

A Talent for Integration

What “Being Church” Means for Evangelical Congregations in Italy Today

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This chapter describes what some evangelical¹ churches in Italy are doing to welcome an increasing number of people migrating from the Global South.

Many Italians are surprised to learn that the majority of migrants arriving in Italy are Christians. They are even more surprised when they hear that Protestants make up a large proportion of Christian migrants.

Like other contributions in this volume, this one addresses issues of multiculturalism in evangelical churches within the framework of *conviviality*. The Latin root of the term, *cumvivere* –living with – refers to a condition of pluralism, including ethnic and cultural aspects, which is experienced not only within societies but also in faith communities. This pluralism is not only “intentional”, that is, animated by personal predisposition, but also “factual” because it is determined by migratory dynamics that appear increasingly structured in the system of relations between the global North and South.

Cumvivere, in other words, becomes a lived reality even for the global Christian community, which is increasingly exposed to confrontations between believers from different traditions and cultures. In this sense, the prospect of conviviality goes beyond the benevolent intention of the encounter between nationals and migrants but is proposed as a political strategy to support social cohesion and, using the vocabulary of the European Union, what is referred to as “integration”.

By embracing this interpretation, the term conviviality is enriched with new meanings and can suggest new practices that also affect the life of Christian communities. Above all, it seems that conviviality makes faith communities laboratories of exceptional

1 I use the term “evangelical” in an inclusive sense, including both historical Protestant denominations (Waldensians-Reformed, Methodists, Baptists) and more recent ones with charismatic or millenarist theology and a mainly congregationalist ecclesiology (Pentecostals, Adventist, free churches). The Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy (FCEI) brings together the Waldensian, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, and Salvation Army churches. Also joining the FCEI as observers are the Union of Adventist Christian Churches and the Federation of Pentecostal Churches.

intensity for the construction of convivial citizenship, capable of breaking the segregating effects of ethnic barriers and offering models of social inclusion even on the secular and civic levels.

In this chapter, I will briefly describe a number of models for relating to migrants that have been adopted by various Italian churches. Then I will focus on just one of them, *Being Church Together* (or, in Italian, *Essere Chiesa Insieme*), a program through which several Italian Protestant churches, namely, Waldensians, Methodists, and Baptists, working with the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy, have sought to include migrant sisters and brothers in their local congregations. In doing so they have created an intercultural path that has produced significant changes for the better in many congregations. It is important to note that the various churches belonging to the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy or collaborating with it (albeit with differing levels of flexibility and intensity) have generally shared a vision that favors the growth of multiethnic and intercultural churches rather than the proliferation of ethnically based churches that are distinct – and often quite distant – from the mainstream of Italian Protestantism.

This chapter will show how multiethnic and intercultural congregations can be seen in the context of the so-called *new religious pluralism* (NRP) that has come to be recognized in recent years as a result of the arrival of new migrant communities in Italy.

It will also show how multiethnic and intercultural congregations produce social capital that can be invested in their broader communities in ways that promote inclusion and cohesion in civic life.

Finally, as I examine the strengths and weaknesses of *Being Church Together* (BCT), we will see how BCT can serve as a model for the way intercultural integration can happen in the broader Italian and European societies.

1 Migrations and “New” Religious Pluralism

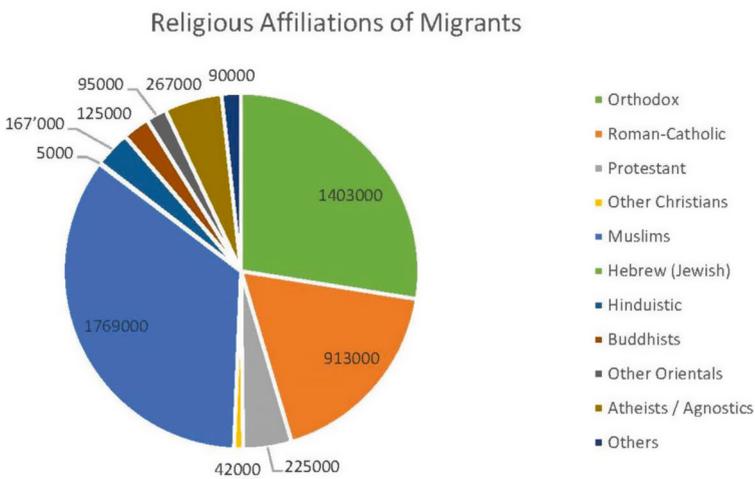
Beginning in the early 1970s, immigration pluralized the Italian religious scene in a way that has never happened before, despite the long history – at least since the Edict of Emancipation in 1848 – of the presence of Jewish, Protestant, Orthodox, and secular communities.

