

VISIT TO THE EVANGELICAL METHODIST CHURCH IN BOLIVIA (IEMB)

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11th April – 23rd April 2017

Visit Objectives

1. To represent Methodist Women in Britain (MWiB) on behalf of Methodist Church Britain (MCB) during my pre- MWiB Presidential year.
2. To form links with the Methodist Women's Federation of Bolivia (FEFEME).
3. To assess the feasibility of working together with FEFEME and IEMB to encourage, equip and enable women of Bolivia to learn new skills with which to support their families, to take on leadership roles within their communities and to provide safe spaces for those at risk.

Introduction

Bolivia is a culturally, environmentally, climatically and linguistically diverse, land-locked nation in South America and, like so many other South American countries has a history of colonisation, revolution, military dictatorship and corrupt government. Evo Morales, current president of Bolivia is now approaching his 3rd term of office. Voted into office in 2002, he is the country's first indigenous president. Popular with rural communities, Evo Morales has made many changes, nationalising oil, gas, mineral and water reserves. However, within the cities the population are becoming tired of unfulfilled promises and object to the attention given to indigenous communities.

Methodism was brought to Bolivia through North American United Methodist Church missionaries in 1906 when the Bolivian constitution was changed to permit freedom of worship. In 1969 the Evangelical Methodist Church became autonomous and elected its first national bishop.

In 1975 a popular movement of the Aymara, representing the majority of church membership, initiated a change resulting in the election of 3 national secretaries. Their responsibilities were:

- national and international ecumenical relations
- life and mission (including education and promotion of the interests of women)
- social services (including rural ministry and health services).

IEMB maintains two hospitals and administers five health centres, promoting public health. Through a formal agreement with the Bolivian government, IEMB sustains and directs 16 educational centres and carries out programs of rural and community development.

In 2006, during the celebrations of 100 years of Methodist witness in Bolivia, IEMB received the 'Order of the Condor', the highest honour that can be bestowed by the

Republic of Bolivia, in recognition of its social, educational and pastoral work and its solidarity with the social movements in Bolivia.

The Visit

Monday 10th April – Departure from UK

Checking in at Heathrow airport at 3.30am we waved a fond farewell to England as we set off for Madrid then on to Lima in Peru, for an overnight stay.

Tuesday 11th April – Arrival

Setting off again at 3:15am we travelled on to El Alto international airport in Bolivia. Arriving at 11:00am we were greeted warmly by Wilson Saucedo, the Volunteers in Mission (VIM) and Projects co-ordinator, who would be our interpreter and mentor for the first few days. Following an ‘interesting’ taxi journey, we arrived at the John Wesley guest-house in La Paz which would be our base throughout our visit.

Official Welcome

Following a restful afternoon we were treated to a warm Bolivian welcome! We were met by Pastor Genaro Quispe (National Life and Mission Secretary), Agustina Castillo (FEFEME leadership), Isabel Vallejos (FEFEME National Women Promoter), Bishop Modesto Mamani (Bishop of IEMB), Nieves Yana (FEFEME leadership), Nicolas Zurita (National Finances Secretary) and Luisa Marquez (Pastor Genaro's Secretary). We were decorated with fresh flower garlands, treated to a Bolivian welcome song followed by hymns accompanied by a piano accordion and a prayer blessing for our visit. After exchanging greetings we were treated to a typical Bolivian meal at a local family run restaurant.



Wednesday 12th April – Opportunity to acclimatise to the altitude and rest.

The busy city of La Paz is 11,975ft above sea level which can create problems with altitude sickness caused by reduced levels of oxygen in the air. Chris was affected quite badly initially so this day of rest was essential before we started on our official visits. Today was ‘Children’s Day’ in Bolivia so as I went across to the local store for supplies the street was filled with the sound of children’s voices, entertainers and popping balloons – along with busy traffic and hooting horns. Life was certainly not going to be quiet for the next couple of weeks!

Thursday 13th April – Maundy Thursday

After a relaxing start to the day we embarked upon a guided ‘Red Bus’ tour of La Paz accompanied by Wilson. This was an opportunity to learn about the history, culture and geology of this fascinating city and of Bolivia as a whole. We became aware of the divide

between the rich and poor areas of the city, of street vendors and street people – and, to quote Wilson, ‘crazy Bolivian drivers’! Stopping briefly at the top of the south side of the city we were able to walk into the ‘Valle de la Luna’, an incredible area formed of gigantic rock formations.

Friday 14th April – Good Friday

Arising early for a 6:00am pickup we were collected by Bishop Modesto. After a short journey we collected a second vehicle, driven by Nicholas, the three FEFEME ladies 4 large cases of Coca Cola, 2 guitars, visual aids and a wooden lectern which was fastened to the roof! Driving out of La Paz we entered El Alto city – the fastest growing city in Bolivia where street names and house numbers are scarce and the majority of roads were still under construction.



