

**Visit of Elaine Turner, President Designate of Women’s Network of the Methodist Church, to Portugal 19 – 28 April 2004**

First of all I wish to express my thanks to Colin Ride, Area Secretary Europe, and his secretary, Angela Newman, for all the help I received in the preparation for my visit.

Secondly I want to say what an enriching and worthwhile experience I had while I was there. The people made me so welcome and I felt that I made lots of new friends.

Much of what I saw and experienced was mentioned in Colin’s report last year so I don’t want to repeat all that he said. I will mention things that have changed, those things that Colin didn’t see and the concerns of the people.

1. **Valdozende** – I was very impressed with the work at Valdozende. The worship still continues and the outreach both to children and the “Third Age” (as they call the elderly) is very well organised. They are still in need of money so that they can buy some land adjoining their land so that they have enough room on which to build. There is obviously a huge demand for places at the centre but until they have more room there can be no increase in activity. The children were obviously very happy in their environment and the staff were caring and well organised. The Third Age were a delight to meet and they sent their greetings to my “Third Age” group who meet in Beverley. They chat together and do handicrafts and have their lunch together. The room is very small for them. Elisa, the project manager, is doing excellent work.



Children playing at Valdozende

2. **Braga** – The John Wesley Centre continues its excellent work under the leadership of Aurora. It seems that bridges have been built between the congregation at the church and the work that is going on at the centre. They seem to understand what is going on a bit better now according to the workers but I didn’t meet any of the local congregation. The social work involves much dedicated service and the whole place seemed steeped in a lot of love. There are a few church members who are employed at the centre. I stayed in the accommodation at the centre and was very impressed by the whole set up.



Children at Noah’s Ark, Braga

3. **Lordelo Church, Porto** – The inside of their church was very pleasant. However they have huge problems with their other rooms and the derelict building at the rear, which used to be the Manse. The meeting room is flush against the next building and they are having serious damp problems with rain water seeping in where the roof of the church joins the wall of the adjacent building. It smelt damp and the décor was being spoilt. At the rear of the church is a large room where an elderly lady lives. She will stay there until she dies. On the same site is the building which used to be inhabited by the minister. It needs demolishing and looks in very bad condition. The church used to have a healthy congregation but now they only have 17 members as most people have moved out of the area. However new apartments have been built and I think that they are hoping to start some new initiatives. Ana Maria, the wife of the minister, Rev. Eduardo Meixieira, has been given permission to become a deacon and her work will concentrate on this church.



Lordelo Church in Porto

4. **Monte Pedral** – As Colin said last year this social centre is in a very difficult situation. Permission to build has still not been given despite lots of promises that it won't be long. Bishop Sifredo is quite frustrated by the situation. Considering the accommodation that they have I think that they do exceptionally well. They have now raised just over 30% of their target but enough for building to start once they are given the go ahead. They assured me that once they got permission they would be in contact with Colin. Emilia Teixeira is working very hard coordinating the work at Monte Pedral.



Outside Monte Pedral

5. **Aveiro** – Synod was held at the main church in Aveiro. I didn't have time to look at any of the other churches. The congregation here seem very active, certainly if the standard of the hospitality is anything to go by. All the delegates were fed and watered very well during Synod. I enjoyed the Synod, if one is allowed to say such things. There was always someone to translate for me. I gave greetings from the British Methodist Church, World Church Office, Europe, Women's Network, York & Hull District (coincidentally they were having their Synod on the same day) and the Beverley Circuit, where I am a member. A little later I introduced myself in Portuguese and then told a bit about the work of Women's Network and answered some questions. I was extremely impressed with the Treasurer. He was so positive and encouraging in what is a very difficult financial situation. I expressed, through Emanuel Dinis, my congratulations to him for his work. Because of this encouragement, by the end of Synod, the local people were challenging each other to make at least 5 new members in every church during the next year. It was a sign of owning what was happening and trying to do something about it. I brought home one of their collecting boxes and I will be taking it around the connexion when I visit places next year. The Bishop stressed the difficulty that the Presbyteral ministers were having in trying to do all the work that was given to them. He thought that it was time to have a different approach to ministry where lay preachers, volunteers and the whole church were involved so that there was one course of action. Ministers should do what they are prepared to do i.e. taught to teach about God. They were often asked to do a lot more. He thought that much of the pastoral work could be done by lay people. Lay preachers were now becoming Deacons. This is a special ministry and does not necessarily have to lead on to Presbyteral Ministry. But if they take on new responsibility then they must be better prepared. If more people are involved more people will come to church. Cooperation was being encouraged with the Presbyterian Church in projects that could be worked at together. This would be good for both churches.

Relationship on the ecumenical front seemed fairly good and there were representatives from the Presbyterian, Catholic and Lusitanian (Portuguese Anglican) churches at the synod and they all gave greetings.

