

VISIT REPORT

PANAMA (CIEMAL), ARGENTINA AND BOLIVIA

CIEMAL Assembly in Panama, 8-13 October 2017

I attended the Council of Evangelical Methodist Churches in Latin America and the Caribbean (*CIEMAL*) Assembly on behalf of the Methodist Church in Britain in October. The Methodist Church in Britain has been partnering with CIEMAL for many years and we are currently developing a number programmes of joint work, namely sending British mission partners to CIEMAL as part of their mission partner training and receiving Methodists from the region to the UK to contribute to evangelism and church growth work.

In the last five years, CIEMAL has been supporting its member churches all over the region in developing discipleship, mission and evangelism. The need for this work has arisen from a greater awareness of the need for church growth and desire to see more people come to Christ among many of our partners. CIEMAL has been doing this in a number of ways:

- Offering training and workshops on church growth and evangelism upon the request of partner churches
- Hosting the year's cross-cultural mission training conference for Latin American and Caribbean Methodists who feel called to overseas mission
- Offering accompaniment to several independent Methodist churches in Venezuela with a view to fostering church unity
- Pastoral visits to many member churches

It was also a very good opportunity to talk to representatives of churches that we currently have no financial partnership with, such as the Methodist Church in Costa Rica. The Lord is certainly doing marvellous things in Costa Rica through this church! In 2010, the church only numbered approximately 1,400 members. It was a declining church. Now, it is a self-sustaining church of approximately 25,000! I asked them what they thought had caused this phenomenal growth. Some of the drivers of growth included discipleship, making disciples of Christ who were taught to become contributors to the Kingdom of God, developing leaders who were true worshipers of God and developing good financial stewardship training to help their members get out of debt and be able to live healthier financial lives and support the Kingdom. Another important driving force was that it was a very united church, a very connexional church. There are certainly many things we can learn from our Methodist partners in this region.

Solidarity for the islands affected by hurricanes Maria and Irma punctuated the sessions of the assembly. A special collection was received to send to Puerto Rico, given the extreme levels of devastation that the disaster caused. Revd Lizette Gabriel, now Vice-President of CIEMAL, shared, through many tears, the difficulty that she had personally faced following the hurricane. Later on, she preached a faith-filled and stirring sermon on the goodness of God despite the challenges in life, and drew upon her own experience of the hurricane where she has had to rely on God's goodness for her own sake and that of her family.

Following the elections for the Executive Committee and the Council of Bishops, the results were as follows:

President of the CIEMAL Council of Bishops: Revd Juan de Dios Peña (Evangelical Methodist Church in El Salvador)

President of Executive Committee of CIEMAL: Bishops Adonias Pereira (Methodist Church in Brazil)

Vice-President of the Executive Committee of CIEMAL: Revd Lizzette Gabriel (Methodist Church in Puerto Rico)

General Secretary: Revd Luciano Pereira

CIEMAL Youth President: Pastor Emerson Castillo for a further year until amendments are made to the CIEMAL youth assembly constitution.

We also celebrated CIEMAL's 50th anniversary as an organisation and enjoyed hearing about prominent Methodist men and women who had caused an impact on Methodism regionally through their work, such as Federico Pagura (a prominent liberation theology theologian) among other notable men and women.

The Roundtable in Argentina

Two days before the roundtable in Argentina began. I met with one of the Nationals in Mission we support, Revd Fernando Suarez. He is in charge of developing three congregations in the towns of Mercedes, Chacabuco and Junin. All three Methodist Church are small in number but strong in faithfulness and commitment to God and to the work of the church. Extreme poverty in Argentina is not as noticeable as it is in other neighbouring countries, but it certainly exists. Argentina has the highest inflation rate in the country, and instability in recent years through the change in government has left Argentines with a great sense of economic and political insecurity. Revd Fernando and the three churches he is helping to grow have recognised this hidden poverty in their own communities, and are partnering with local people to help bring poverty alleviation and show the love of Christ to those who have very little. One such example is the work led by Silvana, a lady who lives in an impoverished part of the town, who felt moved to feed the children in her neighbourhood who would often have nothing to eat over the weekends or during school holidays. It was clear that Silvana herself is living in conditions of poverty, yet this kind-hearted woman gives what she has to feed these children. Since she began the programme, her work has grown in fame locally and she now receives donations of food and kitchen appliances from local business and people. What an example of how we all have something to give back to God, even when we think we have absolutely nothing to offer.



