

I was invited by the Council of Latin American and Caribbean Evangelical Methodist Churches to attend and contribute to a week-long cross-cultural training event 'A Passion for Mission', aimed at preparing and training those in the region



who feel called to serve God as mission partners or '*misioneros*' overseas. Approximately 50 students attended the training, both lay and ordained, from almost all over the region. The training was conducted in three languages (English, Spanish and Portuguese) and seminar leaders and keynote speakers came from several different countries, including a speaker from Africa.

CIEMAL has been charged by its member churches to organise this training for Methodists in the region because there is a leading by the Holy Spirit to resource Methodist Churches from within its members for mission, both for mission within the country and beyond. It was very interesting to speak to some potential mission partners and hear of their desire and calling to work with Muslim communities, particularly as there is a recent increase in the number of Muslims in the region as a result of economic migration and Muslims fleeing the Middle East. One of their workshops addressed ideas of how to work effectively with Muslim communities. Here is Ben Reyes, a Puerto Rican United Methodist minister who works with Muslim communities in the US. He is exploring here what it means for Muslims who convert to Christianity to be a part of the Kingdom of God, questioning whether there is any need for them to completely give up some of their traditions and whether as Christians we are unnecessarily imposing 'christianese' on them along with all the associated traditions and baggage. It was an interesting concept for the group to consider and one which quite obviously challenged our thinking.



Other workshops included best-practice for short term mission, how to communicate the Gospel cross-culturally, how to do inductive Bible Study as a tool for deepening personal devotions and teaching and alternative methods of sustainable mission.





Brazilian Bishop João Carlos Lopes teaching on a biblical understanding of culture

From various conversations with participants, workshop leaders and with the General Secretary, I realised that CIEMAL is aiming to establish its own mission partner sending agency on behalf of

Methodist Churches in the region. The general consensus among the participants was that traditional models of sending our mission partners were no longer serving their purpose and that the calling to mission that Christians around the region were feeling was an indication from the Holy Spirit that a uniquely Latin American model for sending out mission partners was now needed (There are currently over 10,000 Latin American and Caribbean mission partners working around the world-not an insignificant number!). This is indicative of the general desire to find resources for mission

from within Latin America and the Caribbean, and not just to look to western partners for support in these areas. However there is huge scope for collaborative partnership and the Methodist Church in Britain has much of experience to offer and share in this area. It will be interesting to see how this develops over the coming years. For more info please read my blog posts in Panama here: [worldchurchrelationships](http://worldchurchrelationships.com)

I brought greetings to the churches represented there on behalf of the Methodist Church in Britain and spoke about the people to people exchange programmes that we are developing, including the Encounter Worldwide short term programme and our pilot programme for organising group visits to partners. There was much interest around our programmes and a desire to visit the Methodist Church in Britain and partner with us in our mission in the UK. Do not be surprised if a contingent of young Methodist Brazilians arrives on our shores next year at some point! If anyone would like to attend this cross-cultural mission training next year, please do get in touch as CIEMAL would warmly welcome and encourage British Methodists to participate.



Brazilian Methodist workshop leaders and participants



Bolivian and Costa Rican participants

## PARTNERSHIP VISIT TO THE COLOMBIAN METHODIST CHURCH AND CEPALC (LATIN AMERICAN CHRISTIAN COMMUNICATIONS AGENCY)

My visit aims were the following:

- To get a better understanding of the country context
- To gain a better understanding of the church structure
- To visit the work MCB has supported in health, community development and evangelism and visit the Nationals in Mission we support.
- To find out about the current state of the peace process and the Church's involvement in the negotiations
- To visit CEPALC and meet the children and young people they are supporting and spend time with the two Nationals in Mission we support.

### Country context

Colombians have to contend with a potent melting pot of social issues that arise from 62 years of internal conflict and an internal displacement of over 5 million people. Added to that mix is drug trafficking which is a lucrative market for guerrilla, paramilitary groups, gangs and drug cartels that continue to wield power in the country. In addition, Colombians have to contend with corruption at every level of society. This is a very simplified summary of the issues and the reality is that the context is so complex and layered that every Colombian I spoke to ended their particular summary of the issues with the words...*'es que es muy complejo...'*: it's just very complicated.

