

A GENEROUS ROUNDTABLE IN ARGENTINA



The roundtable of Methodist partners took place in Argentina between 9 and 12 March, a week before the presence of Coronavirus in the country caused the Argentine government to enforce a 14-day quarantine for all newly arrived travellers from Europe, and a week before the government announced a national two-week quarantine except for those buying food or medicine. The Evangelical Methodist Church in Argentina has suspended all its church activities for the next two weeks. Many of our partners present at the roundtable come from countries where the state is enforcing a ban on incoming travel and where the entire nation is being asked to self-isolate. Please join us in praying for our partners and their governments who are having to make decisions that affect the lives of entire nations to help prevent the spread of the virus.



Bishop of the Evangelical Methodist Church in Argentina, Américo Jarra Reyes

Beyond the challenge of COVID-19, the region of Latin America is in 'convulsion' as I heard many people say during my time in Argentina. Revd Barbara Glasson, the current President of the Methodist Church in Britain, also participated in the Evangelical Methodist Church in Argentina's roundtable meeting. It was called a *generous* roundtable, given the scope of participants invited, including several neighbouring partner churches and churches from Europe. The Methodist churches in Ecuador, Chile, Uruguay, Colombia and Bolivia were represented by

Purpose of the roundtable

To meet with several partners of the Evangelical Methodist church in Argentina

To understand the current context and challenges to mission in Argentina and in the region

To seek out common solutions and collaborative ways of doing mission in Argentina, the region and in our own context

their presiding Bishops, along with the presidents of the Methodist Church in Italy, the Evangelical Spanish Church and representatives from GBGM, Connexio and the Upper Rooms.

Our regional partners are living in challenging times, as years of high-income inequality, political corruption, violence in local communities, violence against women and economic policies that have exacerbated poverty in communities have taken its toll. In 2019, people across Latin America said very strongly that enough was enough, joining forces to organise several mass protests across the continent in Chile, Nicaragua, Argentina, Colombia, Bolivia and Ecuador, calling on governments to make significant changes to the status quo.

REGIONAL CHALLENGES

Violence against women



Women from the roundtable attending the women's rights march, with Barbara Glasson (second to right)

Latin America is the region with the highest levels of violence in the world in times of peace. Since the beginning of the year, over 56 women have been murdered in Argentina alone. During International Women's Day on Sunday 8 March, there was a mass protest, organised, led and attended primarily by women, calling for the state and society to recognise their rights and offer them more protection. These rights were represented by different coloured scarves that women wore to indicate what they were protesting for, namely:

Green -the national campaign to legalise abortion.

Orange-the separation for the state and the church.

Purple- the *Ni Una Menos* campaign, to end all violence against women (it refers to campaigning for not a single femicide more)

Women wearing scarves in Argentina is significant and historic. The *Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*, the Plaza de Mayo Mothers and Grandmothers, who since the dictatorship years have been campaigning for the right to know what happened to their loved ones who were disappeared during the years of the dictatorship, wore and continue to wear white scarves. These symbolise the nappies of their missing babies and children. The Evangelical Methodist Church in Argentina has been an ecumenical leader in advocating for human rights in Argentina, and is fully invested in the ongoing campaign to improve women's rights and seek justice and answers for those 'disappeared' and their families during the dictatorship years.



This is Nora (second on the right), a leader of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo movement, who suffered along with thousands of other mothers during the dictatorship years (1970s to 1980s) when their babies, children and young adults were taken from them or ‘disappeared’. It was a privilege to hear her speak about how the Mothers and Grandmothers continue to campaign for the right to know what happened to their children. She also said that she felt it was her responsibility to join the younger women in campaigning for what was important to them in their generation, such as climate change and ending violence against women.

During the conversation on how churches should be supporting this campaign for women’s rights, the issue of safeguarding vulnerable people was raised. I was able to share about the work that the Methodist Church in Britain has done in safeguarding and its wider definition of safeguarding that includes creating safe spaces in local churches for women. The church and other partners around the table were keen to explore this further with the Methodist Church in Britain and learn about the process, the policies and training that the MCB has to ensure that our safeguarding is more rigorous than what our laws require.

