

Central America Visit Report. Revd Tom Quenet
November 25th – December 12th 2011.

Belize. November 26th – 28th.

Purposes:

- Make pastoral visit to Mission Partner Maggie Patchett during her second tour of duty.
- Make courtesy visits with MCCA District President and other staff.
- General visit, to further understand the mission context and challenges faced by the Methodist Church in Belize.



Maggie continues to involve herself fully and passionately in the work that she has developed in response to the local churches expressed needs. This work has far exceeded the original vision for her appointment, she is putting in place the means and procedures for the children of Belize to be cared for and safeguarded with a very high level of safeguarding. Maggie works very hard and feels the urgency of delegating some of her job to others, shortly before my arrival, she had completed and despatched her

Diaconate candidating Portfolio to the UK. Maggie has built up an excellent relationship with the District President Revd Roosevelt Papouloute, he expressed the District's gratitude for Maggie's work and asked that the partnership with the Methodist Church in Britain be maintained through the appointment of further Mission Partners that are needed to develop what has become firmly established.

Having preached at Wesley Methodist Church on Sunday 27th, Advent Sunday, I met with Maggie, the District President and District Secretary and spoke together about the state and development of the relationship between our churches. For the Belize/Honduras District of the MCCA the principal current issue is the clarification of how it is being supported financially and clarification on the state of outstanding grant payments.

On Monday 28th of November, following a further three way conference with the District President we agreed that I would submit a General Grant request to the World Mission Fund. The Grant would be used to complete the foundations of a new school to be opened in Belmopan for September 2011. Maggie and I then travelled to Corozal and visited the Methodist Church there, the church has a very successful school that is attracting further government investment to upgrade the school so that it can provide extra classrooms and secondary education. The Methodist Church Belize and most other faith communities are investing a considerable amount of energy into providing schools and improving the standard of education throughout the country in partnership with the government of Belize.

Recommendation: That a general grant for £30,000 for the building of the school at Belmopan be submitted to the General Grants stream of the Methodist Church in Britain.

Honduras Monday 28th November – Friday 2nd December

Purpose:

- To meet with new Superintendent of UMC Honduras Mission and discuss development of the church's mission, ahead of Round Table meeting in El Salvador.

Revd Juan Guerrero is a Colombian Missionary serving in Honduras and paid for by the United Methodist Church. Together we visited the three areas of development of the church's mission that would later be discussed with UMC staff. The work in Honduras was started in the wake of hurricane "Mitch" in 1998 and from then to 2007 it has had 7 ministers or missionaries from Cuba, Brazil and the United States. The mission in Honduras has always been very difficult but the church has grown and now has 12 congregations and over 1200 members.

The Talanga Central Church has been cared for by Pastor Luis Soto and his wife. They have four services per week, run a radio programme and have a vision to grow to 100 people in two years. The approach for growth has been based on cell groups with a very strong emphasis on tithing. "It is our church – we have to take it forward – outside support is for the extras" the pastor affirmed during our conversation.

Another church in a community called "10th of September" ministers to the most marginalised of people in Central America under the most difficult circumstances. Juan spoke of how in winter serving communion is a challenge, both the elements have to be kept moving when they are being distributed, otherwise they would be overwhelmed with flies as they were distributed.

Revd Juan Guerrero took me to the site of what they hope will be location for the national church's headquarters. Full of passion and confidence, he demonstrated how an image on paper and the roughest of sketches can be transformed into a vision for what might be. The challenge is for those that established this work and continue to support it is to provide some encouragement through financial resources.

At a church called "Fuerzas Unidas" a suburb of Tegucigalpa, with the appearance of a favella. We were attended a "Fiesta de Becados" - festival of those that had received grants. In this case from a Texan Methodist couple who seven years ago had started a foundation to support Honduran children with scholarships. The money is administered through a local coordinator that provides accounting for how the



money has been used – grants are NOT paid in cash to children or their families. It is a symptom of the poverty of the Honduran educational system that children need this external help. I struggled with the idea that you have to be dependent upon the handouts of the rich for your education but stood in solidarity with the mothers and children that benefited from this work. The children were brilliant in their dramatic interpretations of contemporary Christian songs.

