

## OUR CHURCH

For the churches which have sprung from the Protestant Reform, freedom and individual responsibility of are fundamental principles. However, since in the life of the church community, problems may arise, throughout the ages the churches have tried to regulate certain aspects of their community life in such a way as to be sure that: “everything is done with order and decorum” as Paul said in First Corinthians 14:40.

Article I of the General Discipline of the Waldensian Church says:

“The churches which, for many centuries and through many persecutions, God, in His great mercy has conserved in the faith in His word in certain of the Western alpine valleys, which, from the Waldensian movement have taken on the name of Waldensian Valleys; those which arose through the preaching of the Gospel in the various countries to which God brought the Waldensian people; and those which, professing the same protestant faith, came to unite themselves with the former, accepting their Discipline, now form, in their totality, a single body which lives by the Grace of the Lord alone.”

This article I of the Discipline, which represents the Constitution or foundational document of our existence as a church, gives clear indications of the manifold character of our Union of churches. In more recent times, other faith communities have adhered to this “single body”, in particular, the Methodist Churches, by means of a Pact of Integration (PI), which has established that the name which shall be given to this expanded faith community, as it operates in relation to other churches, religious faiths and the Italian state is officially: “The Waldensian Protestant Church, Union of the Waldensian and Methodist Churches”. This pact created unity out of diversity, by ascribing value to that diversity. It recognizes that churches need not demand uniformity in order to experience and live the unity of the church; it recognizes that elements of diversity can serve the cause of unity, when these elements are clearly expressed and understood; it recognizes that a church must be open, not only to new ideas and new people but also to new communities of faith.

After the signing of the Pact of Integration in 1975, other churches which had formed outside of the Union came to join and become part of it, at different times, in different ways, according to the procedures established for this in our rule book.

## RULES

The General Discipline establishes a single, common set of rules for all the churches.

**Chapter I** affirms that the church body, as defined above, in article 1, accepts as its sole head the Lord Jesus Christ and professes the doctrines contained in the Old and the New Testaments. The synod establishes the manner and the times of communion with other Christian churches.

The Church is self-governing: it does not permit any meddling with its rules and governance by the civil power, nor does it ask for any privileges from that civil power.

The various ways of worship and the texts to be used in the community’s worship must be in conformity with biblical teaching and with the practice of the primitive church.

The church is governed by the local church assembly as well as by regional and synodal assemblies, each of these bodies having different responsibilities.

The other 8 chapters of the General Discipline provide an overall outline for the life of the church. Each chapter is taken up and expanded upon in a more detailed fashion by the Organic Rule (RO) which pertains to it.

**Chapter II** – Persons (RO.2)

**Chapter III** – Ministries (RO.3)

**Chapter IV** – The local churches (RO.4 and RO.4M)

**Chapter V**- The regional organisations (circuits and districts, RO.5)

**Chapter VI** – The synod (RG/RZ)

**Chapter VII** – The sectorial organisms (youth, women, local preachers, RO.7)

## **Chapter VIII – Administration (RO.8)**

**Chapter IX – The Discipline** (containing no further regulations, this chapter is available in English).

In order to make the request to join the Protestant Waldensian Church, Union of the Methodist and Waldensian churches, it is necessary to be thoroughly familiar with the General Discipline and the Rules.

### **PERSONS (RO.2)**

The persons who participate in the life of the church, with varying degrees of responsibility are:

- *young people who are not yet church members*
- *communicating members* (those who have been ‘confirmed’ or baptised in adulthood)
- *member electors* (those who are willing to participate as voters in church assemblies)
- *sympathizers*.

In order to become a communicating member or a member elector, the person must write and submit a request to the church council. If the request for inscription in the church’s membership rolls is made by a member of another protestant church, that person must provide a certificate from his former church community. Should it be impossible to obtain such a certificate, the person may be admitted to the church on the basis of his/her own certification as to his/her church of origin, followed by one or more meetings between that person and the church council.

In the Methodist churches, all communicating members are also electors (with the right to vote) but such new members become eligible for election only after 3 years of membership in that church.

Sympathisers are adults who take part in certain aspects of the life of the church without being members.

The duties of communicating members are the following:

- to profess the principles of that church
- to live according to those principles
- to observe the disciplines which govern the church
- to contribute economically, through a free offering, toward the maintenance of pastoral ministry and the on-going development of various diaconal initiatives and centres of the church.

