



Native llamas grazing on the plains near the ancient Tiwanaku ruins



The Evangelical Methodist Church in Bolivia's logo, representing the diversity of Bolivian people



Night-life and night time commerce in Santa Cruz

Visit Objectives

- ONE** To accompany Revd Ruth Gee on her overseas pre-presidential visit as interpreter
- TWO** To visit several Methodist Schools
- THREE** To visit CLEM [Comunidad de Libertad y Esperanza de la Mujer/ Community of Freedom and hope for Women]
- FOUR** To begin exploring the possibilities of short term placements in the country
- FIVE** To meet with the national leaders to discuss how to further develop our relationship

+ BOLIVIA FACTS

- **Population:** just over 10 million
- **Indigenous population:** just under 4 million
- **Currency:** Boliviano
- **Current president:** Evo Morales (since 2006)
- **Capital city:** La Paz, highest in the world at 3,600 metres above sea-level
- **Main religion:** Catholicism
- **Methodism in Bolivia:** Since 1906
- **Current Methodist Church president:** Bishop Javier Rojas

Bolivia is a culturally, environmentally, climatically and linguistically diverse, land-locked nation in South America. The country has undergone huge social changes and reform since Evo Morales came to power as its president in 2002, thanks to the nationalization of its oil and gas reserves. This has benefited the large, traditionally poor indigenous population (third largest in South America after Peru and Mexico). An Aymara himself, Evo Morales is the country's first indigenous president, who rose to power from a humble background to become a trade union leader and then president. He has worked hard to improve the economic and social situation of indigenous people in Bolivia. Methodism was brought to Bolivia through North American United Methodist Church missionaries. The church has been active in the country for 107 years but became autonomous in 1969. It enjoys a close working relationship with the Bolivian state, working in partnership together in areas of health and education.



Rev. Ruth Gee preaching at Alpha and Omega Methodist Church

A wonderful welcome...

As we arrived in Santa Cruz, tired after travelling for more than 18 hours, we were met with such a warm welcome that our tiredness soon vanished! We were met by Felix Gómez (Santa Cruz District Coordinator), Rev. Ajelandro Calle (minister of Alpha and Omega Church), Milton Lima (headmaster of the Juan Wesley School) and Deddy Rivera (headmistress of the Walter Henry School) with beautiful flower garlands, a sun hat typical of the region, a guitar-led hymn serenade and a prayer of blessing for our visit. They would be our hosts for the time we were to stay in Santa Cruz.

Visiting Methodist Schools

One of the main objectives of our stay in Santa Cruz was to visit Methodist schools. The Evangelical Methodist Church in Bolivia cooperates with the government in both healthcare provision and education. Education is one of the major ways in which the church reaches out to non Methodist families in the country, by providing holistic education, high quality teaching and a nurturing environment, all underpinned by Christian values. Pupils of different denominations and of none can thrive there and aspire to fulfil their dreams and ambitions. We visited five schools in total during our stay in the country, and although all aspire to the aforementioned, the difference in resources each school has at its disposal is striking. Most schools are private in the morning sessions and state funded in the afternoon. The private sessions of school generates income for the national church.

In the first few days of our arrival, we visited the Juan Wesley American School and the Walter Henry School. We were given an extremely warm welcome in both. Methodists in Bolivia are keen to honour and give special recognition to leaders, and indeed it seemed to me that God has given them incredible grace and strength with which to do so. We arrived during an important time in the school calendar, where preparations for Wesley Day were in full swing.



Students listening to Ruth talk about Methodism in the UK



At the John Wesley American Institute Ruth gave a talk on Methodism in the UK to a group of about 30 students in the *promoción* year [A level students]. Milton Lima, the young headmaster of the school, wanted the teenagers (of mixed denominational background) to learn about the school's Methodist origins and help them realise that their school was part of something much bigger-this worldwide family of Methodists. We also shared an evening meal with a group of 20 students who were specially selected not for their academic excellence, but for showing potential in all areas of school

life. Milton Lima wants to help them aspire to more than just going onto university in Bolivia and settling down. He wants to open their eyes to the possibilities that exist in the world. They asked us many questions about life and church in the UK, and told us about their desires to help their country. One girl of about 16 or 17 years old approached me after our meal, teary eyed, to tell me that that evening had been really special for her. Her father had passed away when she was very young and life had been hard for her. But that night she had been so encouraged by being chosen to participate in that evening and hear about Christianity in the wider world. What a privilege it was to be a part of something that encouraged even just one young person to dream bigger! Many students asked me about whether they could come and visit the MCB, and I spoke to them a bit about my vision for the short-term placement programme and the possibilities I hope to explore.