It is widely recognized that immigration has changed the religious profile of Italy and that immigrants are responsible for the growth of an unprecedented confessional pluralism in a country that has historically been defined as “Roman Catholic.” In the census of 1931, the only one to record religious affiliation, 99.6% of the population (41,771,000) identified as Roman Catholic. There were only 0.4% (157,002) “non-Catholics.” In the non-Catholic segment of the population, evangelicals represented 53%, Jews 30%, and those who said that they did not belong to any religion 11%. It is very interesting that the 1931 census identified two other religious groups, so-called “Greek schismatics” (2% of non-Catholics) and “Mohammedans” (4% of non-Catholics), which establishes beyond a doubt that Orthodoxy and Islam are a historically documented part of Italy’s religious heritage (ISTAT 1935).

The point is that, although this census data can be interpreted as confirming that an overwhelming majority of Italians identified as Catholic, the same data attests to the

presence of other communities, albeit small minority communities, on the national religious scene. Still, even otherwise knowledgeable Italian intellectuals have regarded the presence of other religions to be just blips in Italy’s mono-confessional history. These include Italy’s ancient Jewish communities, the Waldensian community with its medieval roots, the Lutheran church’s presence in Italy going back to Venice in 1650, the ancient Orthodox presence along Italy’s Adriatic coast, and the involvement of many evangelicals in the Risorgimento. This has led to the idea that religious pluralism only dates back to the immigration Italy experienced in the early 1970s (Di Sanzo 2020: 17). This idea needs to be updated. Well over a hundred years ago, important religious minority communities like the Jews, Waldensians, Orthodox Christians, Lutherans, Brethren, Methodists, and Baptists had already taken root in a seemingly mono-confessional Catholic Italy. The Pentecostal movement in Italy dates to the very early 20th century, even before Mussolini’s Fascists came to power, and was destined to experience an explosion in membership in the years following the end of World War II (Pace 2013; Naso 2013).

So, in using the phrase *new religious pluralism*, it is important to remember that religious pluralism itself is a very old phenomenon in Italy, indeed going back to the first Jewish presence in Rome, documented in the New Testament. This long history deserves much more cultural and social recognition than it has been given. The adjective *new* in the phrase *new religious pluralism* is accurate and helpful, if one is referring to the arrival in Italy of large numbers of immigrants linked to confessional traditions other than those with deep historical roots in the country.



Source: IDOS-Confronti, 2022 (translated from Italian)

In Italy, *new religious pluralism* can be statistically measured using the data provided by the Statistical Immigration Dossier Immigration (IDOS-Confronti 2022, 239). Out of just over five million non-citizen residents in Italy, 50% are members of various Christian confessions. The largest groups are Orthodox Christians, followed by Catholics, evangel-

icals and Protestants, “others” (generally independent ethnic Christian churches), Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs (IDOS-Confronti 2022, 239).

New religious pluralism reflects more than just numerical counts of adherents to the various *new* religions. It is also important to understand the social quality of religious forms that the phrase expresses. Various research conducted in Italy and abroad (Ambrosini et al. 2018; Ambrosini et al. 2022; Zanfrini 2020; Foner/Alba 2008) has highlighted the relevance of religious factors in migratory dynamics. These have been effectively summarized by Paul Hirschman in the “3 Rs” formula.

The first R stands for *Refuge*: Personal religious practice and involvement in a faith community can offer a protected and safe place in which to find elements of connection with the old world that one has left. The opportunity to speak one’s own language, to repeat reassuring ritual gestures, and to frequent physical spaces that recall familiar environments in one’s home country work together to provide a physical and emotional refuge for migrants. It is a refuge that is all the more important when migrants have had harrowing journeys getting to their new country and are experiencing acute migratory trauma. Ideally, in their religious practice, migrants can reconnect with their homeland and find “a small portion of Zion in the middle of Babylon” (Warner 1997).

