

VISIT REPORT FOR CENTRAL AMERICA AND JAMAICA MAY 15-JUNE 3 2014

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AIMS:

- To further and develop relationships with our partner churches in Guatemala, El Salvador and the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas (MCCA)
- To explore the context of the Methodist Church in Guatemala by visiting several churches in the Quiche area of the country and learn firsthand about their projects
- To pay a pastoral visit to the Methodist Church of Great Britain's Mission Partners and their family in El Salvador
- Attend the graduations of the SALT¹ (Scholarship and Leadership Training) students in Ahuachapán El Salvador
- Attend the Connexional Council of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas (MCCA) in Montego Bay, Jamaica
- Learn more about the context of the Jamaican church and visit the Egypt Agricultural project
- Meet and discuss with the individual District Presidents of the MCCA from across the Caribbean and the Americas, to learn about their mission contexts, challenges and needs etc

Visit to Guatemala: 16 - 19 May



Guatemala is in Central America, bordered by Mexico to the north and west, the Pacific Ocean to the southwest, Belize to the northeast, the Caribbean to the east, Honduras to the east and El Salvador to the southeast.

Population: 15.08 million (2012 *World Bank*).

Language: Spanish: **Currency:** Quetzal

President: Otto Pérez Molina

Government: Presidential system, Constitutional republic

Capital: Guatemala City.

Current President of the Church, Revd Tomás Riquiac Ixtán

From 1960 to 1996 **Guatemala** was subject to a brutal civil war, mainly fought between the government and various “leftist” groups supported principally by ethnic Mayan indigenous people and Ladino peasants. The Guatemalan government forces have been condemned for committing genocide against the Mayan population of Guatemala during this time and for human rights violations against civilians.

I arrived in Guatemala City late Thursday, 15 May after a long journey via Miami from London. The following day I was picked up by **Karin Solórzano**, the **Coordinator of Programmes and Projects** for the Guatemalan church (and a National in Mission Appointment -NMA)² and her husband Mauricio

¹ The Scholarship and Leadership Training programme aims to assist our Partner Churches to fulfil their own priorities in mission by funding training for individuals or groups within that Church which is both strategic and cross-cultural.

² NMA: The programme exists to enable Churches and organisations which are in partnership with the Methodist Church in Britain (MCB) to develop appointments of strategic mission significance. The person appointed will normally be a member of the Partner Church

Méndez (who also works for the church). They had set off from the Quiche region of Guatemala at 4am in order to pick me up from the capital and cover the 2-3 hour drive back for the National Executive Committee meeting they had convened for my visit!

The Methodist Church in Britain's partnership in Guatemala is with the "Iglesia Evangélica Nacional Metodista Primitiva de Guatemala" (IENMPG) - National Evangelical Methodist Church of Guatemala - a church with about 80 congregations and approximately 8,000 members. The Quiche area of Guatemala is a rural area that is predominantly made up of people of Mayan descent and where the highest percentage of Methodist Members in Guatemala is based.



We began with lunch prepared by members of the church, which consisted of a typical Guatemalan meal of chicken in soup with rice, and "tortillas" (not the Mexican type I am used to, more doughy in texture). I had to quickly get used to eating with a fork and spoon instead of a knife and fork or simply picking up the meat with my hands, Guatemalan style!

It was a real privilege to meet with the President of the Church, members of the Executive Committee and those members serving as Nationals in Mission (seen here). The Committee shared their strategy with me, the different projects they are involved in and their immense gratitude for the way in which the Methodist Church in Britain financially supports them.

Sat 17 May

I was taken on a tour of 3 church communities (Patulup I, Chichicastenango Xalbaquiej and Xeabaj Chichicastenango), off the beaten track, to get a feel for the development of the church in this area and the challenges they face. 60% of the church is located in Quiche and there are about 22 different languages represented there with most churches worshipping in their local language rather than Spanish. Pastors Sebastian Marroquin, Sebastian Quino and Juan Ixtna, together with Jeronimo Mateo Perebral and Mauricio, who ably drove us on very inaccessible dirt track roads, led the tour.