At the Walter Henry School in the Montero area of Santa Cruz we were welcomed with enthusiasm, love and generosity. It is located in a far more rural area where parents noticeably had less income with which to pay their children's school fees (all Methodist Schools are fee paying in the morning), and the school often does not have enough money for teacher's salaries. The resources are very dated and the IT equipment needs a serious upgrade. Deddy Rivera, the headmistress, told us that they don't always have the money to pay for their broadband, so the IT room is not used as it could be. There are parts of the building that are unfinished. Despite all these setbacks, the school is still providing a valuable service to the local community and it is clear that it is the love of its teachers and headmistress that keeps the school running, despite the personal cost. The school also runs a crèche for those households where both parents need to go out and work (usually in the field), charging a small price for childcare.



A warm Walter Henry School welcome



Obsolete IT equipment at Walter Henry School



A world class school

Halfway through our visit we flew to the city of Cochabamba, a city at 2,558 metres above sea-level with a milder temperature than Santa Cruz. We were again welcomed in spectacular fashion, which included a brass band parade and baton swinging students, noticeably influenced by American high school culture.

The headmaster, Marcelo Aramayo, is a former senator under the first Evo Morales government and a Methodist. He had a lot to share with us about Bolivia, and was enthused by Ruth's visit as he felt it was representative of the relationship our churches enjoyed in the post-colonial era: one of

mutual respect and appreciation.

The school has 4000 students, from nursery to A levels years. Morning sessions are for privately paying students and included more services such as a nursery that looks after parents' younger children. Afternoon sessions are state funded and include fewer additional services. The school is piloting an international English language programme and hopes to become established as a bilingual school in the near future. They are also thinking about introducing Mandarin as a third language. This is the school that has potential for easy relationship building with Methodist Schools in the UK thanks to the lack of language barriers.

The school's holistic education includes teaching children how to look after the environment, by giving them little plant pots or vegetable gardens to care for, learn about and cook with from nursery level to the *promoción* level. Every classroom has an interactive whiteboard and the IT room is very high tech.

Marcelo requested that we work together on finding short term teaching volunteers to go and support the school as it seeks to become fully bilingual.

We also went on a fleeting visit to two other Methodist Schools, one in La Paz and another in Montero, and we saw that they were similarly resourced as the Juan Wesley American Institute, with potential for linking their young people to MCB's. Everywhere we went, we were taught about Bolivian traditional dance and music, and in every school the young people gave us beautiful performances of their national dances and music.

Churches we visited



"Bolivia is now in its post colonial stage and your visit to us as the Methodist Church demonstrates our Bolivian freedom and represents the respect you have for us."

Marcelo Aramayo,
Headmaster of the school
in Cochabamba



Folkloric dance in Montero

In the tropical region of Chapare, we visited three new churches that the *IEMB* had built with its own

resources. This is quite an achievement given that traditionally the church has relied on Volunteer in Mission Teams to provide funding, building material and construction personnel. Ruth was asked to share in a dedication service, using coca leaves as an important part of the ceremony. As Ruth wrote on the blog, "For these brothers and sisters, the coca leaf is an important part of their daily life and culture. Coca has medicinal properties, it is central in any community gathering and when people meet to resolve an argument, they chew coca together. In the church, coca leaves symbolise community, healing and reconciliation. Of course, the leaves are also the raw ingredient for the production of cocaine, and the production of the drug and the social problems associated with it cannot be ignored, given that Bolivia is the third largest coca producing nation in the region, after Colombia and Peru.

In all the churches we visited, we were privileged to worship the Lord in Spanish, Quechua and Aymara, two of the main indigenous groups in Bolivia (there are 36 in total). In the Churches we visited in El Alto/La Paz we were treated to dance praise and worship in Aymara tradition, as well as lovingly cooked typical Bolivian food brought by indigenous ladies in colourful cloths that kept the food steaming hot.



