

LIKE A GRAIN OF MUSTARD SEED



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The Methodist Church in Uruguay¹

The Methodist Church in Uruguay (IMU),² is an autonomous church organized at national level, with its own authorities. The highest authority is the General Assembly which every four years chooses the President, Vice-president and the rest of the National Board integrated by pastors and lays. These National Board supervises the whole Church.

“Besides its one thousand members there is a wider community of about two thousand people who are related to the Church” in one way or another.³

IMU adopted the system of a President as a leader instead of the episcopal tradition. The position is open to clergy as well as lay members.

Women are able to be ordained. The Church has also “decided that pastors that wish to minister to homosexuals could do so freely.”⁴

From its beginnings to these days, the Methodist Church has had an active role in society through the Press, radio,⁵ books and magazines, concerts, Sexual Diversity groups, medical clinics, pre-school nurseries, work with people with differently abled, universities, workshops against domestic violence, the creation of Hospital Evangélico, National Federation of Youth, Federation of Protestant Churches, etc.

“Ecumenical relationships⁶ and projects are an inseparable part of the church, nationally and internationally, providing leadership to the world church (i.e. Emilio Castro, former secretary of the WCC).”⁷

¹ Uruguay, formally the Oriental Republic of Uruguay, is a small South American country located at the southern part of the continent bordered by Brazil and Argentina, with Río de la Plata to the south and the Atlantic Ocean to the southeast. It has a total área of 176.000 sq.km.approximately. The population is 3.316.328 (2012), of whom 1.8 million live in the metropolitan área of its capital and largest city, Montevideo.

² Due to its Spanish name: *Iglesia Metodista en el Uruguay*.

³ <https://www.oikoumene.org>

⁴ <http://en.m.wikipedia.org>, *La Otra Voz Digital*, Discriminación sexual: avances y retrocesos de las Iglesias Protestantes Históricas. Retrieved 2016,05-26.

In 2013, Uruguay passed the Ley de Matrimonio Igualitario (Equality in Marriage Law). The law recognises the marriage of two people of any gender identity or sexual orientation. For the Civil Code, marriage is “a permanent unión according to the law, between two individuals of different or the same sex.” The law also allows gay couples to adopt children or conceive them by means of in vitro fertilisation.

⁵ A radio programme *La Voz Evangélica*, has been reaching a national audience for 52 years.

⁶ The Methodist Church in Uruguay is associated to World Council of Churches, World Methodist Council, Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias (CLAI), Federación de Iglesias Evangélicas del Uruguay (FIEU), Consejo de Iglesias Cristianas del Uruguay(CICU) and Consejo de Iglesias Evangélicas Metodistas de América Latina (CIEMAL).

⁷ www.worldmethodistcouncil.org

The Methodist Church in Uruguay has undergone through many different kinds of difficulties, among which we would like to focus on the following: lack of numerical growth; the inability to keep its people and the decline in church attenders.

We believe that it is not an isolated case, but one which bears many similarities with the situation in other traditional evangelical churches.⁸

Methodist Episcopal Church

Methodism came to the countries in Rio de la Plata in the nineteenth century from the United States of America. Some years later, once it was finally settled, it began to give its opinion in the midst of a public controversy, when Uruguay was becoming part of Modernity,⁹ with the arrival of trains, British companies, as well as numerous immigrants.¹⁰

The largest group of immigrants came from Italy and Spain. Many of those took an active part in the European unions, some were anarchists, and all of them made a considerable impact on the Uruguayan union movement and national politics.

At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth, there was a controversy between the Roman Catholic Church and the Uruguayan State, which turned out to be a process of secularization. Methodism joined that process of secularization, in the belief that it was conducive to its own existence and to the development of its own activities.

In the midst of that controversy, the State would reduce the area of influence of the Roman Catholic Church (in certain areas it used to manage). It was then that the newly

⁸ Before I start talking about the above mentioned problems, I think it would be important to clarify that in Uruguay (as within many Latin American countries) there has been a process of deep concentration of the economy and politics around its capital city, which means that there are, so to speak, two different countries: on the one hand, Montevideo, the capital city; and, on the other one, the countryside. These two have really different realities.

⁹ "Modern, Modernity and Modernism are terms that historically have been defined in respect to Europe and to Western capitalist countries like the United States." Patricia Varas, *Modernismo or Modernismo? Delmira Agustini and the Gendering turn of the Century Spanish – American Poetry*. <https://books.google.com.uy>

Modernity: Modernity is closely linked to the ethos of philosophical and aesthetic modernism; political and intellectual currents that intersect with the Enlightenment; and subsequent developments such as existentialism, modern art, the formal establishment of social science, and contemporaneous antithetical developments such as Marxism. It also encompasses the social relations associated with the rise of capitalism, and shifts in attitudes associated with secularization and post-industrial life (Berman 2010, 15–36).
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modernity>

¹⁰ In the first decades of the twentieth century, almost a fifth of the population consisted of foreigners, and the young were the largest group. Furthermore, we would like to point out that almost one third of the country's population lived in its capital city, Montevideo, which was reflected within Methodism, because the largest congregation from the nineteenth century (XIX) until these days, has been located in Montevideo, downtown, in its Central Church. Moreover, back in nineteen-sixty (1960) half of the methodist members of the entire country, were in Montevideo, in one and only church: its Central Church, downtown.

born Methodism joined forces with the liberals and the free masons, who also saw the Roman Catholic Church as a common enemy.

