

Partnership visit to Argentina and Colombia

October 2018



CREAS, based in Argentina, is currently the main ecumenical partner of the Methodist Church in Britain in Latin America and the Caribbean. In English, its acronym stands for the *Regional Ecumenical Centre for Consultancy Services*, which sounds far less exciting and innovative than what CREAS actually does in practice!

CREAS is an ecumenical organisation that is also part of ACT Alliance, and works both locally, nationally and regionally to help communities develop sustainably, focusing on the key themes of children and young people's rights, gender justice, youth leadership, new economies and environmental justice. It was also recently involved in representing faith-based organisations at the G20 Interreligious Forum Ethics and Economics meeting, held in Argentina in September, where the contribution of faith based organisations to sustainable development within the UN's 2030 sustainable development goals was explored.

The roundtable gave partners the opportunity to hear about what impact CREAS' work had made in the last two years on the local communities it supports through various means, and to map a way forward for the next two years of work both locally and regionally. For me, the highlights of this roundtable were the following:

Peace Entrepreneurs

Our Word Mission Fund supports CREAS with an annual grant that helps to fund their brilliant Peace Entrepreneurs project. This project trains youth leaders from churches across Latin America in project management skills, with the aim of helping them develop local, sustainable projects that promote equality, economic empowerment, citizen participation and peace. The training gives these young church leaders the theory, methodology and the biblical, theological, ethical and social foundations needed to develop and implement their proposals. The training has taken place in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic and Honduras. In 2017, 112 young people from these countries received this training through a mixture of webinars and contact hours, and Methodist youth from Colombia and Peru were able to get involved in the project. To read about specific projects being developed by young people, please click on these links (you may need to run these articles through Google translate).

bit.ly/2vLVvi2 bit.ly/2v4rxUu bit.ly/2Dgjrha bit.ly/2AN26K8 bit.ly/2CWdngj bit.ly/2Ew6lvT

Roundtables

CREAS, in collaboration with the MCB, the United Church of Canada, the General Board of Global Ministries and Connexio have been leading roundtables for several of our Methodist Partners in the region, as best practice for developing effective multilateral partnerships and developing sustainable mission in Ecuador, Colombia, Bolivia and Peru. I attended the roundtable table facilitated by CREAS in Peru in 2017, finding it to be an enriching and rewarding experience to sit at the table with all the external partners and together offer the Methodist Church in Peru support for its mission. The World Mission Fund also recently granted CREAS a small grant to support the production of a research book on the methodology of the roundtables, as a way of recording the mission experiences of our partner churches in the region.

Strategic Plan 2018-2020

The nine areas of work that CREAS will focus on in the next two years, within the framework of the UN sustainable development goals are:

1. To continue participating in the UN 2030 agenda as a faith based organisation
2. To contribute to the development of gender justice
3. To continue working with local communities within a regional and global view point
4. Identify and systematise good diaconal practices through theological reflection
5. To develop networks between north-south diaconal experiences
6. To participate as a member of ACT Alliance and in partnership with other faith based organisations in regional and global official delegations
7. Develop intergenerational dialogue
8. To bring together diaconal proposals from faith communities with inclusive financial mechanisms
9. Contribute towards making Latin America more globally visible

It was enriching and encouraging to see CREAS representing Christian faith based organisations on such a regional scale, while at the same time having a significant local impact on the lives of those living in precarious conditions in parts of Latin America, such as the young people benefiting from the Peace Entrepreneurs programme.

THE COLOMBIAN METHODIST CHURCHES NATIONAL ASSEMBLY AND ROUNDTABLE

This annual assembly was particularly significant given that it would result in a change of leadership for the first time in 12 years. As a young church that has been in existence for 23 years, this was an important moment, and saw a new

Bishop elected as President of the Church. Bishop Luis Andres Caicedo was elected as the church's new Bishop (centre) , so please join me in praying for him and his ministry, as well as praying for the now Bishop Emeritus, Bishop Juan Alberto Cardona (on the platform). A new executive committee was also elected.



Some of the highlights of the assembly included reports from a number of ministers who are developing work that the Methodist Church in Britain has supported in the recent past, including the ongoing income generation project with the Zenu Methodist community. The Coventry circuit has been supporting this project since 2016 and has helped with the purchase of machines that will

enable the community to produce beautiful products made from locally grown and cultivated cane, *caña fleche*, more cost effectively. For more information on this work please see the church's webpage here:

<http://icmetodista.org/en/node/142>

Another highlight for me was having conversations with the two Nationals in Mission that we are supporting in two difficult regions:



1. This is Pastor Elizabeth Valenzuela Mosquera, who is a community developer and is building up a faith community in the port town of Buenaventura. Buenaventura is an important and strategic town for trade, but is used as a major drug trafficking port by Colombian and Mexican drug lords and local gangs. It is a violent town, with high levels of poverty and unemployment and little social services - a potent mix that encourages children and young people into gangs from an early age. Pastor Elizabeth, through sheer perseverance and courage reaches out to the children and young people in her local area and through the work of the Holy Spirit has formed a faith community with these young people,

and in turn their parents.