Church initiatives visited



What students think a Bolivian Methodist looks like

THIU RANCHO TRAINING AND RETREST CENTRE

At Thiu Rancho we were welcomed by about 30 lay pastors who had travelled from all over Bolivia for a 10 day training course on Methodism and on the vision of the Bolivian Church. We were told that it had been a time for these lay pastors to share together, cry together and rejoice together over the work they were doing for God in their churches and communities. They were people so passionate about God that many had left their families, work, husbands and children for those ten days, a huge sacrifice, especially for the women, so that they could attend this retreat and grow spiritually and be equipped for their ministries. These lay pastors are so important given that there are only 50 ordained ministers for over 200 churches in the nation. One of the indigenous Quechua women told me that it was especially difficult for women to be lay pastors in Bolivia because often their husbands were not happy with the time they spent in ministry, away from their families. This is obviously an important piece of work that has raised up leaders who are now working for the national church, a few of whom were present to share their testimony of how dedicating 10 days of their lives every year for four years had helped them get to where they were now-national leaders. MCB has been supporting this work for a number of years now through its Annual Grants process.

Ruth shared with the group what is happening in British Methodism today, and there were some similarities in what is happening in Bolivia also, in terms of church attendance and participation of young people. One of the young people attending the training, aged 15, spoke about wanting to help revive some churches where the young people were no longer attending. She wanted to set up a radio show especially for young people and play Christian music that they could relate to.



Retreat centre



Methodist Quechua student

NATIONAL IN MISSION: NÉSTOR HANCO, WORKING WITH THE CHIMANES PEOPLE AS HOLISTIC COMMUNITY EVANGELIST

The World Mission Fund supported this post between 2007/2008 and 2011/2012. Unfortunately, we were unable to personally visit the Chimánés in this western area of Bolivia (Amazon region) because the journey to this area from La Paz is too perilous by road. Néstor kindly came to see us at the IEMB's headquarters in La Paz, where he gave us a presentation of the work he has been doing among the people since 2008.



Néstor Hanco (far left) with Chimanes woman and child, distributing chickens

The Chimanes people were traditionally very poor and lacking in basics such as nutritious food, adequate housing and clothing. They subsisted on what they were able to grow on their lands. The *IEMB* felt that the state had ignored these people for too long, so it was time the church stood in the gap. The *IEMB* aimed to put a local mission partner in place to work alongside them, to help them diversify their subsistence produce, give them access to education and plant local Methodist churches where the Chimanes could receive the Word of God in their own language, Chimán, which they use on a daily basis. The church wanted to help the people preserve their culture and language, as well as give them a greater sense of community.

Five years later and glory to God, the community has flourished. Many have come to know the Lord Jesus Christ and there are at least two well organised local churches and three other congregations where the Word of God is preached to the Chimanes people. The *IEMB* has also provided training on animal husbandry and distributed chickens to each Chimán family. The church has also been helping families improve their living conditions, as well as providing material and items for spiritual growth such as instruments, TV's, electricity generators, hymn books, Bibles and other books based on Christian values that are helping them grow spiritually. On another practical level, the church has been able to work through new laws passed¹ concerning religious freedom in Bolivia to help the Chimanes people obtain important documents like birth and marriage certificates.

It is obviously a very valuable piece of work that has gained the trust of the Chimanes people over time. The *IEMB* has now assumed the cost of funding Nestor's post, demonstrating the importance it places on reaching out to the Chimanes. Nestor shared with us that one way in which we can continue supporting the work, despite the end of NMA funding, is to help the church provide seedlings and other agricultural material in order for the Chimanes to continue improving the nutritional content of their food.



Néstor Hanco and members of the Garden of Eden Methodist Church

¹ Before the law was passed the Catholic Church enjoyed its status as the official church in Bolivia, being the only church authorised to provide marriage, birth, baptisms and death certificates. This made things very difficult for the growing number of protestant/evangelical denominations. This changed when the law in favour of religious freedom was passed, much to the dismay of the Catholic Church at the time.

CLEM

We also went to visit CLEM in Montero, where we met with Tita the Director, in a town located about an hour's drive from Santa Cruz. We were again welcomed with beautiful Bolivian flowers. We were shown the premises on which CLEM members learn sewing skills that they then use to produce the beautifully handcrafted bags, stoles and purses bought by so many Methodists in the UK. We were also taken to visit the medical centre which is funded through the money raised by the sale of CLEM products. The proceeds from these sales help to pay the salaries of three cleaning staff, a pharmacist and a doctor, as well as buy equipment and medicine. Women and families pay a very small contribution towards their medical care at the centre, making the centre an invaluable and inexpensive service to the whole community. Unfortunately, they told us that funding from the UK had dried up and that they would no longer be able to rely on this income source. They were unsure about the future of the medical centre. The relationships between CLEM and the IEMB appeared strained (for example, the church did not seem to want us to spend much time at CLEM but we insisted on it).



