

## CUMBRIA ARGENTINA METHODIST PARTNERSHIP

### REPORT OF VISIT TO ARGENTINA BY JOAN AND RAY WAGER, 9-26 OCTOBER 2019

#### Introduction

The purpose of the visit was

- to attend the 26<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of Evangelical Methodist church in Argentina (*IEMA*)
- to see work supported by the Global Relationships Team on behalf of Sandra Lopez
- to assess IEMA's position regarding marriage and relationships
- to obtain an update on the Nicolas Lowe Homes
- to progress the link between Langwathby CE Primary School and a Methodist School in Rosario
- to meet the current *FeMMA* team (**The Women's Evangelical Federation of Methodist Women in Argentina**)
- to renew contacts and explore new opportunities for the Partnership
- to share in inspirational worship and conversations

The welcome we received both formally and in groups and conversations confirmed that the link with the UK and in particular Cumbria is highly valued.

Preparations for our visit had been made with care – meals, accommodation and transport were all provided or arranged for us. Free “rest time” before the start of the assembly was very helpful following a bumpy flight!

#### The Assembly, 11-14 October

Other official guests were the Methodist Bishop of Brazil and Methodist Ministers from France and Miami (we understand IEMA has a link with Florida).

#### Theme: Jesus, grace that transforms, hope that liberates

This theme was developed during the course of the Assembly in the inspirational worship – the image was used of a caterpillar eventually emerging as a butterfly. The whole experience was

greatly enhanced by beautiful visual aids, art, music, dance and imaginative ways of enabling active involvement by all present with some very meaningful, special moments.

In addition to the usual Assembly reports and elections, members broke into groups for discussion and report. These comprised commission workshops focussing on 7 aspects of church life – we attended “Evangelism & Discipleship” and “Community Life & Liturgy”. Other workshops came under the heading “The Great Parish” based on John Wesley's words, “The world is my parish” – IEMA asked the question “So what is the World saying to the Church?” and from this emerged justice issues for Bible study and discussion. We attended groups on “Gender

Justice & Women's Rights” and “Climate & Environmental Justice”. All groups reported to the Assembly.

With regard to the marriage & relationships issues, we had a conversation with Pastor Maxi Heusser, the leader of IEMA's working group, which had to report to this Assembly on work already done. They requested a further period of time, which was agreed. Some were pressing for early decisions but others were concerned about causing a split in the church (as has apparently happened in USA) if over-hasty conclusions were





made. Copies of 'God in Love unites us' were gratefully received and will assist their deliberations. There was an opportunity in one of the workshops for us to speak about the Methodist Church in Britain's approach to these issues.

An open service of celebration was held on the Sunday evening to mark 50 years as an autonomous church. A notable part was a moving remembrance of ministers and lay people who had died since the previous assembly,

including Bishop Nelly Ritchie, a former Presiding Bishop of the IEMA.

### Visit to Rosario (Population 1.2 million)

The main purpose was to clarify the process for creating a partnership between schools in Rosario and



Langwathby Church of England primary school (Cumbria). We visited two primary schools at La Paz (a poor area of the city) and that at the Methodist Latin-American Education Centre (CEL) in the heart of the city. Geri de Paris, who visited Cumbria in 2018, teaches at both schools. We also visited a special school at Guri,

another poor district of Rosario. We were accompanied throughout by Florencia Lahitte, who is responsible for Christian orientation at CEL and was very enthusiastic about a link with Cumbria. CEL comprises 5 schools under the Director, Martin Tranier, with whom we had a meeting, – kindergarten, primary, secondary, special and adult





education. On the same site is UCEL – the small Methodist University, which has 3 faculties and undertakes ministerial training, mainly by distance learning. We met the Vice-Rector, Fabian Rey, who is a Methodist minister. A link exists between La Paz and Florida so it was agreed we should link Langwathby with CEL and possibly with the special school. A scrap book prepared by the children at Langwathby was warmly received both by Martin and the staff that we met. We were given information to bring back for Langwathby and will arrange a meeting with the school to take this forward.