Church Pastor, second from right, together with my hosts

Here the Mayan people live very simply with scarce resources and money, often facing natural disasters which sometimes threaten their very existence and, for many, the church is central to their lives. Most people, if they are blessed with work at all, work in agriculture, in the surrounding fields and earn just enough (if that) to sustain their families, perhaps around \$5 a day.

I was touched by the faith of the people I met and the church leaders who face the daily challenge of encouraging their congregations in the face of poverty and adversity.

Some of those I met had been faithfully praying and fasting for many years for answers to prayer – I think in the West we may have given up long ago!

In Patulup I, Chichicastenango the church is more established – it was built over a period of 7 years with help from different groups from the USA, known as “Volunteer in Mission” Teams (VIM), who periodically go out there for 1-2 weeks at a time to help with construction projects. This church has about 80 members. One thing I noticed in Guatemala is that the men and women sit separately in services and that they have many more women than men (this latter part not unlike churches in the UK!) though apparently statistically there are more women than men in Guatemala. The pastor – Juan Ixtan - has initiated many projects within the church and one of them is a medical clinic where they are working in the community to collect records about each family in the area, for example, if they have access to water supply, toilets, medical attention. For those families with no water supply they have to use the local river to wash and clean clothes and there is a danger of infection. In an office within the church buildings they have a treatment room where members of the community can go and see a doctor when he visits.



Since antibiotics are hard to come by the church has developed training in how to use herbs to combat and cure ailments, a project overseen by “Tomasa Melia” (who is largely self-taught). She and her small team give regular demonstrations to the community on which herbs should be used for the cure of certain illnesses, such as bronchitis and pneumonia and how to prepare them for use. Tomasa (seen here second from left) and her team gave us a demonstration

Sunday 18 May



No trip to Chichicastenango would be complete without a visit to the famous “mercado (market).” On Thursdays and Sundays this mountain village is transformed into the world's largest handicrafts market filled with pottery, jewellery, colourful textiles, carved wooden masks, flowers, incense and other Mayan goods for sale – tourists come from afar to haggle and come away with a bargain or two.

After the market we visited two churches, Patzibal Chichicastenango and the Bishop’s church - Paxot Chichicastenango. On a tour of the building I was struck by the difference in their facilities with those in UK churches– the pristine dining rooms and cooking facilities we have in contrast to the women there crouching over huge pots full of rice and stew on makeshift stoves. The Sunday School had little if no resources to use in the sessions, though it was brimming with life and joy. The first service was celebrating Mother’s Day which falls in May as in the USA and they had laid pine leaves (see below) on the floor in celebration. It is Guatemalan custom to lay pine leaves to mark a special occasion, such as “Mother’s Day,” or to welcome visitors from afar!

The music was lively and carnival in style and everyone seemed to know the words to all the songs despite there being no “overhead projector!”



The second service was an adolescent service. This church had been built with money from various donors far and wide and was well kept and equipped. The church community has started a small school in some of the outbuildings belonging to the church; resources are lacking, the rooms are dark, small and cramped, but the spirit of the teachers (who I met) is incredible. For most children in this community it will be the only form of education they will ever know.

Prayer requests from the church leaders I met in Guatemala

- Strength from God to keep going in their ministry and for their congregations
- Resources to renovate church buildings and extend buildings due to lack of space
- Against discouragement as they wait on the Lord for answers to prayers
- Sufficient tithing: the church leaders are dependent on tithes for their livelihoods
- Resources to be able to travel to other communities to give “herbal” demonstrations