Negotiating our way through what would become a familiar route we eventually left El Alto and entered the Altiplano area of Bolivia. This is a vast agricultural plain dotted with scattered villages and farms. Several villages form a group and work together as a cooperative managed by Community Administrators. IEMB has several districts in this area and works closely with the administrators to help the communities who are, on the whole, Aymaran subsistence farmers.

After a 4hr drive we reached our first destination, Puna Central District, where several village communities had gathered for Easter celebrations and worship. Here, Chris and I experienced the first of many warm, enthusiastic and wonderful welcomes. Bishop Modesto conducted the service which included singing accompanied by a brass band. Preaching the story from the Cross to the Resurrection, comparing the struggles of this life to salvation, hope and fulfilment in Christ, the whole congregation knelt in prayer to receive a blessing. It was a very moving experience.



We were then served with a typical Bolivian meal of soup followed by potatoes and meat – and Coca Cola. It was good to have the opportunity to chat to our host and hostess, to hear about the devastation caused by the prolonged drought and the effect climate change was having upon the region.

After the meal the gifts of Coca Cola and a guitar were presented and we were encouraged to join in an Easter celebration of music and dance. At 4:00pm Bishop Modesto tactfully suggested that we move on to our next venue – the Central Altiplano District.

On the road once again we found our way cross-country eventually! Arriving just two hours later than expected. Once again, we were warmly welcomed by the villagers as they gathered for their evening Easter celebration – using the new lectern!

Leading the worship as before, Bishop Modesto was visibly moved by the response of his congregation to the message of forgiveness and new life in Christ. Chris, Modesto and I sang a Taize chant which was enthusiastically received.

After presenting the gifts we were about to take our leave when our hosts insisted that we join in the meal they had prepared. So, sitting side by side on a bed, we enjoyed once again the richness of Bolivian hospitality consuming more soup followed by potatoes, plantain and meat.

Arriving back at base around midnight we enjoyed a well-earned rest.

Saturday 15th April

Leaving at 8:00am this morning we were again collected by Bishop Modesto and along with Wilson, Isabel and Nieves we went to visit Tabita House in El Alto. This is a project that was funded initially by the United Methodist Church of N America but this funding has now ceased. The initial aim was to build a 5 storey building which would provide accommodation for a) homeless women and women needing refuge from domestic abuse b) kitchen facilities providing food and lessons in cooking c) rooms with teaching and craft facilities d) small retail units that could be rented to generate income for the centre.



Only three storeys were completed before funding ceased so the decision has been taken to make the existing building structurally sound and waterproof thus preserving the work already done. Once the building is waterproof, the intention is to finish off and equip the existing rooms so that work with disadvantaged women can begin.

El Alto city, as previously mentioned, is rapidly expanding with growing social and economic problems.

Lunching in the airport café, we then set off to take a late afternoon/evening service at Iglesia Galilea in El Alto District. The community gathered on a plot of land they had recently purchased with the intention of building a church. The congregation currently meet in a nearby house, the home of our host and hostess.

Once again Bishop Modesto conducted the worship which was followed by enthusiastic



music and dancing and wonderful Bolivian hospitality. This time we shared our meal in the small house-church before leaving at about 9pm.

Dropping us at the cable car station Bishop Modesto began his 6 hour journey to Cochabamba to take an Easter morning service!

Easter Sunday 16th April

Rising at 5:00am we joined the Protestant Church Resurrection March led by the Salvation Army. We cheated slightly because the march went past the John Wesley Centre so we joined in when the IEMB group arrived! Marching uphill to the Methodist school sports hall we experienced an extravaganza of worship and liturgical dancing with over 2000 fellow Christians.

Walking back to the John Wesley Centre we joined Wilson and his cousin, also named Wilson, for breakfast before catching a taxi to Iglesia La Resurreccion where, again we received a warm welcome by La Paz district. The church was celebrating its 70th year so many representatives from the district were present and contributed to the worship.



Over lunch we had the opportunity to meet Simon, Anne and their young family, mission partners from Switzerland training leaders to lead others. We had a second opportunity to meet during the final weekend of our visit.



La Paz has a growing cable car system, to ease congestion on the streets so, having completed our Easter worship celebrations we were taken by Wilson to see the city from above – a breath-taking experience! From here it was easy to see the differences in the city between the southern more affluent society and the favela-style housing in the north accessed by a network of steps and small alleyways. La Paz, like many large cities across the world is a city of contrasts.

We said our goodbyes to Wilson who was awaiting the arrival of a VIM group from America – a combination of medics and construction workers who were going out to supply water pipes and healthcare to a village in the Altiplano region.

Easter Monday 17th April

Having made the decision not to return to Valle de la Luna because of ongoing problems with altitude we were taken by Pastor Genaro, Isabel, Agustina and Nieves to La Paz zoo where amongst other creatures we had the chance to see the magnificent Condor - the National bird of Bolivia. In the afternoon we visited the Museum of La Paz which turned out to be an historic Franciscan monastery. Our young guide, trying to improve his

English could not quite understand what a 'Methodist' was and although we explained that we too were Christian, but not of the Catholic tradition, he wasn't at all convinced!

