

Council of Latin American and Caribbean Evangelical Methodist Churches (CIEMAL) Youth Assembly

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Aims and objectives: To represent the Methodist Church in Britain at the CIEMAL Youth Assembly

CIEMAL Youth Assembly: During the first week of October, twenty representatives from around Latin- America gathered at El Pedregal Church in Panama City for the Council of Latin American and Caribbean Evangelical Methodist Churches' Youth Assembly, which meets once every 4 years. Anna Malnutt, Berenice Dalrymple and I were privileged to be the first ever representatives from the Methodist Church in Britain.



The theme of this year's Youth Assembly was, "How to be a living Church in a context of death", with the context of "death" referring predominantly to violence, but also to the death of dreams and opportunities, the decline of the Methodist church and socio-political difficulties.

The Youth Assembly officially commenced on the evening of the 4th October with an opening service, with conference proceedings beginning the following morning with various presentations. We learnt about the history and structure of CIEMAL's Youth in Mission team before participants from the Andean, Central, Southern American and Caribbean regions shared how youth work is going in their areas. This was followed by a forum led by Revd Juan de Dios Peña, the Bishop of the Methodist Church in El Salvador, exploring the different contexts of 'death' faced by each region. This varied hugely from violence against women (Brazil), to drug addiction and drug related crimes (Paraguay),

racism against indigenous people (Argentina), immigration, refugees and prison work (Mexico), corruption (Guatemala), problems surrounding education (Bolivia), and gang violence due to the breakdown of the family unit (El Salvador).

Berenice, Anna and I explained that things also vary hugely across Europe, but some of the areas of work that European churches are currently involved in includes work with refugees, while in the UK we are seeing a rise in homelessness and terrorism, as well as issues surrounding the freedom of religious beliefs. I elaborated a bit on how the Methodist Church in Britain continues to be faithful to its roots of social action through the involvement of local churches in food banks/ feeding schemes. I also spoke about the Methodist Church in Britain's recent consultation on Religious Freedom, which the World Church Relationships Team jointly organized with the Joint Public Issues Team.

It was a very enlightening and informative session. It helped all the participants gain a better understanding of the various contexts from which we were all coming, and some of the struggles we were facing as a church, but also as individuals living in the said contexts.

One of the things that emerged from this session that I found quite challenging was the El Salvadorian context. We learnt that while El Salvador has many churches, they have few happy communities, with the Bishop of the Methodist Church in El Salvador thoughtfully reflecting, "Sometimes, the church can be a bit isolated from the realities". El Salvador has one of the highest murder rates in Latin- America, despite the fact that 80% of the population professes to be Christian. In such a context, something as simple as evangelising therefore becomes a huge challenge, as even walking down the street can be risky. We heard of instances where the representatives present were not able to cross the road to attend an event being organised by the church on the other side of the road, because a certain gang is in charge of that area, and so just crossing the road could put their life at risk. It was moving to hear the representatives from El Salvador state, "Our young people are dying; they're being murdered". For them, the theme was not just a snappy title, but a pressing issue that needs urgent attention.

We concluded the evening with a cultural activity, during which we learnt more about the culture of each country represented at the assembly. Participants dressed up in their cultural attire and we learnt folk dances, had a taste of various local languages and shared local foods. Berenice, Anna and I contributed Scottish shortbread biscuits, accompanied by cups of Earl grey tea, and gave everyone a taste of 90's British pop culture by teaching them the dance to "5,6,7,8" by Steps!





As fun as the evening was, the ultimate purpose of the event was to remind us that our different cultures should not serve to divide us as a church, but to strengthen us. As Rev Luciano, the pastor of El Pedregal church put it, "People mistake unity for uniformity but in reality, we have unity in the midst of diversity. Diversity is a gift from God." Pastor Emerson Castillo added, "But we can only attain true unity as a church by understanding one another, which includes our different cultures, as they form such a big part of us".

6.10.17

The following day, having already discussed the various contexts of "death" we were all facing, Pastor Emerson Castillo used Mark 10:46-52 as a basis to help us explore what it means to be a living Church/ how we can be a living church.

We shared some of the things that may be keeping our various churches bound/ stuck. Answers included religion, lack of love, corruption, self- sufficiency, judgment, lack of unity, lack of faith and resistance to change.



Berenice, talking about 3Generate

After lunch we spoke a bit about the work of the Methodist Church in Britain, explaining how 3Generate works. This was met with enthusiasm, with participants stating that they really like how we do youth work in the UK, and expressing interest in attending 3Generate.

Rev Luciano Pereira, the Secretary General of CIEMAL and the minister of El Pedregal Church, then led an engaging and thought provoking workshop exploring mission and

the challenge of being a living church in our own context. It was said that sometimes it can be easier for us to leave our own context in the guise of helping others; however, God places us in our localities for a reason, and often, mission starts at home. We then had the opportunity to pose questions to Rev Luciano, Bishop Adonias from Brazil, and Bishop Juan from El Salvador, during a lively panel discussion. Someone asked, "The theme of the Assembly is 'How to be a living church in a context of death', but is the Methodist church really 'a' living church? Are we really one church?" This led to discussions on unity and connexalism. It turns out that many churches across Latin- America also struggle to promote unity and connexalism!

That evening, the youth leaders put a lot of effort into organising a reflective spiritual experience, going to the extent of taking our mobile phones away so we could all give the activity our full focus!



Evangelizing!



Spiritual activity

7.10.17

One thing that really came through during the Youth Assembly was the dedication and passion of each represented church for evangelism, something we do not often do in the Methodist Church in Britain. Saturday morning was therefore an interesting time spent evangelizing, and inviting members of the local neighbourhood to our "Praise in the Park" event that evening, held in the local park adjacent to El Pedregal Methodist Church.



***With the poster we made inviting people to
"Praise in the Park"***

In the afternoon we had an empowering women's only event called "Just between us". Berenice and I were delighted to be asked to perform during the event, and thoroughly enjoyed singing "Joyful, Joyful" for those present.

This was followed by Praise in the Park, which was awesome! Having seen us dancing at the back, Berenice, Anna and I were called to the front and asked to lead the others in some choreographed dancing to the praise songs. All the children, the majority of the young people and even some of the bishops joined in, and we had a great night of praise and worship!

8.10.17

Sunday morning saw us attending Sunday school at 10 am, followed by the normal church service from 11am. Their Sunday school is not as we know it in the UK. It was targeted at adults, and more akin to a Bible Study class, with those present engaging in in-depth analysis of a Bible passage. It seems this is how most Sunday schools function across Latin- America.

Overall thoughts

The CIEMAL Youth Assembly was a brilliant week of sharing and learning. I really enjoyed gaining further understanding of the various contexts across Latin- America. My prior understanding of each of these churches came mainly from information given in their annual grant reports, often written by adults in a formal church role. It was therefore great to receive the 'youth perspective' on the issues faced by their various communities, and how they thought their church should tackle the concerns.

The boldness, authority, dedication and passion of these young people really inspired me, as did the welcome we received from the wider church and from the wonderful women who cooked all our meals each day. As a group, we got on very well, not only with the other participants, but also with the leaders, who were very approachable and humble. During a conversation with Revd Luciano and Shirley, Shirley stated, "Sometimes, out there [around the neighbourhood] it's chaos. But then we enter here [within El Pedregal church] and it's like being in paradise" Revd Luciano added, "You always have a family here in Panama". Indeed, there was a great sense of fraternity all throughout.

It was also great to note the interest and enthusiasm in further exchange and sharing with MCB, particularly in regards to 3Generate.