On the final day of this visit, I was taken to see work in some the rural isolated communities. Here the church has established a church in a community called “Escuapa”. People walk miles daily to receive their education and worship daily. Newly constructed by volunteer mission teams, the church it is hoped will become a focus for rural development work aimed at creating sustainable income generating agriculture.



El Salvador, Friday 2nd to Tuesday 6th of December.

Purpose.

- To attend a Round Table with the emerging churches in Central America
- To work with these churches bilaterally on the way that the MCB will support their mission over the next three years
- To plan for a visit in 2012 with British and Irish Representatives.
- To gain firsthand experience of group theological training in the region.
- To visit communities affected by floods in October that had been supported by emergency MCB grants

With Juan de Dios Pena, the young head of church we planned the visit with others from Britain and Ireland in February 2012. We further talked about the strategy for developing the bilateral part of the relationship between Church in El Salvador and the MCB. Similar conversations were also held during the visit with Francisco Guzman, from the Methodist Church in Nicaragua and Mario Chanchavac of the Methodist Church in Guatemala. The outcome of these was that pending agreement by the MCB grant streams

- (a) Rolling grant applications would be made for the next three years to support the churches with their mission priorities.
- (b) Part of the grants would be used for relationship and communication development between the churches and MCB
- (c) Also agreed that we would try and support the Central American churches with their application for membership of the World Methodist Community.



We visited the communities of those affected by floods to distribute food parcels with young people from Costa Rica that were visiting the country to support the relief work being done. The floods had most impacted on El Salvador and many people were still homeless as the floods were being very slow in receding.

In consultation with the General Board of Global Ministries, the UMC's General Board of Higher Education, Duke University in North Carolina and others, El Salvador has become the hub for theological training to over 50 students from the region. The training takes place in two ten day periods in May and December of each year. Tutors travel from Duke University and deliver the courses. Students submit work in between times that is assessed by the staff from Duke. In observing the course I noted

- Excellent participation
- Traditional teaching lecture style, being attentively received.
- Students thirsty for knowledge.
- Disappointed that the course gives no credit to the students – but does give them the preparation and confidence to engage in academically recognised courses.
- Good quality books in Spanish being given to the registered students.
- As well as registered students many others had turned up that were graciously absorbed into the activities.
- Ministry Commission taking place at the same time – they had been invited by Juan De Dios and others to give themselves the credentials of testing by UMC colleagues.

Further to bilateral discussions with the regional heads of the churches taking part in the theological training course a Round Table discussion was also held on Monday 5th of December.

- It took place and a good spirit of sharing and openness
- Decided on a course of action to develop regional Christian Education capacity in each of the three countries.
- A UMC mission partner in ES and three other equal NMA applications in Honduras, Guatemala and, Nicaragua.
- Accepted the need to involve the MCCA Belize/Honduras District in the process.

This was a hard and extensive but very rewarding period of travel. Felt that meeting them all together in one place advanced forward significantly the willingness to regional thinking.

Jamaica, Cayman Islands and Cuba. Tuesday 6th – Sunday 11th of December.

Purposes;

- Joint visit with Church of Scotland regional staff member Jennie Chinembiri to Cuba acting as translator and background guide.
- Opportunity to openly discuss with Presbyterian Church Cuba, their understanding for tensions between the Methodist Church Cuba and its partners at the ecumenical seminary of Matanzas.

Reaching Cuba involved an overnight stay in Jamaica where Jennie had been visiting the Church of Scotland partner in the country during which we took the opportunity to have a meal with the Methodist District President. On the 7th we travelled to Cuba via Grand Cayman. This was a first visit for me and though in transit through the island, we took the opportunity to connect with the Church of Scotland partner on the island (there is no Methodist Church on the Cayman Islands). The few hours enabled us to visit the recently extended and very exclusive Prep and High School that is owned by the United Church Synod of Jamaica and the Cayman Islands. The institution is very proud of offering the best education on Grand Cayman, it is supported in this by the Elmsley Memorial Church on the Island. The Jamaica and Cayman Synod of the

United Church is made up of Presbyterian, Congregational and Disciples of Christ Churches that came together in 1992 after separate histories dating back to 1800.