The next day we had a tour of the city conducted by Melina Docampo from the University and then met Bishop Américo and his wife, Pastora Maria-Esther Andersen, at the Church of the Resurrection. We visited the attached student home where recent work to renew electrical systems etc had been paid for from the loan fund set up with money from Cumbria. We met a student

and her story confirmed the value of the student home programme.

A fast car ride to an eating place courtesy of the Bishop provided lunch before our return to Buenos Aires on the bus. We were taken to ISEDET, the former theological college, now largely empty apart from some rooms used as offices, where we stayed overnight – alone!



### **Visit to Mercedes, Chacabuco and Junin, 17-18 October**

Sandra Lopez wished us to visit these churches, as the Global Relationships Team has been funding the pastor, Fernando Suarez, under the Nationals in Mission scheme. This funding is coming to an end and will need to be replaced by funding from local churches and IEMA. (IEMA will be seeking an NIM grant to fund a pastor in the north of Argentina).

Fernando is President of the Ecumenical Human Rights Commission.

We were accompanied by Ariel Fernandez and his wife, Silvina Cardoso – Silvina is Superintendent for this vast area.

We first visited the Nicolas Lowe Home in Mercedes – separate report below.

### **Mercedes (Population 52,000)**

Fernando has inherited his father's house in Mercedes so the pastor's house adjoining the church is now used daily as a children's activities centre. We were particularly pleased to find that there is now a positive and strong link between the church and the Nicolas Lowe Home – children attend church followed by visits to members' homes. Also





two members visit the Home after school to teach Bible stories etc. We took part in a short informal service at the church followed by tea. Numbers attending church are not high – Fernando said ten regulars do the work and others think “about once a month will do”!

We then drove to Chacabuco (two hours) before driving on to Junin the next morning.

### **Junin (Population 85,000)**

This small church was built for railway workers and is in a district of the city of Junin. Very traditional in ethos, with 15 attending most Sundays and 12 for a weekly Bible study, the Church gave us a warm welcome. This was the Church where the all-women membership prayed for men! There are now two male local preachers from a Brethren background. Silvina hopes a man in his forties who feels called to be a lay pastor will come here if he can secure employment – the aim being to revitalise the church and increase engagement with the community.



### **Chacabuco (Population 38,000)**

We returned to Chacabuco and had lunch in the Pastor’s House adjoining the Church. The Church is located in the centre of this attractive town and was the most active of the three churches. Fernando takes the Sunday services at 8pm every week (alternating between the other two churches in the morning). The Pastor’s house is mainly used for Christian education and activities several days a week after school. For the past 25 years this church has run clothing sales for the poor of the area and their commitment to this is undiminished. A small charge is made for clothing to avoid the stigma of “charity”. We were given a very warm welcome and asked to sign a document that everyone present also signed recording the “visit of missionaries from Cumbria”!







A choir, which includes members of the community as well as the church, had rehearsed three songs for our visit and we were interviewed by local radio! “Fraternal Tea” followed.

This church was lively, friendly and clearly engaging with the community. We drove back to Buenos Aires.

### Alta Gracia

Ariel drove us to Ezeiza for the flight to Cordoba, where we were met by Bishop Frank and Myriam, who took us to Alta Gracia (Population 43,000). After a drive around this attractive town, with the Sierras de Cordoba mountains in the distance, we arrived at Myriam and Frank’s newly built house. They moved in May 2019. Frank is pastor of the two churches in Alta Gracia and one in Cordoba, an hour’s drive away.



Here we were able to do some sightseeing – Che Guevara’s childhood home, the Jesuit Estancia Museum, a drive into the mountains to a “German” town and a monument marking the dead centre of Argentina - this was near an impressive retreat centre used by FeMMA.

Ray missed the Sunday services, due to being unwell, but Joan attended the Cordoba church in the morning, which started with a one hour Bible study with a lay leader. About 12 women were present and there was a lively discussion on a

passage from Acts. We then moved into the fairly large Church building, where a mixed-age congregation gathered for a Mother’s Day celebration service. People in the congregation were invited to speak about their mothers, which they did at some length. Frank preached, moving into a fairly high pulpit to do so – a tradition in this church. The music was varied, including “What a friend we have in Jesus” and “Blest be the tie that binds”! The children left part way through for Sunday school, returning later with Mother’s Day gifts for women in the congregation. Communion followed, when everyone gathered at the front of the church, with the children at the altar rail and adults behind. Then a newly baked



loaf of bread was broken and shared, followed by the wine.