### **MINISTRIES (RO.3)**

A particular responsibility is entrusted to those who exercise a *ministry*, that is, a particular kind of *service* in the church. The church recognizes three regulated ministries which are on-going: *the pastor, the elder (or, for the Methodist churches, the Group Leader) and the deacon*. Other specific ministries are recognized and considered useful to the communities, including: youth workers, choir directors, Sunday School teachers, Catechists, technical and administrative staff members, communications experts, specialists for managing relations with the mass media, hospital visitors, home visitors, etc.

A particular kind of ministry is that carried out by the local preacher, who helps to assure the service of the preaching of the word while simultaneously carrying on his/her own trade or profession. In certain cases, such persons may be asked to provide pastoral service in a local community on a short-term basis.

RO.3 specifies the requirements and formal preparation required for carrying out a pastoral ministry. This rule specifies that our church may take on and employ as pastors persons who have been properly trained and ordained in other protestant denominations. All pastors (with the exception of the local pastors) receive an equal treatment from the centralised administration, no matter where they are assigned to work or what their specific duties are. The only variables which affect a pastor’s income are his/her seniority and extra provisions for the support of family members.

There are local pastors who work in a job or profession outside of the church and, having been consecrated, they carry out their pastoral activities on a voluntary, unpaid basis, although they do have an administrative or contractual relationship with the Waldensian Board.

The elders and deacons who, along with the pastor, constitute the church council, are elected by the church assembly to a term of 5 years. They can be re-elected for another 2 terms, for a total service of 15 years.

### **THE LOCAL CHURCH (RO.4 AND RO.4M)**

The Pact of Integration called for the perpetuation of regulations for the Methodist churches which differ in some ways from those of the Waldensian churches, thus there are two chapters designated RO.4. For all other levels of church government, there is a single Rule for both.

The churches are defined according to the number of their members and nature of the activities which take place within them. The two main categories are: church in formation (at least 15 members), constituted church (at least 35 members). Waldensian churches may also choose to be Autonomous churches (more than 150 members).

**In the Waldensian Churches (RO.4)**

- Churches which have achieved autonomous status, having been so recognized by the synod, have the right to elect their own pastor. In the case of other churches, the Tavola Valdese (Waldensian Board) appoints the pastor.
- The church council is composed of the pastor(s), elders and deacons.
- The size of the deputations elected to represent the community at the District Conference and the Synod are determined according to the number of church members.

**In the Methodist churches (RO.4M)**

- Pastoral ministry is guaranteed by the Tavola, which sends pastors as required, assigning them to a circuit but also indicating the location of their church of residence.
- The church council is composed of the pastors, the group-leaders(elders) and deacons, as well as representatives of sectorial activities (youth groups, women's union, Sunday school) and the local preachers selected by the church assembly.
- The deputations for the District Conference are chosen at a local level in accordance with the number of church members. Deputations for the synod are chosen on a circuital basis, according to the number of deputies called for in the rules of the synod and divided up by the Tavola amongst the circuits which have a Methodist presence.

Both in the Waldensian and in the Methodist churches, it is the church assembly, properly convoked, which decides on all of the questions having to do with the spiritual life of the community, the worship services, meetings, the review of the year's work done by the church council, the ordinary and extraordinary administration of church building, facilities and properties (in this last case, having received the prior approval of the Waldensian Board or of the Permanent Committee of OPCEMI, see below) and the election of the church council. The church council is the assembly's executive arm and must answer to the assembly for all its actions and decisions.

All churches, in accordance with their economic possibilities, are required to pay in to the central administration (the Waldensian Board or CP OPCEMI) an annual contribution. This contribution is fixed by starting from the annual sum required by the church at the national level, as shown in the annual budget. Once a proportion of this global figure has been assigned to the four Districts, the Executive Commissions of the four districts then subdivide their sum in allotments to the individual churches of their district.

Of particular interest is article 8 of RO.4, which established the means for admitting churches to our union which have sprung up outside of it. The steps required are as follows:

- Present a request indicating that the community has the requisites necessary to be recognized as a constituted church or as a church in formation;
- Work out, prepare, and sign with the Tavola, a convention which specifies any elements of governance or regulation different from but not in contrast with the Waldensian regulations.

It is then the task of the synod to review this request, along with the convention, if one has been prepared. To the synod will also be forwarded the opinion of the District Conference. The synod will then vote on the question.

