

IRISH METHODIST PRESIDENTIAL VISIT TO CHILE

January 2018

The Methodist Church in Ireland's current president, Revd Laurence Graham, agreed to visit Chile as part of his presidential year. The Methodist Church in Ireland and Britain are partners in developing relationships with partner churches all over the world, but the Irish church currently has few active links with Latin America and the Caribbean. Their most active link is with the Haiti District of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas, which holds a particularly special place in Revd Laurence's heart given that he was a short term mission partner there 25 years ago working in agriculture.



So why arrange for him to visit the Methodist Church in Chile? Migration in our current age is truly everywhere to everywhere, and Chile, along with several other countries in the region, continue to receive large numbers of migrants from other parts of the continent and beyond. For the last three years, Chile has received over 80,000 Haitian migrants, the majority of whom have sold everything they own in order to buy the expensive airfare to Santiago (over \$2,000) and begin a new life. Current immigration laws in Chile allow Haitians to enter the country under a three-month visitor's visa, during which they must find contracted employment and thus be eligible to renew their stay in the country. However, finding work is difficult and many Haitians end up destitute, homeless and rejected by parts of Chilean society who have had little contact with black and minority ethnic groups (other than Chilean indigenous ones), given that Chile was not as strongly impacted by the slave trade as other nations in the continent were.

The Methodist Church in Chile is doing extensive work with Haitian communities in three locations. The aim of our visit would therefore be to:

- Meet with the Church's coordinator for migration and indigenous communities, Mariela Correa Montecinos
- Visit the local churches who are supporting Haitian communities and learn from how they are responding to migration
- Spend time with Haitians to learn about their struggles and joys in Chile
- Make a first partnership visit to a partner church and meet with its leadership and new Bishop, Bishop Jorge Merino, who had just been

elected in the church's national assembly prior to our arrival

Revd Nigel Cowgill, London District Chair, and Becky Cutcliffe, the London District's communications officer, also accompanied Revd Laurence and I. The London District is developing their Moving Stories initiative as part of the District's exploration of migration in London, and wanted to learn from the experience of overseas partners of migration. For more information on Moving Stories please click on the link: movingstorieslondon.com

Santiago:



Pastor Hugette Fenelon

The first local church we visited was in Santiago, where Haitian Christians meet to worship God in a separate service from the usual Sunday morning one. Pastor Hugette Fenelon is the lay pastor leading the service and a key person in the Chilean church's support for Haitians. She works closely with the church's Coordinator for migration and indigenous communities, Mariela, who is also a national in mission appointments postholder supported by the Methodist Church in Britain and Ireland. Hugette has been in Chile for 8 years and is married to a Chilean.

The service reminded me of the times I have worshiped with Haitians in Haiti—a vibrant, passionate style of worship, where God is worshiped from the heart and with all one's might. There are several Haitians in the congregation who are certified lay preachers for the Methodist Church in Haiti, and it is hoped that they can be trained and developed to become an integral part of the Chilean church's response to Haitians in various communities. Unlike the fellowship groups in the UK, this church has little contact with the Chilean church that meets in the morning. Mariela shared with us that there has been some resistance from parts of the church to Haitians and to their influence on the Chilean Methodist Church. However in the case of other churches, ministers have worked hard to teach their members to welcome Haitians, to embrace them with the warmth and love of the Lord Jesus Christ, and we were privileged to witness this in other churches we visited.

Mariela is pioneering a Spanish language course for Haitian Creole speakers, given that a major obstacle for Haitians is of course the language barrier. Other migrants, such as Colombians and Venezuelans (of which there are significant numbers in the country), don't face this challenge, but Haitians need to learn Spanish as soon as they arrive as they begin seeking employment before their three month visitor's visa expires. So far, the Methodist Church in Chile has been able to give Spanish classes to

hundreds of Haitian and is looking to develop the programme beyond Santiago.



(Front) Mariela Correa, (back) Revd Irma Bascuñan).

Curico

Chile is a high-income country with one of the most stable economies in the region. However, the reality is that living costs are extremely high in Chile and employers and property owners take advantage of Haitians by paying them very little and charging extortionate amounts for rent. This leads to many Haitians ending up homeless or having to share a room with their entire family or with many other people (an extreme case that we have heard is 20 people sharing two bedrooms). This is certainly the case for many Haitians that we met in the town of Curico, a town that is a three hour bus ride to the south of Santiago.

The Methodist Church in Curico works extensively with the local Haitian community. Pastors Irma and Ernesto Bascuñan coordinate a small team of church workers who do what they can to help Haitians find accommodation, employment and in many cases, their only meal for the day (or the first meal they have had in days, unfortunately). They open up the church's kitchen to let Haitians cook meals for themselves, and the small congregation goes to great lengths to give what they can to financially support the ministry despite the fact that they themselves are low-income households. We were deeply impressed by the great lengths they go through to both support Haitians in meeting their basic needs but also integrate them into their church life and services. The service we attended yesterday evening included reading Bible passages in Creole, Bilingual worship and preaching in Creole (Revd Laurence Graham was asked to preach in Creole and there is a Haitian member of the church who regularly preaches in Creole too).



Meeting Haitians in Curico town square-they did not want us to take photos of their faces

As our hosts accompanied us to the centre of Curico, we observed how they reached out to the many Haitians who were waiting to go to the *Oficina de Extranjeria* (immigration bureau) or seeking to find employment through word of mouth. We met a group of around 20 Haitians, mainly men but some women also, who asked our group to help them find employment. Our hosts directed them to their church so that they could find help and accompaniment through their visa process. Some had not eaten for two days, some did not speak Spanish well and had not been able to understand how the visa process works. Many of them were Christians and were trusting in God to help them. It was striking how willing the ministers of the local Methodist Church were willingly and freely giving these Haitian brothers and sisters their personal phone numbers, very much expecting them to get in touch and seek support at their church. It will mean the need for more resources to be deployed by the members of this local church, but a demand that they seem more than willing to take on in Christian love.