This complexity is the one in which the Colombian Methodist Church, a fairly new and emerging church of approximately 5,000 members is doing its mission and bringing hope to many communities that feel completely forgotten by the state. It works with communities that because of corruption, never received the benefit of government funding and support because the funds that are supposed to trickle down to them, are siphoned off by the middle men and women. The church brings hope, Christian love and service to these communities in several ways.

### Healthcare in Brisas del Mar

Brisas del Mar, a small village in the region of Sucre in is one of 7 *corregimientos* or small, rural villages, where Afro-Indigenous Colombians live in absolute poverty and isolation from public services. It is not easy to get to these rural communities and had it been raining we would never have arrived as the roads would have become a dangerous slush of mud with an imminent risk of snake bites. These are the conditions the community faces when there is medical emergency, and without the Clinton Rabb Clinic that was established in 2007 with the support of United Methodist Committee on Relief and other partners, the community would have no access to any type of health provision.



Brisas del Mar

The Clinic offers a variety of free health services to these communities, including general medicine, dentistry, a clinical laboratory, a pharmaceutical service, minor procedures surgery, preventative oral health care, family planning and preventative health education. The team consists of a full time doctor, a number of nurses and specialists (bacteriologist, gynaecologist, pharmacist, paediatrician and a dentist) who are brought in on a periodic basis to serve the communities. The medical team also do preventative health campaigns and visit local communities in their home in order to capture those who because of traditional beliefs or lack of knowledge would otherwise not go to the clinic. The team told me stories of lives that had been saved because of these health campaigns. I was impressed with the health services offered and



the strategy of the work of the clinic is firmly in the hands of health representatives from every *corregimiento*, so that the interests of their communities can be truly met. The Clinic is also supported by volunteer in mission medical teams from the United Methodist Church who offer their specialist areas of medicine to the clinic for a fixed period of time. The clinic values these groups and would also welcome medical teams from the Methodist Church in Britain.

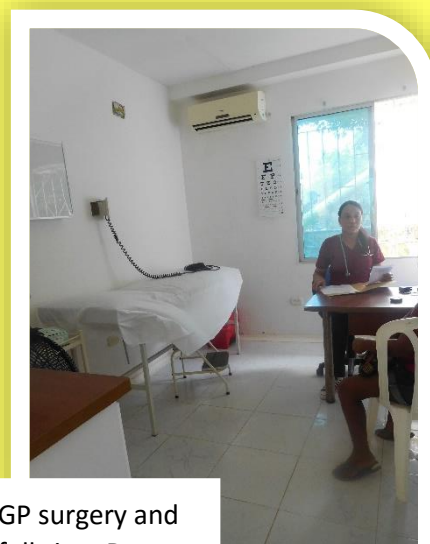
The local Methodist churches are closely linked to the clinic in *Brisas del Mar* (which means 'sea breezes') that welcomes members from several of the local villages, and they have worked hard to support this community who has suffered greatly at the hands of the internal conflict and state abandonment. It brought hope to the children and young people left traumatised by the conflict and who had lost any ability to smile or laugh because of this trauma. The children I met during my time with the community seemed joyful, gave me beautiful smiles and laughed freely as one would hope all children would be in a position to do. The Lord has used the church to bring hope back to these precious people.



On the left is Yuleida giving me a tour of the clinic's pharmacy. She is a young, intelligent women who is a committed member of the church and currently the manager of the Clinic. The Methodist Church in Britain has just recently agreed to fund a Scholarship and Leadership Training grant to enable her to specialise in project management and train her for an important role in a new National Office for Projects, where she will be training local churches to manage their local projects and implement effective reporting, and monitoring and evaluation strategies.

This is an important and strategic step that the church is

taking towards self-sustainability. At the clinic she manages staff, liaises with the clinic health committee and works with the nearest hospital (in San Onofre, a 40 minute motorbike journey along a dubious looking road) and local authorities to support the work of the clinic. The church is looking to purchase an ambulance which will allow them to transport patients in need of serious emergency medical attention to San Onofre. This will help them not only quickly and safely transport the most serious emergency cases to the hospital but they will also be paid by the hospital to the transport patients to San Onofre.



