

URUGUAY VISIT REPORT

Uruguay: the most secular country in Latin America

Uruguay is considered the most secular country in the region, thanks to over 50% of the population professing agnosticism or atheism. Uruguay had one of the earliest separations of the church and the state in the region, back in 1917. This is highly unusual in a region where Catholicism remains the dominant religion and where Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches are continuing to grow. The question I asked myself during my visit was how do you survive and thrive as a church in such a secular society, where no one really wants to talk about God in any kind of way?

A SMALL CHURCH WITH A WIDE OUTREACH

The Uruguayan population is small, with under 3.5 million people. The Methodist Church in Uruguay is also small in members, at under 500 members nationally. In relative terms, the Methodist Church in Britain is in a similar situation concerning church membership. I was told several times that while the church is not currently growing and has an ageing membership, it has a large and nationally recognised outreach through several social programmes that are sponsored by the Uruguayan government:

The Good Will Institute



Youth learning beauty

The *Instituto de Buena Voluntad* is an ecumenically run centre for young people with mild mental disabilities in the Cerro neighbourhood of Montevideo, Uruguay. The Cerro neighbourhood is an area of high vulnerability, and were it not for this centre, young people with mental disabilities would not be able to access specialised education. The centre receives children aged 12 to 18 and supports them by teaching them skills such as sewing, gardening, beauty, woodwork and more. There are specialised staff at the centre including psychologists and SEN teachers that support children throughout their education at the school. A number of years ago, teachers from the school visited the Lancashire District, with whom the Methodist Church in Uruguay enjoyed a partnership

When: 3-9 October 2019

Where: Uruguay

Who: The Methodist Church in Uruguay

Purpose:

- Undertake a first partnership visit
- Visit National in Mission Appointments postholders
- Visit the church's social outreach projects



Youth proudly showing off their hand-sewn cushions

for a number of years. The teachers visited a number of special needs schools during their stay, and learnt about sensory rooms and their benefit to those with autism and other special needs. They took this learning back to Uruguay with them, and using locally sourced resources, built their own sensory room at the Institute. They say that the room has brought great benefit to their students. This is a wonderful example of how church twinning can lead to new ideas and learning being shared and used for God's mission around the world (for info about twinning your church, circuit or district with a partner church, please go to <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/our-work-worldwide/global-relationships/church-twinning/>).



Friendship House

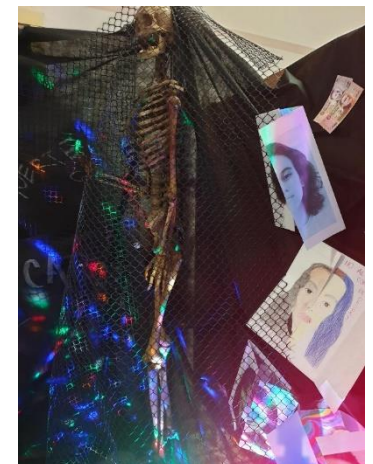
The church offers the use of its property to *Casa de la Amistad*, or Friendship House, and is on the executive board of this organisation. This is an early years community centre that works with the government to offer nursery schooling, the protection and the promotion of children's rights to infants aged 0 to 3 years old that live in areas of poverty and high risk in urban and rural settings. There are over 400 of these centres across Uruguay, and *Casa de la Amistad* gives the church the opportunity to be a witness to local authorities and families that use the centre.

THE WORLD MISSION FUND: SUPPORTING DRUG ADDICTION PREVENTION IN MONTEVIDEO



Rev Jorge Gerhard, extreme left

Jorge Gerhard, is a National in Mission Appointment postholder supported by the World Mission Fund. He coordinates the church's work in the area of drug addiction, and he is doing impactful work with the *Instituto Crandon*, a large Methodist School in Montevideo. The School has over 1482 students from pre-school to year 13. He works with teenagers aged 14 – 18 to explore the issues around drug addiction and encourage young people to take a serious look at the causes of addiction, the lies and myths behind drug addiction and the consequences of it. Young people at the school use art as a way of expressing their feelings about the subject and to warn other young people about the realities of taking drugs (right-hand photo).



The Methodist church in Uruguay is gravely concerned about a spike in drug consumption in the last few years. The people I spoke to from the church believe that a change in drug laws a few years ago that legalised the selling and buying of marijuana in the country may have a lot to do with this. This legislation appears to have caused a corresponding hike in crime, family breakdown and mental illness.

Despite being a small and aging church, it is well known in the country for its social action, and is working hard to develop preventative strategies to decrease drug consumption in its communities and support drug addicts and their families to deal with addiction and work towards rehabilitation.

MIGRATION

Migration across the region is growing, and a new wave of migrants are increasingly travelling to Montevideo. Migrants are travelling mainly from Venezuela, Cuba and the Dominican Republic. The church is currently supporting a number of Cuban families who often arrive very badly clothed for the cold weather in Uruguay during autumn or winter. The church is currently supporting about 100 people with food, clothing and in some cases accommodation in unused manse or church property. Families can stay in these church properties for up to 4 months while they find work and other accommodation. Cubans are being welcomed in church services and efforts are being made to integrate them into the life of the church.

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

The Methodist Church in Uruguay works closely with the Evangelical Methodist Church in Argentina in regards to theological education. Theology students would usually attend the Higher Education Evangelical Institute of Theological Studies (*ISEDET* in Spanish) when it still existed. Now that *ISEDET* is no more, students from both churches study at the Latin American University Centre for Studies (*UCEL*) in the Argentine city of Rosario. The Wesley Faculty at *UCEL* enables them to follow two courses of study. One is called The Hidden Pearl and a Diploma in History and Theology. The Hidden Pearl course is for equipping lay leaders. However, neither course is accredited in Uruguay, which means that the Methodist Church in Uruguay faces challenges in developing theological education for its ministerial and lay leaders.

SAFEGUARDING:

The Church runs several ecumenical, state funded community centres, and all these centres adhere to robust safeguarding policies set by the state.

CONCLUSION

The church appears to be facing a similar challenge to the one we face in the UK of finding a way to grow as a church in contemporary society. The issues appears to be more acute in Uruguay than the UK, given that religious pluralism in British society is strong and many people are happy to talk about God or their religious beliefs. In Uruguay, many people do not want to talk about God or religion at all. For the moment, the church is able to survive in Uruguayan society through its ecumenical and social outreach work. The questions remains: how does it thrive and grow in new disciples of Christ? #