The second R stands for *Resources*: In almost every faith community, there is a social dimension that is expressed in charitable activities such as the management of funds for the poor, the distribution of used clothes, support for people looking for a job, and the religious and social formation of young people. Recent research, conducted in Lombardy (Ambrosini et al. 2022) but certainly indicative of more general trends, documents activities in almost nine hundred congregations that go far beyond the sphere of strictly religious practice. These charitable activities take place in basements, garages, or accessory rooms of places of worship – whether these are Pentecostal churches, Sikh gurdwaras, or Islamic prayer rooms. In migrant congregations it is easy to find volunteers who collect and distribute food for the poor; select used clothes; carry out service orientation activities; teach Italian, Arabic, or Romanian; educate children in the fundamental principles of religion; or organize activities for young people, women, and the elderly. These activities create the elements of “social capital” (Putnam 2000) – such as trust, shared norms, and social networks – that can improve the efficiency of society as a whole. The concept of social capital, generally used in reference to secular associations, is perfectly applicable to religious communities that are structured in the double dimension of internal cohesion, on the basis of shared principles, and of service to others. An approximate expression of social capital is *zedaka* in Judaism, *diakonia* for Christians, and *zakat* in Islam, which are all much more than *almsgiving* but a real ritual offering, or the principle of compassion in Buddhism. In Sikhism, the founder guru Nanak asserted that in front of God there is no Hindu and there is no Muslim, but there is only charity, service, and prayer, all of which are forms of social capital.

The third R is more complex because it reflects a fact that is certainly found in the North American context but is much more controversial in Europe: The *Respect* earned by migrants who practice a religion. If religious pluralism in North America is a historical fact, and is in some respects fundamental, some European societies perceive the *new religious pluralism* they see around them – and in particular the presence of communities other than Judeo-Christian – as a threat to national identity. Despite this difference,

however, the interpretative model holds up in the framework of a fourth R that we could add to the previous ones: *Resilience*, understood precisely as a positive dynamic aimed at controlling events and reconstructing a positive life path.

The political scientists Pippa Norris and Klaus Inglehart (Norris/Inglehart 2011) were among the first to devote particular attention to the nexus between religion and immigration, thus identifying one of the most important shortcomings of the various “theories of secularization”. The core of their analysis lay in their concept of “existential security experienced by individuals” and the proportional relationship between increased social insecurity and an increase in the “value of religion”. Norris and Inglehart’s analysis was based on a comparison between economic and social data, on the one hand, and religious practice on the other hand. Their analysis led them to conclude that the religiosity of the Global South would inevitably and increasingly have an effect on the world order as well as on the religious profiles of host societies.

Their prediction was decidedly correct and today the “R factor” of religions is a decisive element for understanding – if not managing – intercultural dynamics. The best known socially relevant case, which is also important for its political implications, is that of Islam. In addition, however, there is an entire universe of immigrant religiosity that has burst onto the European public scene. In doing so, it has significantly changed the old paradigm of secularization, opening new fields in post-secular studies. In a nutshell, religion was in decline at the beginning of the twentieth century, but now, a little more than a century later, it is among the most important influences on public life and is an extremely socially relevant phenomenon, even if it is complex and sometimes incoherent.

By developing and updating an interpretative approach that was first used to explain religious behavior by the French professor and founder of the academic field of sociology, Emile Durkheim, it is possible to identify what he described as “elementary forms” that have an evident social function in every religious community. Each faith community, including those in the evangelical sphere, offers educational opportunities for its members, organizes social service activities, provides opportunities for its members to support humanitarian causes, and recognizes religious leaders who often assume the public role of cultural mediators. Every faith community obtains, renovates, and maintains their respective places to gather where spiritual and ritual activities take place. All of these activities strengthen precious bonds of social cohesion inside each faith community. Every nucleus of immigrants that gathers around a spiritual center promotes intra-community welfare that sometimes extends past its own membership. This extension of a faith community’s sphere of influence is possible when a community manages to break the ethnic or confessional shell that surrounds it, and when – and this is something that does not always happen – the broader society welcomes meetings, dialogue, exchanges, and civic cooperation with immigrants and their faith communities.

2 Multiple Types of New Religious Communities

This migration-based *new religious pluralism* is structured differently in each faith community. Nevertheless, the faith communities that constitute the *new religious pluralism* can be understood as belonging to one of two different types. The first type, which is certainly the most widespread and immediately recognizable, is that of “ethnic congregations” that are formed on the basis of the geographical and linguistic origin of their members. The phenomenon is most striking among Muslim religious communities. It is easy to identify the origin of an Islamic center or a mosque precisely on the basis of the geographic origin – or transnational ties – of its members. The Italian Islamic Confederation, for example, has a substantially Moroccan composition. On the other hand, the Islamic Religious Community (COREIS) has many “Italian” Muslims (Angelucci/Bombardieri/Tacchini 2014).

The other type of *new religious pluralism* is seen in the Orthodox community whose members, whether Italians or immigrants, all come together in the same churches for the same liturgy, often in church buildings that belong to Roman Catholic dioceses (Pozzi 2022: 55; Giorda 2022).

