

GUATEMALA VISIT REPORT

“Mayan Quiché people are like the Israelites in the Old Testament without Jesus Christ. They raise alters to God on the mountain, but when they receive Christ, they raise alters to Jesus in their hearts.”

This is the answer that Bishop René de León, provided when I asked whether the Methodist Church in Guatemala encouraged indigenous Christians to drop their religious beliefs when they come to Christ, and what is it like to be an indigenous Guatemalan, yet follow Christ. He is well placed to answer this as a Christina and Mayan Quiché indigenous person himself.



A Catholic cemetery, with an indigenous religious alter (little brown brick hut in the background)

Mayan religious beliefs are practiced alongside Catholicism in Guatemala, with worship and sacrifices offered to God at the foot of mountains, on the steps of the entrance to Catholic churches and inside Catholic churches. Evangelical Christians in Guatemala, including our partner church, usually leave behind the religious traditions of their ancestors, yet preserve many of the moral codes that are in line with Biblical morality (respect and honour for parents, respect for the environment, and more). Local Methodist churches are active in supporting members overcome issues that are rife in many indigenous communities such as domestic violence and alcoholism, through the transforming love of Christ.

When: 9-15 July 2019

Where: Guatemala

Who: The Evangelical National Primitive Methodist Church in Guatemala

Purpose:

- first partnership visit
- explore safeguarding issues
- visit National in Mission Appointments postholders
- visit communities affected by the volcano eruption in 2018 that MCB supported through WMF
- discuss the current situation of theological education in the church

With demographic research indicating that 85% the population is indigenous Guatemalan, the question of whether churches allow their members to continue practicing some traditional beliefs is a contentious one, and one which the Methodist Church in Guatemala does not have an official position. Leaving behind the traditions of one's ancestors can lead to persecution within indigenous communities of Christians and ostracization. It can also lead to entire communities and Mayan priests accepting Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour as they see the witness of Christians in their midst, and witnessing frequent healing miracles for sickness that could not be cured by the local *chamán* (shaman). To God be the glory!

A CHURCH ACTIVE THROUGHOUT CONFLICT

The National Evangelical Methodist Primitive Church in Guatemala (*IENMPG*) was not established by United Methodists, but by a Methodist Church in Pennsylvania in 1916. This church began supporting Dr Carlos Secord, a Christian who felt called by God to open a clinic in Chichicastenango, while at the same time preaching the gospel. The Methodist Church in Pennsylvania eventually took this clinic under its wing and established a mission in the country. The Pentecostal movement started in 1938, and it is evident to see how influential this movement is. There are Pentecostal churches everywhere, and these are the fastest growing churches in the country.

Every church and every Guatemalan was affected by the armed conflict that took place between the 60s and mid-90s. The conflict was between the non-indigenous state dictatorship and the guerrillas who were predominantly the rural, impoverished, Mayan Guatemalan people. The state used forced disappearance as a weapon against the 'rebels' and it is estimated that up to 700,000 people were killed or disappeared. The IENMPG accompanied affected indigenous communities during this time, offering spiritual support and health care and medicine with the support of the United Methodist Church's General Board of Global Ministries. The church also participated in the peace accords that ended the war in 1996.

VOLCANO OF FIRE

On 3 June 2018, the Volcano of Fire in the department of Escuintla (south central Guatemala) erupted and affected 14 communities. The ash fell as far as Guatemala City. Several communities were engulfed by lava and there were many people who were unable to escape. Many lost their lives that day and thousands of people were displaced. I visited the town of San Miguel los Lotes (right photo) with members of the Church, who provided relief and aid to over 700 families thanks to a solidarity grant sent by the Methodist Church in Britain. We walked along an ash covered road and saw the utter destruction of this town, of homes and lives. It was hard to comprehend that there are still cadavers buried inside some of these homes. We heard incredible stories of escape, including one young man who managed to escape by running along the roofs of the houses as the lava flowed alongside him below.

We met Josué, whose four children managed to jump into a van seconds away from the lava flow and whose wife escaped the deadly flow by about a metre. He is a Christian and thanks God for sparing his life and the life of his family. He is a local church leader and has started a home group in his new home in a nearby town.





Homes engulfed by lava



Casas dignas

We also visited government funded *casas dignas* (dignified homes), which are being built to give those displaced from their communities permanent council housing so that they can rebuild their lives. The Methodist Church here is in conversation with local authorities to explore how they can further support these new communities.

FINDING METHODISM IN THE GUATEMALAN YELLOW PAGES



In San Marcos, a rural village in the department of Quetzaltenango! A disaffected minister from another denomination, sought to plant a church in San Marcos. He wanted to come under the wing of an establish church, and came across the Methodist Church in the nearest town of Coatepequé, in the local yellow pages! He made contact with the church there and they supported him in establishing the 'Ark of Noah' Methodist Church in San Marcos.

Revd René Cardona gave the congregation the opportunity to share their concerns about their community with me, and these include health and education. There is no clinic or health centre in San Marcos or in any neighbouring villages, and buying in medicine is unaffordable for most in the village. The church dreams of setting

up a pharmacy one day to support the community's health needs. There is also the need for education opportunities. Many people in San Marcos do not study any further than primary school level as the need to work to support the family income is too great. I also met with representatives from the local



authority, who said that the lack of drinking water was a major issue in this community, and that they felt largely abandoned by the state. The church's vision is to find a way of supporting its community in addressing these issues, while continuing to spread the gospel. It has a deep faith and hope that God will make provision for them one to do so.

