

4 THE GENERAL SITUATION AMONG ITALIAN ASSEMBLIES AND THEIR MISSIONARY AWARENESS

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The General Situation of the Assemblies

The assemblies in Italy started in Florence over 150 years ago, and from there they spread into most parts of the country. There are now about 200 assemblies. Some are small, some meet in private homes, and some are large with 100 or 200 or more believers in fellowship. It is thought that there are around ten to twelve thousand believers in fellowship in the assemblies today in Italy. A paper circulates among the assemblies called *Il Cristiano*, ie *The Christian*, which was founded exactly one hundred years ago by John S Anderson, a British brother who worked for many years in Italy. A few years ago another publication was started, called *Creedere e Comprendere*, ie *Believing and Understanding*. There are a number of English speaking missionaries associated with the assemblies, some of whom are British. On the whole, however, ever since the beginning, the work has been carried out by Italians. There are now about twenty full time workers supported by the Italian assemblies and six or seven more supported by assemblies abroad.

In addition to the assemblies, there are other Protestant churches such as the Waldensians, Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals and some smaller groups started mainly by Americans since the Second World War.

The Missionary Awareness of the Assemblies Today

Italy is itself a large, needy mission field. There are fifty-seven million inhabitants who, for the most part, do not know the gospel as we know it. Many hundreds of towns and villages have no evangelical testimony and—as far as the Brethren movement is concerned—there are large regions that have not yet been reached.

Because of this, the first concern of the assemblies has always been our own country. The Brethren have always been conscious of their

missionary responsibility towards their fellow citizens. They carried on the work through the years in spite of the suspicion of the Roman Catholic population, and in spite of persecutions coming both from the Catholic Church and from the authorities. These persecutions were suffered especially during the twenty years of the Fascist regime, when many believers were imprisoned and treated unjustly.

Progress of Missionary Activity Since 1945

From the end of the Second World War, the work of the Lord has progressed considerably. During the last forty years the number of assemblies has doubled and new regions have been reached, among which are the islands of Sicily and Sardinia, and the region of the Molise where we are working.

Various factors have contributed to bring about such a progress, for instance:

1 *Religious liberty* which we have been enjoying increasingly during these last forty years.

2 *The widespread use of marquees* by means of which new towns have been reached and new assemblies started, eg at Rimini on the Adriatic coast. The use of marquees has been increasing since the 1960s and about ten are regularly used during the summer months in many parts of Italy, Sicily and Sardinia.

3 *Open air meetings* which have been possible since the end of the Second World War. Through these meetings thousands have been reached with the gospel and some have come to know the Lord.

4 *Radio work* has been increasingly used. At first programmes were broadcast from Tangiers, Morocco, and then from Monto Carlo, but now, as a result of the liberalization of the media, several assemblies have set up their own local radio stations from which they broadcast the gospel for many hours a day. Other assemblies use local commercial stations for short periods each week. Response to the programmes has been encouraging.

5 *The distribution of block calendars* with a daily Bible message. Some of these calendars are prepared by a group of Italian Brethren and others by a Swiss mission. About one hundred thousand of these are distributed to Italian individuals and families each year and they speak to the hearts of many.

6 *The distribution of portions of the scripture*, mainly provided by the Scripture Gift Mission.

(The first New Testament I ever read myself, and by which I came to know the Lord, was in fact an SGM publication!)

7 *Bible camps* which are held in three main centres: in the north near

Turin, in the centre near Florence, and in the south near Foggia. Many children and young people attend these camps yearly to learn about the Word of God, and the results are extremely positive. There is a great need for similar centres in other parts of the country.

We can be thankful for what has been done in past years and is being done in Italy today, but all our efforts are like a drop in the ocean of great spiritual need. The ratio of one believer for approximately every 4700 Italians is a clear indicator.

Suggestions for the Future

Until now, the progress of the assemblies has mainly been due to individual initiative. Some brethren have been full time evangelists while others have had a secular job, and, on occasions, the Lord used women, as in the case of Lydia, the dealer in purple cloth (Acts 16:14), to start a new assembly, as was the case in San Severo.

Today, I believe it is time to consider the possibility of adopting a coordinated plan of action in order to evangelize systematically each town of Italy. The isolated efforts can be praised for what they have been able to achieve, but it is time now to move forward.

I believe that we should get together to pray and fast as the leaders of the church at Antioch did before sending Paul and Barnabas to the mission field (Acts 13:1-4), We need to get together to pray and make plans for the evangelization of our country.

I am well aware that a strategy would not solve all the problems involved in missionary outreach. However, I am convinced it would make a valuable contribution by: encouraging believers to feel more involved in the work of the Lord, both in prayer and in practical support; helping to unite the assemblies, making them realize more fully the oneness of God's family and the reality of the body of Christ; increasing contact and communication between those who hold particular responsibility in this work.

I was therefore thankful when at the annual Brethren conference held at Poggio Ubertini near Florence, in May 1986, two important evangelistic projects were approved by over 150 delegates from all over Italy. The first project concerned southern Italy, in particular the city of Bari. As a result of this decision, an evangelistic campaign was held and several people came to Jesus Christ and a new assembly was formed.

The second project concerned the much neglected region of the Friuli, with the town of Monfalcone, a few miles from the city of Trieste as the centre of this activity. In connection with this project, Dr Giona Prencipe from Genoa and myself have been visiting this region for some time.

Important steps forward have been taken. The few believers scattered in this large region have been encouraged and a little flat has been prepared for use by servants of the Lord who will take turns in ministering there for short periods.

I believe that if we move forward wisely and prayerfully in this direction, similar projects could be carried out in the future in other locations.

Wider Horizons

I said earlier on that the Italian assemblies have always regarded Italy itself as their prime mission field. However, at the same time, we must be ready to go wherever the Lord sends us . . . 'to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8). Last year a girl from Southern Italy, Claudia Pignatelli, went to Indochina as a missionary under the auspices of WEC. An assembly in Northern Italy is supporting a national full time worker in Africa.

Thus missionary awareness is gradually developing and widening its scope.