The Evangelical Methodist Church in Argentina uses World Vision’s safeguarding policies and the church also has a gender policy, but the issue the church continues to work on is ensuring that these important codes of conduct and safeguarding policies filter down to the local churches?

Climate change

The roundtable recognised that climate change is affecting the entire region. The Evangelical Methodist Church in Bolivia shared how one of their communities was badly affected by the Amazon fires last year, and that they continued to offer their spiritual and financial support to the Chiquitanía community. It was good to share with the roundtable the work that the Methodist Church in doing to bring together a group of young climate change advocates from across our partner churches to establish a climate change campaign in the lead up to COP 26 in Glasgow this year. It was fascinating to hear about the indigenous Aymara view of what constitutes truly healthy living. The Bolivian Bishop, Antonio Huanca, shared what the concept of well-being or *suma qamaña* meant for him as an Aymara. It means living well together, and underlines the importance of harmony between nature and humans, leading to sustainability. It is a concept that former Bolivian President Evo Morales promoted through his social policies and ensuing social transformation. He is credited for lifting many indigenous people in Bolivia out of poverty. He is currently in exile in Mexico because of alleged corruption and electoral fraud accusations and an interim government is currently in place. This was the reason for protests in Bolivia last year, as indigenous Bolivians protested against what they see as a rolling back of the rights and economic progress they gained under Evo Morales.

Migration

Until the arrival of Coronavirus in Latin America, migration across the region had increased substantially in the last three years, thanks to the millions of Venezuelan migrants who have felt forced to leave their nation. As borders across the region have closed to both contain and keep out the spread of the virus, migrants face a new vulnerability.

Several of the partner churches have been working closely with Venezuelan Migrants. The Colombian Methodist Church runs projects in several Colombian cities, supporting Venezuelans through children's clubs, supporting Venezuelan mothers of young infants and lactating mothers and developing information networks to help migrants access the right information on their legal rights, local support and educational support for their children.

The Methodist Church in Ecuador has fewer migrants residing in the country, but the church supports migrants who are passing through Ecuador by giving them provisions at the major bus terminal in Quito.

The Methodist Church in Uruguay also works with a number of migrant families and helps them find temporary accommodation in Montevideo, the capital.

The Evangelical Methodist Church in Argentina is working to support some of the 170,000 Venezuelans in the country through CAREF, the Argentina Commission for Refugees and Migrants, the president of which is a member of the Methodist Church.

All our partners mentioned that the arrival of Venezuelan migrants had seen a corresponding increase in xenophobia against migrant populations, rental abuse and families living in squalid, unacceptable conditions. All our partners are working hard to give welcome, love, spiritual and physical support to as many migrants as they can, given their limited resources.

