

An unexpected Advent Journey

I had determined Advent would be different last year, not the usual hectic last-minute preparations for Christmas. So, in preparation I had ordered a new Advent devotional 'Repeat the Sounding Joy' and a friend had kindly loaned me the 'Little Book of Advent'. The Forward, to this gem of daily wisdom from some of the world's greatest spiritual teachers, is written by Robert Soderstrom. In it he writes that the four weeks of Advent should not simply be a hectic dash between carol services and office parties, but a season in which to be taken by surprise. The final sentence of his forward, 'It is my hope and prayer that the coming Saviour will surprise us all in our Advent journey to him.'

Our Lord certainly had a few surprises in store for me during the Advent season! I had received an email from Hilary Evans in mid-November saying there was a last-minute opportunity for someone to visit Bolivia to represent the Connexion & MWiB at the Evangelical Methodist Church of Bolivia's Assembly 15-17 December and to visit a women's shelter MWiB had supported following Sandra Goodwin's visit in 2017. Hilary requested a quick response; I had always wanted to visit Bolivia and as I wasn't hosting the family for Christmas, and my passport & vaccinations were up to date, I applied. A few days later it was rather a shock to discover that my application had been accepted. However, nothing was for certain unless flights could be reserved, so I was still unsure on Advent Sunday if the trip was on or off.

On the following Monday three flights were confirmed leaving from Teeside on 12th December, via Schiphol (Holland) & Bogota (Columbia) to arrive in the early hours of the 13th December in La Paz, Bolivia. Sandra Lopez, Partnership Coordinator for The Americas, quickly organised a pre-visit briefing for Tuesday. Now it was confirmed I was going to Bolivia, excitement mounted as well as trepidation! My first thoughts were, thank you Lord for this privilege to visit your people in another part of our amazing world and the second, to find my Spanish phrase book! I had so much to prepare in a short space of time, Christmas (as I didn't return home until the night of the 22nd December) and for my 11 day visit to the Evangelical Methodist Church of Bolivia.

I knew from two previous visits to Kenya, representing the Darlington District, just how much I would need the prayers of Christian friends to uphold me for the journey and tasks the Lord would lay before me. I am sincerely grateful to all of you who held me in prayer; those prayers strengthened me to trust God would lead & guide me and trust that through his grace he would give me the words and gestures to communicate his love, even though I don't speak Spanish, to our Bolivian brothers and sisters.

We know Jesus walks alongside us, but we also know he goes ahead of us preparing the way. I was blessed & secure with this knowledge in my heart as I set out on this journey. Bolivia is the second poorest country in South America, yet I received such warmth and generosity from its people. Respect, and care was shown to me by everyone I met, not only at the Assembly and within the Methodist Church but also on the streets of La Paz and

neighbourhood. Even at the check outs at the local café, store or restaurant people offered their assistance when they saw me struggling with the language or currency in the early days of my visit as I was acclimatising to city life at altitude (3,600 meters) and a new culture.



I was never so thankful for modern technology, I was able to have daily WhatsApp video calls with my husband, listen to our District daily devotions on WhatsApp, watch our Circuit service on YouTube and join Englesea Brookes Chapel for our final Zoom Advent Bible Study. Home did not feel 6,500 miles away!

The main event was to attend the three day Assembly which took place in a school sports hall a few blocks from the John Wesley Guest House where I was staying. It should have been a short morning walk, but the problem was the venue was up a hill! As fit as I might think I am exertion at altitude leaves you quite breathless even after a few uphill paces, so it had to be a taxi ride along with my wonderful interpreter Froilan Quisbert and the other international guests Pastor Anita Lang from Wisconsin & Rev Edgar Avitia from El Paso, Texas. Anita is Chilian by birth and Edgar, Mexican, so both spoke fluent Spanish and were of great assistance to me helping me to understand the proceedings along with a wonderful Swiss couple I met, Monica & David Brenner, who were in their final & fourth year as Coordinators for Latin America (Argentina, Bolivia, Chile) sent by the Connexion of the Methodist Church for Switzerland-France.

We were all in for a treat at the opening worship of the Assembly as 712 delegates gathered from the far corners of Bolivia, 19 districts were represented as the sports hall filled. Everyone wearing their Sunday best, many wearing traditional Bolivian garments, the ladies in their full skirts, layers of shawls and top hats, which differed depending on the area or tribe they hailed from. However, the younger representatives wore more western type clothing. Bolivian music filled the air, pipes and drums, keyboard and instruments I have never seen before added to the cacophony of sound & song – some tunes vaguely familiar hymns. The Prelude to worship was the Entry of Light (Candles), the Entry of the Word of God (Bible) followed by the Entrance of the Cross and Flame (the symbol of the

Evangelical Bolivian Methodist Church) followed by the many Bishops and dignitaries. It was quite a spectacle to witness. And thanks to Google Translation I was able to follow most of the Liturgy, however after speaking in Spanish another person repeated everything in the Aymara language including the Bible readings. Some hymns were sung in the native tongue. Bishop Antonio Huanca Corimayta gave the message on the theme of Personal and Community Faith.