GP surgery and full-time Doctor

## Community development with Zenu communities

The Church supports two Zenu communities and with the support of international partners, including the Methodist Church in Britain (to the right is the church that British Methodists helped to build for the community), the Colombian Methodist Church has established two growing Zenu Methodist Church of about 300 members. The Zenu communities live in small, isolated villages near Ponedera, a town in the Atlántica department of Colombia. The Zenu people are subsistence farmers and the only real source of income generation in the area is from the production of the *caña flecha* (a type of cane) for the creation of *sombreros volteados*, a symbol of Colombian culture. The products made from *cana flecha*, are not fairly traded so the community receives a poor reward for their skilled and beautiful work, while the hats and products are sold for a variety of profit making prices (for the benefit of the



middle man), depending on the number of strips woven into the product. The higher the number of woven cane strips the higher the price that can be commanded.



An 11 piece *caña flecha* strip being woven



Right: two Zenu community leaders teaching us about *caña flecha* and showing us the products that can be made with the cane



Bishop Juan Alberto Cardona, church president, wearing a *sombrero volteado*

The community leaders I spoke to said that they had not been affected by the conflict due to the geographical location of their village, which was very remote. This had meant that they had not suffered the trauma and loss of other communities, and had a fairly peaceful way of *convivencia* or co-living, despite the economic difficulties they face. When there are problems in the community and someone commits a crime, if it is not a serious crime then the local authorities allow the community to deal with the crime under its own indigenous law and by indigenous 'police'. A more serious crime is referred to local police. It is a way of the government supporting the drive to help indigenous communities preserve their culture and way of life, even if this particular community has not been able to preserve its original native language.

Click [here](#) for a short clip of the worship I participated in, to give you an idea of authentic Zenu Methodist worship

## Community development in Buenaventura



Buenaventura is a port on the Pacific coast of Colombia that is known as one of the most dangerous places in the country. It is a place where gangs, paramilitaries (who are concentrated in the north and western parts of the country), people displaced by the guerrilla, drug traffickers and an afro-Colombian community that lives in poverty collide. It is a violent place where young people are recruited from an early age to be part of the local gangs and where teenage girls become mothers and fathers are largely absent from the family.

It is in this context that with the support of a Nationals in Mission (NMA) grant from the Methodist Church in Britain that the Colombian Methodist Church began a community development initiative two years ago. The NMA grant enable the church to pay the salary of Elizabeth Valenzuela Mosquera (far right in the





picture on the left) to lead the evangelism and mission initiative and to reach out to the community in the love of Christ. Pastor Elizabeth and two young leaders, Arnold and Danny, lead a faith community of about 40 members who are predominantly young people aged between 7 and 16. I visited a special service that was held to welcome us and saw the fruit of their work first hand. I sat with children who led part of the service, who fully participated in the worship and the word. It was obvious that they felt welcomed and loved by this Methodist community, who seeks to serve *los más pequeños* (the most vulnerable). They were providing a safe space for these young people, and through the Bible were teaching them the values they needed to be the SALT and light in their challenging environment.

It was such a joy to see the church affirming the cultural background of this community and we saw a performance of Currulao, a traditional Afro-Colombian Pacific dance to Christian Currulao music. You can see a clip of this [here](#).

Hip Hop is also an important part of the community's culture and the two young men supporting the ministry write and produce hip hop for a living and use it as a way of reaching out to and connecting with the local community in a way they can identify with. Click [here](#) for a clip of a Christian song written and performed by Arnold and Danny with a hip hop vibe!



Danny and Arnold

## Cartagena de Indias

Cartagena de Indias is widely recognised as a beautiful tourist spot with a colonial history that attracts hundreds of thousands of tourists a year. But Cartagena's colonial centre is a poor representation of Cartagena as a city. The majority of *cartageneros* live in conditions of poverty and in *la violencia* or in 'violence', which is a term regularly used here to sum up the volatile mix of guerrillas, paramilitaries, drug traffickers and gangs and the awful consequence of this potent mix on communities such as the ones I visited.

The Colombian Methodist church has two churches located in different neighbourhoods. Both churches work predominantly with children and young people and the ministers at both have had to work hard to earn the respect and recognition of the community who in turn give them safe passage to operate in these dangerous neighbourhoods. The work of Pastor Luis Andres (far right in the above photo) particularly struck me. He works with Afro-Colombian young people in the neighbourhood by giving them a safe space in which to learn about God and express themselves through Hip Hop and Break dancing, which is an important part of youth culture in this area. Through the work of the church these young people learn Biblical values that help them deal with some very difficult family situations (there are many young, single parent families and fathers in jail) and are also affirmed and given the opportunity to develop their cultural identity.

