

Partnership Visit to Dominica, 18-21 May 2018

Participation as lay representative at the MCCA's 39th Connexional Conference, 22 to 31 June

The purpose for my visit to the island of Dominica was to pay a solidarity visit to the Dominica Methodist Circuit, following the devastation caused by hurricane Maria in September 2018. Hurricanes Maria and Irma hit a significant number of islands in September 2017 year causing many thousands of deaths across the Caribbean and billions of dollars' worth of damage. Hurricane Maria, a category 5 storm, hit Dominica, decimating the island and causing the deaths of just over 30 people. The Methodist Church in Britain sent the Methodist Circuit a solidarity grant to enable the church to respond to the disaster, and also contributed to funding sent from UMCOR (the United Methodist Church's Committee on Relief) for ongoing relief work.

DOMINICA

When I landed in Dominica, I was reminded of my visit to Haiti in December 2016, where it was obvious that the once lush, green and dense landscape had been stripped bare by Hurricane Matthew. The landscape I saw in Dominica was faring better however, considering that the landscape has had more time to recover. But the tell-tale signs of the hurricane were evident: bent over coconut trees, less dense greenery, rubble piled up on the streets, homes without roofs and several buildings that are too unsafe to use.



Revd Novelle in his study-now a relief items storage centre

My host, the circuit superintendent Revd Josiah Novelle, transported me to several places on the island to visit communities that the Circuit has been supporting following the hurricane. Eight months on, some communities still need relief support and certain foods are still being imported along with drinking water. The Dominica Methodist Circuit continues to manage relief centres and liaise with partners such as UMCOR (United Methodist Committee on Relief,) The Salvation Army and Catholic organisations for the ongoing relief and rebuilding work.

400 families in the town of Dubique and 98 families in the town of Bagetelle are receiving relief support from the UMCOR, the work of which is being coordinated by the Dominica Methodist Circuit. The relief centre from which food packages are made is in fact Revd Novelle Josiah's manse. When we visited his home, I saw every room full of relief supplies sent from UMCOR, including lentils, beans, rice, baby items and hygiene items. The Circuit also purchased a large shipping container in order to store additional foodstuff and other items. The generosity of British Methodists, who raised over £40,000 for the Caribbean Hurricane Appeal in collaboration with UMCOR, has contributed to this vital UMCOR support.



UMCOR relief coordinator, sister Alice, with UMCOR dry food supplies, at the manse

The Circuit has managed to raise 100,000 Eastern Caribbean dollars (\$50,000 US dollars), with support from external partners and the wider Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas (MCCA), which will enable the Circuit to give their communities some funding (about \$500 US dollars per family) to buy material for rebuilding and repairing their homes. The Methodist Church in Britain's World

Mission Fund sent £10,000 in solidarity with the Circuit towards this reconstruction appeal for this appeal. Rebuilding has been slow due to the fact that materials need to be imported, a process which has been taking

months in some cases. Revd Josiah sends his deep thanks and appreciation to the Methodist Church in Britain for standing in solidarity with them.



Ebenezer Methodist Church Hall in Roseau



Landscape damaged by the hurricane



A home destroyed in Roseau



The natural beauty of Dominica

THE METHODIST CHURCH IN THE CARIBBEAN AND THE AMERICAS' 39TH ANNUAL CONNEXIONAL CONFERENCE

Key Theme: FACING THE TASK UNFINISHED: IMAGINE



Bishop Everal Galbraith (4th from left), new MCCA Connexional President

The MCCA is celebrating its 51 years of autonomy as a conference this year, as well as 258 years of Methodism. It is also the year when the majority of District Bishops of the eight MCCA Districts will change, as will the Connexional President. There was much anticipation at the Connexional Conference that the next triennium will usher in the vision of a more self-sustaining MCCA, a growing church and one that is fulfilling its calling to spread scriptural holiness throughout the Caribbean and making disciples of Jesus Christ.



Revd Jenny Pathmarajah (left) with Revd Claire Robinson of the Bahamas, Turks and Caicos Islands District

I was the Methodist Church in Britain's lay representatives and Revd Jenny Pathmarajah was our ministerial representative. The MCB has voting rights during the conference, as does the MCCA representative to our Conferences.

We spent several days hearing about some of the challenges facing the MCCA, including the Connexion's substantial debt, its challenges in paying for ministerial training at the United Theological College of the West Indies, its challenges in growing its local churches (except for the Haiti District) and difficulty in attracting young people, the challenges of the yearly hurricane season that each year threatens to derail the best laid plans and budgets, and some of the linguistic and cultural challenges it faces as a church that covers over 25 countries and many languages in that region.

