

A glance into Liturgy and Worship in an inter religious group in Uruguay today

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The purpose of this paper is to share the experience of the **interreligious celebration of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women** in 2009 in Montevideo, Uruguay, as an example of a concrete experience in the process of formation and affirmation of the Inter-Religious Group of Uruguay.

The inspirational phrase from the next Oxford Institute, **Wesleyan Communities and the World beyond Christianity**, invites us to reflect on the ways and methods Methodist Churches have followed when they look beyond Christianity, as an Integral Mission, in the place and time in which we live.

The questions to be asked are: How have we acted, both in thought and in action, at the Methodist Church of Uruguay (IMU)? How are we acting today and what do we project into the future in what is related to the interreligious world which surrounds us?

In order to understand the experience aforementioned, we should clarify:

- what we understand by Integral Mission
- our traditional Wesleyan background which support our actions
- the Methodist Church of Uruguay's historical background to act through diversity in its context

1. What do we understand by Integral Mission?¹

In the complex task of announcing **the Good News of Jesus Christ (Evangelization)** and embodying it (**Service**) in a society like the Uruguayan, marked and characterized by the myth of secularization, it is essential to:

- a. **Understand** the historical moment in which we live in all areas (world, regional and local), trying to listen to all the voices, developing a “big ear to listen to the voices of the community”
- b. **Know, respect** and on numerous occasions, **recover** the local culture;
- c. **Adopt** everybody's language for everybody
- d. **Be** sensitive to the concrete needs of the people we belong to;
- e. **Sympathise** with those who need it, suffer with those who suffer;
- f. **Denounce** all which threatens life;
- g. **Practise** coherence between what we say and what we do
- h. **Recover** an ethical standard which will “sustain and maintain” abundant life for everyone;
- i. **Include** those who are often excluded from society
- j. **Understand** our differences and look for integration, seeing that as a wealth and not as a problem.

Integral Mission is the one which looks for Word and Action, giving LIFE to the announcement, not only in speech but in practice – through Service.

¹ Simeone, Inés, An opinion from the Methodist Church of Uruguay

This Integral Mission should guide us towards full abundant LIFE, towards the experience of peace (the Shalom), towards the Kingdom of everyone and for everyone, in which love, justice, solidarity, harmony prevails, as taught by Jesus.

2. Bases from our Wesleyan tradition to act through diversity

There are numerous examples of the enormous respect for those who think differently - both in speech and in practice- in John Wesley's life. His **Christian Spirit** sermon conveys this idea very well. That is why this is an excellent basis for the practice of ecumenical and interreligious links from the Methodist Church.

Remember that J. Wesley based himself on the biblical text from 2 Kings 10:15: "Jehu started out again, and on his way he was met by Jonadab son of Rechab. Jehu greeted him and said, "You and I think alike. Will you support me?" "I will," Jonadab answered. "Give me your hand, then," Jehu replied. They clasped hands, and Jehu helped him up into the chariot..."

In this sermon Wesley says: "...it must needs be, that, as long as there are various opinions, there will be various ways of worshipping God; seeing a variety of opinion necessarily implies a variety of practice... none can be obliged by any power on earth but that of his own conscience, to prefer this or that congregation to another, this or that particular manner of worship... **I dare not, therefore, presume to impose my mode of worship on any other.**"

For him the most important question to ask those wanting to be part of an act of mercy is: Is your heart honest with your neighbour? Do you love all human kind with no exceptions as yourself? If you only love those who love you, what merit do you have? Do you love your enemies? Is your soul full of good will, of tender affection towards them...? Do you even love the enemies of God? Do you show your love through your works...? Do you do as much good as you can? And the fundamental question is: **Are your intentions towards me as good as mine towards you...?.. If they are so, give me your hand...!**

As a song from these Latin-American lands says: Give me your hand! Let's go forward together!!!

It is concluded that having our hearts open towards all human kind, known and unknown, friends and foes, is fundamental for Wesley and the Wesleyan movement, as long as the aim is in favour of LIFE.