Fernando Suarez (second left), Silvana (second right) and other members of the local Methodist Church in Mercedes

The Methodist Church in Mercedes supports Silvana's work by collecting bread and other food items from a local bakery that donates unsold food after trading hours to the project. It was clear when I met Silvana that their fellowship and spiritual support were a comfort to her in her life and her work.

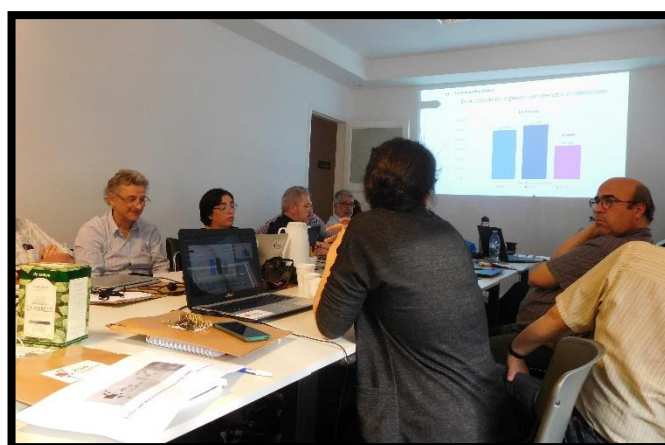
It was very good during the roundtable to get to know our partner better and to hear how other partners such as General Board of Global Ministries, General Board of Higher Education, the Upper Room and Connexio are also supporting the IEMA. I was impressed to see that the church's own financial resources cover the majority of its budget in terms of operational costs and stipends, and that the remaining amount, which goes towards some of projects and programmes, are covered by the donations received from partners and other sources.



Bishop Américo Jara Reyes (left)

The church is in a similar situation to the Methodist Church in Britain in terms of statistical membership decline, which means that it still needs some support from partners to enable important community and advocacy work to be done. The IEMA is ecumenical in character and works in partnership with other denominations concerning a number of social issues, particularly in the area of human rights. The IEMA has a deep desire to enable its local congregations to evangelize in their communities. When I asked the Bishop how the church would help local churches achieve this, he said that they had to enable people to fall in love with Jesus again, and that when this happens evangelism would naturally take place. The work being done by the church in developing its lay leadership for mission, awakening vocations and working on their Christian Education resources for children and young people reflected this desire to help members 'fall in love' with Jesus again.

It was good to be able to talk about the SALT group-training programme as a way of supporting the church in offering its members ongoing theological education, given that Institute Superior Evangélico de Estudios Teológicos (ISEDET-the IEMA's main theological training institution) has now closed down. The church is developing a training programme comprising four combinable levels, in order to offer ongoing theological education from the very basic level to degree level. I suggested that the Scholarship and Leadership Training grant programme (SALT) could have a role in supporting this strategy, particularly from a group training perspective, and we agreed to keep the conversation going regarding this possibility.



The IEMA was also keen to explore Encounter Worldwide possibilities that would enable British Methodists and other Christians to serve the church for between 3 to 12 months in Argentina. They were equally excited about the possibilities that Encounter Together offers, which would enable Methodist groups from Britain to visit the IEMA and work with the church in a productive way during a short group visit (usually 10 days). If anyone would like to explore any of these possibilities in Argentina, please do get in touch with our office.

Meeting with CREAS



The CREAS team

While I was in Argentina, I also met with CREAS, an ecumenical organisation based in Argentina that the Methodist Church in Britain supports through the World Mission Fund and works in partnership with in throughout the region. Its work is multifaceted and focuses on developing cooperation across the region, building up capacity of national churches and raising awareness of many issues in a view to producing and sustaining a process of change in the region. CREAS works extensively with several of our partners to chair and coordinate roundtable meetings and to promote peace initiatives in communities with widespread conflict and /or violence. We spoke about the possibilities that Encounter Worldwide presents to

British Methodists who would like to contribute to the ecumenical work that it does and learn how it supports churches all over the region.