In the afternoon Pastor Anita invited me to visit an old peoples' home being built by the IEMB at Alberque with the support of Wisconsin Methodists. An amazing 83 year old lady called Gregoria met us as she was the acting caretaker & security for the site. A diminutive lady in stature who took great delight in showing us how she was preparing the ground for a garden with her pickaxe.



On the second day of the Assembly the school sports hall was packed as this was the day delegates would cast their votes for a new Bishop. Pastor Anita Lang gave the message during devotions on the theme of Faith that changes and transforms. A long day was in store as delegates had to be checked and their ID Tags shown when voting. The vote was done manually, each voting paper collected by independent adjudicators, then each one read out aloud by Bishop Antonio before being scribed on a white board in view of all present against the allotted candidate. With a packed auditorium the heat was nearly overwhelming, but the patience and concentration of all astounded me not least the impeccable behaviour of several children who had accompanied their parents to the Assembly. I never heard a child misbehave or a baby cry.

It was a nervous and early start for our third day at the Assembly, I had been given the honour of giving the message on the theme of Discipleship. It was rather daunting addressing so many Bolivians with several Bishops present so I was very pleased to have Pastor Anita Lang accompany me onto the platform to act as my interpreter. My offering seemed to be well received, the congregation clapping when they agreed with something I had said. I was so glad my Advent Bible Study had been the Methodist Way of Life with

Roger Walton. Later I was able to share details of the Methodist Way of Life with the Bishop's Office.

Then began the main business of the day to consecrate the new Bishop Medardo Vedia Gutierrez, along with all those voted into positions to serve under him. It is hard to describe what I witnessed which was done in true 'Bolivian style'. The band played, the drums sounding out, Bishop Antonio and his wife Julia were dressed with Bolivian wear and garlands as they left office and Bishop Medardo and his wife were consecrated and then dressed and presented with garlands and absolutely everybody in the place had to congratulate him personally even bringing him gifts of maize and throwing white chrysanthemum petals like confetti.



As I moved through the gathering, I was amazed at the women's response to me. So many women wanted to greet me or be photographed with me. The older Aymara indigenous women were not happy with just a hand shake they wanted to hug and even to kiss me. So much for social distancing during Covid!

My visit was a truly humbling experience so often the poorest of people give the most. On the first day of the Assembly a Bolivian lady approached me and hugged me and through an interpreter thanked me for coming from England to visit her country because Rev John Wesley was from England and through him the Methodist Church was established. Missionaries then came to Bolivia in the early part of the twentieth century from America to teach them about Jesus Christ. The Evangelical Methodist Church of Bolivia was founded, hence she had learned about Jesus and had come to faith. She sought me out again on the second day of the Assembly and gave me a key ring which had attached a tiny carved wooden chalice, with the Spanish word for Trinity written on it & reference to Psalm 22. On the third day of the Assembly a lady approached me and gave me the most beautiful hand crocheted shawl.



Here you see me wearing it alongside Pastor Miriam, one of only two women ministers, and Anita.

What an experience for me to have witnessed on behalf of the BMC, I was honoured to have presented on the Connexion's behalf a crystal paperweight depicting John Wesley to Bishop Antonio the retiring Bishop and a copy of Singing the Faith to Bishop Medardo.

My final days in Bolivia were spent in the company of sister Santusa Manani, Coordinator for the Federation of Methodist Bolivian Women and her assistant sister Natty, here we are crossing La Paz on the Tellyferry.



We attended church on Sunday at the oldest Methodist Chapel in La Paz, El Redentor consecrated in 1924. I could have been at a chapel back home in Teesdale, the lay out was so similar, including the attached school room where I visited the children's Christmas holiday club next day.

I was captivated by the Liturgical dancing during the service.



Another visit was to El Alto to see the new roof on Tabitha House funded by MWiB in 2019 after Sandra Goodwin's visit in 2017. Tabitha House is planned to be a refuge for women fleeing abuse and a safe place for women to stay for a few nights when first coming from the countryside to seek work. Sadly, Bolivia has the highest incidence of femicide in South America. The plan is also to give training for women at the centre in crafts, cooking and possibly IT. Because of the pandemic and shortage of money the centre has yet to be completed. Investigations are ongoing to see if there is a way forward to encourage completion of the ground floor of this building so it can be fit for purpose.

Tabitha House



Going forward I hope we can continue to encourage & support the Federation of Bolivian Methodist Women and pray Bishop Medardo will be supportive of their work & this project. So much has already been invested in time, money and effort it would be a shame if it does not come to fruition. Tabitha House would be a huge asset to women and girls in the El Alto district of La Paz. If you feel able to help in any way, please contact me.

We must understand Covid 19 had a huge impact on Bolivia as it has and continues to do throughout our world. Plus, Climate Change has caused severe drought, effecting food production on the already impoverished nation of Bolivia and its people.

I hope I have managed to give you a flavour of Bolivia and the depth of Christian Faith in this area of South America.

Debs Coggrave

If you want to make contact with Debs regarding help for Tabitha House please contact communications.mwib@gmail.com and your message will be forwarded.