

Report on Round Tables in Peru and Bolivia 15-22 May 2015

The main purpose of this visit to our partners in Peru and Bolivia was to participate in the two round tables at which supporters of the church in both countries could hear of the work in progress and consider the best means of future support. Most of the time was spent in meetings although one day was free in each country to see something of life beyond the conference centre.

A warm welcome awaited me at the airport in Lima (at almost midnight) and the next day it was good to meet with Bishop Samuel Aguilar-Curi and some of his staff before being shown around the city along with some of the other visiting partners. Warm hospitality and the sense of belonging among brothers and sisters from our partner churches characterised the time in both countries. As Lidia Diaz guided us around the bustling city of Lima, between the Andes and the Pacific with a population of 10 million - one third of the population of the whole country, there were reminders all around that this is a predominantly Catholic country where our Methodist church is very much in a minority.

Nevertheless, since its inception in 1877 the church has exercised a valuable ministry and mission, especially amongst the poorest and most marginalised in society. This is exemplified through the work of someone like Luis Ruiz, co-ordinator of the PROVEA project which we support through the Nationals in Mission Appointments programme. PROVEA brings together volunteers who will give help in emergencies anywhere in the country. Last month they assisted in a disaster area where a landslide had killed eight people and made 800 homeless. In his earlier years Luis had lived with the Aymara people for six years, sharing their lifestyle in a concrete expression of incarnational mission among the poor.



The well-organised round table in Lima was based around the church's new three-year plan. Others present included representatives from the United Methodist Church Board of Global Ministries, representatives from "Connexio", a mission arm of the Swiss / French UMC, the 6 District Superintendents, the 4 heads of Methodist schools which provide a credible profile for the church in Peruvian society as well as providing 75% of its budget, the Director of the Wesleyan Theological Seminary and leaders of the various areas of the church's work. Also present were the bishops of the Bolivian and Chilean Methodist Churches which gave those present an enhanced sense of the valuing of the round tables on the part of Church Leaders in the region.

An in-depth review of the church's life and mission in the three year plan entitled "United in proclamation and service" offered an honest appraisal of the challenges facing the church as well as good news which was illustrated by two well-produced AV presentations showing indigenous worship, skills training for children in danger of involvement in drug culture and the Peruvian version of Messy Church.

The other NMA project we support is Mission Support in Amazonia which aims to present the Bible in a holistic way to the native communities of that region by providing spiritual, social, cultural, medical and technical support - another example of the way that evangelism is necessarily integrated with the support of people in the basics of everyday living.

The Federation of Methodist Women in Peru is guided by their aspiration “to be courageous servants in the hands of the Lord who will overcome and will change history”. One of the church’s priorities is to raise the self-esteem of women. I was impressed by the dedication of Luz Landa, leader of the Women’s Federation, who, in addition to fulfilling this role, has extended her house to accommodate a growing church which includes a lively ministry to young people.

After a cultural evening with demonstrations of dancing from the various regions of Peru, we left for the round table in La Paz.

The view of La Paz from above was breathtaking as was the altitude (but not too badly). The logistics in Bolivia were very well-handled thanks largely to a young man named Wilson and his friend Grover, the leader of Youth ministry.

As with the church in Peru, the Bolivian church has recently appointed a new bishop, Modesto Mamani. Bishop Modesto led the opening sessions of the round table and outlined what he felt to be some of the priorities for the next few years. He has entitled this year “the year of the local church”. The aim is to pay attention to the needs of those local churches which need assistance, either with the renewing of their premises or the enlivening of their spiritual life.

There were some of the same partners here as in the round table in Lima but also some extra ones from a number of conferences of the UMC (Oklahoma, Texas, North Illinois).

The heads of the various ministries within the church gave reports on work achieved and hoped-for. One of the striking features here was just how integrated mission is – there is no proclamation of the gospel without an accompanying work of social or health care and, as Bishop Modesto said, “When we think of evangelism we think of community”.

Some examples of what the church is involved with are - medical services offering early detection of cervical cancer, a youth conference on sexual ethics in a fast-changing moral environment, the acquisition of more llamas of higher genetic quality to provide a living for families (they started with 40 and now have 770 providing for 329 families), a “Wesley truck” to facilitate integrated evangelism on the move – preaching from village to village and providing dental care amongst other essential services as they go (Bolivia has its first indigenous President in Evo Morales and since his coming to power the poor have fared better. Some Methodist social service / medical centres have been turned over to the government and the IEMB now seeks to work among those who are even more needy and marginalised), the reconstruction of crumbling churches, the provision of marquees for large outdoor meetings, the completion of the “Casa Tabita” where the most vulnerable women will learn a skill in making clothes.



There are so many possibilities but, as everywhere, finite resources. During the course of the round table, Humberto Shikiya of *CREAS* (An ecumenical partner organisation that offers professional services provided by Christians to churches across the region), based in Argentina, did a good job of facilitating a process of prioritisation.

One of the projects we support is the training of lay leaders. This is going very well and our support is much appreciated. Interestingly, Bishop Modesto noted that when people working as lay leaders in various parts of the country come together with others doing the same work, they grow in confidence and “lose their fear”.

One of the other striking features was the work done by the young people’s leaders. In an increasingly globalised world, especially for younger people, they face many of the same issues as young people in GB and are working hard to bring a Christian response to challenges such as an increasing number of teenage pregnancies and the ever-present environmental concerns.



A cultural evening, Bolivian style, brought the round table to an official close and the next day we visitors were treated to a journey through two districts of the IEMB – Distrito Norte “B” and Distrito Lago, the latter taking its name from Lake Titicaca. In one village on the shores of the lake we were shown an old church building being demolished to be replaced by a larger, more functional, new one. There couldn’t be many more picturesque settings for a lunch. There was a revival meeting scheduled to take place in this village on the following weekend – a sign of the hope and missionary purpose in the IEMB.

Peter Hancock, June 2015.