we are small and easy to describe.

From our perspective, however, an island offers not only protection but imposes also obligations. A protected place is needed to solve or update internal "problems" of which ELCI has mainly two: language and pastors.

### *Language*

Our tradition of being a home for German speaking Lutherans still continues but it is no longer considered a distinction, rather an enrichment. Each congregation is free to decide in which language they want to preach, pray or sing. There were Italians present - members or catholic visitors - from the very beginning and church services were also held in Italian. It was an early concern of Dean Dahlgrün to provide an Italian hymn book (1951).

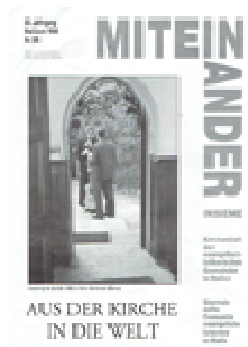
In recognition of its history and its mission ELCI has adopted in its constitution Italian and German as its two official languages. This is also reflected in its now completely bi-lingual journal *Miteinander / Insieme* (Together).



Cohesion through information  
Evangelical Newspaper for Congregations.  
Monthly newspaper for the evangelical congregations of German language in Italy, 1928.



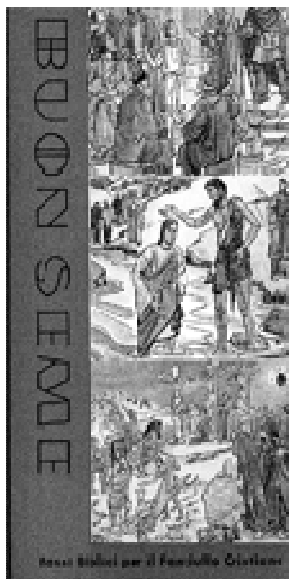
Church newspaper for the Evangelical Lutheran congregations in Italy, 1949



Together, 1998. mostly in German with some Italian.



Together, the bi-lingual monthly journal of ELCI, 2011



But the real point of arrival was the introduction of a completely bi-lingual hymn book which includes psalms, prayers and liturgies (2010).

#### Pastors

To solve the other “knot” will take more time. ELCI still has to rely on the assistance of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) to find pastors for its 15 congregations. In general they come for 6 years which is not very much to learn another language not just for survival but to be able to move in the congregation and its ecumenical context. Discussions are going on and on about whether and if yes, how, to create a group formed by pastors permanently employed and pastors dispatched from Germany for a limited time.

Now to our obligations:

We have to draw down prejudices such as considering ELCI a German outpost by getting more involved in Italian social and Church-State related issues.

We have to find the right balance between international and national involvements. ELCI is a member of LWF, CEC,<sup>8</sup> CPCE<sup>9</sup> and has partnerships with Austria, Hungary, Slovenia, EKD and VELKD.

We have to measure our forces. We are few people and have to decide on our priorities very carefully.

We have to build bridges. An Island gives the impression of independence and security, but islanders have the need and task to bridge the gap to the mainland, to build bridges as best they can through their gifts and tools. They need to interact with their neighbours, to know them, to learn about them, to share resources with them. The goal is not to give up identity, but to gain shared diversity.

### *Impulse*

The following remarks about impulses that might make the voice of ELCI be heard in a chorus of minority churches are by no means exhaustive; they rather reflect my personal impressions and experiences.

Italian Lutherans can face confrontation and challenges in a different way because persecution, inquisition and restrictions, as the Waldensians had gone through, are not part of the Lutherans' story with Italy.

Many of us have been born in the only country, i.e. Germany, where – as far as I know - the ratio between Protestants and Roman Catholics is 50 : 50. This gives self-confidence.

Although few in Italy we are members of the great Lutheran World Community. Actually, already in 1948 the ELCI synod suggested that LWF should have a desk for Minority Churches. As one of the Minority Churches in Western Europe we are grateful for LWF meetings where our concerns are heard.

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<sup>8</sup> Conference of European Churches

<sup>9</sup> CPCE – Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (ex Leuenberg)

We have an answer to questions from Roman Catholic Christians. There is an increasing number of people asking honest questions and expecting honest answers. This goes also for couples who want to get married after a divorce or couples who ask for a blessing. Some attention has been given by the press to ELCI when the Synod of 2011 voted in favour of the blessing of same sex couples.

And last but not least we can transmit and promote the great tradition of church music from the time of the Reformation on through organ concerts, choirs or also courses for organists.

## **VII – Conclusion**

Coming to my conclusions. The Lutheran congregations in Italy started as single flowers imported into Italy at different times. After WWII they decided to form a bouquet and to become a Lutheran Church in Italy.

I am grateful that ELCI at the moment is a rather “joyful little flock”. As a small church we might - or proudly live our splendid isolation - or try to attract attention by all means. In both cases we would define ourselves in relation to our environment and no longer in relation to our mission as a church.

We as ELCI have to accept as a fact that we are too small to be visible on our major sister’s screen. It is natural to long for visibility, to be seen and heard, but it does not help to push this. We prefer to wait prepared for the moment when we will be heard and do our job in the meantime.

Our means to create awareness of us are limited, but joining forces with other protestant realities will help. We have learned to invest in small things, people or projects, hoping that they will grow such as the evangelisation project in Bari or consulting centres for young women in Naples.

We have also learned that not all depends on our own efforts. There seems to be a growing awareness of us. Just remember the almost 60.000 signatures in favour of ELCI by Italian tax payers. Or another, even more far fetched example. Last month (16.8.) I watched a detailed report on the visit to Assisi of a delegation of some 200 Swedish Lutherans, guided by

Archbishop Antje Jackelén. Much information was given in the Interview by the Franciscan journalist on the Lutheran Church in Sweden and on Lutherans in general. No mention was made of Lutherans in Italy, but all of a sudden there appeared a photo of the entrance to our congregation in Torre Annunziata. This transmission is seen by an average of 1.700.000 people!

To build up Christian Unity starts where two people share parts of their daily life, be it work, family, grief, music, worries, joys, questions, Sunday service. Very often we believe to know what the other person is thinking, but do they really think what we are thinking they think? Differences have to be recognized before they can be accepted – not destroyed.

Let me finish with two questions that we should ask ourselves as members of Minority Churches.

**Question 1:**

How can we create more occasions of common worship and prayer to render the unity from which we live more visible and more effective?



**Question 2:**

How can we bridge the gap between ecumenical dialogues at church leadership levels and ecumenical diapraxis at the inter-human level?

Here is the Anglican/Episcopal Church in Naples where, in 1967 a certain Lutheran couple was married!

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[www.chiesaluterana.it](http://www.chiesaluterana.it)