

The XVII Asamblea of the Iglesia Evangélica Metodista Argentina ('IEMA')

Report of the visit by James Tebbutt as the representative of the Methodist Church in Great Britain and the Cumbria Methodist District

Introduction

On behalf of the Methodist Church in Britain and of the Cumbria Methodist District, who have enjoyed a partnership with IEMA for some two decades, the District Chair, James Tebbutt, attended the XXVII Asamblea meeting at Collegia Ward, Buenos Aires, between 7th and 10th October 2022.



Allowing for travelling days and due to significant work commitments either side of the visit, it was unfortunately not possible for me to visit other parts of Argentina, other than a brief visit to a local foster home for children in care (see further below).

1. Themes and experience of the Asamblea

The Asamblea had been delayed a year because of the pandemic, and the representatives' collective delight in personal reunions was evident and full of joy. Even towards me as a visiting stranger, the greetings and embraces were warm and generous. All this demonstrated a delight in human relationship and gathering, which for myself became rapidly one of the richest of my life, including through rapidly forming new colleagues and friendships that will last.

At various points deep gratitude was expressed to me by individuals with historic or present awareness of various projects supported by Global Relations (or its predecessor departments) within the British Methodist Church, or by the Cumbria District. Many personal greetings were expressed towards those who had previously visited from the Cumbria District or who had been visited in Cumbria, as also to the present and former connexional officers responsible for Argentina. As part of this, there was significant appreciation that someone had travelled from as far away as Britain, which in itself clearly affirmed them as a church and in the importance of their Asamblea.

As will be known, IEMA's primary link is with the United Methodist Church. There were official representatives also from Uruguay and Chile (with apologies sent from others with clashing gatherings), with the affinity with Latin American neighbours evident; and from Florida (Dawn Worden and two colleagues) and Europe (Etienne Rudolph, a District Superintendent from France and Switzerland, who had



previously served with IEMA), with whom I had warm conversations with appreciation of the mutual support given.

In these conversations, and with the Argentinian representatives, conversation often turned to the issue of human sexuality and relationships. It is clear that painful divisions, and perhaps fixed positions, are present in many parts of the world, causing hurt (including to those who seek to minister in such situations). My sense for IEMA, not least from conversation with the Emeritus Bishop Franke de Nully Brown, is that at present there is a living with the situation with a degree of freedom afforded to individual congregations, but with a concern also that further tensions may yet emerge. IEMA had declined to respond to overtures from the new Global Methodist Church; and formally the issue of human sexuality was not to the fore either in the business or general conversations in the Asamblea.



The Asamblea's official theme was, as previously: "Jesus Christ: the grace that transforms, the hope that frees". This

lay just beneath or at the surface of all the business undertaken, and was above all present and expressed in worship. In addition to the morning 'devotionals', there were main acts of worship on the opening Friday and on the Sunday evenings. The sermon on the Friday evening by a young lay woman, who is responsible for IEMA's Christian Education team, was inspirational. Indeed, the worship as a whole was inspirational, and personally one of the highlights of my worship experience in life so far. Here was a



mature Christian faith, rooted in an Arminian and Wesleyan sense of God's love for all, involving a personal experience of forgiveness and joy, but also with a deep commitment to its outworking in care for the vulnerable and poor (reflecting a Latin American liberation theology 'bias to the poor'). All this was expressed time and again in the words of prayers and songs that were succinct in communicating the heart of the gospel, and through music that could be both gently and deeply moving, or full of vigorous joy, accompanied by an able gathered choir and musicians, prompting rhythmic movement, clapping and heartfelt singing by the congregation. This did not present as a simplistic emotional 'high'; here was a movement of the Spirit, in height and depth, committed to those in greatest needs, with a vitality that perhaps questions whether in the British Methodist Church it is we who are now the poor relations?