3. Historical background from the Methodist Church of Uruguay to act through diversity in its context.

In this sense it is important to remember some of the characteristics of the Methodist Church of Uruguay (IMU) since its arrival in 1869.

IMU has sought to follow the Wesleyan heritage of expressing faith through **acts of piety** and **works of mercy**, i.e., worship and congregation (acts of piety) but also in concrete works of service (acts of mercy) in life (and anti-life), taking into account the needs of the people. It understands, as James in his letter: What good is there in your saying to them, "*God bless you! Keep warm and eat well*" _ if you don't give them the necessities of life?²

² James 2:16

Since Methodism arrived in these lands, there have been plenty of concrete actions in response to the needs of the society. “The new-born Uruguayan Methodist Church saw itself involved in the Uruguayan problematic from the beginning. The first leaders who arrived, Thomson and Wood, took full responsibility. They, along with their apprentices at the beginning of the 20th century, had no doubt that not only could Christ’s Gospel satisfy people and their family’s spiritual needs, but also transform the entire society.”³

People's memory, their family stories and the documents surely record this Methodist presence. Popular schools in the 19th century, help for the needy families, studies support, denunciation of injustices, manifestos in favour of life, support for the excluded and marginalized, soup kitchens, medical clinics, professional training for handicapped people or for people at social risk, incentives to create community productions, cooperatives, employment projects.

Through these acts, it has always sought to serve alongside other (non-Methodist) people or groups, who were also willing to fight for the well-being of the neighbour.

Times change, and church also changes. The Gospel is the same today and yesterday but it must be proclaimed to each generation and suited to each generation and culture. The inculturation of the gospel should not only be done in Uruguay, but in the Uruguay of each time, in Uruguay today. The inculturation has its price. The more Uruguayan the church becomes, the more exposed it is to suffer what the country suffers.⁴

In 1969, IMU became autonomous and had to face reality, respond to the existing challenges, fulfil its mission, and serve with its own resources.

The last 40 years have been hard in Uruguay, “... the country polarized itself, and that polarization got to church, part of the country moved away and so did part of the congregations and the leaderships. Many people moved away... a whole generation and their children were lost. Only the faithful remained, and congregations got older. Therefore, church, mighty in words and facts, in predication, teaching and works, rediscovered the essential dimension: the fraternal communion, the koinonia.”⁵

The Uruguayan context and the Methodist Church in an interreligious frame

It is no coincidence that the challenging biblical text chosen for one of the last IMU General Assemblies was: *Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by complete change of your mind...*⁶ The text invites us to look into the current Uruguayan context, to reflect from our faith and to change our way of living (and being church) according to God's will.

The dictatorship established by the military coup, which started 40 years ago and ended in 1985, left strong marks.

The last crisis (2002) caused a harsh impoverishment in the country's and church's population. A chaos broke out with huge consequences, process which started to revert in

3 MORTIMER, Arias, Texto - Nace una Iglesia Uruguaya

4 ditto

5 ditto

6 Romans 12.2

the last years. Based on all of this, and on a Uruguayan and Latin American process, Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano says:

States stop running business and concentrate on running jails. Presidents become local managers of foreign companies. Finance ministers make good translators. The captains of industry become importers. The many more depend more and more on the leftovers of the ever-fewer few. Workers lose their jobs. Peasants lose their plots. Children lose the right to be children. Youth lose the capacity to believe. Old folks lose their pensions... "Life is a lottery," say the winners.

Adding to and/or as a consequence of what Galeano describes, there has been a known and felt increase in domestic and social violence. Women's voices⁸ say the number of those who suffer violence are much higher than what statistics say, with our own groups (congregations) having some victims and victimizers too.

