

Partner Roundtable meetings, Argentina and Chile: 4-15 November 2015

By Rachael Varney, Partnership Coordinator for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Aims

- To participate in the bi-annual partners' meeting with the Iglesia Evangelica Metodista de Argentina (IEMA) and the Iglesia Metodista de Chile (IMCH)
- To learn more about the context in which IEMA and IMCH work, their successes and challenges
- To meet with the Rector of ISEDET (Evangelical Institute of Theological Studies) and the Director of CREAS (an ecumenical organisation, providing a range of support services to Latin American churches)
- To meet with two of the Nationals in Mission which we support in Argentina and Chile

The Partner Roundtables in Argentina and Chile are bi-annual and began a few years ago as a way of bringing together the international partners who work alongside the Argentinean and Chilean Methodist Churches. It is a time for them to share their strategy and vision for the future and for us to gain a better understanding of the contexts in which they work; the challenges they face and how we can work together and better support them. It is also an opportunity for our partner churches to hear about our context and church and the ways in which we work together with our partners in mission.

ARGENTINA



I attended on behalf of the Methodist Church in Britain along with Juan Gattinoni from the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) and a team from Connexio (The Swiss and French Methodist Churches), headed by Andreas Staempfli. In Chile we were also joined by Rafael Goto from the Iglesia Metodista del Peru (IMP)

In meetings; Bishop Frank de Nully Brown is in the middle in the white shirt

I arrived in Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, a couple of weeks before their final General Election round on 22 November. This would eventually see Mauricio Macri, the Mayor of Buenos Aires and leader of the “Cambiamos” Party, (the Conservative Let’s Change Party) triumph against Daniel Scioli of the existing ruling Peronist Front for Victory (FPV) Party (and successor to Cristina Fernández de Kirchner who had served two terms so couldn’t run again.) It is still early days to know

how this will impact on Argentina, but I heard strong arguments from both sides of the political spectrum while I was there. I lived just outside Buenos Aires in 2002/3 for 8 months and this was my first visit back to the city since then. Argentina has experienced the brutality and pain of successive dictatorships, human rights abuses and economic crises. The economic crisis culminated in 2001 with widespread unemployment, riots, the fall of the government, a default on the country's foreign debt and the end of the peso's fixed exchange rate to the US dollars. Despite all of this, Buenos Aires is still a vibrant, beautiful city. It is often referred to as the "Paris of South America" with its wide avenues, European style architecture and chic shops; and the Argentinean people are just as warm, friendly and welcoming as I remembered.

I was met at the airport by Pastor Fernando Suarez, one of 3 Nationals in Mission that the World Mission Fund supports in Argentina. Pastor Suarez is working in the area of evangelism and community work in the districts of Chacabuco, Mercedes, Junín and Chivilcoy, all in the Buenos Aires province. Pastor Suarez's vision for the area is one day to have a Methodist family working for the church and living in each of the districts so that there is a consistent presence to help grow the church community there. I also had the opportunity to meet and talk at length with the Bishop of the IEMA – Frank de Nully Brown. We talked about the different areas we financially support the Church and our partnership moving forward, the challenge it faces economically due to inflation and political uncertainty and its active and cherished partnership with the Cumbrian District in the UK.

Before the roundtable discussions began I visited 2 schools under the church's care: Juana Manso - for ages 3 - 18 years, in the "Dock Sur" area of Buenos Aires, an extremely rundown neighbourhood and William C Morris in La Boca – right next to the famous tourist area where people flock to see the colourful houses and pedestrian street, the Caminito. Here tango artists perform and tango-related memorabilia is sold in abundance. As a former teacher I always love visiting schools, chatting to the students and experiencing school life in another country and culture.



Together with Pastora Mariel and some of the students at Juana Manso

Overseeing the schools is Pastora Mariel Pons, Superintendent Minister for this area of BA and chaplain to the schools. She accompanied me and Claudia Florentin Mayer (head of Projects at the IEMA) to the visit. The visit with Mariel and Claudia was one of the highlights of my trip. We began the day with an entertaining bus journey across Buenos Aires, chatting and laughing together,

talking about Mariel and Claudia's life in Argentina. There are many social challenges, especially in Juana Manso and the staff members are dedicated to getting the best out of the students and supporting them both in and out of school. The staff members in both schools are doing a sterling job of motivating the students and providing them with a safe haven.

Pastora Mariel is clearly held in high esteem by students and staff alike and everyone was happy to see her, all wanting a piece of her! It is so beneficial for a school to have a pastoral presence and I reflected that here in the UK this role seems to have diminished somewhat in many schools. I thoroughly enjoyed visiting the different classes in the schools and all the children were keen to ask me questions about life in England!