From Cordoba we came back to Alta Gracia for lunch (empanadas and ice cream!) and were joined by Nahuel, Myriam and Frank's son, and his partner, who live in Cordoba and attend the central Methodist Church.

An evening service followed at the central church in Alta Gracia – a small building in the process of being decorated, which was converted to a church from a house. Myriam and Frank used to live in a flat on the premises – Frank said this could be used to accommodate one or two adults from UK who might wish to undertake church work. There is a large room for children's activities and community use, with an outside covered area and barbecue. The congregation of all ages



were very friendly and outgoing. The worship leader was excellent and there was a mix of enthusiastic singing and times of silence. A good rapport existed between Frank and the congregation.

Later in the week we had a meeting with Pablo Oviedo, Superintendent for Cordoba District, who described his nine churches, middle class and poor, theologically diverse and at different stages of "consolidation". He emphasised qualitative as well as quantitative growth as an objective and described help given to the poorer communities.

We also viewed the premises of Frank's other church – a former Baptist Church in a very poor area, which changed to a Methodist Church, because its congregation were not happy with the Baptist Church's ruling on the marriage and relationships issue. Worship is apparently very lively and the Church seeks to support the community through clothing sales, activities for children, making the premises available for family gatherings and sale of vegetables grown on site.

On our last evening we attended a meeting of 10 people for Bible study and prayer. As always people were ready to participate and to share concerns for prayer, which Frank noted then asked each of us to pray on behalf of someone else. Afterwards we enjoyed a meal with Frank and Myriam at a Spanish restaurant in the centre.





## Nicolas Lowe Homes for Children

The home in Mercedes was built a century ago for 100 orphans. Needs and policies have changed over the years – Argentine law now restricts homes to a maximum of 24 children. The present building, therefore, is not suitable for modern needs. However, the children appeared well cared for, relating well to adults and being very responsive. We were impressed by the head of the home (a social worker) and her



husband, a paediatrician, who volunteers at the home, and also by the part-time building surveyor, Christien Clausen, all of whom clearly had a good relationship with the children.

Christien is tackling ongoing maintenance issues and endeavouring to reduce running costs. He said the Government meets only one third of costs so funding continues to be a major concern, especially for salaries.

The reconstituted leadership team of Institute Lowe has adopted a

strategy of seeking to provide four or five small homes linked to Methodist Churches. This is not straightforward – the present building at Mercedes is too big and unsuitable for modern needs. It cannot be demolished, as it is a historic building and it would be difficult to sell in its present state. Some adjacent land has been sold but it is feared the proceeds will be needed for running costs rather than being available for development. These are real dilemmas that they are having to face but we felt the new team



have vision and a desire to move forward from the status quo.

We had a conversation about continuing care beyond 18 – an example is use of the pastor's former house at Villa Sarmiento Church to accommodate a small group with support from the church (comparable to the student home model).

## Carpenter of Nazareth Church, Ingeniero Budge, Buenos Aires

We were not able to include a visit in our schedule but met Pastora Teresa Soliz and her husband at the Assembly. Teresa has made a good recovery from the aneurism she suffered but has lost the sight in one eye. She was full of gratitude for her renewed health. Flooding is still a concern at the Church and she had to take time out from the Assembly to check that all was well after storms over the weekend of the Assembly. (She had raised with us some time ago the possibility of some flood barriers to protect the premises)

### **The Women's Evangelical Federation of Methodist Women in Argentina (*FeMMA*)**

Nora Viacava, the new coordinator, arranged a gathering with her team and Joan. One of the issues of concern was the fact that many women are having to look for home-based work to supplement the family income. Nora's deputy is Mirte Monmany, who visited Cumbria around 2003 – she had many happy memories of Cumbria and sent enthusiastic loving greetings to our team. Support given from Cumbria to enable women to attend *FeMMA* conferences was greatly appreciated and Nora is eager to visit Cumbria possibly to contribute from her many skills to Cumbria MWiB.