In what refers to the religious context in Uruguay, I share the following text written by sociologist Nicolás Iglesias Schneider⁹ on secularism:

Former Uruguayan president Dr. Tabaré Vázquez claimed: "If democracy is, among other things, human dignity, autonomy and capacity of decision, secularism is creating conditions for people to decide on their own in a frame of dignity (...) Secularism is not the indifference that does not take part. Secularism is to assume the commitment of equality in diversity, equal rights, equal opportunities, equality before the law, equality before life..."¹⁰

Regarding the current worship situation in Uruguay:

According to different research¹¹, there are more than 1500 places of worship organized in more than 100 religious groups in Montevideo alone. According to official information, the National Household Survey of 2006 showed that almost 60% of Uruguayans identify with a particular religious confession, while more than 23% are believers with no particular confession. Therefore, almost 83% of inhabitants believe in God in diverse ways. There is no doubt that these sociological data diminish the almost mythical image of Uruguayan irreligiosity.

Religions and the social aspects, constructing minimal ethical standards of love to the neighbour.

All religions develop the worry about "the other." Well-being alternatives are sought for all of God's creation, especially for the rest of the human beings and oneself. In this ethical approach of love the other, there is a particular theological approach which tries to appreciate and care for life in every way. These ethics, apart from being part of the religious speech, are the main factor in the implementation of its principles and worries for the common well-being on many occasions.

7. Galeano, Eduardo. Upside Down. A Primer for the Looking-Glass World

8. Workshops on The value of life organized by IMU's Pastoral of Women and Family. 2005-06

⁹ Iglesia Schneider, Nicolás – Texto – Laicidad, religiones y participación social - 2013

10. http://archivo.presidencia.gub.uy/_Web/noticias/2005/07/2005071404.htm

11. Cf. N. Da Costa *Religión y sociedad en el Uruguay del siglo XXI: un estudio de la religiosidad en Montevideo*, CLAEH y CUM, Montevideo, 2003.

In this context, we can say that there is an awareness at IMU that you need to assess, project, change and grow in unity considering the society in which it is inserted and the Wesleyan tradition.

The results of the last Life and Mission Consultations (2005 and 2011) and the last two Assemblies accelerated this process resulting in adjustments, reconstructions and new proposals. Among these conclusions we find:

- The challenge of participating in groups -outside church- which denounce everything that threatens abundant and full life.

. Training to “overcome violence” and women's proposal of dialogue, trust, respect, education, courage to break vicious circles, of valuing each person, accepting the differences, and denouncing violence without fear.

There is much more to announce, denounce, teach, learn, share, and grow as a 20th century Christian community. The challenge to the community (church) of accomplishing the mission serving as expression of faith, in love, and humility, through concrete actions, serving the neighbour, is always present. This diakonia, this service, is the foundation for growth and edification.

4. The Interreligious group in Uruguay

The different religious groups of Uruguay have tried to get organized – in unity – since the beginning of the 21st century.

The First Uruguayan Interreligious Forum, from its motto '**Faith and Dignity – another Uruguay is possible**', called the religious citizenship to seek dialogue, respecting cultural diversity and sharing their religious experiences. Apart from offering information about the religious reality in our country, topics linked to the reality of the moment were analysed. This Forum was convened by UNESCO and OBSUR.

During 2009, many gatherings with religious leaders were organized, taking up what had been started in 2002. The first gatherings and the creation of the Coordinating Board for the Interreligious Dialogue were convened by the Pro Tempore Presidency of MERCOSUR, on that occasion President Lugo from Paraguay. Coordinating Boards and Forums from all MERCOSUR were initiated (formed in that moment by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay), coordinated by CLAI (Latin American Council of Churches).

The Interreligious Forum of Uruguay was created with the objective of gathering different religious expressions for the purpose of creating a place for dialogue and possible common actions, both to overcome our own differences, and to create room for dialogue with the State, having a voice before it in areas which are common to the different religious expressions. Acknowledging that not always have religions contributed to peace and living together in harmony, even though every religion's vocation tends to these values. We seek to highlight these values and ends in this gathering, which joins us in favour of peace and life. (Source: document elaborated in the Third Interreligious Dialogue).