2. This is Revd Javier Ochoa, who lives in the department of Cauca and is currently developing a Methodist faith based community. He is doing this through offering homework clubs to children aged 5-12 and community Holy Communion, visiting the sick in the local community, offering physical and spiritual help and guidance to Venezuelan migrants (of which there are hundreds of thousands around Colombia). The work he is doing with Venezuelan migrants highlights the new pieces of work that local Methodist churches are increasingly developing around the country. It is estimated that by the end of 2018, there will be 1 million Venezuelans living in Colombia, with almost half residing in the country illegally and most living in precarious social conditions and extreme vulnerability. And while Colombia has opened its borders to Venezuelans and there is very little antagonism towards this wave of migration, the country is struggling to cope with a system that cannot even meet the needs of its own citizens, including 5 million internally displaced Colombian nationals (because of the decades-long civil war). The national church is developing a plan to support Venezuelans in certain parts of the country in collaboration with the Red Cross and other actors, and our mission partners Chris and Vera Lacey are involved in helping the church develop project proposals for this purpose.



Chris and Vera Lacey

Chris, Vera and their daughters Sofie and Abigail have been serving the Colombian Methodist Church since August 2017. Vera is a programme development advisor for the church, helping the church develop programme funding and grant proposals for their social projects. Chris is serving a digital lead for the church, developing the church's communications platforms.

As mentioned above, Vera is currently supporting the church's project development for working with Venezuelans in several locations, along with helping the church to do impact analysis on the current work they are doing. Please see the church's office for projects website pages for more info

<http://icmetodista.org/proyectos> .



As well as developing the church's website, Chris has been offering training to the church leaders in using website content to share the work and stories from their local churches, as a way of improving relationships and accountability with external partners.

Their daughters, Sofie and Abigail, enjoy living in Colombia and are learning Spanish. They have both developed accents from the Antioquia region where Medellin is located, or *paisa* accents as it is known in Colombia! Chris and Vera are also progressing well in their Spanish.

Partners Roundtable meeting

At the partner's roundtable meeting after the Assembly, I raised the issue of safeguarding and the expectation that the Methodist Church in Britain has in regards to partner churches developing and implementing their own safeguarding procedures. The new Bishop welcomed my offer to support them in this process through information sharing and possible safeguarding training. In partnership with CREAS, the United Church of Canada and the General Board of Global Ministries, CREAS will also be conducting an institutional financial analysis of the church, to pinpoint the challenges that the church faces in some of its accountability and financial processes. This is with a view to strengthening the church's financial situation and its partnership with external partner churches and organisations.

CEPALC

In a society that continues to deal with the issues of chauvinism, paternalism, sexism and racism, The Ecumenical Centre for Popular Communication in Latin America and the Caribbean, or *CEPALC*, is a safe space in which marginalised and vulnerable groups can learn about their rights as Colombian citizens, and find an outlet through media communication and the arts through which to explore this knowledge and share it with others. *CEPALC* has been working extensively with children, women, young people and indigenous communities in impoverished areas across the country for the last 40 years. The founders of *CEPALC*, Felix and Amparo Beltran, shared with me how they



have seen generations of young people grow through *CEPALC*, from being children who benefited from *CEPALC*'s activities to now becoming the activity leaders and examples to the younger ones.

I visited several *CEPALC* projects while I was in Bogotá, including a school on the outskirts of Bogotá in a neighbourhood that is classified as a *strato 6* neighbourhood. In other words, a disadvantaged and impoverished neighbourhood with significant social problems. *CEPALC* works with the school to teach children their rights and help them teach these rights to their peers through drama and music.

I visited another project that *CEPALC* has in conjunction with the *Casa de la Cultura* (the local cultural community centre) in a nearby town called Suba. Suba used to be a neighbourhood of Bogota, but now has a population of one million people and is considered to be off the official scale for classifying neighbourhoods, on account of the extreme violence and poverty the exists. However, *CEPALC* has been working there for the last 15 years in the cultural community building, developing activities with community children and young people predominantly through theatre. I was privileged to see a retelling of Biblical parables by the children who performed with box theatres, puppets and drama.



In conclusion

During this visit, the link between some of the partners we work with in the region has become more apparent. The support that *CREAS* is able to offer the Methodist Church in Colombia is a good example of these networks, as does the work that *CEPALC* does with a number of Methodist communities in the country. It is a wonderful example of how God can use different gifts and talents to help us complement one another and support one another's ministry.