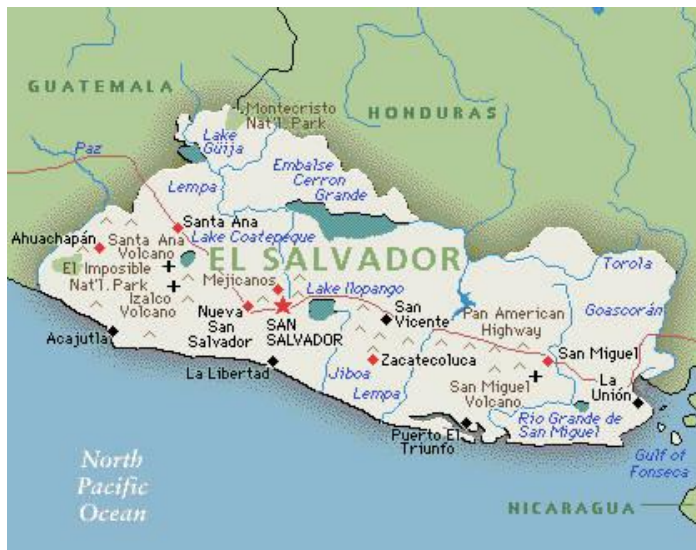
Monday 19 May



En route back to Guatemala airport for the next leg of my visit, Karin and Mauricio took me on a whistle stop tour of one part of the huge, incredible and beautiful lake – “**Lago Atitlan**” – a must see on any visit to Guatemala.

I had good opportunities to share with the leadership of the church during my time in Guatemala, hear about their needs and concerns, hopes for their congregations and vision for the future. Above all, the visit impressed upon me the zeal of the church for growth, their incredible faith in God, despite challenging and adverse conditions, and their infectious joy. They are a young and emerging church, but have great faith and desire to emulate the work of John Wesley and be faithful to his example.

El Salvador: 19 – 23 May



El Salvador is the smallest and most densely populated country in Central America

Population: 6.29 million (2012 *World Bank*).

Language: Spanish

Currency: American dollar

President: Salvador Sánchez Cerén (ex rebel leader)

Capital: San Salvador

Government: Presidential system, Constitutional republic

Current President of the Church,
Revd Juan de Dios Peña

El Salvador, which is Spanish for "The Saviour," was ravaged by a bitter civil war from 1980-1992. This civil war was fuelled by gross inequality between a small and wealthy elite, which dominated the government and the economy and the overwhelming majority of the population. Some will know of Monsignor Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, who regularly denounced injustices and massacres committed against civilians by government forces. He was considered "the voice of the voiceless", but he was assassinated by a death squad while saying Mass on 24 March 1980. El Salvador has returned to democracy, though crime gangs and the drugs trade pose a serious challenge to security. A succession of natural disasters and social inequality has shaped much of modern El Salvador and the economy is heavily dependent on remittances from abroad, especially the US. The people of El Salvador continue to struggle with poverty. The country's economy is agricultural, with some processing industry. Main export products are coffee, cotton and sugar.

The majority of the population is Christian. Roman Catholics (47%) and Evangelicals (33%) are the two major denominations in the country. The Methodist Church in El Salvador is a young, enthusiastic and growing church. 80% of the membership is under the age of thirty, it has very few assets except the drive and energy of its membership. In partnership with the United Methodist Church's General Board of Global Ministries (UMC, GBGM) in the United States, a strategy of support has been developed that provides leadership training, theological resourcing and the building up of its infrastructure.



I was picked up from Guatemala airport by **Paul Collins and Maura Cook**, the World Church's mission partners in El Salvador. They have been based in Ahuachapán, with their 3 children - 2 daughters, **Scout (7 years old)** and **Assisi (5 years)** and their son **Saffi (3 years)** since December 2012. They are working as **teachers in the Methodist Church nursery school** there, teaching **English classes to adults** and **working with the Methodist Church**.

Ahuachapán is not far from the border with Guatemala and is only about a 2 ½ hour drive. However, this journey can

often take longer if there are road works, which often spring up in El Salvador without any explanation as to why and for how long you will have to wait. People selling fresh fruit pieces, CDs, DVDs and other things wander up and down the line of waiting traffic, clearly used to the selling opportunities such road works present to those sitting bored and hot in their cars! We ended up sitting without moving, not far from the border, for about an hour and a half and we didn't get to Ahuachapán until very late that evening.