The topics covered in each of these 4 Forums were:

Domestic Violence

Religious education and expressions

Overcoming Violence – children, women, the elderly Dialogue with the State

The different groups represented were:

Roman Catholic Church, Uruguayan Evangelic Church Federation (the Methodist being part of it), Latin American Council of Churches, Jews, Muslims, Afro Umbandistas, Unification Church, Diakonia of Diversity, the Old Catholic Church in Uruguay, Bahai Faith, Buddhists, Mormons, Brahma Kumaris among other ecumenical organizations such as the Young Men Christian Association, Youth for Christ, OBSUR, among others.

This movement created actions for specific situations, with the creation of new groups. One of them was named "**Overcoming Violence**", which gathered people from various religions to denounce reality and look for alternatives to possible solutions.

This is how during the year 2009 women and men met to share their experiences in relation to the existing violence. One of the actions proposed to the group was that everybody, in unity, could be present in the events of the 25th November (International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women) which would end with an interreligious celebration. This resulted in an enormous challenge which demanded a lot of dialogue and respect among all the people taking part in the group.

5. Interreligious celebrations for the International Day For the Elimination of Violence Against Women

Preparation

How do we realize a celebration considering the great diversity existing among all participants?

First of all, some **factors common to everyone** were found:

- **A strong faith and sense of identity** within each group, an important will of serving in unity.
- **Fighting for the same cause**, overcoming the violence many women suffer in our country. While sharing experiences, there was strong evidence of the close existence of violence. *In the southern countries, one every three married women is beaten as part of their marriage routine, as a punishment for what they have done, or what they could have done.* "We are asleep", says a blue-collar woman from Casavalle in Montevideo. "A prince kisses you and sends you to sleep. When you wake up, that prince whacks you"… And another one: "I have my mother's fear, and my mother has my grandmother's fear"¹²
- **Each group already had** an organization of women fighting against violence, who were all working for men to become more aware of the situation.
- **Awareness of the need to transform reality.**

With all this, without speaking about the differences, and with strong established links in

¹² Galeano, Eduardo in 'Upside Down: A Primer for the Looking-Glass World'

the meeting in which we had participated highlighting all that we had in common, we started our liturgical construction for 25th November.

The social room (not the temple) of the Central Methodist Church in Montevideo was chosen as the venue for the celebration, considering its closeness to all the other actions planned for that day, and also considering its good transport links to all the neighbourhoods.

Each group chose texts from their identities to be shared while the liturgy was being prepared, so that each part could get to know how the others live that liturgical experience.

The songs and music had the same criterion mentioned above.

We decided to give an important space to silence for personal prayers.

Choosing symbols to be used was the hardest task of all. However, candles, seeds, flowers, fruit, a white tablecloth and a logo prepared by the group were agreed to be on a table in the centre of the room.

Chairs were placed in a circle, and some cushions were available for those who wished to pray on their knees.

There were some signs distributed across the room which read: Respect, NO violence, NO discrimination, Abundant Life, Integral Peace, Harmonious Relations, Love, Solidarity, Justice, and Peace.

The different parts of the celebrations were conducted by the groups' representatives.

The Celebration

- ***Prelude – John Lennon's song Imagine***

Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today...
Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace...

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one

Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can

No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world...

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will live as one

- **Welcome words** from the local group: On this day of reflection, prayer and action to overcome the violence women suffer, we commit to seek ways of change and to participate in a global movement which seeks to defend and dignify each person created in the image and likeness of God.

From the Methodist Church of Uruguay, we claim that this is the right time for reflecting upon how our life as women has been, for talking to our friends and companions about the struggle that unites us, for the dialogue with our brothers and sisters, children, companions, parents, husbands, friends about all that we can construct, in unity, for overcoming the difficulties that we still have to face, for celebrating the victories that we have built together. And we do it through our faith.

Song: Blow loudly, Divine Spirit ¹³

Blow, blow loudly
Divine Spirit
Come to us
With all your strength
Planting your seed
Of abundant life
And make it sprout
For the creation all

Blow, blow loudly
Divine Spirit
Move our beings
With the bravest fire
Giving us courage
To shout loudly
The Word of Life
That makes us move.

