

Report of the visit to the MCCA, Panama and Costa Rica District – David Friswell, August 2017

Aims:-

Costa Rica:

1. To undertake the first partnership visit to the country for some years
2. To explore and understand the current nature of partnership where no financial element currently forms part of the relationship

Costa Rica:-

Methodism of the British tradition in Costa Rica is centred around Siquirres and Limon in the lower lying area towards the Atlantic ocean. Established in the early 1890s, the church has traditionally been comprised of black, English speaking members, many of whom came into Costa Rica from other areas of the Caribbean where Methodism was prevalent. Many generations on and Methodism has struggled to keep up with changes in culture and in language which has become almost entirely Spanish speaking. However it does appear that the trend in language may be changing with younger and middle class Costa Ricans more keen to learn English to open up greater global opportunities for them and their families. The cultural and ethnic make-up of the region has also appears more diverse and more integrated since the 1960s.

After travelling by public bus from San Jose to Siquirres (a journey of some 95km, the first half of which was slow going as we climbed over the top of the mountain range surrounding San Jose), I was met by Alphonso Jarret. Alphonso (a former professional soccer player in Costa Rica) who has, at the age of 75, recently become the Circuit Steward in Siquirres. He took me to see Emmanuel Methodist Church in one of the outskirts of the town called Cairo. Emmanuel church has been closed for about five years now as the elderly congregation dwindled. The building is still well cared for in the hopes that the forthcoming arrival (from Haiti) of a dedicated and resident presbyter for the circuit will breathe new life into the church's ministry here.

The second church we visited (Siquirres Methodist Church) has around twenty regular worshippers. Many are old and again there is concern for the future. Recently however the church has started to use a minibus to collect children and young people on a Sunday morning and bring them to church for Sunday School. It is early days yet but they have been gathering around thirty children on recent Sundays. They are also looking into how to welcome the families of these children into the church.



Wednesday morning started early with a 5am prayer meeting at Siquirres. It was a good turnout with ten of us present. Starting with worship and song (from the 1933 hymn book) we were led, by Victor, into a time of Bible study based on Matthew chapter 7. Discussion was good and some thoughtful points were drawn out about how we understand God's answers to our prayers. More singing, this time in Spanish, and then a time of open prayer for a wide variety of concerns but particularly for Venezuela at this time. I was then invited to share about the work of WCR

for a few minutes which drew some good questions about how, as a very small church, they can stay connected with Methodism in Britain and other countries.

Finishing the prayer meeting at 7.30am we headed off to visit a small church in Pacuarito a few miles east of Siquirres. This was the first permanent site for Methodism in Costa Rica and the home church of George and John Brown – two brothers that attend the early-morning prayer meetings. It was also the childhood church of Alphonso and between them they had many stories of the ‘good old days’ when the church was overflowing and people had to stand outside for services. With just fifteen to twenty regulars today, their story rings true of many village chapels in our own church where numbers have fallen dramatically over the last sixty years. They told stories of the first time they had to recite passages from memory and of strict local preachers who would ask questions after the services to make sure they had been paying attention!



Breakfast of rice, beans and coffee beckoned before another bus journey on to Port Limon on the Atlantic coast.

Having been met by Revd Heinsley Johnson we headed off to Martina Methodist Church about 30km north-west of Limon. There we met with Ada and a gentleman from the church who were introduced as ‘two of the faithful’. Again the congregation here is smaller than in the past but they also now have an active Sunday School with between 15 and 20 children each week. Although the parents bring the children, few of the adults stay and attend worship. This community struggles to build ongoing relationships with the transient nature of banana plantation workers.



Most plantation workers are on short contracts and can be easily moved by the plantation owners to different farms. In the past the majority of workers were Black English speaking Costa Ricans but now many of the plantation owners prefer to use immigrant workers from Nicaragua. They can pay them less than the minimum wage and do not have to offer the same conditions of service as they do to local people. Once again this has had an impact on the traditional Methodist Church attendance.

As the four of us sit in the church and reflect on this, Ada explains that the decline in church membership in this region is seen not only across Methodism but also the Anglican, Adventist and Catholic churches. Apparently the Baptist churches are just about holding their numbers and it is only the evangelical church that is seeing slight growth.

(The blue plastic bags around the hands of bananas in the picture above are to prevent insects from marking and discolouring the bananas.)

The Methodist Church in Costa Rica owns and runs a small school in Limon. This is a fee paying school for kinder to pre-prep. Teaching is in English - with a little Spanish when things need more explanation! There are three classes, each with about seven or eight children. School meets in two sessions with half the children coming in the morning and the other half in the afternoon. Current number of students is around 45. The school building is part of a small complex alongside the main church (City Temple) in Limon with the District Bishop’s house also next door. The school is nicely maintained and the classrooms well resourced to a very high standard. The school had a very pleasant atmosphere and there were clearly good relationships between the teachers and the children. Speaking



with the principal, Mr Kendrick Johnson, they do hope to grow the school a little and add two more classes – adding another 10 or 12 children for each session. The classrooms are set around a large hall (with stage) which is used for weekly assemblies, wet playtimes and other activities that need more space than the classrooms offer. The school hall is also used for evening church meetings and rented out for commercial income outside school hours.

On my last evening in Limon I spent time with Bishop Heinsley talking about what the next five years might look like for Methodism in Costa Rica. His instant response was that of a bigger, more active church with probably 40% being children and youth. Initial stationing for his replacement when he sits down in 2018 has already been carried out. This helps give confidence of continuity in the Limon area.

The local Mission and Evangelism group are active here in the town and are heavily involved in a new 'churches together' project with the local council that will provide shelter and a food-bank for the homeless. Alongside the accommodation there will be counselling and opportunities for evangelism. Each church denomination has committed to caring and cooking for the clients for one or two days of the week on a rota basis.

City Temple has three services each Sunday – two in the morning and an evening gathering. The early service in English is growing in size and they now have four choirs, a worship dance group, men's and women's groups, young adult and youth meetings. The regular congregation numbers over one hundred. The Spanish service at 11am caters for those that only speak Spanish and others that find the timing fits better with family commitments.

As I reflect on this visit I see a very small church that for some may feel like it gradually fading away. But there are real signs of excitement and growth especially focused around the children and young people's work. The church is not weighed down by lack of financial resources and obviously benefits from very low 'overheads'. Its buildings are cared for even where congregations are small in number. That is not to say there won't be challenges over the coming years. As in many of our own churches there is a 'missing generation' and younger, active workers appear few especially in the village churches. But I do see a hopeful church – one with which I hope we, in British Methodism, can stay truly in 'connexion' with through conversation, prayer and solidarity.