2. Parallels and distinctions between the Asamblea and the British Conference

Unsurprisingly, there were many parallels with the British Methodist Conference, such as:

- A reflection by the presiding Bishop (equivalent in some ways to our President) on the situation in the Church;
- the agreement of representatives;
- the receiving of reports (though less formally so), or presentation of new resources (for example a volume of liturgy to provide templates for the congregations, perhaps less formally authorised than our Methodist Worship Book, but copies of which were made available to each church and pastor, and generously a copy for our Global Relations team and one for the Cumbria Methodist District);
- agreement to the ordination of a new pastor (presbyter) (but processes work differently, for this would be for ordination in the pastor's district, and more generally stationing as a whole works

differently compared with the British Church where the district superintendents have a greater role);

- a media release was agreed (including carefully expressing concern for the welfare of indigenous peoples), but also a letter of greeting for IEMA's congregations; and
- the honouring of those who had died (including members as well as ministers).

There were also differences, and not just because the Asamblea's length was shorter and the size of the gathering was more akin to that of a British district synod. Two aspects stood out.

Firstly, 'Comisiones' (committees drawn from the membership of the Asamblea, each with a mandate) had a central role in proceedings, and thus afforded arguably greater policy making responsibilities to the 'ordinary' members of the Asamblea than in the British Conference. Eight commissions met, considering reports and perspectives for which they had particular responsibility, before formulating recommended resolutions for further work or action for consideration by the main Asamblea. The



occasional weakness of this system was apparent when greater information (e.g. regarding costings) would have been helpful prior to the Asamblea debate, but, on the other hand, it did feel that policy was being generated by the members of the Asamblea, rather than risking, in the British system, a 'rubber-stamping' by the Conference of recommendations brought by prior working parties or committees with often no or just limited amendment or occasionally rejection.

(In terms of the Comisiones, I participated in one for Ministerial Formation, which affirmed much good work undertaken by relevant bodies through the challenges of the pandemic, but also addressed some internal and external – expressed by partner Methodist and other Latin American Churches – frustrations arising from misunderstandings around the realities and responsibilities concerning the ending of a joint seminary project and the care for its significant theological library. I felt sympathy with IEMA in its endeavour to learn from events and to be appropriately firm but also constructive.)



Secondly, there was a contrast in style compared with the British Conference in the greater informality and flexibility involved in dealing with business: representatives could speak more than once in a debate; voting rules could sometimes be adjusted mid-stream (and whilst my British instinct was hesitant, nonetheless 'the world really didn't end!'); and more passion was evident, yet with a

desire to maintain harmony (illustrated once when two representatives stood at one microphone vigorously arguing, yet with their arms around each other's shoulders). Each system has its strengths and weakness, involving a trade-off perhaps between preparation and precision, and flexibility and empowerment?

I was also intrigued by the presence of the dozen or so members of the 'General Board', who frequently needed to speak but did not have voting rights (unless also being representatives of their districts); a precursor perhaps of the future role of the proposed Connexional Council in the British Conference (but whose members will also be voting members of the Conference).

Sometimes it felt like IEMA was a younger church, with growing awareness but not yet as much developed process around some issues? On the other hand, IEMA appeared to retain a vitality and greater immediate awareness (with head and heart) of the gospel's purpose and power. Both Churches can learn from each other; we can certainly learn from their conviction of the Gospel's redemptive power and their alertness to the Gospel's attention to the poor; and, I believe, from their greater flexibility.

3. Challenges yet conviction

The Asamblea meets every two years, with the election of their presiding bishop taking place usually in every fourth year (but delayed this time until the fifth because of the pandemic). The episcopal election was central to this Asamblea, with every pastor (presbyter) in the active work (putting it in British terms) eligible (i.e. without requiring a nomination), with a two-thirds majority required to be elected (at this Asamblea therefore requiring 45 out of 66 votes).

