

Combined Report of the visit to Panama – David Friswell, Sandra Lopez and Jonathan Hustler August 2017

Aims:-

- To observe and participate in the CIEMAL missionary training
- To visit the Lacey family as they prepare for their mission partner service in Colombia
- To meet with leaders of CIEMAL to explore possibilities of mission partners from Latin America coming to Britain
- To undertake a partnership visit to the MCCA churches and Methodist school in Panama

CIEMAL Missionary Training (Mr David Friswell)

During the first week of August nearly fifty Methodists from a range of Latin American and Caribbean countries gathered in the township of Pedregal on the outskirts of Panama City to take part in the third annual missionary training organised by Council of Latin American and Caribbean Evangelical Methodist Churches (CIEMAL).



Ranging from aged 16 into their 60s, the participants had either funded themselves or been supported by their home churches to attend the training and discernment week led by The Missionary Society (TMS), an off-shoot of the American United Methodist Church. The programme was designed to help participants consider a wide range of issues that may be encountered whilst serving in another country as a missionary, and, at the same time, help those present to ask themselves the right questions about whether they really do feel called to missionary service.

Sessions were led by a variety of people from across the region and from further afield. Revd Luis Cardoso (a minister originally from Brazil but now in Full Connexion in the British Church) shared much about crossing cultures and encountering different styles of church in other places. TMS staff helped participants explore what being part of a global fellowship might mean and different interpretations of sending and serving.

Sandra and I were asked to lead a session on alternative forms of worship in a British context and so Messy Church made its first appearance in Panamanian Methodism. With the whole group taking a full part in all the key elements of Messy Church, the craft activity of making fishing lines to 'catch' paper fish was developed through the worship (including the miming of 'Frizzy the Clown' into the calling of the first disciples. After the worship, singing and prayer, food in the form of small fish shaped biscuits were shared by all. This, along with other styles of worship (drawn from India, Ghana and Kenya), helped to explore how participants are able to adapt to different worship environments and languages used.





Luis Cardoso and Bishop Lopes led a session helping us to consider what questions need to be asked and answered (both by the sending church and the missionary candidate) before being accepted for missionary service. Despite the relaxed setting the questions were deep and helped those present to explore their own reasons more fully. Each evening testimonies from different regions were shared which helped to give a broad picture of the sort of work, challenges, joys and frustrations that may be encountered as a missionary.

Some time was specifically given over to the concept of mission being only about conversion (especially of Muslims within the 10/40 region (North Africa, Middle East etc). This was received differently by different people though it is clear, that for many, this was a very real part of their understanding and calling to mission work.

Surrounded in worship, prayer and fellowship enabled friendships to be built. Meal times gave the chance to talk with those so keen to spread the word of Christ and share their faith with others. There was much that was excellent about the week and it was good to explore what possibilities there may be for some of our future Mission Partners to participate in these sessions as part of their preparation.

The Lacey Family (Mrs Sandra Lopez)

The Lacey family are our mission partners going to work with the Colombian Methodist Church. Chris and Vera Lacey and their two daughters Sofie and Abigail recently underwent cross cultural mission training in Panama City through the Council of Latin American and Caribbean Evangelical Methodist Churches (CIEMAL). The aim of the training was three-fold: Firstly, to receive formal training on cross-cultural shock, Latin American Methodist Theology and Latin American mission theology. Secondly, to take Spanish lessons in country in preparation for their mission service in Colombia and thirdly, to get a taster of what it might be to adapt to a new local community in a Latin American context, as well as a church community which may have a different style of worship to the one they are used to. They also had the opportunity to join with 48 other Latin American and Caribbean Methodists in exploring cross cultural mission, in the aim of increasing their exposure to the myriad of cultures that exist within the region.

After speaking to the Lacey's about their training experience with CIEMAL, I can report that it was generally a good one. There are some adjustments that need to be made regarding the language tuition provided and some of the cross cultural content delivered. However, they found the training valuable, especially the experience of adapting to a new community. We thank God that they successfully built good relations with the local church in Panama that hosted them and although the style of worship at this local church is very different to their own style of worship at their home church in the UK, they were able to appreciate the value of experiencing this lively, vibrant, growing congregation and were encouraged by witnessing a number of adult baptisms of new converts to Christ on their first Sunday in Panama City.

