

Visit to Chile  
18-25 Oct 2019

## **Civil Unrest**

As it turned out, civil unrest started in Santiago around the same time as I left home in Ireland! I knew nothing about it until meeting with the folks at the airport in Chile. It began after the announcement of a price rise in metro fares. It quickly developed and grew as a vehicle for expression for the majority of Chilean people who struggle to make enough to live on.

Chile is one of the wealthiest countries in Latin America with a growing economy but it also has a very wide income gap. Many ordinary people work in jobs which are very badly paid and yet because of the economic growth, prices here are higher than in many other Latin American countries.

The protests have been largely dominated by young people. The older people in Chile commented that the young people have no fear of the army because they don't know how this could end. It is almost 30 years since the end of the Pinochet dictatorship and so there's a whole generation that do not know what that was like. This also explains why when the military went onto the streets on Friday 18<sup>th</sup> October to quell the protests it in fact greatly fanned the flame of anger. This was the first time that the army were on the streets of Santiago since the fall of Pinochet, almost 30 years.

The outbreak of violent protest on Friday the 18<sup>th</sup> October was very sudden and completely unexpected. The Church Leaders said they never saw this coming. However, to quote the Methodist Bishop of Chile in one sense it "started 20 years ago." By this he meant that tensions and pressures have been building over many years. Some of the factors in this tension are as follows:

- The first places to be set on fire were some of the Metro stations. This was as a reaction to the price rise (which has since been reversed) because people with low wage jobs couldn't face any further expense in trying to get to work.
- Supermarkets were the next to be attacked. Again this was a reaction to high prices and the cost of living. In particular the 'Leader' chain was targeted because it is owned by Walmart who are well-known for paying very low wages.
- The hatred of the army also stems from the fact that senior figures are believed to have embezzled funds which should have been used for health, education etc. In particular the public health services in Chile are in a real crisis and almost coming to a standstill for lack of funds.
- In the north of Chile some crosses were attacked which had been erected for the Pope's visit last year. This symbolises the anger that there now is in Chile towards the Catholic Church because it was seen as part of the power structure and also it has 'lost the heart of the people' because of clerical sexual abuse etc.



## Conversations with Church Leaders

In a meeting with Bishop Jorge Merino and other church leaders I outlined how our understanding of world mission is that it should be in both directions and that we in Ireland and Britain have as much if not more to receive than we have to give. I explained that while we would talk about how we could possibly partner and assist in their work, we also needed them. I gave the example of how I have been using the work with migrants that I saw during my visit to Chile in 2018 as a challenge to Methodists all over Ireland to go out and find vulnerable people in our midst rather than waiting for them to come to church and find us.



They explained that historically missionaries from Europe and America came to Chile only to give (this was a general conversation about missionaries in general not any one denomination). But nowadays we agreed that 'mother' church language should be replaced by 'sister' church language. Towards the end of the conversation I was glad to hear one of the church leaders say "it is important for us that you can learn from us too."

## **The Methodist Church in Chile**

I was anxious to unpack the four specific objectives which are defined in their current four year programme. These are proclamation, teaching, service and communion. However they explained to me that these four things are not new. They are the constant and ongoing pillars of their work. But what changes every four years is how they implement and express those pillars. In the four year programme (2018 to 2021) they have taken the motto 'Committed to the Kingdom of God and His Justice'. Under this heading the four pillars are implemented as follows:

- 1 Proclamation: Evidencing the power of the message of Jesus Christ as good news for the present time in all the faith communities and ministries of the Chilean Methodist Church.
- 2 Teaching: Emphasising the Evangelism of the Kingdom of God in all the teaching of the church, from a biblical and theological perspective.
- 3 Service: We commit ourselves to the present society through supportive and integral service for the benefit of human dignity, from a Wesleyan perspective.
- 4 Communion: To increase the internal life of the church as a community of fraternal, friendly, inclusive and sound faith.

We had some conversation about whether or not the Methodist Church was affected by the liberation theology movement in the second half of the last century in South America. They said that many of their pastors in the 1970's were influenced by liberation theology. It led to a very stimulating conversation about the challenge to 'equilibrate the Good News' for body and for soul. They noted how some evangelical groups only ever worked towards the salvation of people's souls but the Methodist Church, while wanting to proclaim good news for people's souls, also wants to offer good news for the body as well. The church runs 18 educational institutions and 10 social projects and one family health centre. This is cited in Temuco in the south where the population are mostly Mapuche indigenous peoples. In the Health Centre approximately 15,000 people per year get free health treatment for which the church receives some State funding.

### **Seminary**

A big part of our conversation both in the church office and at the seminary was about theological education. The annual grant from the Methodist Church in Britain helps to fund this.

The Seminary is 55 years old and the Methodist Church was one of the founding churches. Now there are six churches involved – Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian and three Pentecostal churches. Three years ago their Degrees were certified by the Catholic University. They are the only evangelical college to have this and this is important because generally evangelical pastors don't have State recognised qualifications.



In addition to their centre in Santiago they have some local centres in various other places as well as offering an on-line programme. There are 80 students this year on the extension programme from various churches (including Catholic). This can eventually lead to degree level after five years of evening classes.

The last five Methodist Bishops have studied at this College including the present one. The present Lutheran Bishop also studied here at the same time so they are 'still friends in mission'.

In the past, 80% of the students were studying to be pastors but now approximately 60% are not studying to be pastors and have other jobs, although some end up being called into the Ministry during their studies.

The College is aiming for financial independence and now only 25% of their income comes from overseas (Switzerland). In the past nearly all their income came from overseas.

