Did you visit Machu Pichu? Walk the Inca Trail? Experience the culinary delights of Lima? These are the usual questions that are asked when I say that I have just come back from Peru. Other than one invitation to taste Cervice (a Peruvian dish of raw fish & sea food) I was not there for the tourist experience but had been invited to the General Assembly of the Methodist Church in Peru.

The invitation came after a few aborted attempts to begin a twinning partnership between the Chester & Stoke on Trent District and the Methodist Church in Peru. Over the last couple of years, I had exchanged emails with Bishop Samuel Aguilar, and we had had one zoom conversation with leaders from both parties but in reality, it was not easy to form relationships. Language was one barrier but even more significant was the fact that neither of us could imagine the others context. As we all lived through the Covid pandemic, it became more difficult to find the energy for conversation or to understand the devastating effect covid was having on the church in Peru. I wondered if the idea of a partnership was just another thing to be shelved post pandemic, a nice idea but simply not possible.

It was therefore a delight to receive an invitation to attend the General Assembly of the Methodist Church in Peru taking place between 7-10th July. As a District we felt that this was an opportunity to explore a partnership and so made the decision to send a small group which consisted of myself, Rev Liz Singleton, Super of North Staffs Circuit and Ned Hilton a student and Spanish speaker. We were grateful to Sandra Lopez at the Global relationships team for facilitating the visit.

We arrived in Lima on 5th July and were able to spend a day visiting the headquarters of the Methodist Church of Peru, in Lima. Here we met many church leaders who were already gathered to plan the assembly. We were also given a tour of the building and especially of the transformational work that had been done in turning part of a large colonial building into affordable accommodation for young people working in Lima.

On 7th July we moved to the Betana Retreat Centre, located near George Chavaz Airport to attend the General Assembly. Although all in Spanish we were able to appreciate this time of worship & testimony and have a sense of the missional opportunities that the members were engaging with. It was a real privilege to be present when the new Bishop Cesar Antonio Llanco Zavaleta was elected and to offer him greetings from the Methodist Church in Great Britain. The assembly also offered the opportunity to meet and share with our Methodist brothers and sisters from Chile, Bolivia, El Salvador, USA and Central America.

The Assembly Culminated on Sunday 11th July with a special service of consecration for the new Bishop and ordination of presbyters. It was a wonderful celebration, at the end of which Superintendent ministers were appointed and sent.

With three days left before we flew home, the outgoing Bishop, Samuel acted as our guide as we visited churches and projects around the city. In Commas we visited the House of Hope which was set up in March ‘22 to offer support for migrant families, especially from Venezuela. The project offered day care for children, dormitory style accommodation for single mothers and cooked meals for approx. 100 people every day. They had also set up a carpentry workshop, making use of redundant machinery which was donated 40 years ago by a Swiss Mission society, to teach women how to make simple furniture.

Carmen, their irrepressible lay pastor has plans to create a sewing room so local woman might develop skills and start their own businesses. They are in the process of engaging with legal advisors, health professionals, mental health counsellors so that the church may be a hub offering wholistic support to migrant families. The church itself has few resources and so the whole of the project is dependent on partnership with UNHCR, charities and other NGO’s. It was truly inspirational to see.

At Carrabaylo we saw a smaller project but with similar aspirations. Carrabaylo is literally built upon what used to be the refuse tip of Lima. It is a place of deep poverty and yet one in which the Methodist church has chosen to remain. For a number of years, a small fellowship has met in the home of local lay leader and her family. With the onset of the pandemic, the congregation became more involved in feeding families who were in deep poverty. Then, in a step of faith and with a loan from the wider Methodist church, they bought the building next door to their meeting place and have a vision for a day school for children as well as a desire to renovate an old bread oven as a resource to the community. The building needs much work but with the enthusiasm and faith of the local pastors I do not doubt it will succeed.

Our final visit was to the seminary in Lima, where we were able to meet with the Director, Rev Rosanna Panizo Valladares and hear of how their ministerial training has moved online during the pandemic and now continues online enabling them to draw on expertise from their partners around the world. It was a joy to hear of how committed the church is to ministry and training of all people, both lay and ordained, and especially with an emphasis of encouraging women leaders.

By necessity our trip to Peru could only be for a short time and sadly we did not have the chance to visit the growing church in Cousco or the inspirational work in the Amazon, however we came home inspired by a numerically small church who are engaging with communities, often in the poorest areas, empowering leaders, working in partnership and believing that God is at work bringing hope and transformation.

The Chester & Stoke on Trent District are optimistic that we can grow a fruitful friendship with the church in Peru, acknowledging that we have much to learn and offer through such a partnership.

Our hope is that delegates from Peru may be invited to next years Methodist conference and that in 2024 we might take a group from the district to visit our brothers and sisters on the other side of the world.