Consensus was lacking, causing considerable underlying concern and strain, notwithstanding a respectful and appropriate atmosphere. Two strong candidates emerged, of whom after about 4 rounds the second placed candidate invited her supporters no longer to vote for her, but many continued to do so. After two long sessions and a period of 'conferring', it was only after an historic 12 rounds and late at night that the existing bishop, Pastor Américo Jara Reyes, was re-elected for a further (and what under the rules will be a final) four-year term. A number of factors were probably involved, including perhaps inevitably preferences for personality, style or cultural background amongst them, and not least the effects of disruption through the pandemic, together with awareness that there had only once previously been a female bishop. Both the bishop and the other main candidate sought to demonstrate unity, whilst for some the question as to whether the system needed to be changed was raised.



The deadlock in the voting for so many rounds, which they had not experienced to that extent before, shook them. For myself, I was reminded of the Christian Psychiatrist Frank Lake's phrase: "where there is constriction there is confusion". By this, Lake suggests a resonance with the birth process, in that wherever individuals or organisations experience external or internal pressure, there is often confusion about how best to proceed, such as regarding which type of leader is might be needed etc.. This was perhaps applying in the Argentinian, as indeed in the British, Methodist Church.



For indeed, Like the British Methodist church, IEMA faces many challenges. They, like us, are concerned about significantly aging and declining numbers, so that some pleaded for reorientation towards appealing to the youth (including if necessary abandoning Sunday morning worship). IEMA is also burdened with many aging, crumbling and over large buildings, and an economic context that is even more challenging than ours. (To illustrate, because of the number of votes variously taken, including ties in making appointments, the scrutineers began to run out of paper; they resorted to using mixed colours, smaller sizes, and multiple uses of ballot papers, before resorting to show of hands; all because of the increased cost of paper, which was a further expense that they did not wish to incur.)

More widely, there was alertness to the vast financial inequalities in society, and for many the blight of seductive dreams of fame and fortune leading to a falling prey to the abusive and criminal elements and structures in society. I attended a workshop on the Friday afternoon concerning gender violence (other workshops concerned leadership or issues of equality), where gratitude for the support of Global Relations in this area was expressed later to me by one of its leaders. In what I understood to be a patriarchal society (as too often elsewhere), the need to increase awareness, to challenge unjust power structures, and to enable female empowerment (including economic empowerment) was made apparent, for Church and world. (Later I also met the leaders of FEMMA, the equivalent of MWiB.)



Additionally, I had opportunity for a brief visit to a local foster home for children in care, associated with the Nicholas Lowe homes, a project supported by IEMA. The family hosting the children, and the half dozen children who were of primary school age, displayed a great deal of love and care, in what were clearly far from affluent circumstances.

In such actions and commitments, and in the Asamblea's reference to endeavours and initiatives in local congregations or through wider projects or programmes, I felt that

IEMA's continuing faith, trust and purpose itself invited confidence that God would continue to have faith in them, as they demonstrably sought to work out their faith in practice. Here were a Methodist people formed by Wesleyan vision, faith and community, who were seeking for themselves and others to be transformed by grace to bring a freeing hope to those most in need in an unjust world.

This was captured at the heart of the Asamblea by the commemorative and celebratory act of worship on Sunday evening, which included the reaffirmation of the continuing bishop, in which hands were laid and blessings offered by ecumenical, multi-faith, and global church representatives, in an utterly inspiring act of worship.



It was a profound privilege to share a few days in the company and on the journey of the members, representatives, officials and pastors of IEMA; to express the solidarity with them of British Methodists; and to generously receive from and convey to them the love that flows between us.

Personally and practically, I was grateful for the hospitality that was extended to me; for the eight different individuals who voluntarily translated for me; for Cumbrian colleagues who encouraged me and to whom I am separately conveying individual greetings and updates or proposals for various partnership initiatives; and to the Global Relations team for their support and financing of this representative visit.

Revd Dr James N. Tebbutt, Chair of the Cumbria District
6.11.2022