There are many different types of evangelical faith communities (Naso 2022: 321), however, in general, evangelical faith communities fit into two broad typologies. The first is the typically communitarian one that aims at the establishment of “ethnic-based” churches or, perhaps more simply, but not quite as accurately, “ethnic churches”. In general, these are local churches with a strong congregationalist character, but with different origins (Campagna 2022). In some cases, they are the product of North and South American mission organizations. Other “ethnic-based” local churches are the result of mission work done by mission organizations based in the Global South. These churches represent this same missionizing impulse from an earlier century and are now returning to the continent from which they came (Pace/Butticci 2011). In other cases, they are the fruit of the initiative of the migrants themselves. In these churches, which are often characterized by strong charismatic leaders and an absence of elected lay leadership, the preachers are often self-taught entrepreneurs who started their religious careers by founding the churches they are leading (Di Sanzo 2013). In other cases, the churches are “ethnic” expressions of evangelical denominations that are already present in Italy, for example Baptists, Pentecostals, or Adventists (Naso/Passarelli/Pispisa 2014).

Unfortunately, the expression “ethnic churches” risks stereotyping groups in ways that neglect important differences and dynamics inside each group. A great deal is lost when one thinks of “Ghanaian Methodists” or “Latin American Pentecostals” or “Filipino evangelicals” as monolithic realities (Naso/Passarelli 2018; Ricucci 2017). Nevertheless, “ethnic” is the term currently used for communities made up of people with a shared non-Italian language and homeland, who often hold on to models of being church and ways of worshiping that they learned in their countries of origin (Di Sanzo 2013: 185; Russo 2017: 109; Russo/Saggioro 2018: 199; Costantini 2018 and 2019; Ambrosini et al. 2022).

If the factors that explain why ethnically-based congregations are obvious, the limitations of ethnically-based congregations are also evident. Ethnically-based congregations often have a kind of cultural shell around them that can impede their members from integrating into the broader Italian culture. The inter-generational dynamic in ethnically-

based congregations is also no coincidence. There is often a tension between the educational goals of first-generation immigrant parents and those of their children who want to align their goals to those of their Italian peers. This tension becomes very evident when parents and children have to decide whether or not the children will participate in a specific school trip or youth camp or what clothing the children should wear or how they should spend their free time (Frisina 2007; Naso/Passarelli 2018, Acocella/Pepicelli 2015, Ricucci 2017). Intergenerational tensions can also make church attendance problematic. A worship service, that for the parents is completely normal, can feel quite abnormal or even alien to their children. For many sons and daughters of immigrants, an ethnically-based congregation's way of being church seems to be rooted in an immigrant experience in which they have not been directly involved. It is inevitable, therefore, that the reassurance, comfort, protection, and sense of belonging that immigrant parents feel in an ethnically-based congregation are less strongly felt by their children and grandchildren. If the strength of the ethnically-based model of being church is that it offers a place of identification, a safe haven of resilience, and an opportunity to find healing after traumatic experiences of migration (Naso 2013), its weakness is that it can hinder the integration and inclusion of the immigrant into the broader society. By creating a "Little Zion in Babylon" (Warner 1997; Ambrosini et al. 2018: 253), in some ways evangelical migrants end up isolating themselves from their new social, cultural, and religious environment. To use an image adapted from the Bible, every migration journey involves the challenge of living in Babylon.

3 Being Church Together: An Ecclesiological Challenge

If the ethnically-based congregation represents one typology for faith communities seeking to minister with migrants, the other typology is faith communities that seek to build a path toward multiethnic and intercultural integration. This typology is reflected in Being Church Together (*Essere Chiesa Insieme*).² Started in Italy in the early 1990s by the Waldensian and Methodist churches, the strategy of Being Church Together has also been implemented by Baptists and Adventists and has been adopted by the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy, which has supported the initiative with conferences and training programs, including the Intercultural Laboratory of Training and Hospitality (FCEI 2023).

The historic Italian Protestant Christian communities, including Waldensians, Methodists, Baptists, and Lutherans, were somewhat slow to recognize the importance of "evangelical" immigration. The historic churches' first response to new migrants was not to recognize them as sisters and brothers in faith but instead to support them in looking for jobs or places to live. There was a pervasive assumption among almost all Italian Christians that immigrants were "naturally" Muslims, even though statistically the majority of migrants were and remain Christian (IDOS – Confronti 2022, 239). Even when particular migrants were Christian, that identity was often unrecognized. For

2 Chiretti in this volume offers reflections on the work of a congregation that is part of *Essere Chiesa Insieme*. Baumann-Neuhaus provides an overview on the strategies of the Roman Catholic in Switzerland. Insights in muslim communities are presented in Amiti's chapter.