WOMEN IN GUATEMALA



Left to right: Sandra Lopez, Zoila Mercedes and Maria de Lourdes Manses (UMC mission partner)

As an indigenous woman in Guatemala, you face a double discrimination. You face discrimination as an indigenous person and you face discrimination as a woman. Indigenous woman all over the continent face financial hardship and deep inequality. I was told that woman in Guatemala might be paid 20 Quetzales a day for work in agriculture (£2). A man would earn 30 Quetzales (£3).

The Methodist Church in Guatemala has a membership of over 12,000 of which about 7000 are women. The church wants to begin addressing the challenges women face in Guatemala, and has employed a women's empowerment worker. Zoila Mercedes's work is supported by a National in Mission Appointments grant from the World Mission Fund. She has been travelling all over Guatemala, visiting 116 congregations to lead workshops that help empower women, enable them to know their worth in Christ Jesus and enjoy a life of abundance in Christ. Most indigenous women are taught that their place is only in the home, and that they have no say, voice or decision making capability in their lives or their family's lives. Domestic violence in homes is rife, and they have no financial independence, even in evangelical churches (in Latin America, the term *evangelical* is used for any church outside of the Catholic church). People like Zoila are helping Guatemalan women to fulfil their God-given potential and understand that they have value. The hope is that as Methodist Guatemalan women grow in confidence in who they are in God, that there can be more female leaders and ministers to help build the church.

WORLD MISSION FUND DONATIONS-HELPING to KEEP YOUNG GUATEMALANS OUT OF GANGS



Guatemala is a transit country for drug trafficking to the US and elsewhere, and this in turn fuels gang violence, particularly in Guatemala City. The World Mission Fund supports the church's Coordinator of Youth Evangelism, Edgar Joel Riquiac Cael (pictured in the photo), with a National in Mission grant. He is working with Guatemalan youth all over the country to try and help young people avoid being sucked into gang life. Many young people who have grown up in rural areas will leave at a young age (12-14 years old) and seek to make a living in Guatemala City. The problem is that they are very susceptible to gangs who easily rope them in with the allure of money but sometimes through violent coercion. Others issues that young people face are living with their partner outside of marriage, which is against the teachings of the church, underage pregnancies for girls in rural areas who often have little access to education on account of their gender. The youth federation also encourages young people to no longer follow the practices of their communities' indigenous religion, but to commit themselves to Christ and Biblical teaching. The other phenomenon is that 5% of young people in Guatemala (young people there are aged between 12 and 30) will at some point attempt to journey to the US

under the hope that they will make it over the border. That's over 881,000 young people who chose to leave incredibly difficult social and economic circumstances in their homeland and attempt a dangerous journey and border crossing every year, from Guatemala alone. This is part of the larger migration issue in Central America, where despite the American Administration's changing migration policies and dire handling of the welfare of migrants claiming asylum at the border, thousands of Central Americans continue to attempt this perilous and uncertain journey.



Theological students en route to training venue in El Salvador

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Getting theological education for Methodist Guatemalans is challenging. A high number of Methodist members did not finish primary school education, and many do not speak Spanish or speak Spanish as a second language, after Quiché as a first language. This makes it difficult to train ministers and lay people theologically, not to mention of the financial sacrifices that students need to make if they wish to do theological education. As the church does not have its own theological institution, it has been partnering with US Duke Divinity college, the General Board of Global Ministries, and the Methodist Churches in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras in order to send its students to the Course of Study that takes place in El Salvador. At the last graduation, 48 students graduated from the training course that equips lay

and ministerial members and strengthen their ministry. This is no small achievement given that these students were of varying educational backgrounds and had to raise the funds themselves for their bus travel and their accommodation. There are conversations being held with the Juan Wesley theological Seminary in Mexico and the General Board of Higher Education and Ministries (UMC) about opening a Bible institute in Guatemala, with accredited courses.

Executive Committee meeting



Raising the issues of safeguarding continues to be a priority when meeting with partners overseas. The Church was keen to receive our support in developing its safeguarding policies, with a particular focus on children at their schools and Sunday School. There are several challenges they face, not least prevailing concerns about denouncing abuse to authorities, which in some communities can lead to violent reprisals towards the victim. The other challenge is that while at 18 you are allowed to marry and are an adult in the eyes of Guatemalan law, the age of consent is 14. I offered to share Methodist Church in Britain safeguarding resources, and to put them in touch with the United Methodist Church's mission partner who is focusing on helping regional partners develop their own child protection policies in line with UN's rights of children.

Key people

- President of the Church: Revd René de Leon
- Nationals in Mission: Zoila Mercedes and Joel Riquiac Calel
- GBGM Mission partner: Maria de Lourdes Manses
- Minister of Ark of Noah Methodist Church in San Marcos, Quetzaltenango: Revd René Cardona

Follow up actions/outcomes

- To send the church links to MCB online safeguarding documents
- To put the church in touch with the UMC mission partner focusing on child protection in the region
- To have a conversation with the General Board of Higher Education of the UMC on theological education in Guatemala