In summing up the Bishop said that there was a lot to be done. The work needed to be continually evaluated in order to move forward and overcome difficulties. If all the potential of the church is realised there will be much to be thankful for. Worship must be more participative with all ages giving testimonies. "We need simplicity and tranquillity in a world that is angry with itself. In order to help we need to be right with ourselves." That goes for us all!

I understand that in the past it has been mainly the ministers who have spoken at Synod. That certainly did not seem to be the case this year as many lay people took up the challenge to express their views. Bishop Sifredo was very encouraged by the participation of the delegates.

The Synod ended and then we had an Ordination Service for Eunice Alves who ministers in Braga. This was a wonderful service with a great sense of celebration. It was recorded for the television and the next day there was a photograph and write up in one of the national newspapers. Eunice was the second woman Methodist minister in Portugal. After the service celebrations continued with a buffet tea and a lot of talking. I felt really privileged to be there.

I was hosted by a family from Aveiro for my stay at synod and I welcomed the chance to experience Portuguese home life. They made me very welcome.

6. **Lisbon** - The church in Lisbon is in a very difficult situation. It rents 3 hours a week on a Sunday from the Church of Scotland. This costs them 250 euros a month. At 3pm they meet for Children's Sunday School and Adult Sunday School and then have worship at 4pm. They have their own council, a choir that sings every week, a weekly newsletter, a youth department, a women's group and a liturgist's group. They have a number of ecumenical exchanges during the year. If they want to use the church at other times they have to pay extra for the room and for the caretaker to unlock and lock up afterwards. I asked whether it was possible for them to have their own key as surely they could be trusted. Miriam had wondered why this hadn't been suggested to them. An added worry for them is that there is talk of the Church of Scotland closing! All of the congregation are black Angolan immigrants and I met with about twenty of them. They live in various parts of Lisbon and for them all it means a journey on public transport in order to get to church. This is often made more difficult because it is a Sunday. They sang to me before they went home and if that was anything to go by then I can imagine that their worship must be very dynamic. It is a very young congregation, aged between 20 and 40, with a small number of old people. They have a very evangelical spirit. Some of them are able to meet for Bible study during the week in someone's home. They spoke openly about the difficulties they have in finding permanent work so that they don't need to apply for a new visa. That costs them 75 euros each year, which is a lot of money when you are trying to make ends meet. Rev. Miriam Lopes is their minister. She is very isolated from the other presbyters in Portugal and longs for more contact but with the distance involved that is very difficult. Miriam is caring for the two churches, Moita and Lisbon, which means visiting and taking part in meetings that many times happen in people's houses and she represents the Methodist Church at events or meetings taking place in Lisbon that the Bishop can't go to. Also she is finishing a masters degree in the University. She is helped by Ana Cristina. Ana Cristina is supported by the British Methodist Church and really appreciates all that is being done for her. She enjoyed her visit to England to attend a training event at "Lindors". She would love to be able to come to study at Cliff College and I am looking at some possible funding for her through Women's Network Training Fund.



7. **Moita** – The Church at Moita is situated across the river from Lisbon and it takes about 45 minutes to get there by car. Their first meeting place was in a garage. Again the congregation are mainly from Angola and when they came they had nothing. A new church was built in 1987 in a new building that was part of a shopping complex. They had a very unfortunate experience with a minister and that situation meant that they lost a lot of members. The ones who are left are very loyal and work very hard. The church inside is kept very nice but outside they get a lot of vandalism. On the day of the Madrid disaster, one of the members who is in serious financial circumstances through no fault of her own other than her generous nature, asked her customers if they would like to meet for prayer in the church. Six women met that day and they are looking to meet again. A great story of intuition and putting it into

practice. Ana Cristina who works here has to travel from Lisbon on public transport and on a Sunday this can take her 3 hours! She is hoping to learn to drive. I met with about six of the congregation and listened to their stories. It was a very humbling experience.



In my conversations with Bishop Sifredo I found out the things that were of concern to him and also the joys that he wanted me to bring back to the Church in Britain.

1. The financial support from Britain is essential.
2. He would appreciate support in the European Council in September
3. More lay people were taking part in Synod.
4. Waiting for letter from Mayor re Monte Pedral.
5. Concern for African group in Lisbon. He asks if there is any dialogue between Church of Scotland and Methodist Church in Britain? They desperately need a building.
6. Appreciate Cristina being supported by Britain.
7. Synod challenged people not only to increase in money but also people.
8. Need for grants for students to study.
9. Bishop's emphasis on "tranquillity, simplicity and social deeds.
10. Portugal Evangelical Magazine, in old format to be finished if new magazine gets off the ground. New one having a trial run in June. (Looks more like "Magnet"!!)

I was filled with admiration for a church that is struggling in so many ways and yet trying to be as positive as they can be. Their evangelistic spirit and vitality were a great witness to their faith and a lesson to the church in Britain.

I hope that I have given you the kind of report that is helpful. If I can be of any more help please let me know.

Elaine Turner