example, on August 25, 1989, at Villa Literno in the agricultural region of Campania, Jerry Essan Masslo, a political refugee from South Africa, who worked as a laborer in conditions of severe exploitation, was killed during a robbery. Masslo was, in fact, a Baptist preacher who had continued his pastoral work even after immigrating to Italy. In contrast to what would happen today, his brutal murder produced a wave of popular outrage that pushed Italian authorities to organize a state funeral. In an Italy still unprepared for religious pluralism and the novelty of migrants of faiths other than Roman Catholicism, almost automatically the funeral was conducted according to the Catholic rite. Only when the ceremony was nearly concluded was a Baptist pastor given the opportunity to say a prayer (Naso et al. 2014: 5; Di Sanzo 2020).

Only beginning in the 1990s, and therefore more than fifteen years after 1973 when, for the first time in national history, the number of immigrants coming to Italy exceeded that of emigrants leaving Italy, did people begin to think about the potential impact of migration on the life of evangelical churches. The turning point came when a large group of Ghanaian migrants of Methodist origin settled in Palermo. This is how one migrant leader described his experience:

My encounter with the Methodist and Waldensian Church in Italy dates back to the early 1990s when, after a long search, some Ghanaian brothers and I landed at the La Noce Diaconal Center in the Methodist Church in Palermo. The beginning was not easy, the worship and liturgy of the Church in Italy was very far from everything we had been used to, not to mention the difficulty of understanding the Italian language. But one fact struck us all, namely the way the congregation welcomed us and the pleasure they took in being with us and sharing their Community Days with us. (Ampopho 2022)

That the concept, if not the name, of Being Church Together, began in Palermo was not accidental. For many years, in the absence of Italian government policies for integrating and including migrants, many irregular migrants settled in places like Sicily where a “gray” labor market offered them employment opportunities that did not exist in other areas of the country. The presence of a pastor like Sergio Aquilante in Palermo, a former president of the Methodist OPCEMI (The Board of Methodist Churches in Italy) and a scholar focused on migratory processes, helped to develop a vision for multiethnic and intercultural evangelical church life in Italy. Importantly, as numerous Ghanaian Christians relocated to central and northern Italy following various Italian government amnesties for undocumented migrants, the Palermo experience proliferated at a national level. Methodist migrants from Ghana reflected on this experience:

Thus, we reached the Waldensian churches of Brescia, Vicenza, Verona, Bergamo, Mantua, and Conegliano as well as the Methodist churches of Milan, Bologna, Modena, Treviso, Pordenone, Udine, Como, Piacenza, Novara Bassano, and Grappa. (Ampopho 2022)

The presence of Ghanaians continues to be a driving factor in the commitment of Waldensian and Methodist congregations to Being Church Together. Nevertheless,

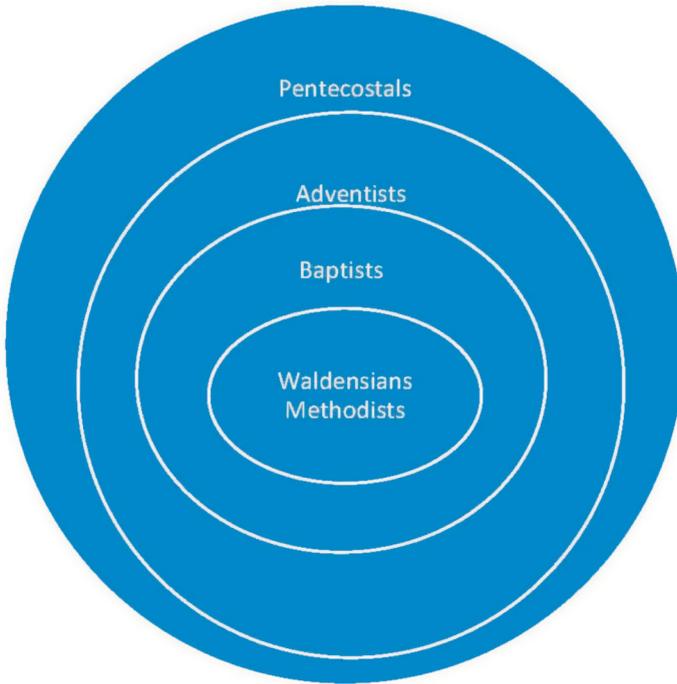
other churches have had similar experiences in opening their church life to other migrants. In Rome, for example, a historic French-speaking evangelical church has evolved into an important resource for migrants. In Turin, within the great Waldensian church, a francophone space has been established that provides welcome to migrants from French-speaking countries in West Africa. A Hispanic group was formed in Genoa in 1990 and five years later, in 1995, this group morphed into the *Iglesia Evangelica Hispano Americana* and is now a Waldensian congregation. Other multi-ethnic churches have also developed in other places in central and northern Italy. For example, in Rome there are various congregations that include members of Filipino and Korean origin (Naso et al. 2014). In the South, however, despite widespread evangelical presence that is particularly pronounced in Naples and the area around Naples – in Castel Volturno, for instance, there are at least twenty Pentecostal churches and an Adventist church – the Being Church Together experience has not taken root and, to date, the experience of Palermo remains an exception in this area.