It was very good to hear about how the relatively small grant we give to CREAS has a considerable multiplier effect on its programmes. I was reassured in no uncertain terms that this grant is vitally important for the work the church is doing in places like Colombia for example, where CREAS is able to develop peace initiatives that train youth 'peace entrepreneurs' in helping other young people develop peace initiatives for their communities. The young people from the Methodist Church in the town of Buenaventura have benefited from CREAS' work and now have a number of peace entrepreneurs in their community, a community whose young people's lives are deeply affected by drug trafficking and gang violence.

The Roundtable in Bolivia

What has struck me again on this second visit to the Evangelical Methodist Church in Bolivia (IEMB) is how unique the church is in terms of its very strong indigenous membership and culture, not only in terms of the church but also in terms of Bolivian society. Evo Morales, the country's first indigenous leader, affirmed indigenous culture in Bolivia in unprecedented ways in the region. His government has done much to lift a considerable percentage of the Bolivian population out of extreme poverty, and the IEMB has had a close partnership with the Morales government in the areas of health and education since it came to power in 2006. The question now is whether Morales is willing to relinquish power and support democracy or whether he will continue in his efforts to amend the Bolivian constitution which will enable him to stand for a third term of presidency.



Bishop Modesto Mamani (right)

Some of the mission aims of the church are as follows:

- Open new mission stations in areas of Bolivia that have little church presence and no Methodist presence. We are already supporting this endeavour by supporting two Nationals in Missions in the areas of Cochabamba and Charazani. The Grants Stream has just approved an additional NMA post in the Potosi area, which will enable the church to continue its mission to bring the gospel to these remote communities.
- Theological training and capacity building of lay pastors, with emphasis on being able to respond to prevailing prosperity theologies that are widely held and taught by neo-Pentecostal churches
- Strengthen local churches and develop discipleship initiatives for members. This year the theme of the church is the year of the local church.
- Rebuilding or finishing the building of several local churches.



Some of the challenges include developing women's work, particularly in finding new sources of funding for projects such as the Tabitha house, which hopes to become a safe haven and training centre for vulnerable women. Furthermore, the church is seeking to develop sustainable ministries, particularly in the areas of rural development and health. These ministries are currently funded by external partners in their totality. Connexio, the IEMB's Swiss partner, is reducing the grant they contribute towards rural development year on year, so the challenge is to find a way of generating income for

this area of work or seek new sources of funding. Moreover, the church is currently working on amending its statutes, so the process for local church input into this extensive piece of work is ongoing.

The church were very keen to explore the possibilities of Encounter Worldwide and Encounter Together, particularly in the areas of rural development and health. Equally, there are many placement possibilities with the IEMB in education, women's work and children's work. They were also keen to explore how the SALT grant could enable them to continue training their lay and ordained ministers and local churches.

In conclusion

There is much to rejoice about concerning God's work across Latin America and the Caribbean, and there is still much more to do. Methodism in the region is currently in a position to help other churches outside of the region grow, although there are churches within the region who need this support themselves. I appreciate the comments of Bishop Américo of the Evangelical Methodist Church in Argentina, when he said that growth would happen organically when local churches enabled their members to fall in love with Jesus again. I see evidence that this is true across the region. The churches who appear to be growing the most and deepening discipleship the most are those who teach their congregations and members to unashamedly love the Lord Jesus Christ with all their heart and soul and mind. They allow this love to cause the spark of passion that drives all their work in their contexts and societies. These churches are intentional about sharing Jesus with others. Are there things the Methodist Church in Britain can learn from these partners? Certainly! Perhaps we need to be intentional and more explicit in our sharing of Jesus with others. There is also much knowledge and expertise that the Methodist Church can share with partners on developing sustainable models of ministry, of best practice accounting and financial management models. Praise God that every church and every partner can bring these different gifts and resources to the feet of Jesus, to enable the Kingdom of God to grow.

Sandra Lopez, Partnership Coordinator for the Americas and Caribbean

17.11.2017