The first full day in Cuba was split into an early morning courtesy visit with Bishop Ricardo Pereira of the Methodist Church, followed by the rest of the day spent in the company of the Moderator of the Presbyterian –Reformed Church in Cuba, Revd Daniel Izquierdo Hernandez. We spent the day together, walking around Habana, stopping for coffee and after a further walk a late lunch. During this time Jennie

attended to various details of the Church of Scotland relationship and together we shared about the broken relationship between Methodists and Presbyterians in Cuba. The hurt is evident on the Presbyterian side and the interpretation by them is that the Methodist Church's move away from its ecumenical partners arose from an insubstantial set of events that provided the pretext for the Methodist Church to establish its own Seminary.

Undoubtedly the Methodist Church has become very "Charismatic" over the past 15 years and especially during the term of office of the current head. This has led to the previously reported growth in membership of the church, it has also led to a theological and liturgical distance from the church's more liberal partners. Bishop Ricardo Pereira, attributes the growth and necessary distancing as responding to the spiritual and emotional needs of evangelising Cubans of afro Caribbean origins.

It struck both Jennie and I that much of the conversations taking place were doing so while travelling in order to get to know Cuba and each other. Though it felt strange not to be talking about these matters in an office, on reflection the start of a journey in this way was a strong symbolic representation of what after all was a very real, open and honest time of reflection by a most sincere person.

The next day our pilgrimage together led us to travel to the Evangelical Theological Seminary of Matanzas. On several previous visits to Cuba I had found it difficult to visit this institution. The day had started out with Jennie and I visiting two of the house churches or missions of the Bishop's church in Habana. These visits were inspirational in that the young leaders spoke sincerely, with conviction, enthusiasm and commitment about their faith and growth of their mission.

At Matanzas I was struck by the fact that so little had changed since my previous visit in 2006 only the grounds were slightly less well maintained. In contrast to previous visits the place seemed noticeably absent of students and or faculty members, that led me to wonder about the depth of the impact that not having a Methodist presence may be having.

On the journey back later in the day we stopped and ate together with Daniel and felt that a good basis of trust and empathy had been established on which the Church of Scotland could build an ongoing relationship with and from which the MCB could also relate to in the future.

The second stage of our journey in Cuba started though with a breakfast meeting that I had with two members of the Methodist Church, one of which, Elena Moreno had been a Mission Live visitor before she had left Cuba. This was the first visit that she had made home after a three year absence, she had married and had two children in between, none of which Elena's family in Cuba had shared in. Elena had gained a Masters in Theology in Guatemala and was teaching in a Bible college that we hope can be used by our partner in Guatemala to train its members and pastors.

We then met with Revd. Francisco Marrero, President of the Presbyterian Church in Cuba, again this was a conversation had during travelling and eating together and not in an office. During this Jennie rehearsed again the steps that she would take to revitalise the relationship with the Church of Scotland upon her return and we spoke briefly about the reasons for the distance with the Methodist Church. In the journeying together I was giving more translation than with the Moderator and my previous knowledge of Cuba corrected and enhanced by the President's knowledge enabled Jennie to ask many questions about the Cuban revolution, its causes, present state and ongoing developments. Again the experience this day became a symbol of a journey where we were building up trust, learning and exploring with each other on the way to building relationships.

The final day in Cuba we attended worship in both the Central Presbyterian Church and the Vedado Methodist Church in Habana. The minister at the Presbyterian Church was Revd Hector Mendez, a gracious older colleague that had endured much after the revolution but whose faith had stayed firm and grown from the experience. The service was warm and well attended with hymns, readings, long set of announcements and greetings, prayers and a short sermon. It concluded with anointing with oil and blessing.



In contrast the Methodist Service was packed to overflowing 1200 people present, noisy, led by young people singing choruses, dancing in the aisles, and manifestations of the gifts and joys of the Holy Spirit. The service we had left was concluded after an hour and a half, the one we arrived at had an hour more to go, part of which was Jennie offering a testimony that impressed the congregation, by the content, delivery and evidence that here was a young evangelical woman of a church in the UK that had been entrusted with a senior position of leadership. Before departing for the airport, Bishop Pereira wanting to impress, took us with his family and assistants to a location in Habana where we were treated to a splendid meal of roast pork.

This rounded off a very busy but fruitful set of visits, for which I am grateful to God, the Methodist Church in Britain and my Church of Scotland colleague for the richness of the experience that it is my privilege to share.

Tom Quenet. Partnership Coordinator. December 2011.