In comparison, large numbers of people who identify as Baptists and Adventists have come to Italy from Latin America and Eastern Europe. However, most Baptist migrants belong to ethnically-based congregations while only a few belong to multi-ethnic intercultural congregations, which is exactly the opposite of the Waldensian Methodist experience.

Only partial data is available for these Pentecostal churches. Their current membership is about 300,000 (IDOS – Comparisons 2022), among which are many Nigerians, Brazilians, and Latin Americans. It appears that most non-Italian Pentecostals belong to congregations made up primarily of their own ethnic or national group.

Finally, the Italian Union of Adventist Christian Churches has what might be called a “binary” system. Alongside intentionally integrated congregations, other explicitly ethnic congregations – Ukrainian, Romanian, Latin American, and Ghanaian – have been formed.

The concentric circles below summarize the different ways denominational groups have evolved to serve Italy’s Christian migrants. The closer a circle is to the center, the more that designated denominational group has focused on building multi-ethnic, intercultural congregations. The further a concentric circle is from the center, the more that denominational group has emphasized cultivating ethnically-based congregations. So, closest to the center are the Waldensian and Methodist churches which have consistently aimed at the creation of multiethnic intercultural congregations and discouraged the creation of ethnically-based congregations. The Italian Baptists’ circle is a bit further out. While affirming the Being Church Together model, the Baptists have offered important legal support to numerous ethnic congregations by including them as part their own congregation in relations with the Italian government. The Adventists occupy an even wider circle because, though they too have a “mixed model” that, on the one hand, favors multi-ethnic integration, and on the other hand, recognizes and institutionalizes ethnic communities. Finally, in the outer circle are the Pentecostals, who, through their membership in the Federation of Italian Protestant Churches, understand Being Church Together, yet still adhere to a strict congregationalism that tends to favor ethnically-based congregations. Even so, Pentecostals share a vision of all Christians being “one” church, capable of breaking down national, linguistic, and cultural barriers.



Source: Visualization by Paolo Naso

Being Church Together is a “path” rather than a “project” because it has developed in an organic way over the years, finding ways to follow its mission that were not always foreseen or planned. This path has its North Star in a profound conviction, namely that there are good theological and sociological reasons for Italian churches to open themselves to welcoming migrant sisters and brothers. And at the same time, there are equally good theological and sociological reasons for sisters and brothers from other countries to make the Italian churches their spiritual homes. From the very beginning it was understood that a precondition for the success of Being Church Together was a willingness to change. Indeed, to use a New Testament term, Being Church together required a cultural *metanoia*, or conversion, for both Italians and immigrants. Although not intended theologically, the much-quoted definition of integration of the European Commission is nevertheless relevant:

[Integration is] a two-way process of adaptation by migrants and host societies [and implies] consideration of the rights and obligations of migrants and host societies, of access to different kinds of services and the labor market, and of identification and respect for a core set of values that bind migrants and host communities in a common purpose. (IOM 2017)

In the experience of Being Church Together this process of mutual adaptation has involved every aspect of congregational life. Most obviously, in many congregations the ordering of worship has been changed to reflect a profoundly intercultural perspective. It is possible to describe four models for this reordering of worship, outlined in the table below. The “fully integrated” congregations provide space in the Sunday liturgy for each

tradition. For example, in congregations with a significant Ghanaian membership, the *Kofi ne Ama* often occurs, which is a particular offering tied to the day of one's birth that is collected while the assembly sings and dances.

The table below illustrates several modalities that have been observed in a research project³ that is still in progress (conducted by Paolo Naso et al.) but which appears to confirm data already collected in the past (Naso/Passarelli/Pispisa 2014, 30). As can be seen in the summary table below, the models range from fully integrated and multilingual worship (Italian + other language) with the careful use of a variety of liturgical songs and practices – for example the *Kofi ne Ama* in the case of congregations with a significant Ghanaian presence – to worship services conducted according to the customs and traditions of just one of the migrant communities.