We hope that we can continue to partner with CIEMAL by asking them to provide some of the training for future British mission partners who are looking to serve one of our partner churches in this region. We look forward to hearing more from the Lacey family once they have settled into life in the city of Medellin and the work they will be doing in Colombia

Report on a Meeting with the General Secretary of CIEMAL (Revd Dr Jonathan Hustler)

As part of the visit to the CIEMAL training in Panama City, the representatives of MCB met the Revd Luciano Pereira da Silva to discuss the possibility of ministers and/or lay people from Latin America serving in the MCB as mission partners. The main aims of CIEMAL have been simplified and reduced to three: training and capacity building; evangelism; developing mission opportunities. The General Secretary spoke of the enthusiasm for cross-cultural mission that he sees in those who offer themselves for training as missionaries but also of the importance of those who go going with the appropriate authority of their sending church, with proper preparation for the different context, and with clarity from the receiving church as to how their ministry might meet a need.

Mindful of the 2017 Methodist Conference's emphasis on the need to make disciples, the MCB representatives agreed that the Churches of Latin America have much to teach us; the training also received testimony from the Revd Luiz Cardoso (who serves in the Manchester and Stockport district and was previously in the Channel Islands) which illustrated the point. However, it became clear that we need to do more than to receive ministers to serve in circuit appointments that cannot otherwise be filled. It was agreed that a proposal should be drafted by David Friswell and Jonathan Hustler to be presented to the Ministries Committee in September 2017 and the CIEMAL Executive Committee in October 2017 for a scheme under which the MCB would welcome up to five mission partners from member churches of CIEMAL to serve in specially designed appointments with a focus on evangelism.

Partnership visit to the Panama/Costa Rica District of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas (MCCA) (Mrs Sandra Lopez).

Revd Jonathan Hustler (Assistant Secretary of Conference and Ministerial Coordinator for Oversight of Ordained Ministries), David Friswell (Team Leader, World Church Relationships Team) and I visited Panama to meet with CIEMAL (the Council of Latin American and Caribbean Evangelical Methodist Churches) and the Panama part of the Panama Costa Rica District of the MCCA.

The construction on the Panama Canal had a significant impact on the demographic makeup of Panama. The work on the canal began at the beginning of the 19th century and brought over workers from many different parts of the world, although the largest migrant community representing manual labourers was from the British and the French West Indies. The large numbers of West Indian Methodists residing in



Panama City encouraged the establishment of an English language Methodist Church was founded in the early 1800s. The Panama City circuit continues to have a large West Indian membership, but as West Indians and Spanish speaking Panamanians have intermixed over time, the membership demographic has also changed. This has led to all the Methodist Churches in the city now developing bilingual services to meet the needs of their Spanish speaking members and be more accessible to new members.

Revd Juan Simpson is the superintendent of the Panama City circuit. He spent 20 years as a minister in Honduras and has been the superintendent of the circuit for a year. Revd Juan invited Revd Jonathan Hustler and I to attend a lively Bible Study at Rio Abajo Methodist Church. This is an active congregation of about 100 people. His vision for the churches in the city is that they adapt their ministries to reach out to the migrant communities around them. There has been an influx of migrants from Venezuela, Ecuador and Colombia in recent years, so the mission field is large, and there is a sense of urgency because a good portion of the existing members are elderly and are experiencing membership decline. In some of the churches we visited there is an active children's ministry.



Panama City is a wealthy and well developed city within the region (it is known as the Hong Kong of Latin America). However, there exists another story beneath the veneer of wealth. There are many pockets within the city which continue to be impoverished and increasing housing prices push lower income families further and further away from the city centre. There are many opportunities for the churches in Panama City to do mission among disaffected youth whose lack of employment opportunities leads them to get involved in gangs, drug trafficking and other illicit activities.

We also visited the Colon Circuit. Colon has a large free trade area and free port, designed to enable and incentivise merchandise to and from Latin America and the Caribbean. The government is working to expand the free trade area to the entire city, and is relocating its population to the outskirts. Many residents have also been forced to move to outer Colon because of rising living costs. The Colon Circuit has a Methodist School, which caters to over 400 students from primary school to secondary school. It is considered to be one of the best schools in the city and keeps its fees very reasonable to give the lowest income families in the area access to quality education. The local Methodist Church attached to the school has a small membership. The Colon circuit Superintendent, hopes to continue encouraging the elderly congregation



to increase their efforts in reaching out to the school pupils, given that out of an elderly congregation of about 30 there is only one young person.



