The Country

Until the mid-nineties Argentina was a comparatively wealthy country in South America. Then IMF austerity measures left hundreds of thousands of Argentinians without pay, pensions or benefit payments. Now there is 34% unemployment and 57% of people are living in poverty. Children are dying of hunger again, 70% of them are defined as poor. It was described to me as, ‘The most ‘Northern’ of the South American nations undergoing ‘Latin Americanisation’’. Argentina remains an exporter of food, producing bumper harvests of soya, corn and maize; the problem is not poverty, but justice.

There is a sense of political impotence and no one expressed any optimism that the presidential elections in April/May would bring either change or hope. There is however some solidarity in the face of a common plight. Neighbourhood Assemblies and organisations of unemployed workers are springing up and undertaking community action. The recent meeting of the World Social Forum and the election of ‘Lula’ as president in Brazil were mentioned as signs of hope that new understandings of power and leadership might develop and bring change.

Iglesia Evangélica Metodista Argentina

In Buenos Aires, where I met with Bishop Nellie, Humberto Shikiya and Sylvia Gutierrez, connexionality was mentioned as one of the gifts the Church can bring to this situation. As well as co-operating on local social projects, the leaders of the historical and the newer pentecostal churches meet to think about national issues together. There are structures for working together on theological training, human rights, indigenous peoples and Christian education.

The common view is, ‘If you want peace, work for justice!’ It was acknowledged that much of this ecumenical work is not reflected at local level. The Methodist Children’s Christian Education Secretary is a part-time NMA appointment, the rest of the week Sylvia Gutierrez is principal of a secondary school. She is building a network of representatives from each of the seven regions of Argentina and aiming to develop guidelines for ways of working based on a modern understanding of how children learn. It became clear later in my visit that local expectations are much more practical and expressed in terms of teaching materials and resources.

British missionaries established Methodism in Buenos Aires in 1834 and the first Methodist Church building was completed in 1874. The Revd Arne Klausen is currently minister there and introduced me to the building and the work that goes on there, all of which would probably amaze those early
founders. It finds itself now in a capital city, which is bustling with people all week but empty on a Sunday, consequently there is no Sunday morning service and no children’s work. Worship takes place on Sunday evenings and, more recently, on Thursday lunchtime. Mid-week groups include Alcoholics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, a support group for divorced people and a drop-in for the homeless. The work with the homeless is growing and can attract 150 people in colder weather.

**Patagonia**

Argentina is enormous; it was a three-hour flight from Buenos Aires to Río Gallegos where I was to meet the Revd. Leonardo Felix, and the superintendent minister Claudio. It was a shock though to discover that they had driven 1800km to meet me!

Leonardo Felix and his wife, Silvina Cardoso, who is also a minister, are both NMA appointments and live in Trelew. Claudio lives in Bariloche. This is the area where the Welsh landed in the 1860s and still preserve their language and their Welsh chapels. There are 21 Methodist churches in this area and 9 Methodist ministers. Although Trelew and Bariloche are both in the far north of Patagonia in Chubut province, they currently mark the southernmost extent of the Methodist Church in the country. That is why Claudio and Leo are so keen to take the church further into the 96,000 km$^2$ of Patagonia, including the whole of the province of Santa Cruz.

The main towns are along the coast and the southerly ones last saw a Methodist pastor in 1868 when Thomas Bridges of the South American Missionary Society (SAMS) was here. Each place has been explored and the question asked, ‘Could Methodism have something to contribute here?’ All the Argentinian ministers were asked if they knew any members who had moved to the South. In one place as they began work they found a Baptist minister had just been stationed there, they met and decided they should leave her to work in that town and moved on.

In Río Gallegos the main expressions of Christianity available to its 90,000 inhabitants are the long established and fairly conservative Roman Catholic Church and the perhaps equally conservative Pentecostal churches. They felt the social and political spirituality of the Methodist Church did indeed have something new to offer and began to gather a small congregation, mainly of people who had some sort of church background but nowhere to develop their faith.