Model	Language	Musics and hymns	Liturgical innovations
Fully integrated worship services	Italian and at least one other language such as English, Spanish, Portuguese, Twi (in communities with Ghanaian constituencies), Tagalog (for communities with Filipino constituencies).	Both Italian and international and, in some cases, drawn from their home traditions. Presence of ethnic or multi-ethnic choirs.	Both Italian and international and, in some cases, particular the traditions of origin. Presence of ethnic choirs. <i>Kofi ne Ama</i> (entrance with singing and dancing in churches with a Ghanaian presence), “free” testimonies.
“Adapted” worship services	Predominantly Italian. Sermon readings and summaries in other language.	Predominantly traditional Italian hymns with some space for hymns from other traditions	Scarce and limited to occasional gestures.
“Alternate” or “complementary” worship services	There is an alternation or “dual offering” between predominantly Italian services and worship services in other languages.	Mix of Italian chants and other traditional music in the primary Italian services; traditional chants in the secondary services.	Scarce in the primary Italian services; drawn from the traditions of origin in the secondary services.
Worship services ordinarily parallel (except in exceptional cases that fall under “integrated” or “adapted” worship)	Each ethnic group in its own language, at different times, in the same venue or at the same time in different venues.	Each ethnic group uses its own musical heritage.	Each ethnic group uses its own liturgical heritage.

3 The research project produced several publications edited by Paolo Naso and others: *Il Dio dei migranti*, Bologna: Il Mulino 2018; *Quando gli immigrati vogliono pregare*, Bologna: Il Mulino 2021; *Chiese nere, lavoro nere*, Le Penseur 2023.

Although the goal has always been to create integrated congregations, the Being Church Together process has resulted in congregations with varying levels of integration. This has happened more as a byproduct of how Being Church Together evolved in each community than as a result of careful planning. Thus, it is possible to define congregations as “welcoming” which, while opening themselves up to the presence of immigrants, maintain the essential features of a traditional Italian church. There are also “regenerated” congregations that, starting with a small nucleus of Italians, have seen their worship and community life reshaped, thanks to the participation of immigrants. Then, there are “integrated” congregations – it might be better to say these congregations are “in the process of integration,” given the dynamic nature of Being Church Together. In “integrated” congregations, Italians and immigrants have placed themselves in postures of mutual listening and, with respect for each other’s sensitivities and traditions, are seeking to adapt the ways they worship and live together as a church.

The strength of the “integrated” model is its commitment to openness and its determination to create congregations open to society and committed to interacting with people who are not among its members (bridging) (Ryan 2011). If this concept is the North Star of the Being Church Together path, nevertheless, over time various and sometimes serious disagreements and issues have emerged within Being Church Together congregations. These conflicts, identified in a research project conducted within the Waldensian and Methodist churches (Naso et al. 2019), trace back to different ethical approaches. These differences arise with the perennially divisive issue of homosexuality, with different educational and pedagogical models, and as reflected in different congregational priorities. At the risk of oversimplifying, Italians are more oriented to political action, whereas immigrants are more oriented to evangelization and building group cohesion in the congregation.

Another interesting result of Being Church Together is that substantially “ethnic” congregations, that identify as Methodist and Waldensian, find themselves participating in Methodist and Waldensian regional bodies. Rarely does this involvement happen without effort and difficulty.

The following schematic reflects the experience of “international” churches which, by conducting worship and church life in English or French, are able to bring people of multiple different origins together (ibid).

Summary Outline of the Types of Community Aggregation of Evangelical Immigrants			
Type	Composition	Vehicle language	Integration
Welcoming churches	Mainly Italians	Italian	High
Renovated churches	Predominantly Italian	Italian with translations	Medium
Integrated Churches	Mixed	Mixed Italian with translations in various languages, including national languages	High
Ethnic churches	Migrants	National languages of the predominant community	Low
International churches	Migrants	International language	Medium

It's important to note that congregations receive assistance in becoming Being Church Together congregations. In addition to training courses for congregational leaders, the Waldensian Theological Seminary offers regular support for people who want to engage with intercultural themes (Redalié 2019, Noffke 2023). For people who want to explore intercultural ministry more deeply, a Master's degree in Intercultural Ministry has been offered since 2016.