Mariela is also hoping to develop a discipleship course in Creole for Haitians in Chile, and the support of Pastor Hugette and other lay Haitian preachers will be crucial in this and will strengthen the work of local churches as they seek to meet their spiritual needs as well as physical.

Chillán



Revd Alejandra Romero and her husband, Revd Hugo Romero

In the capital of the Bío Bío region, Chillán, seasonal workers from different parts of Chile are able to find work in the summer months (between December and February). Chileans and migrants, including Haitians, will travel to Chillán to work in surrounding farms and pick seasonal fruit and veg. The work well paid but they are more likely to secure work contracts through this type of employment, which mean they can apply to extend their visitor and working visas.

Revd Alejandra Romero, the minister of the Methodist church in Chillán, told us that Haitian migrants started coming to her church in January 2016. As a church they started collecting clothing, mattresses and donating food to the church's kitchen, to help meet some of their more immediate needs. In the winter months they open the church's kitchen every day to allow Haitians to cook for themselves and other. There is a severe shortage of employment in winter months (there is little harvest to pick), so Haitians struggle to make

enough money to feed themselves- the need during this time of the year is great. The Methodist Church also works with local businesses to find employment for the Haitian community, and local businesses trust the church to find them good workers. Revd Alejandra briefs those who are going to start work, encouraging them to work hard and work with integrity, so as to preserve the name of the church and the good relationship they have with local businesses, which will

in turn help other Haitians. The church also offers Spanish classes to the Haitian community and is in the process of applying for scholarships from the local college that will give 12 Haitians the opportunity to begin their studies in Chile.



Laurence Graham and Nigel Cowgill offering communion to Haitian brothers and sisters at the church in Chillán

After a service, we sat down with a number of Haitians to find out what challenges they are facing as a community. One of the things that Haitians at the church are asking for is a space to meet as Haitian Christians, to be able to worship together in Creole and hear preaching in Creole. They do not wish to form their own church but are keen to be integrated into the Chilean church as members (they start membership classes in March). Their requests remind me of the numerous Methodist fellowships that exist in the British Connexion who benefit from the support of a Chaplain, while still being members of their local church. The Methodist church in Haiti held their national assembly in January, and decided to nominate a Haitian minister to become a sort of Chaplain to the Haitian community in Chile. They have nominated Revd Marco Depestre, an excellent minister with an excellent standing within the church and beyond. In other words, they are sending their best to Chile, which is a testament to the importance the Methodist Church in Haiti places on God's mission. This is the fruit of a growing partnership between the two

churches that has been taking place since last year, when a prominent Haitian minister, Revd Jean-Pierre Fède, was invited to visit Haitian communities in Chile. I look forward to observing the development of this partnership and seeing where the Methodist Church in Britain and Ireland can further support the process. Please join me in praying for Revd Alejandra as she assumes her new post of Superintendent for the region, becoming the only woman in the church's executive cabinet. Please also pray for Revd Marco Depestre as he is sent from Haiti as the Methodist Church in Haiti's first missionary/mission partner to the region.

In conclusion, there is much to learn about the church's response to Haitian migrants. Some of the lessons we might consider are:

1) You always have something to give

You can do much work with few resources. The national church does not have a national budget set aside for work in migration, nor are they currently able to source local government funding. However, local churches are sacrificially giving all they can to support Haitians in their communities, despite being in need themselves

2) If you give, be prepared to receive

In some Methodist churches, the Chilean church is allowing Haitians in their congregations to change the way they are as churches and revitalize their congregation. These churches believe that their outreach will impact both local Haitians and Chilean churches, as they allow themselves to both give and receive from one another.

Appreciate cultural differences

Those local churches who are being revitalized by Haitians, welcome and appreciate cultural differences and try to integrate them into the daily life of the church.

3) How much is your local church willing to sacrifice?

The need of some Haitians in Chile is so great and their situation so desperate, that local churches open not only their church but also their personal lives to them in an effort to show them the love of Christ.

4) Networking with the local community is key

Local Methodist churches in Chile network with local business, educational institutions and local government in order to develop links with the local community that can lead to employment, education and new sources of funding support for Haitians

5) Be a voice for the voiceless

Local Methodist Churches in Chile are doing a very important job of accompanying Haitians to immigration appointments, medical appointments and job agency appointments, often speaking on their behalf because of language barriers, a lack of knowledge in terms of how the Chilean system works and discrimination.

Future action points

1. To work with the Methodist Church in Ireland to offer support, expertise, and possibly a financial contribution to the Methodist Church in Chile and the Methodist Church in Haiti as they develop this mission partner/missionary initiative.
2. To ask The Methodist Church in Haiti to consider using CIEMAL as a partner for helping to train Revd Marco Depestre in cross-cultural issues with particular reference to Latin American culture, Spanish language and Methodism in Latin America
3. To share with the Methodist Church in Britain and Ireland, through various media outlets and speaking engagements, how the Chilean church is working with migrants what lessons we can learn from them as we consider our own response to migrants in our communities.
4. To speak to other regional partners about the work and whether they would consider co-supporting

Sandra Lopez, Partnership Coordinator for America/Caribbean. 15.02.18



Revd Laurence Graham with Haitian brothers and sisters in Chillán