When we broke out into commissions, I was in the Mission and Evangelism commission, and gained better insight into the aspirations and hopes of the MCCA to mitigate some of the challenges and to thrive as a church during the next triennium.

We covered a range of issues including the young people's triannual gathering, Youth Encuentro (MCCA youth conference), streamlining lay preachers training accreditation across the MCCA and crucially, across three different languages (French, Spanish and English), the state of MCCA men and MCCA women, the need for developing better communications strategy across the MCCA and the urgent need to develop a mechanism for archiving historical records. I suggested that Encounter Worldwide

volunteer placements could be explored for some of these needs, enabling volunteers from the Methodist Church in Britain to contribute their skills and knowledge in some of these key areas for between 3 and 12 months. Please keep an eye out for future Encounter Worldwide adverts for some of these opportunities on the relevant web pages:

www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/our-work-worldwide/world-church/overseas-opportunities/encounter-worldwide/



The incoming District Bishops pray together

Hurricane season is upon the Caribbean, and it was challenging, and upsetting to hear how the hurricanes last year and in previous years have intervened with church life across the MCCA, not to mention the loss of life and destruction. The Youth Encuentro was unable to meet last year due to hurricane Maria and Irma in September. Students studying as lay preachers last year were unable to complete their training on time to receive their accreditation due to these hurricanes. However, this commission spoke about how the conference needs to support each District more and envisaged a Connexion where each District builds up a hurricane relief fund, and people trained in post hurricane relief work, ready to be mobilised to support islands affected by future hurricanes. Out of a very serious and present challenges, the MCCA is growing in unity and in love. God be praised!

As all of the incoming District Bishops were present I was able to offer information on our grants process and on the types of grants that they would be eligible to apply for, namely Scholarship And Leadership Training grants and National in Mission Appointment grants, both of which encourage capacity building in our partners. There is also the possibility of offering resource personnel from MCB to offer training in project proposal development and submission for accessing grant funding from organisations such as UMCOR. The concern and urgency of this is due to the fact that following hurricanes Maria and Irma last year, only one island was able to successfully apply for UMCOR funding (the Dominica Circuit in the Leeward Islands District), simply because the person who made the application had experience in developing such project proposals. There is the possibility that one of our mission partners currently working for the Methodist Church in Colombia, might be able to offer training in this area of her expertise to enable the MCCA greater access to this crucial relief funding following natural disasters.

The five key areas that were identified as part of the vision for the MCCA's mission and evangelism over the next three years are as follows and were received as a report by the conference:

1. Mission and church growth: Ideas included rehabilitation and housing projects, developing a skills/job bank particularly for young people, disaster management and preparedness, job creation and the creation of health and legal clinics.

2. Evangelism: Developing a 24 hour prayer, intercessory and counselling hotline, developing a faith sharing programme, establishing team ministries in local churches, producing an MCCA prayer handbook, implementing a mentorship programme, mentorship programmes that target youth, and Methodist Ministries Retreats to be hosted to expose youth/young adults and others to the forms of ministry

3. Education and Training: The establishment of a physical and virtual worship arts institute, development of a chaplaincy handbook, mentorship programme manuals to be developed, strategic strengthening of Methodist ethos across MCCA Methodist schools, leaders training, clergy ongoing training and development and details of available scholarships/grant funding to be researched, collated and shared.

4. Technology integration and communications/marketing strategy marketing: Developing a cyber/digital/mobile church, Voices in Praise (MCCA Hymnbook) app to be developed and made available for sale, development of social media policy, resuscitation of MCCA website.

5. Resource development as part of Christian responsibility of stewardship trust: Real estate development, establishment of legal status for properties in each District and crowd funding for funding specific initiatives of the church

6. Intentional partnerships: Tripartite agreements between MCCA, Districts/Circuits and the governments of countries where the MCCA operates to increase mobility between Districts. Strengthen relationships with the Upper Rooms Ministries, strengthen existing Methodist and ecumenical relations with the Council of Evangelical Latin American and Caribbean Methodist Churches, MCB, UMC, etc.

In conclusion, the commission has been mandated by the Conference to take this vision forward during the next three years. I am very excited about these ideas, and while some might say that these are ambitious, there was a sense of the MCCA really wanting to walk by faith and not by sight, to truly imagine, as was the key theme of the Conference, the possibilities for their church that was more Connexional, more appealing to young people, more powerful in its witness and manifestation of Christ and more financially self-sufficient. May God help the new leadership and may God ... “accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.” (Ephesians 3:20, NRSV).



Sandra Lopez, partnership coordinator for Latin America and the Caribbean