

Report On Visit To Cuba

In December 2018 we (Revs. Stephen & Elaine Lindridge) with our adult children (Ruth and Sam) travelled to Cuba with Sandra Lopez in order to visit the Methodist Church. We were particularly keen to observe how Cuban Methodists engage in evangelism and to ascertain if there were principles and practices that would aid British Methodism. Our intention was also to re-establish links with the Newcastle upon Tyne District where Stephen acts as Chair and Elaine as District Evangelism Enabler.

Regarding Evangelism

Without a doubt, evangelism is given a high priority and is a main focus of much of their work. There is a strong belief and commitment to helping new people become followers of Jesus. Members are expected to pray for their friends and neighbours and to invite them to church services or cell groups. Many of the services we attended had the opportunity presented for people to make a commitment to Christ. There was the expectation in all of the services that there would be new people present – largely they were there because they had been invited. Appeals and encouragements to come forward for prayer were a regular and normal part of the worship. These appeals were always met by a response and it was obvious to see that those responding were doing so in a way that meant a lot to them. All the churches offered excellent welcome and guests (whether us or Cubans who were attending for the first time) were expected to be present. We were impressed with the natural way in which this was all done.

New believers are encouraged to attend Bible classes and after a while they may progress to membership classes. The bar is high to become a member – attend classes, pray and read the Bible for themselves, tithe/give, be of good character and have a testimony. They also sit an exam! All of this takes about one year.

As well as church members being expected and encouraged to engage in evangelism, each local church also had several missions attached to them.

They train and send missionaries to new areas and when the first person becomes a Christian they ask them to open their home to start a cell group. When the cell grows big enough (up to 25) it becomes a mission. When the mission grows to 40+ they start to try to register it as a church. Both the Bishop and the Superintendent are involved with this process and visit to make sure the new church is being formed in an appropriate and Godly way. Once it becomes a church, the Bishop sends a pastor (sometimes the missionary becomes the pastor). Otherwise the missionary becomes an assistant pastor elsewhere or starts a new mission. If they become a pastor, it is then that they go to seminary (in other words, it's only after they've proven they can plant a church that they are trained as pastors).

There was obvious strategy in their plans. We met the officer for Evangelism and he shared with us the strategy he was employing. At first they decided to plant a

mission in every area with a population over 1000 people. They've completed that and are now planting in populations over 700 people.

It was interesting to meet with a group of missionaries from one church who had gathered together for their weekly support and prayer. One missionary admitted that he struggled with self-confidence and every time he went to talk with someone about Christ he found it difficult, as he was shy. However, this did not prevent him from engaging in evangelism, as he believed it was an integral part of being a Christian.

Notes For British Methodism

It occurred to us whilst we were there that they do not waste any time on inconsequential activity. There is no fund raising meetings or activities – yes they have American sponsorship, but a lot comes from the members who are expected to tithe or gift money.

Social care and evangelism are intrinsically linked – but evangelism comes first. One pastor explained how they always offer Christ first. If they just give a man or woman physical food then they will still be hungry tomorrow. So they offer the Bread of Life. Often there are meals at church (particularly for children). When they join the church they seem to look out for each other and share things.

There is a deep commitment to discipleship, training and study. Time and resources for study is seen as a precious gift and there are more people than places at their Seminary.

Time and again we noticed how there was a deep respect for the pastors and for the Bishop. This was not born out of a blind commitment to those in authority, but rather out of knowing that they were God's appointed people. In almost every way, this meant that the pastors (and Bishop) had far more authority and influence than British ministers. However it should be noted that the accountability structures were strong and robust.

Links With Newcastle upon Tyne District

We have taken every opportunity since our return to tell stories and share the good news of revival in the Cuban Methodist Church. This has been met with an eagerness to learn more.

We are exploring the possibility of initiating a visit from Bishop Ricardo and hopefully others to come to Newcastle and other Districts to preach, share testimony, encourage and pray for us.

This experience has been one of deep challenge and encouragement for all our family. We are deeply grateful to British Methodism for allowing us to go and to the Cuban Methodist Church for their gracious and generous hospitality.

Revs Stephen & Elaine Lindridge. January 2019