

## Colombia Visit Report: 29 October– 8 November 2012.

The purposes of the visit were;

- To attend the International Reference Group for PEAC (Ecumenical Accompaniment Process in Colombia).
- To have bilateral meetings with the Council of Latin American Churches (CLAI) re ongoing support from the MCB.
- To attend the by-annual Conference of the Methodist Church Colombia and meet with the NMA's working in the country.
- To attend a Round Table of the Methodist Church Colombia with International and Regional Partners.
- To meet with CEPALC (Colombian Ecumenical Centre for Popular Communication)
- To visit the new mission being undertaken with indigenous people in the Sucre region of the country.

**Ecumenical Accompaniment Process in Colombia, (PEAC) – 29 October– 1 November.** There are many denominational accompaniment processes taking place in Colombia as churches respond to the need to support the poorest and vulnerable, caught up in violent conflict over the past 50 years. PEAC is the first ecumenical initiative and has been supported by the World Council of Churches, The Latin American Council of Churches and nine other partners in Colombia and beyond. As it develops its work the proposal is that it will put into place a programme of volunteers that will accompany communities in their call for justice. Support from international partners has established an international and National Coordinator. The International Coordinator is Revd Chris Ferguson (United Church of Canada) and the National Coordinator is Lucia Blanca (CofE).



The meeting dealt with –

- Mapping and evaluating the risk areas and priorities for action
- Defining the relationship between the local churches, national reference group, international reference group and external agencies at regional and international levels.
- The security and process for international volunteers to accompany communities.
- The relationships between National and International Coordinators.
- Fund Raising for the ongoing process
- Others.

*(A video recording of an interview with Lucia Blanca and Jim Hodgson, Americas & Caribbean Coordinator of the United Church of Canada on the role of PEAC is available on file)*

As the first time that all the key players had gathered together, it was an intense and complicated period of work during which basic issues of accountability and decision making were openly discussed and became

clearer. While international partners have a crucial role to play, the responsibility for the ongoing management and functioning of the process is to be held within the National Council of Churches. It was resolved to continue discussions on these areas through Skype and further meetings.



While the discussions demonstrated a clear need by those that had initiated the process to establish, improve and strengthen ways of taking the process forward, a visit to a community near San Onofre, demonstrated the impact and need for the presence of international accompaniment. Representatives



from the community that had recently experienced violence and terror at the hands of unknown assailants demonstrated how well they could present their case before the civil authorities. Keeping law and order in the community was the responsibility of all but the Civil Authorities could not deny their responsibility to investigate thoroughly and take action. The authorities have a constant local presence, through the army and they know what is going on and who is doing the crimes. In the almost silence presence of the visitors they local authorities and the community made their points to each other and both parties agreed a way forward that involved acknowledgement of wrong, restitution for loss and commitment to work and reconstruct by the community. It was a small instance that demonstrated how well the process could work.

**Meeting with Nilton Giese (General Secretary of Council of Latin American Churches – CLAI).** It had been sometime since I have been able to meet with this new officer of CLAI. Our meeting discussed and clarified areas of support. CLAI is the regional sponsor for PEAC but it has also other areas of concern throughout the region. An application has been submitted by both organisations for Annual Rolling grant support from the Methodist Church in Britain. While there are issues of which body should manage the ongoing support and administration of grants received from Britain to be resolved, it was agreed that the application for both CLAI and PEAC continue as one application while the local details remain to be resolved.

**The Conference of the Methodist Church Colombia, 2Friday– 3 Saturday November. Medellin, Colombia.** This is a Church that is approximately 14 years old of which the Methodist Church in Britain, The United Church of Canada, The United Methodist Church, The Council of Latin American Methodist Churches and a regional NGO known as CREAS has provided invaluable support in establishing it as growing church with a vital witness in Colombia. For the past six years, it has been led by Bishop Juan Alberto Cardona whose personal and family sacrifice has provided presence, stability and support. Bishop Cardona will continue for a further two years, and in 2014 he will hand over a stable and growing church to his successor. There is a need for its history to be properly recorded, its statistics to be developed into a source for mission, its infrastructure to be strengthened and its internal communication to be strengthened. The programme of building new churches supported by United Methodist Church Volunteer Teams is well underway, its financial structures have been substantially strengthened in the last two years and its membership has



grown to about 5,000 members, with it counting on many more children and young people to whom it ministers. Essential to the secure establishment of this Church has been a very sound theological base provided by excellent regional and national theologians. The support of ecumenical partners has also been invaluable with Bishop Francisco Duque (CofE Colombia) being very important. It is a church that is recruiting clergy (11 new deacons were dedicated) and one Presbyterian was ordained. Bishop

Cardona has gleaned good practice, procedure and pastoral care from his international partners and with local leadership secured this church. The two days spent in Conference were encouraging, the highlights of which were the way that the young people planned, developed and delivered the worship sessions and Dr Elsa Tamez (United Bible Societies, Bible translator) who provided the opening Bible studies on Salvation and Holiness from the Letter of James. During the conference I recorded video interviews with two of the NMA's for use in report making and mission advocacy by the MCB.