Leo comes south with a colleague every two months and stays ten days or a fortnight. For those who lead in the interim some training is being offered in leading worship and preaching, visiting and communicating Good News.
His visits are clearly a major event. He took me to meet some of the members on the evening I arrived and a veritable feast was in preparation. This was my introduction to ‘Assado’ - a monumental barbecue that bears no relation to the English outdoor tradition. Many kitchens are equipped with this large indoor cooking area, which uses charcoal and has its own chimney. Much local beef, mutton and sausages was cooked and consumed. A most convivial evening was enjoyed by all.

Two days later I travelled with Leo to Ushuaia, an eight-hour journey by car that brought several school history lessons to life as we took a ferry across the Magellan Straits and on to Tierra del Fuego. Ushuaia is truly the end of the earth, there is nowhere further. I was surprised by the number of tourists, but it is stunningly beautiful and from here you can take trips to the Antarctic or up onto the Andean glaciers. There is a tourist railway, with a steam engine made in Daventry and a Welsh engineer. I was also surprised at the extent of the drug problem in this peaceful looking town of 60,000 people, but neither beauty nor distance are barriers to such things. Economic problems were in evidence here too; the number of derelict factories easily outnumbered the functioning ones, despite the island’s status as a tax-free zone.

This is the also the naval base most involved in the war over the Malvinas/Falklands. It is still very much a live issue; I saw several memorials and statements that the islands are Argentinian.

I met some of the new church group around Hugo and Azucena’s kitchen table. The conversation quickly turned challengingly to truth and trust. How much truth is there in what the (US/UK/Argentinian) government says? Who can you trust? Does power corrupt?

There was a stark contrast with this patient way of building church and that going on in the town centre where the Mormons are building the most enormous church.

The Next Stage
Leo and Claudio are clear that for the work to progress further, a new phase of development must begin. What they have done so far is impressive, but to support the groups in Rio Gallegos and Ushuaia and to develop the contacts in Rio Grande from over a thousand miles away is impossible. They have asked a couple (called Willy and Viviana) from the north to consider leaving their home and jobs (as pharmacist and music teacher) and to come and live in Rio Gallegos. The church has found money to buy a house for them and support them initially. Willy and Viviana have agreed. Willy (far right) has accompanied us on this trip to Ushuaia to meet the people there and will be presented to the congregation in Rio Gallegos this evening. They will then move to the new house in a week or so. I could only hope that The Methodist Church in Britain would be given the opportunity to be part of the next stage of this exciting development.
Back to Rio Gallegos
On Sunday morning we set off northwards again along empty, gravel roads aiming to be back for the Communion service in Rio Gallegos.

The service takes place in the integral garage of Pedro and Maria Hammond’s house, their daughter Agustina helps the children find things to do. The table is covered with a red poncho and a home-made cross stands in the maté (usually used for communal tea-drinking when they meet), bread has been specially made and wine too from calafate berries picked on a church outing last year. A congregation of thirty or so gather, a real mixture of differently-abled people of visibly different races. The service sheet (there is even one in English for me!) includes the songs we sing, they too come from different lands, and I feel the liturgy shows Catholic and Celtic influence. Leo preaches on Mark 1 and 1 Corinthians 9 dwelling on the way we teach and learn and how copying others won’t work for long, the individual, and the church, must find its own ‘right way’ in order to be authentic, ‘anew in every age’. Willy is commended and welcomed, we all lay hands on him and agree to support and respect him all we can.

There is a real sense of being an early church here. Potential, risk and hope are palpable. There is strength and weakness in knowing that we all have a part to play in what happens next.

Mendoza

Everyone told me I was travelling to a beautiful city and so it is. In the west of the country, towards the foothills of the Andes lies the major wine-producing area of the country. Mendoza itself is an old yet very up to date city with tree lined avenues and elegant squares, a thriving commercial and tourist centre. As elsewhere in this country there are signs of the extensive immigration of the past, I saw the Italian School and the English School, public monuments presented by the French and Israeli governments. If, like me, you speak little Spanish, here it is always worth trying any European languages you do know.