Over the next few days I spent time with Paul, Maura and their family, chatting with them and learning about how they are settling into a completely different way of life, language, climate and culture. It was amazing to hear the children speaking fluent Spanish! Ahuachapán is not really a tourist destination and so the family provide a constant source of interest and attention.



I spent one day with Paul and Maura at the nursery school where in the mornings they teach English to children from 4 ½ -7 years of age. The school is in a poor area, where even children over the age of 7 sometimes miss out on education. In El Salvador the government provide education from ages 7-15 years, so most children under the age of 7 don't go to a nursery – only if they can afford a private one. The school was built with money from the United Methodist Church (UMC) in the USA and the building work was done by VIM teams from the US.



The children are learning English, mainly through rhyme and song, which helps to motivate them. With limited resources Paul and Maura are making great progress. They try to keep the classes as creative and interactive as possible. Paul, who has excellent DIY and carpentry skills, is making great use of them for the school, church and community. Here you can see the shop he made for the children which they love playing in!

In the afternoon I observed a class which is part of a church project every weekday afternoon called **'Infancia con Futuro'** (Children of the Future). The class ranges from 15 to 28 children, depending on the day, of ages 8-16 years. The project aims to provide a safe place for children, vulnerable to being recruited to a gang, to play, eat, learn and meet their friends. Paul and Maura also give English classes to adults from the church and willingly volunteer to help out wherever they can.

I had the privilege to meet with the Head of the Evangelical Methodist Church in El Salvador – Pastor Juan de Dios - and visit one of the churches which he oversees in the local community. Together with Pastor Juan I went to meet **Dr Maria Letlce Aguirre**, a GP working in the local Methodist clinic, who is a National in Mission. She is supported by a small team of nurses, one of which is a community nurse. The waiting room was busy and Dr Aguirre is a dedicated doctor – without her many would not have access to a doctor. Pastor Juan explained to me that all the antibiotics in the clinic mainly come via a charity in the US.



My time in Ahuachapán culminated on **Thurs 22 May** with the official service to mark and celebrate the SALT graduations. For many of the emerging churches in Central America there is a need and desire for theological training in Methodism and pastoral matters. Through the support of SALT and Duke Divinity School in the USA, students come from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua to participate in the residential part of the course in Ahuachapán.

The Course of Study follows the approved curriculum of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of The UMC and professors from Duke Divinity School go to Ahuachapán to teach on two sessions of 7 full days every year with eight to ten courses offered every session. I was there to see the graduations of a group of these students. It was a moving and joyful celebration, complete with cap and gown, which you can see from the picture and even with the words to the songs (a new and vital addition, thanks to Paul) so that newcomers or visitors can join in the singing).



After a weekend break, together with the Cook-Collins family, back in Guatemala visiting Antigua (former capital of Guatemala and a UNESCO World Heritage Site), I then left Central America behind for the next leg of my visit. To read more about how our mission partners are getting on in El Salvador please refer to

<http://www.methodistchurch.org.uk/mission/world-church/caribbean-the-americas/el-salvador>

Antigua Centre

The MCCA Connexional Council Meeting, Montego Bay, Jamaica: May 26-June 2

I arrived in Montego Bay, Jamaica via Miami airport (again!) and arrived late evening on Monday 26 May in Montego Bay.



Jamaica is an island in the Caribbean Sea
Population: 2.715 million (2013 World Bank).
Language: English: **Currency:** Jamaican dollar
Prime Minister: Portia Simpson-Miller
Monarch: Queen Elizabeth II
Government: Unitary parliamentary constitutional monarchy
Capital: Kingston
District President of the Jamaican Church
Revd Everal Galbraith

The governing body of the MCCA is the Connexional Conference which meets every three years. It is presided over by the Connexional President, currently the **Revd Otto Wade**, and supported by the Connexional Vice President (who is a lay person), the Connexional Secretary, **Revd Patmore Henry** and the Treasurer of the Connexional Funds (lay). In the period between the meetings of the Conference, the Connexional Council, the executive body, acts on its behalf and it was this Council meeting that I attended along with the Executive members of the 8 districts of the MCCA - **Bahamas/Turks and Caicos Islands, Belize-Honduras, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Leeward Islands, Panama/Costa Rica and the South Caribbean.** I was warmly welcomed to the meeting and the hospitality from the Jamaican Methodist church during our stay was incredible.



