

Prayer Letter

June 2009

I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.
(Matthew 25: 35-36, NIV)

Dear friends,

At the end of our second year in ministry as BMS mission workers in Sicily we felt we wanted to share with you the testimony of one of the men who came forward for baptism in our church on 31 May 2009.



Siracusa Baptist Church ladies dishing out the rice to African immigrants on a Tuesday night at Padre Carlo's Shelter

Luciano's testimony

"I come from a Catholic background and was baptised, had my first holy communion and was also married in the Roman Catholic Church. I accepted Jesus Christ into my life as my personal Saviour and Lord at the age of 23 in a Pentecostal church, although I did not get baptised. Eventually, I drifted away from the church and lost my way in my Christian walk.

Over a period of ten or more years I very rarely sought the Lord and those times only when I needed a favour. There was the time I prayed that God would save my wife who was in serious danger of death after a difficult delivery and subsequent delicate surgery. God answered my prayer. Again I asked God to help me when it was my turn to undergo a very serious operation. God answered my prayer. Last autumn I invoked the Holy Spirit of God to release my wife from enslavement to a religious cult. God answered my prayer.



I had turned my back on God but he, patient Father that he is, never lost sight of me. He has led me here amongst you my brothers and sisters where he is worshiped in spirit and truth. He has made me realise that I am a sinner and that to be saved I need the blood of Jesus that was poured out even for me!

If Jesus Christ has loved me first, I cannot help but love him back, I cannot help but consecrate myself to him and to confess that Jesus is Lord."

One of the most common questions we are asked is "What are you doing in Sicily? Italy is a Christian country isn't it?". It is a good question and one that we will attempt to answer using Luciano's testimony.

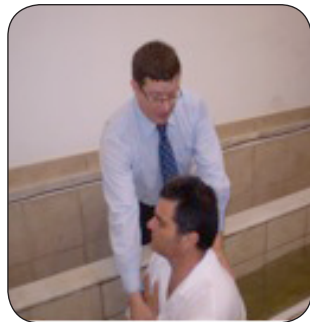
For an Italian who is hungry for a counter-cultural experience of God there seem to be few options. Perhaps too quickly they reject the Roman Catholic Church, even though there are some very positive movements within it. For many of them, the Vatican seems to be too involved in politics to be a credible source of spiritual enlightenment. Certainly Luciano, after having been exposed to the simplicity of the Biblical message about Jesus, no longer felt comfortable in the church into which he had been christened and sought an alternative. Sadly, often these 'alternatives' involve extreme and tyrannical leaders who exert control over every aspect of a person's

life, normally using the gospel to justify their stance. Luciano is too gracious in his testimony to talk about the hurtful experiences he suffered in his first encounter with evangelical Christianity, but he has shared them with us personally. Suffice to say that when he began to question some of what he was being taught he was excommunicated. This led to a “wilderness period” in which he and his wife and family felt betrayed and ostracised, still longing to know the Lord of the Bible but unable to find him in any of the religious groups that were available to them. Luciano, however continued to pray and read the Bible and even joined an evangelical forum on the internet to keep his faith alive. Time and time again he found that God was faithful to his prayers, even though he admits he himself was not consistent.

“Over a period of ten or more years I very rarely sought the Lord and those times only when I needed a favour...”

Unfortunately, his wife Angela was easy prey for a cultish organisation, with whom she remained for 20 years. She had already learnt a very literalistic way of interpreting the Bible without regard for context and this was exactly what was offered to her.

This almost cost them their marriage but through Luciano’s diligent prayer and years of research into the experiences of others who had come out of religious cults, this year his wife was able to leave the organisation that had kept her bound for so long.



Luciano in the baptistry

“Last autumn I invoked the Holy Spirit of God to release my wife from enslavement to a religious cult/sect. God answered my prayer.”

Luciano felt that God had restored his family and in gratitude he wanted to find a church community that would enable him to join in praise and worship ‘in spirit and truth’, that would give him both the love and the freedom that the apostle Paul talks about in Galatians 5: 13. He started worshiping with us at the end of last year and, after completing a back-to-basics Christianity course, decided to get baptised (along with Alfredo, who also had returned to the Lord after many wilderness years). He and his wife have been a tremendous asset to the church

helping in the After School Club and also with the Rice Run on a Tuesday night in which our church provides the evening meal for up to 80 African immigrants who live in desperate conditions at Padre Carlo’s Church Centre.



Alfredo going under!

Although we Baptists are far from perfect and do not even pretend to have all the answers, we do provide a “middle ground” which we hope will come to be respected by both the more conservative evangelical groups and some branches of the Catholic church. In I Corinthians 10: 23 Paul says, “Everything is permissible” – but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible” – but not everything is constructive.” We aim to maintain that difficult balance, providing our corner of Sicily with some much needed “middle ground”, promoting the Kingdom of God (the reign of Christ) and tending to those who feel estranged by both society and church. We need to start, of course, with our own congregation, some of whom are in the “Everything is permissible” camp and some of whom are too hidebound!

*Yours in Christ,
Huw & Alex Anderson*

Prayer points: We hope that you have been encouraged by Luciano’s testimony and have been struck by how faithfully God answers prayer. With this in mind, do please continue to pray for our (nearly unique) ecumenical project, especially the joint Bible studies and the food distribution. Pray also for more growth in quality and quantity in our church members, so that we can better model this “middle ground”, making it attractive to all sorts of enquirers. In addition, pray for us as we consider our long term future here in Sicily. There is a great deal of change in pastoral personnel in Sicily and this may well have implications for us.

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