Members of CLEM at the medical centre

All the women asked us to send their greetings and love to Maggie Stringer, the founder of CLEM, whom they love and remember with great affection.

Orphanage in Montero



Our hosts in Santa Cruz also took us to the *Orfanato de San*

Pedro [Saint Peter's Orphanage] north of Montero. The *Iglesia de la Transfiguración* [Transfiguration Church] has been running the orphanage and school for 32 years. It built with the help of North American missionaries, who have financially supported much of the church infrastructure we saw in Bolivia. The orphanage currently looks after 32 students, 7 lived on site. The school had been facing increasing financial difficulties in recent years. Global warming has badly affected local agriculture, which means that giving in the local church had been decreasing and poverty rising. Some of the pressing needs of the school include

renovating its kitchen and building better toilets. It was wonderful to meet Bismar, who was raised as an orphan at there, who went to university and then returned as a teacher once he had graduated. He said that he wanted to give something back to the school that had given him so much.

Meeting with Church National Leaders

We only discovered two days before we were about to leave Bolivia that we would not get the chance to sit down with Bishop Javier Rojas and speak to him about all that we had seen and experienced, and about how we might take the partnership between our two churches forward. However he had kindly arranged for us to spend time with the national secretaries of the church, each of whom heads up a national church department. We met with Reyna Maldonado, Finance and Stewardship Secretary; Ruben Terán, Secretary for Services (including education, health and rural work); and Julio ____ (apologies, I didn't note down his surname), Secretary for Life and Mission of the Church. The following are some of the needs mentioned during this meeting that MCB might be able to support:

- Funds for buying food for the children's homes the church runs (we did not visit this ministry so we would need to do some more research into it with the Bishop)
- Facilitate university exchanges for lecturers and students at the Methodist University they hope to build in Cochabamba by 2016.
- Continued support for lay workers or 'pastors' through Thiu Racho Retreat Centre
- In the area of health, provide medical personnel (particularly long-term doctors, psychologists and midwives) who can support their health posts in rural areas (again we did not get a chance to visit any of these)

Other requests included help towards the church's infrastructure. They plan to build more schools, expand existing ones and are seeking support for local church buildings. I explained that the MCB does not traditionally support these types of requests because our priorities are rather to support our partners in capacity building and helping them become self-sustainable.

Earlier on in the visit, the Bishop also told us during an informal conversation that they lack personnel to develop their communications and media strategy. I suggested this is something that we could perhaps help with through short-term mission personnel who could train members of the church in media-communications.

A SIDE NOTE ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Bolivia has three climates:

- 1) **tropical**, for example in Santa Cruz/Montero
- 2) **mild**, for example in Cochabamba (at 2,500 metres above sea-level and
- 3) **cold**, in La Paz/El Alto (at 3,600-4,000 metres above sea-level)

Climate change is affecting the crops grown in these different contexts, particularly in the tropical and colder regions. Sugar cane, corn and soya production is being hit in the Santa Cruz/Montero area. In La Paz/El Alto, potatoes and beans are being affected. The Bolivian glaciers are also melting. These most affected by these changes are the poor, rural, mainly indigenous farming population, whose traditional methods of farming are at risk, and whose crop yield is increasingly less as climate change continues to take its toll.

The *IEMB* would like to ask MCB to send them agricultural experts that they could exchange knowledge and expertise with.

Visit recommendations

- **Begin exploring with Bolivian Methodist Schools, Children and Youth Team and Methodist Independent Schools the possibilities of developing links between our youth, including social media links and face to face encounters**
- **Explore the possibilities of personnel exchange between *IEMB* and MCB through:**
 - agricultural experts
 - teachers (Cochamamba Christian Educational Centre)
 - university lecturer exchanges
- **Help *IEMB* explore the possibilities of a SALT group training grant that facilitates cross-cultural exchange with other LA/Caribbean churches, through Thiu Rancho Training Centre**
- **Provide mission personnel to support the church's communication strategy with a view to training up local members to continue the work (or see below).**
- **Provide medical mission personnel to support rural health posts**



Ruth and Sandra visiting the Tiwanaku ruins