**Round Table of the Methodist Church Colombia and Regional and International Partners, Sunday 4 – Monday 5 November.** This provided an opportunity for a deeper analysis of the reports that had been presented to the Conference.

- Whilst tremendous advance had been made in financial accountability, the way the figures were presented and the absence of a budget made it difficult to provide the fullest analysis possible.
- The accounts of the Church were for the first time fully audited by an external independent auditor that found them in accordance with national and international audit standards.
- The United Methodist Church had required very expensive accounting software. This was necessary but the UMC and MCB would provide the initial structural support to enable the collecting, recording and securing the data.
- Theological training has been secured by providing very well qualified but expensive personnel; the immediate need was to develop this through regional training networks and national group training through the SALT programme of the MCB.
- International and regional partners would continue support, particularly developing volunteer and short and long term mission partner presence.
- The Methodist Church Colombia would continue to develop its Strategic Plan for growth and provide yearly budgets and financial statements of its activities.



Both the Conference were very moving and satisfying moments for me personally as with my colleagues in Canada, the USA, Argentina and the Region we had worked well to enable God's mission to be well secured through Methodism in Colombia.

**Meeting with CEPALC (Latin America Popular Centre for Communication), Monday 5 – Tuesday 6**

**November.** This small ecumenical body was the first such body established in Colombia, it was started in 1979 by a former nun and sociologist that had studied together and subsequently married. Amparo Beltran and Felix Antonio Posada have dedicated all their lives to ecumenism and a non politically partisan stating of the Colombian context and the suffering of the poorest in Colombia as a consequence of this context. I was able to spend an evening and a morning with them in Bogota, before travelling to Cartagena for the final stage of this visit to Colombia.



*The three prints above illustrate the different contexts of women and children in Colombian society. From left to right: Pre Colombian, at one with nature; conquest, subject to and violated by "the book"; modern, subject to the market of exploitation.*

The centre where CEPALC meets is a living testimony to the network and communities that these two saints have developed over the years. From terracotta sculptures of Mary and Joseph given to them by a community they accompany through the violence done to them, to the children's paintings that have formed the basis of the calendar they produce yearly to promote the work of CEPALC. Felix and Amparo speak of a day when forces that could not stand their sincere and non partisan telling of the Colombian story, broke into the premises with guns and batons started to vandalise and held the staff blindfolded in a room, how they urged their captors to ignore everyone else and do what they would with them. They feared for their lives at the time, but where not going to compromise on a non political partisan telling of the story. This quiet organisation has played a profound part in developing ecumenism in Colombia and has been supported by European and Canadian churches in their very necessary work. The MCB has provided a small grant for five years and commissioned documentary film work on Colombia and Guatemala from them. It is proposed that the work continue to be supported through the Annual Rolling Grants of the World Mission Fund.

Key to CEPALC's vision statement is enshrined in the following;

***"Gospel before dogma  
Discipleship to Jesus before obedience to the Pope and other hierarchies  
Beatitude before morality  
The Kingdom of God before the church"***

**Visit to Brisas del Mar and Los Palmitos, Cartagena, Colombia.** As far as possible, the Methodist Church Colombia works in communities where there is no other established church presence. This was the case with Brisas del Mar (Sea Breezes). An Afro-Caribbean community reached after a two hour journey by road from Cartagena and a further hour's journey on a motorbike.

In memory of Clinton Rabb (worker who died in the Haiti 2010 earthquake) a partnership between community, UMCOR, and the UMC has built a clinic that has become a source of excellence of basic medical care to the community. As the images enclosed demonstrate this is an excellent quality service to the 1600 people around it, where previously there was none. Full time, doctor, nurse, pharmacist and health



promoter are employed and providing a quality service. Work in the community of Brisas del Mar was initiated in partnership with grants made by the World Mission Fund.

A further two hours away is the community of Los Palmitos, this is also a work where previously there was no Church presence. In this case the work is with the indigenous Zenú people. The Zenú, were the first indigenous people encountered by the Spanish colonisation of Colombia and suffered almost complete

genocide through violence and disease introduced by settlers. Men, women and children of the Zenú, weave the narrow palm bands that are used to make a variety of handicrafts associated with Colombia. They are paid £0.33p per meter and can produce between seven and ten meters per week. Their crafts are sold for thousands of pounds in fashion shops of the USA and Europe.

For the Zenú and the people of Brisas del Mar, their livelihoods have been jeopardised by their being dispossessed of traditional land for intensive monoculture and livestock raising. The great need in these communities are for housing as in many cases, three or four families share a palm thatched mud hut with a clay floor. The Methodist manse at Los Palmitos is no exception. The house consists of two rooms and the family of four lives in the bedroom and cooks on the floor of the kitchen, with bamboo walls providing a minimal degree of privacy. It was proposed that the Methodist Church Colombia considers the priority of this work alongside many others and applies for grant support and NMA funding in 2013.



This was a very busy but very moving visit that is an example of the best that can be achieved through working in partnership with others, to extend God's mission throughout the world.

**Tom Quenet, November 2012.**