Montego Bay has a beautiful coastline with lovely sandy beaches and an infamous stretch of road called the "hip strip," though you have to move fast if you want to avoid giving in to encouragement from local vendors to step into their shops to buy their wares! It was a visit of many "firsts" for me – the first time in the Caribbean, the first time in Jamaica, the first time in Montego Bay and the first time I have heard "yeah man" so many times in 1 sentence!!

Meetings began on **Wed 28 May and continued throughout the week:** Each day started early with devotions, followed by a packed programme of Council meetings. Throughout the week there were discussions on issues ranging from episcopacy, baptism and same sex marriage as well as the normal business of Connexional meetings.

One evening we all travelled to an area on the outskirts of Montego Bay to participate in an open air evangelistic service in a tiny community where the church is trying to launch a new congregation. I was struck by the confidence and enthusiasm of the church community to evangelise in the open air, being faithful to the path set by John Wesley. There was praise and worship followed by a powerful sermon led by Revd Patmore Henry.

During the week I also had various opportunities to meet privately with District Heads of Church to discuss their church contexts and how we can partner further with them and their church community. *Here you can see us all together in a group photo!*



Thursday 29 May: I visited the “Egypt Property Development Project,” about 2 hours from Montego Bay in Brownstown. This project was started in 2010 as part of the MCCA 250 Anniversary Celebrations of the arrival of Methodism in the Caribbean and the Americas. With support from the Methodist Church Britain, through the provision of an NMA grant, the plan is to continue to develop this agricultural project.

The project will not only provide an income stream for the church in the future (through the production of avocado and ackee), but will also support agricultural training for the York Castle High students based next door. It is overseen by Superintendent Minister Revd Harrison who has 27 years experience of working in agriculture before becoming a Minister.



It was fascinating to see the vastness of the land and the vision Revd Harrison has for the project and also to hear that they will be reaping by hand! Here you can see Revd Harrison with one of the avocado trees – he also helped me to plant one!

Friday evening we were treated to a “Jamaica” Night by our hosts with traditional food, poetry, singing and dancing (see below). On the Saturday I had the chance to visit the monument to Sam Sharpe – a National Hero in Jamaica – who fought against the cruel injustice of slavery.





Sunday 1 June: I experienced my first Jamaican service at St John's Methodist Church, our base for the Council meetings. Later that afternoon we celebrated the official service of the Council meeting, at St John's once more. I thought one of the district presidents had been joking when he said it would go on longer than the 3 hour service in the morning – but at just over 4 hours he was spot on! I can't remember the last time I was in such a long service, but it is quite normal in the Caribbean where they

just love to worship and praise the Lord for as long as they can, so much so that it is infectious! I had the privilege during this meeting to bring a word of greeting from our Methodist Conference. The picture shows a group of Methodist young people who sang during the service

Monday 2 June and my departure day, - I headed to the airport in the morning, taken by the wonderful Mrs Lorna Pittar who ensured I was picked up and dropped off at the beginning and end of the day.

A big thank you to every one of our partner churches and Mission Partners Maura and Paul who made my visit so memorable and ensured my welfare and well being throughout.

Recommendations from the Visit

Guatemala

- To support the church in providing a new office in the Quiche area of Guatemala in order to better serve the church community since the majority of the membership is here.
- For Guatemala Methodist Church to explore possibility of providing mission partner placements in the future

El Salvador

- Following useful discussions with mission partners, WCR to reflect on ways to enhance the mission partner process and placement

MCCA

- I discussed with various district presidents areas they would appreciate ongoing support, such as possible National in Mission Appointment applications, the possibility of receiving mission partners in the future – Partnership coordinator to follow up with individual districts.

Rachael Varney July 2014