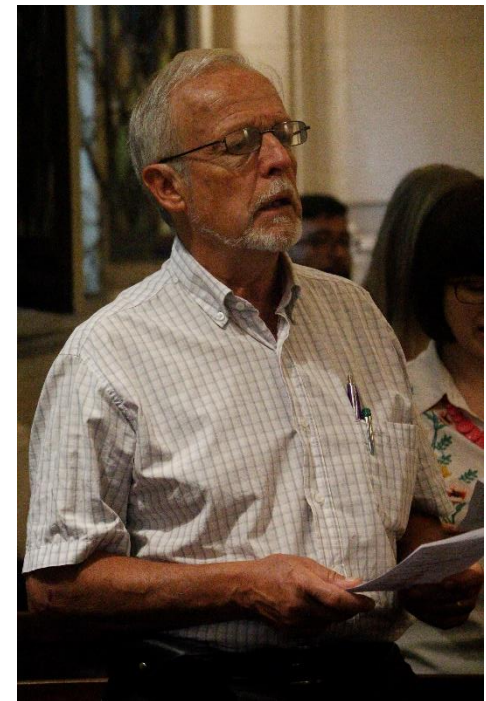


Bishop Antonio Huanca, Evangelical Methodist Church in Bolivia



Left: Bishop Silvio Cevallos, United Evangelical Methodist Church in Ecuador

Right: Bishop Luis Andres Caicedo, Colombian Methodist Church



Mr Alfredo Alcarraz, President of the Methodist Church in Uruguay

Evangelism



Revd Mark Ochoa, coordinator of evangelism

As a small church in its context, the IEMA is seeking to grow in membership and in discipleship. The IEMA has recently nominated an evangelism coordinator, Revd Marco Ochoa, and has appointed a national evangelism team. However, it is a team without a budget, so the members of the team finance their own travel across Argentina as they begin working with local churches and host evangelistic events to share the gospel with local communities. The team has worked with a few local communities so far, and they have had successful evangelistic campaigns that have attracted new people from local communities to their churches. Praise God for that! I have shared the draft MCB evangelism strategy with the church in case it is useful as they develop their own contextualised strategy.

Financial sustainability

The treasurer, Daniela Peralta (right), gave us a break down of the income and expenditure of the church Argentina income. It was heartening to see that only 10% of their income comes from overseas partners, including the Methodist Church in Britain. 70% of their income comes from the tithes and offerings of their members, and the remaining 20% is rental income from a number of church properties. The church headquarters, which is both their connexional team, a Methodist guest house and the place of the former ecumenical theological college, ISEDET (Higher Ecumenical Institution of Theological Education), is about to undergo refurbishment work that will give the church an additional 20% of space that can be leased in the future and provide additional income for the church. This additional income will be used to cover the cost of numerous projects and programmes of the church. The church was hit by the high rates of inflation that continued to rise in 2019 which was the year of the last election, which saw the value of the Argentine peso against the dollar double in the week of the last election. Argentina, is just one example among many in the region of advanced economies that face increasing inflation rates, high costs of living and the highest income inequalities in the world. All these factors exacerbate the regional problems of an increase in poverty and inequality, in the region with the highest levels of inequality across the world.





Meetings with UCEL-The University of the Latin American Educational Centre

After the roundtable discussion, I travelled to the port city of Rosario. When ISEDET closed four years ago, it left the Methodist church in Argentina with the conundrum of where their candidates for ministry would go for their theological training. The church has therefore been working with a Methodist university, *UCEL* based in Rosario, to develop a theological training programme for its ministers and lay workers alike. *UCEL* has four faculties, including the Wesley Institute, and is currently waiting for the State to approve its application to accredit a distance learning bachelors' degrees in theology. In the meanwhile, it is offering a diploma to students who will study the future bachelor's degree. This will enable students to advance in several modules before the degree is granted accreditation by the ministry of education. They currently have 13 Methodist students taking the diploma, their average age being between 35 and 40 years old, as well as a number of students from the Methodist Church in Uruguay.

The Wesley Institute at *UCEL* is coordinated by Professor Gabriela Amaya (right in the photo). She coordinates a lay workers training programme called the 'Hidden Pearl' which offers distance learning theological training to lay workers. Both Gabriela and Revd Fabian Rey (left in the photo), the vice chancellor of *UCEL*, and were very interested in Cliff College's Theology X virtual platform that is currently being developed, that will enable theological students from across the world to access the latest study material and courses, in the a variety of languages. I promised to put *UCEL* in touch with Cliff College so that they could explore a potential collaboration.

We also discussed the possibility of future mission partners who are called to serve God in the region going to

UCEL to undertake Spanish language and cross-cultural study, as part of the their pre-visit training.

In conclusion, this generous roundtable was an opportunity to look at common regional and cross regional challenges, and to highlight the need to work together in solidarity as churches in order to respond to these issues. It is simply not possible for individual churches to try and tackle regional issues alone- Latin America is in 'convulsion', and this deepening and accentuation of the issues, such a violence against women, mass migration, increase in poverty and climate change, requires joint action. The roundtable enabled partners to exchange information and resources that will support one another in their context, highlighting that we are not alone in our country specific challenges. Every part of the worldwide Methodist family can support one another in solidarity, love, prayer and action.



Sandra Lopez, Partnership Coordinator for Latin America and the Caribbean, 26 March 2020.