Tuesday 18th April

Once again at 6:00am we set off for another 4 hour drive to the Altiplano region with Pastor Genaro, our three ladies and Elaine, our interpreter for the day. This time we were visiting the Lago District Women's group. About 50 ladies of all ages were present along with their young children and some partners. We met in a community hall, which also serves as safe overnight accommodation for women who have travelled a distance.

After the traditional welcome ceremony and opening worship led by the ladies, I spoke, as requested, about leadership from a Susanna Wesley perspective. At this point loud thunder and pouring rain created a natural break in proceedings, to be resumed when the noise subsided!

We were then taken outside to watch the preparation of our meal. In addition to the traditional soup we were shown how quinoa is used. Now an important cash crop for Bolivian farmers it is rich in nutrients.



After lunch Chris conducted a Bible study based on Ruth encouraging the ladies to talk about how it felt to be a stranger in a foreign land. Both sessions were well received.

Before leaving we were taken to an upper room where the ladies had set out an exhibition of the craftwork they produce to supplement the family income. Chris and I were presented with knitted waistcoats and Pastor Genaro with a scarf.

The return journey took about 6 hours due to heavy traffic in El Alto and La Paz!

Wednesday 19th April

Today we travelled with Isabel and her husband Felipe to their home village, on the outskirts of Copacabana. This time we used a public minibus for the 5 hour journey. This in itself was interesting and at times entertaining. We were well looked after and enjoyed a delicious Bolivian meal of fresh trout cooked straight from Lake Titicaca.

Thursday 20th April

This was to be our last trip to the Altiplano area. Accompanied by Pastor Genaro, our three ladies and new interpreter Angela, who has trained at Mission School and is hoping to go out to Japan, we travelled to the Susanna Wesley Centre in Central Altiplano District.

Larger than the centre in Lago, this centre again provided safe overnight accommodation for women and facilities enabling women to meet together for fellowship and craftwork.

Today the customary enthusiastic welcome was enhanced by music played on traditional woodwind instruments. Ladies from the surrounding villages demonstrated their spinning, exhibited their craftwork, explained their herbal remedies and, when it came to lunchtime, carefully unwrapped their aguaya cloths to reveal a 'bring and share' meal for all to enjoy.



Again, worship was led by the ladies and the leadership talk and Bible study were well received.

Before leaving we were taken to see their 'pride and joy' – a large floor-standing heddle loom used for weaving blankets. Ladies come into the centre to share the single loom which means that they are restricted to limited weaving time. There is space for a second loom should funding become available. Some have simple home-made looms which enable them to weave small items.

We came away feeling quite inspired by the ingenuity and skill that we had witnessed.

Friday 21st April

Our meetings for the final two days were held in a lecture theatre within the Methodist school complex in La Paz. Representatives had travelled from most of the Districts across Bolivia to join in their annual National Workshop weekend. We only discovered later that they had purposely changed the date to fit in with our visit!

Ladies from each district brought forward food and crafts typical of their area, explaining what each item was and how it was produced. These items were later shared in a bring and share lunch.

After a time of worship I again spoke about leadership from a Susanna Wesley perspective. Many of the ladies related well to the struggles faced by Susanna especially in terms of poverty and hardship.

The keynote speaker for the weekend was Nancy Calle, a professor in sociology. She too spoke of leadership followed by a session on finance.

After a short, late afternoon break we gathered together in a large hall for an evening of traditional dancing. Sixteen districts participated in a dancing competition, the judging panel consisted of myself, Bishop Modesto, Isabel and Anne, from Switzerland. Great fun was had by all!



Sadly we weren't aware that this would be the last occasion we would meet with Bishop Modesto so we missed the opportunity to sit and talk about our experiences.

Saturday 22nd April

Our final meeting began as before, with worship and prayer, Chris led her Bible study based on Ruth and once again the ladies enthusiastically shared their experiences.

Nancy Calle led her final workshop entitled 'believing in yourself as a woman'



The results of the dancing competition were announced and seven districts went home each carrying an enormous cooking pot!

On returning to the John Wesley Centre we had our final meeting with Isabel, Agustina and Nieves. Having already given gifts from MWiB to the various ladies groups, we now had the opportunity to show our appreciation to our hostesses before they left for a well-earned rest.

Conclusion

Chris and I feel very privileged to have shared with fellow Christians in Bolivia. Their warmth and generosity is second to none especially in the rural Aymaran communities where life is often a daily struggle and resources are few. Children travel long distances to school, the women work long hours in the fields and many older women travel into the city to sell their produce. An Aymaran himself, Bishop Modesto travels vast distances to lead worship and encourage these communities in their Christian faith, listening to their stories and offering practical help where possible. Maybe we too can explore ways in which we can help as sisters in Christ.

Visit Recommendations

- * Maintain and build upon the links made with FEFEME
- * Begin exploring with MWiB the feasibility of supporting the Tabita House project.
- * Investigate the feasibility of funding an additional loom for the Susanna Wesley Centre.
- * Investigate the possibility of funding 2 ladies from FEFEME to attend the 14th World Assembly of the World Federation

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2nd May 2017