According to article 26 of the Pact of Integration, a new church will be asked to specify whether it wishes to be counted among the Waldensian churches or the Methodist churches in order to decide which of the rules for local church government will be applied as well as which of the national executives will receive that church's contributions.

This choice should be stated in the request for admission.

**REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS (RO.5)**

*The Circuit* (whose assembly is generally convoked twice a year), acting through its *Circuit Council* coordinates the spiritual life of a group of churches within a geographical area and guarantees the pastoral care even for small groups and churches which do not have their own pastor. The assembly of the circuit is

made up of the pastors resident in the circuit and of the delegations of the church councils of the churches of that circuit. There is a total of 16 circuits.

*The District* has an annual assembly called the *District Conference*. The Conference is made up of the pastors in the district and of the deputies elected by the churches. The district conference has the task of examining the life of the churches and administrative aspects pertaining to them; of recognizing the formation of new local churches which have grown out of other Waldensian or Methodist churches. The decisions taken by the district conferences are implemented by the Executive Commission for the District (CED). The four districts are: the Waldensian Valleys, North, Central and South.

## **THE SYNOD**

The highest human authority in the church, in matters pertaining to doctrine as well as legislative, jurisdictional and governance questions, is the Synod.

The Synod is composed of deputies elected by the local churches and by the circuits, along with a number of pastors not to exceed the number of lay deputies. The synod examines problems regarding the profession of faith and church discipline and governance in general. With the help of the Examining Commission, the synod reviews all of the work done by the Waldensian Board in the previous year, along with the work done by the Standing Commissions of the synod. Members of the Tavola and of the other commissions are elected yearly at the end of the synod session.

The Waldensian Board represents the Union of Waldensian and Methodist Churches in dealings with other churches and with the Italian state, as well as acting as the executive organ of the synod, carrying out its decisions year by year. The Board is made up of 7 members, both pastors and lay people, each of whom may be elected for not more than 7 consecutive years, and is presided over by the Moderator. A Methodist presence (usually 2 members) in the Tavola is assured.

The other Executive Commissions of the Synod are:

- The Permanent Committee of OPCEMI (Opera per la Chiesa Metodista in Italia). This committee is responsible for the administration of the real properties and diaconal works of the Methodist churches and for maintaining ecumenical links with other Christian denominations, as well as with non-Italian Methodism. The four-person committee has one member appointed by the Waldensian Board.
- The Council of the Waldensian Theological Faculty in Rome. In cooperation with the academic College, this Council is responsible for the creation and execution of pastoral training programmes, as well as those who simply wish to study for a diploma or a degree in Theology. Presided over by an elected Dean, the council is made up of 7 members, of whom at least one must be a Methodist. The Waldensian Board has the right to appoint its representative to this council to undertake the role of monitoring the council's work.
- The synod Commission on Diaconal work coordinates and administrates a great portion of the diaconal activity of the Waldensian church. The Tavola, through its delegate, monitors the activity of this Commission.

Since 1974, the synod has recognized a new element. The Waldensian churches which were formed in Latin America ( Rio de la Plata: Argentina and Uruguay) by Italian Waldensian immigrants from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century onward were once organized as a transatlantic district of the Waldensian church in Italy, and although they had been autonomously formed, they preserved a tie with their mother church. Now, there is just one Waldensian synod, which is held in two separate sessions, one in Italy and the other in Latin America. Thus, there are regulations which regard the synod (RG) in both its sessions, along with two geographical regulations (RZ) which take into account the particularities of each area. The Rio de la Plata session elects its own executive arm, the *Mesa Valdense*.

## **ORGANIZATIONS FOR SECTORIAL ACTIVITIES (RO.7)**

The sectorial activities called for in the rules include one for young people (Federazione Giovanile Evangelica in Italia or FGEEI, a group which includes young Waldensians, Methodists and Baptists), for

women (the Federation of Waldensian and Methodist women FFEVM) and local preachers ( Union of Local Preachers, UPL). Each of these organizations, constituted and governed by its own statute, operates on the national level and has the right to send one representative to the synod as a non-voting member.

**CHURCH ADMINISTRATION (RO.8)**

The regulations on administration establish the norms which govern the operations of the Waldensian Board, the Synod Commissions and the Institutes and Diaconal works, both the autonomous ones and those reporting to an Administrative commission of the Synod or to the church council of a local church. These articles also lay out the norms for managing church employees.

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