The last leg of our journey was to Bocas del Toro, a province on the Caribbean coast of the country. Revd Ephraim Alphonse is a pioneer of Methodism in Bocas del Toro and became the District's first Panamanian District Chair. He, along with other famous Methodists in this area such as Revd Mortimer Surgeon (a minister from Jamaica), not only spread the gospel in Isla Colon, Bocas' main island, but also took the gospel to the indigenous Nove people who are native to this part of Panama. Mortimer Surgeon was a Jamaican ministers working in Bocas. He began to feel a call to work with the indigenous people when he observed how they would go to Isla Colon to trade, and would then spend all their earnings on alcohol. He visited the Nove people in their communities to understand their way of



life better, and began a Methodist ministry among them. We have the privileged of visiting two of the 12 areas where there is an indigenous ministry.

We visited the Nove community in Kusapin by boat, where the Valiente circuit is gearing up to celebrate 100 years of Methodism in the area. Brothers and sisters from all over Panama will travel to Kusapin in September to join in with the celebrations. The community of Kusapin have little employment prospects, so many of their young people leave the island to look for work in Panama City. I am told that those from the Methodist community seek out the Methodist Churches when they get there, which is also a factor of change in the demographics of the membership.



Revd Jonathan Hustler and Revd Antonio Trottman
en route to Kusapin



Kusapin has a long history of British Methodist mission partners, and they would warmly welcome more British Methodist Mission partners, as well as Fijian ministers! Kusapin has received two Fijian ministers in the past and I am told that they developed an excellent ministry among the Nove people. There is a concern that there is no one to replace Revd Caramelo Sam, the Superintendent of the circuit, when he retires in the next year or two.

Again, training young people and

helping awaken vocations is a pressing factor. Church services in Kusapin are in Nove, and Revd Ephraim Alphonse translated many Wesleyan hymns and even the New Testament until Romans. The Bible is often read in Spanish but the preaching is in Nove.

We also visited the island of *Valle Escondido* or the Hidden Valley Island. It is not easy to get to and Revd Antonio Trottman, the superintendant of the Bocas del Toro circuit, had to skilfully navigate our speed boat through dense forest to get to the Nove community. There are approximately 300 inhabitants on the island, with a very active Methodist Church of about 40 people of all ages. We met with some of the members of the church, most of whom are under 40 years old. Again, services are in Nove and a stalwart of the church, Charlie Surgeon (not related to Mortimer Surgeon), sang 'To God be the Glory (click [here](#) to see him sing) in Nove to demonstrate how important their Methodist roots are, despite living worlds apart from the UK. The living conditions of the inhabitants on the Island have improved since solar power was installed by a Mexican NGO.





The Nove Methodist community in Valle Escondido Island

Revd Antonio Trottmann, said that one of the challenges the church is facing is knowing how to reach out to the many tourists around them, and developing new leaders. Becoming a minister is not seen as an attractive prospect for the youth, and recently none have offered themselves for ministry. The District as a whole has a shortage of ministers, and a number of

the Superintendents are due to retire in the next few years. Rev Antonio hopes to offer training to the church's youth to help develop their leadership potential, and I reminded him about the Scholarship and Leadership Training group (SALT) programme that could support this initiative. I was also asked to send them some Sunday school material as they are currently using material produced by the Baptist Church, which is the only solid teaching material they have access to.

Conclusion

This was a fascinating exposure visit into the history of a very diverse District in the Caribbean that seeks to reach out to a changing and ethnically mixed population. There are concerns about the number of ministers it will be losing to retirement, and a request to the Methodist Church in Britain to send ministers as mission partners there. There are also serious concerns about declining membership. There is also a desire to work more closely with CIEMAL and I will continue discussions with the District and CIEMAL as to how this can be done. One of the suggestions was that three people from the District attend CIEMAL's cross-cultural mission training next year, and I will seek to secure funding from the World Mission Fund that will encourage this type of unity building opportunity between the MCCA and other Methodist Churches in the region.

Sandra Lopez
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