The Revd Sue Jansen has been a Mission Partner here for almost two years. She lives in a simple flat in the city centre church and works as a chaplain in a school and as minister of a church in one of the ‘barrios’ called Patron Santiago, a poor housing estate on the edge of the city. Her superintendent minister Ariel lives above her in a third floor flat, an interesting venue if you have a large dog, which doesn’t do stairs and the back yard is the roof! It is also an interesting base for Sue, not because of the plumbing and the erratic hot water, but because having a traditional, conservative church base for challenging work on the margins of society brings its own tensions.
**Patron Santiago**
Life here is hard. Living conditions are basic and very overcrowded, a small two-bedroom bungalow will often house two large families, this places the health, safety and education of the children at risk. Drugs, alcohol and theft are commonplace and have been driven out of the church at some cost.
In Argentina 40% of the population lives on less than 400 pesos (£80) a month. In the barrios this applies to almost everyone. One of the liveliest women I met at the church has a benefit of 320 pesos a quarter (£21 a month) and the only work she can get is delivering supermarket leaflets three times a week from 11pm to 11am in a dangerous neighbourhood for which she gets 30 pesos a week. On this sort of income few can afford to pay their rent, so the council has no money for services or repairs.
The church building is one of the bungalows in the middle of the estate and is a homely, welcoming place. It is soon clear that in this family of faith people share and look after each other.

**Children’s work**
Sunday School takes place on a Saturday beginning with breakfast and its social as well as its learning aspects are taken seriously by its 10 adult leaders who meet every Wednesday to plan. The lectionary is followed but recently the 30 four to eleven year olds who attend have also tackled topics such as ‘violence’ and ‘love’. The leaders make a conscious commitment to be at worship at least three weeks out of four, to grow in faith and to undergo training. (I reflected on our commitment to section 66 of our standing orders in Britain, which outline similar requirements for children’s workers in Britain.) The children had recently received end of year reports, which valued achievements such as friendship, solidarity, self-expression, participation, self-discipline and honesty. One father is a carpenter and offered to lead a project with the children. He was asked for a written proposal and the idea was accepted. Aims included developing a positive attitude to work and some income generation as well as developing God-given skills. Not all the children come to church on Sunday; some are Catholics, who come with their priest’s blessing, since their church offers nothing similar.
The work is an excellent example of qualities we have identified in the Children’s Section as requirements of ‘best practice’, and is successful in many ways not least numerical having had two leaders and six children a year ago.

**Colegio Alberto Schweitzer**
The role of chaplain is described by Sue as ‘being a rock and accompanying students and staff’. She is in the building soon after six every morning to accompany the cleaner as she opens up, the secondary school pupils arrive at 0730 and work until 1300, then the school becomes a primary and the younger children work from 1330 until 1800. I was there during the school summer holidays which last from mid-December until mid-March, but the teachers were still working full days, preparing and planning.
Education in Argentina is free, although absolutely all materials must be paid for. At this Methodist school the state pays the teachers salaries (erratically, sometimes over a month late) but other expenses are covered by fees. Pupils pay a registration fee of 110 pesos and then 40 per month for primary and 60 for secondary.

The school specialises in business administration and in helping children with behavioural difficulties. Many students have been expelled from other schools and this is their last resort. They have psychologists on the staff and the school is considering selling their services to other schools as a way of easing their financial problems.

The school takes its name seriously (though why it was chosen no one could tell me) and for a week every September they follow a theme on Albert Schweitzer's life and work. The chaplain role is clearly valued, though I suspect this is in part due to the qualities and skills Sue brings to the role, but she is deeply involved in management and strategy meetings and they would dearly love her to put more time into teaching English, but this would only take time from her ministry in the barrio.

The school has an interesting link with a Methodist school in Guinea and want to develop a joint programme of cross-curricular moral education.

Street work in the city
Sue has an affinity and deep concern for those on the street. You don’t walk far with her before she is greeted by someone who lives most of their life on the street, often with serious problems. The number of homeless is increasing; she was most concerned to discover a small group of boys newly taken to the street and clearly vulnerable. She is working with Ariel and the city centre church to extend their awareness and concern and with other churches to cooperate in this work, with the aim of providing a night shelter.

Recommendations
Encourage a new NMA application from Patagonia as Leo and Silvina come to the end of their five years.
Maintain contact between Silvia Gutierrez and the Children’s Section and offer a copy of the Kaleidoscope training course for information.
Support the link between Colegio Schweitzer and the Methodist School in Equatorial Guinea as a good model of South-South collaboration of potential benefit to other parts of the Methodist family.