Blow, blow loudly
Divine Spirit
Make it fruitful
The gift of your love
Gives good life
It brings to us the justice

¹³ Inés Simeone – Horacio Vivares. - English : Miguel Arenas

And it gives rise to us
Communion and Peace

- **Moment of reflection** about the situation – Introduction of father Julio from the Old Catholic Church.
- Silent prayers while listening to reflexive music from Buddhist and Umbandista groups.
- The following prayer is prayed in community:

Forgive us, Lord, for our indifference ¹⁴

Forgive us, Lord,
For our indifference in face of destruction of nature,
For our desire for excessive profits, with no respect for life.
Forgive us, Lord
For our violence against the earth,
For our silence in face of devastation of forests and the pollution of rivers.
Forgive us, Lord
For our complicity in making species extinct,
For our readiness to destroy what is different from ourselves.
Forgive us, Lord
For our burning desire to consume, inconsiderate of future generations,
For our concentration on the present without taking account of tomorrow.
Forgive us, Lord
For our arrogance in thinking that we are the center of the universe,
For our lack of zeal to preserve your creation.
Teach us, by your grace,
To love all your creatures, our sisters,
And to care for life in all its forms.

- **Kyrie Eleison**¹⁵ - Is sung in unity, while candles representing commitment, faith and the will of being constructors of PEACE, are being lit.

For the troubles and the sufferings of the world, God, we call up on your mercy: the whole creation's labouring in pain! Lend an ear to the rising cry for help from oppressed and hopeless people. Come! Hasten your salvation, healing love! We pray for peace, the blessed peace that comes from making justice, to cover and embrace us. Have mercy, Lord! We pray for power, the power that will sustain your people's witness: until your Kingdom come, Kyrie Eleison!

¹⁴ Perdoa-nos Senhor, nossa indiferença – José Carlos de Souza (Brasil)

¹⁵ Gaede Neto – Brasil – English by George Lockward and Simei Monteiro

- We thank God for:
 - the reactions and resistance of women through time.
 - the reactions and resistance to the orders from absolute bosses.
 - the reactions and resistance to the very old custom of obeying without questioning
 - the reactions and resistance to the rooted customs, the dominations, the abuses, the deaths due to continuous violence.
 - the life of all those women (with or without a name) who opened new paths to what we are today.
- Thanks giving song
- Peace hug
- Are your intentions towards me as good as mine towards you? If they are so, give me your hand!
- Song: Canción de caminantes (María Elena Walsh)

Porque el camino es árido y desalienta,
porque tenemos miedo de andar a tientas,
porque esperando a solas poco se alcanza
valen más dos temores que una esperanza.

*Dame la mano
y vamos ya.*

Si por delicadeza perdí mi vida
quiero ganar la tuya por decidida.
Porque el silencio es cruel, peligroso el viaje,
yo te doy mi canción, tú me das coraje.

Ánimo nos daremos a cada paso,
ánimo compartiendo la sed y el vaso.
Ánimo que aunque hayamos envejecido
siempre el dolor parece recién nacido.

Porque la vida es poca y la muerte mucha.
Porque no hay guerra pero sigue la lucha.
Siempre nos separaron los que dominan
pero sabemos hoy que eso se termina.

- Blessing without words

Conclusions

All this experience has brought about enormous growth in each of the participants since it has enabled us to realize the exercise of giving life to speeches about love, justice and peace.

It has also started a process of interreligious links which has been kept until today. We have realized the celebrations of International Women's Day every 8th March.

Both the government and the rest of the non-religious groups who are committed to justice and peace know about the FORUM and have taken part in it.

The feeling and perception of the presence of the Spirit of Good in the celebration has been indescribable.

The challenge to move forward and share the experience which makes our faith and identity grow with our Methodist brothers and sisters of other places of the planet is still there.

Hope in the dream of God... ¹⁶

The dream of God, dreamt when He created.
He created and dreamt of harmony among its creatures.
Creatures who have lived in agreements and disagreements,
rare agreements, countless disagreements...
Hence, the challenge to “construct it”
Hence, the light of promise...
Hence, the hope to make the dream of Love, Peace and Justice
dreamt by God come true.

¹⁶ Inés Simeone, 1st December 2004

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