Sunday worship was at the Iglesia Evangelica Metodista Central which is the first evangelical church in Argentina where Spanish was spoken. The congregation was celebrating and thanking God for 80 years of the Methodist Nursery school located next door to the church. Different representatives across the decades spoke from the front of the church about their memories of the nursery, including Lucia, the eldest, seen here in the picture. Lucia emigrated from Armenia to Argentina with her parents in 1939 and arrived at the school speaking no Spanish, but always with a big smile on her face. Afterwards we shared lunch



with members of the church starting with empanadas (stuffed pastries) – my favourite! The next 2 days were packed with meetings at the church head office, focusing on the context in which IEMA works, the political and economic climate, the different ministries of the church and the church's strategy and vision for the future.

Also at the roundtable was the President of the Iglesia Metodista del Uruguay – Revd Oscar Bolioli, with his wife and a representative from the church. It was a privilege to meet Rev Bolioli for the first time.

As a part of my visit to Buenos Aires, I also had the opportunity to meet with the Rector and administrator of ISEDET. ISEDET has been providing theological education to students across the denominations and South America for many years and the WMF has supported the college with an annual grant. It was disappointing to hear that due to a variety of reasons and after a long time of reflection, it will be closing in 2016. ISEDET point to a crisis in the official status of the college – Government requirements placing more and more pressure to fulfil certain guidelines; declining numbers and the challenges of relations between the denominations involved at leadership level. Added to these reasons, the Methodist Church in Argentina is concerned about the lack of pastoral and practical experience offered on the largely academic courses and they are keen to develop a more hands on training for ordinands. The closure leaves a void in theological training in the region – one that the Church is only too aware of. They will urgently address this at a meeting with the

bishops from Chile, Bolivia and Peru before the end of the year, with a view to working together to address the urgent need for theological training.

I also met with Humberto Shikiya, Director General of CREAS. CREAS is an ecumenical organisation that works alongside churches across Latin America, providing advisory, coordination, communication and training activities across Latin America. We have partnered with them in the past and will continue to do so next year to some extent, as they provide a vital service to many Methodist churches in the region.

CHILE

Departing Buenos Aires I headed to **Santiago de Chile** for their roundtable event. It was impressive flying over the Andes, although I didn't enjoy the turbulence! Once again we gathered as partners in mission, this time to focus on the Iglesia Metodista de Chile (IMCH). Bishop Pedro Correa Montecinos has been Head of the IMCH since 2014 and he welcomed us warmly on the first day as we met for breakfast together before the meetings began. The IMCH is one of two Methodist Churches, the other being the Methodist Pentecostal Church which was formed as a separate church following a revival in 1909. Today the Methodist Church with whom we partner (IMCH) extends throughout the whole country, covering a distance of over 5000km. It is organized into seven districts with educational, social and health ministries at the heart of the extensive work they do.



Bishop Pedro Correa is third from the left in the picture

As with IEMA, IMCH, through presentations and discussions, shared with us the political context of the country, the economic and public service issues they face and their strategy as a church for the future. Since Chile is such a vast country, with the church operating in diverse, often rural remote areas, this poses many challenges for the leadership, not least

in reaching some of the congregations further afield and engaging in effective outreach work. One of their challenges is in church growth – they haven't established a new church in about 15 years and their membership is static. They are working hard to address this and we heard, for example, about a young Chilean couple who, supported by Global Ministries, are about to go to a remote area of the country for a period of 3 years, with the aim of reviving the Methodist church there. The Church is also developing their relationship with the Methodist Churches with whom they share borders, namely Peru, Bolivia and Argentina. The church is involved in some fascinating projects such as working with the "mapuche" indigenous communities.

It was a real privilege to meet with Nestor Cuevas Avendano, while I was in Santiago, who is the Youth Pastoral worker and a National in Mission in Chile. Nestor is an extremely well qualified church member who in the past was responsible for the Young People's Federation and formerly, when he was younger, served as Youth President of the Church. Nestor has a powerful testimony and his faith is infectious! He is doing a demanding job which requires much travelling across the length of the country, but a challenge Nestor rises to and he reports is going well.

Both roundtables were an opportunity to get to know the team from Connexio (the Swiss and French Methodist Church) and Revd Juan Gattinoni from Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church. It was invaluable spending time with them and learning about their partnerships and experience in South America; fellowshiping with them and communicating in a mixture of English, French and Spanish! I also got to chat more to Revd Luciano Pereira da Silva, General Secretary of CIEMAL (Council of Methodist Churches in Latin America and the Caribbean) who was at the roundtable in Argentina. He shared with me more of the vision of CIEMAL and the context in which CIEMAL is working across the region. **Revd Pereira will be one of the keynote speakers at the Methodists for World Mission (MWM) conference "Spirit of Liberation" June 3-5 2016.**



Nestor Cuevas on the left with Aaron, a member of IMCH



Outside IMCH church offices, Santiago – left to right: a church member, Simon Barth and Andreas Staempfli (Connexio), Juan Gattinoni (GBGM) and Rev Etienne Rudolph (Connexion and Superintendent, Methodist Church France)

With thanks to everyone at Iglesia Evangelica Metodista de Argentina and Iglesia Metodista de Chile for their hospitality, organisation and welcome during my visit.