4 Highs and Lows on the Way to Being Church Together

In just over thirty years, Being Church Together has gone through different phases. If the vision of multiethnic and intercultural churches goes back to the early 1990s, the first local experiences in Being Church together, apart from those in Palermo, came a few years later. In that first phase of Being Church Together, there was the surprise and even joy of seeing empty pews now filled with migrants, Sunday Schools with lots of children, and new study and fellowship groups at one's local church. A special working group of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy organized a series of conferences to give national exposure to these local experiences. This phase of growth continued for more than a decade until the financial crisis of 2008 and the failure of the Arab Spring in 2011. As a result of these two world events, fewer new migrants from largely Christian West Africa came to Italy, and more migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa came, both regions with substantial Islamic majorities. This change in migration patterns significantly decreased the number of new migrants in Waldensian and Methodist congregations as well as in evangelical congregations generally.

Through all the events of the last 15 years, migrants and Italians alike were very much aware that, in spite of having become a country with net-immigration, Italy does not offer long-term support for migrants akin to what is provided by many other European countries. As a result, many new immigrants move on from Italy to other countries where they can be more certain of securing a basic living and a good job. If over the years the

total number of migrants permanently residing in Italy has remained stable, it is due to the fact that departures were compensated by new arrivals.

Changing migration trends were not the only factors affecting Being Church Together congregations. In 2010, the synod of the Waldensian and Methodist churches voted to allow local congregations to bless same-sex couples. This decision led many migrant members of Being Church Together congregations to transfer their membership to more traditional ethnically-based evangelical bodies such as the Presbyterian Church of Ghana (Gyamfi Asiedu et al. 2021).

The most recent problem facing Being Church Together congregations has been the COVID-19 pandemic. Public health precautions required that congregations minimize congregational gatherings, group lunches, and conferences that previously had enriched the Being Church Together experience. Moreover, most denominations belonging to the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy adopted even stricter COVID protocols, often making in-person church meetings of any type impossible. Unwilling to trade the joys of worshipping God with other believers from their own country for an hour of passively sitting in front of their computers, some migrants decided to attend ethnically-based congregations whose theology, expressed in phrases like “God is my vaccine” (Del Re/Naso 2022; Jackson/Passarelli 2020: 31), often led them to be much more willing to do things that might expose their members to COVID-19.

5 Conclusions

Now that the pandemic seems mostly over, the congregations that have been most committed to the Being Church Together process are now engaged in a period of reflection to understand how to proceed. Probably they will decide to do some “fine-tuning” of ecclesiological and liturgical practices. A lot will depend on the attitudes of the sons and daughters of the immigrants who first joined Being Church Together congregations. The situation of these young adult children of immigrants is becoming increasingly precarious because of the current Italian government’s hostile policies toward people with migrant backgrounds. Studies have been done comparing young adult children of migrant Christians and young adult Italian evangelicals. This research has described the young adult children of immigrants as “a generation that walks on the wire” or as a generation that occupies the “thin ridge between the feelings of belonging they once felt and the sense of isolation and alienation they now feel” (Naso/Passarelli 2018: 119; Passarelli 2019). Secularization is one of the possible outcomes of this process, starting with distrust of all paths of integration, including even those promoted within the evangelical churches. It is also possible, of course, to consider other outcomes which would be determined partly by the ability of churches to respond to the new challenges facing migrants and their children and partly by how migration patterns change in the coming years.

Faced with the emergence, not only in Italy, but throughout Europe, of appeals to ethnic identity, sometimes characterized in nationalistic and even racist terms, the principle of conviviality that has guided the actions of so many churches is in danger of losing its appeal. The idea of equating a European nationality with one or more alleged European ethnic groups is a dramatic trap (Rivera 2001) that prevents the harmonious develop-

ment of plural societies. Facing this ethnocentric challenge, the paradigm of conviviality appears even more relevant, especially if we know how to develop it in its “political” dimension, i.e., aimed at establishing useful guidelines and norms to sustain it. In this perspective, “political” conviviality refers to fundamental rights such as the freedom to express one’s faith, the possibility of gathering in appropriate places of worship, and the recognition of a *new religious pluralism*, largely determined by migration flows.

In conclusion, many factors will determine what happens with Being Church Together and the social capital that has accumulated in this ecclesiological model. But right now, the risk facing Being Church Together congregations in Italy is that governmental policies are being revamped to make the legal status of migrants and their children even more precarious, stopping and reversing the process of integration that has already been achieved. The sense of precarity, fragility, and exclusion, in fact, could result in a reassuring retreat inside cultural, religious, and denominational shells of identity, that are less permeable to the surrounding reality. In short, the gift of a rich and comprehensive conviviality that has been invested in the Being Church Together path risks being buried by governmental policies reluctant or unwilling to promote multiethnic and intercultural integration.

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