They would love to explore the idea of teachers coming from Ireland or Britain for a year or six months

They would also be very grateful for some financial help for the annual lectures which they run at which a visiting lecturer gives talks which many people attend. It costs approximately 2,000 US dollars per year.

I was told that in the last 12 years doors have opened for Protestants to be Chaplains in hospitals, military, prisons etc. So this has motivated Protestants to be prepared for this. This College is an important place to prepare people for this kind of work. This reflected an earlier conversation I had had with Rev. Raquel who is the Methodist Lecturer at this College. She has done a PhD in gender violence and the Bible. Earlier in our conversation we had talked about how in this post-Christendom era the mission of the Church now had to be the mission of the whole people of God. Then I asked her why there was such emphasis on the seminary. She pointed out that as well as ministers, it was important to train lay people to equip them because various doors are opening. For example, Methodist people can now teach Christian education in State schools. They also train Chaplains at the Seminary and so in this way the seminary currently impacts 17,000 school students. So, "mission goes far beyond 'our little church'".

Another area they pointed out was that they feel they need help with Christian formation of young people and children. I mentioned that MCI has a very vibrant and effective youth and children's department and we wondered about the possibility of some kind of exchange or visit for short-term training. I also wondered whether this might be something that could be facilitated through a SALT group training grant.



We discussed the work amongst vulnerable Venezuelan migrants in northern Chile which is being funded by a general grant from the World Mission Fund. This has mainly been providing food and legal assistance to these vulnerable migrants. The funding will run out early next year so I mentioned that because this is an ongoing urgent situation it may be possible to apply for a second solidarity grant. I was informed that they're currently doing a thorough evaluation of the work so far and they expect to have results in December. I then explained that they could decide if another short-term solidarity grant was the best thing for the future or if it was going to be an ongoing project that might need staffing then perhaps it could fall into the MMA category. They seemed to clearly understand what I was talking about and said that that was the kind of decision that they would be making once they had the results of the evaluation.

I would have liked more time to continue this discussion and learn more about the work of the Church in Chile but our second meeting which was scheduled for Wednesday didn't happen.

### **Work with Haitian Migrants**

It was wonderful to be able to spend extended time in conversation with Mariela and Hugette so that I could hear in detail about their work with Haitian migrants in Chile even though, due to the political situation in Chile at the time, I was unable to travel out of Santiago to see some of this work for myself. I do have lots of pictures which they sent me though. It was also good to spend some time with Hugette walking around a huge food market and talking with some Haitians who work there. We had some enlightening conversations about what life can be like for them in Chile.



I asked how the money which was sent from Ireland earlier this year (from the GospelFest goes West concert) had been spent. It is being used to help out Haitians materially as well as helping to pay fees which they need to pay from time to time to regularise their visas. Also this money has supported the formation of a choir of Haitian migrants. The money is used to pay bus fares so that people can travel to choir practice and pay for a choirmaster to train them. This may not seem like the most obvious thing to do to support the Haitian migrants but it is an imaginative project that fulfils many wonderful objectives.

The choir is a reason/excuse to get people together so that mutual support can be provided in community.

Secondly, Mariela said that they were anxious to help Haitians hold on to their spirituality and the choir greatly helps with this.

The choir has plans to sing in public spaces partly for evangelisation and also to help reach other Haitians.

Some Chilean people are now beginning to join the choir 'out of love' and they help the Haitians. This also means that the choir is contributing towards racial harmony.

Unfortunately it was impossible to travel to Curico where they had intended to show me more of the work being done with Haitians. In Curico and in several other locations they have used the church halls to establish de facto vocational training classes. This includes baking (bread and cakes) and sewing material. The products are then sold and 70% of the profit goes to the Haitian workers while 30% is used to buy new materials for the next round. The church supplies the teachers and the space for free.



They have a dream to establish a similar project in Santiago. There is already a hall or room which could be made available at one of the churches. They are going to write a project outlining the funding necessary for start-up costs. This may be something World Mission Partnerships in Ireland could support.



Another wonderful initiative is that churches in various places organise training classes advising Haitians how to go about regulating their visa situation legally.

In Curico the dream of the church is to be able to rent a dwelling-house to make available to Haitians who currently sleep in the street.

I was also told about two students in a Methodist High School in Santiago who are now ready and able to go to University. The State will provide them with a university college but they need funding for books, transport etc of approximately one million Peso (approximately 1,200 Euro) each per year.

As our conversation drew to a close I said to Mariela that I could see that the Chilean Church was contributing much to the lives of these Haitian migrants and enabling them to get established in Chile. But I also sensed that the Chilean Church was receiving much in different ways from the Haitians. Mariela wholeheartedly agreed and said that the Haitians are the reason that she doesn't look her age (63)!!

Because other meetings were cancelled on my last day I had the opportunity to visit the home of Hugette and her husband Simon. I was almost embarrassed with the level of welcome I received - they seemed genuinely touched that I had come but for me it was a pleasure and an honour to visit their home. They live in the La Florida suburb in a very small, little townhouse which is three storeys high but perhaps only about 12 feet wide. Simon and Hugette have two children and Hugette's mother lives with them. However, also on the top floor she has made space for her two sisters and their families so there are 15 people in total living in the house. This gives an idea of the tough life for many Haitians in Chile. And yet I was hosted royally and treated to some beautiful home-cooked Haitian food. We also got to sing songs and pray in Creole as I fervently asked God to bless that home and family.

**Revd Lawrence Graham, Methodist Church in Ireland**