The young people shared with me that the Colombian Methodist Church stands out from other churches in the area because it allows the



young people to be themselves with no condemnation. It is a church working with the most marginalised in these difficult communities, giving them space to allow God to transform them at their own pace and from the inside out and not from the outside in. It was a joy to see how much the young felt at home and welcomed in the church. Click [here](#) for a clip of their breakdancing

## CEPALC

Colombia recently voted 'no' to a referendum that asked the Colombian people whether they wanted to ratify a peace treaty that would have ended 52 years of civil war. The voter turnout was a measly 37% and the 'no' vote won by a slim margin. This shocked the entire country, including the proponents of the 'no' vote who themselves had not imaged this result. But a 'no' vote for the peace treaty is not a reflection of a nation who is split down the middle in its desire for peace. The great majority of Colombians seek peace and are tired of the violence and war that has affected their communities and resulted in millions of victims.

A proponent of peace in Colombia since 1978 is CEPALC, the Latin American Ecumenical Centre for Communications. CEPALC's main vision is to promote a culture of peace in the most marginalised communities in Colombia. They work with indigenous women, children and young people at risk from impoverished backgrounds in the city of Bogota and Afro-Colombian women in the region of Sucre. They work with several denominations, offering workshops that promote peace, teaching the target groups their rights as Colombian citizens, promoting mediations skills, helping target groups become more aware of the environment around them and teach theming to look after it. They help women young people and children express the knowledge they acquire on these matters and their skills through a variety of media communication tools and through art, theatre, puppet shows, music and dance.

I sat in on an internet radio show called *Derechos y Sonrisas* (Rights and smiles) led by 9 children from the neighbourhood of Suba which is on the outskirts of Bogota, who produced the show and presented it, very professionally. They spoke about what peace meant for them as children in Colombia and about some of the people from history who had been promoters of peace such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King. CEPALC hosts 22 radio shows presented by more than 80 children and young people as well as other groups that CEPALC works with. They have audiences in Colombia and abroad of about 8,000 people.

I also met Juan who is a second generation CEPALC beneficiary. He was supported by CEPALC when he was a child and 14 years later he is now volunteering with CEPALC as a workshop leader, working in the Suba neighbourhood. CEPALC has very large outreach across Colombia and has touched the lives of thousands through

their workshops. I also met with two of the Nationals in Missions that we currently support, Yesid and Lizeth. Yesid is a workshop leader and a promotor of peace and justice in target communities in Bogota. Lizeth is working predominantly with women and in particular with the indigenous Zenu community, which includes women from the Methodist



Yesid on the far left



Lizeth



Church 'Brisas del Mar' (Sea breezes). CEPALC thanked the Methodist Church in Britain for supporting CEPALC and its two NMAs. I thanked them for the marvelous work they do and for our partnership which allows us in some way to support the peace process in this beautiful country of Colombia.

## Peace Treaty Negotiations

The churches in Colombia have been fully involved in the peace negotiations for the last 6 years. Bishop Juan Alberto Cardona of the Methodist Church in Colombia has been working with representatives from the historic protestant churches in the country, including the Baptist church, the Presbyterian Church, the Anglican Church, the Lutherans, the Mennonites and the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI). The churches, many of whom represent areas most affected by the civil war worked with Juan Manuel Santos' government and the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) to ensure that the treaty would represent the interests of these communities and that the church could play a major role in the peace and reconciliation process.

Bishop Juan shared with me that the peace negotiations are still underway after the referendum, and that the original peace treaty was being upheld albeit some minor changes. However the main points of the treaty, including victim reparation and political participation of the FARC would be maintained. It is hoped that these current negotiations will lead to the Colombian people accepting the revised peace treaty.

The Methodist Church in Colombia will be heavily involved in the reconciliation process once a peace treaty is agreed and approved by the Colombian people. The majority of its church communities are located in areas directly affected by the civil war or in communities that are receivers of large number of internally displaced Colombians, such as the on the Caribbean and Pacific coasts, a number of which I visited while I was on my visit. Please continue to pray for all those taking part in the peace treaty negotiations and for Colombia as it awaits a time of peace and works towards reconciliation.

Sandra Lopez 14/11/16



Colombian protestant church leaders at the signing of the peace treaty in Cartagena