Methodism thus supported the separation of Church and State¹¹, the secularization of the cemeteries (which used to be under the care of the Roman Catholic Church), freedom of religion, and laicism¹² in state schools.

By that time, streams of liberal and rationalist thought had entered the intellectual field. They confronted the *Roman Catholic Apostolic Church* and sometimes even any other form of religious expression. The religious debate was present among the intellectuals and from there it extended throughout society. Intellectuals gathered in an institution called *Club Universitario*, and later at a place called *Ateneo*.

When dealing with rationalism defenders, Methodist priests and lay people had to confront faith against popular subjects at that time. In the *Club Universitario* and in the *Ateneo* and through the Methodist Press, they defended the veracity of the Bible, the divinity of the Christ and the miracles of Jesus, that were denied by the rationalists. Some young rationalists of the *Club Universitario* and *Ateneo* admired the United States because of the industrial and political development.¹³

It is worth mentioning that during those years at the end of the nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth, the Methodist Church founded schools and, together with other people, the National League Against Alcoholism,¹⁴ the league Against Human Trafficking,¹⁵ the Home for Single Mothers, the Young Women's Christian Association, and the Young Men's Christian Association.

Furthermore, the Methodist Church in Uruguay had its own newspaper,¹⁶ held conferences and even started a school and the Methodist Church in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

Throughout history, this attempt to accomplish more than what the number of people would reasonably allow it to, would be a distinctive feature of Uruguayan methodism.

Although it was (and still is) a minority group, methodism became (and still is) wellknown in the public arena.¹⁷

¹¹ Roman Catholicism used to be the official religion of the Uruguayan State.

¹² Laicism and Secularity - The word "*laicidad*" the abstract noun for "laicism", is a polysemous one. In Uruguay, "*laicidad*" means the separation of Church and State. The State remains impartial among religious institutions and about religion in general. It also remains impartial among political parties and ideas and philosophical points of view.

¹³ Mirtha E. Coitinho, *When History teaches us to think theologically*. The Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, 2013.

¹⁴ Our version of the Temperance Movement.

¹⁵ White female sexual slavery traffic.

¹⁶ The first christian newspaper in Rio de la Plata, called *El Evangelista*, published in Montevideo between 1877 and 1886.

¹⁷ Let's just say that when one gets into a controversy, one is not always able to keep the required dignity, but we can judge that today only by comparing gains and losses. At times, Methodism confronted those who thought differently using some arguments and language which we would regard inappropriate today.

Finally, the separation of church and state was enshrined in the new 1917 Constitution. "All religions are free in Uruguay. The State does not hold any religion." This principle continued until the present day.

It would be important to point out that this social and cultural process would result in an anti-religious position, not just anti-church, which has had a great impact on the Uruguayan society.¹⁸

There was more to the *Methodist Episcopal Church* (as it used to be called when it arrived in Uruguay) than just controversies and public affairs. On the contrary, it had its own interests, which consisted in a personal relation with Jesus Christ.

Therefore, with the settling of congregations along the country, methodism sustained the great value of the above mentioned personal relation with Jesus, and above all, the holiness which was shown through the making of ethical decisions.

Once those heated controversies were overcome, methodism prioritized the work in the congregations that had been settled in the country, although it was also interested in the national and international affairs.

The congregations

Even though many of those congregations remained through the years, some others had a short life, got stuck, or even closed.

A long-standing problem, which is still a source of worries, was the decrease in the number of children, adolescents and young people within the congregations¹⁹. It was said that the effects would have severe repercussions in the future.

Confronted with this situation, at the end of the fifties, a brief coming from the *Christian Education Commission* insisted on not closing the Sunday Schools in summer.

With regards to the lack of young people, pastors and leaders were asked to look for concrete solutions to a "problem that year after year increases our preoccupation".²⁰

Although many ideas were put forward, coming from different origins, it was impossible to put them into practice, "because this would mean treating the issue superficially,

¹⁸ Uruguay is the most secularized nation in all of the Americas with the highest percentage of atheists and agnostics. According to a 2014 survey by the Pew Research Center in Washington, 57 % of the population self identifies as Christian, 37 % of the people report no religious affiliation. That includes atheists, agnostics and people with spiritual beliefs that are not part of an organized faith. In addition 15 % identify as Protestant.

¹⁹ Since the eighties of the twentieth century the country went through a process of crisis of the rational laic ethos, which permitted the proliferation of other spiritual expressions, such as afrobrazilian cults, neo-pentecostalism, yoga, reiki, new age, etc. Gerardo Menéndez, *Crisis del Uruguay laico-racionalista: Nuevas religiones y cultura holística*. <http://elmontevideanolaboratoriodeartes.blogspot.com>

²⁰ Minutes of Sixth Annual Conference, IMU, January 14 – 18, 1959, Paysandú, p.52.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

ignoring its complexity and transcendence". Thus, the *Christian Education Commission*, recommended the making of round-tables with experts²¹ "in different areas, in order to study each age-group problems".²²

With regards to the congregations in Montevideo, the briefs mentioned encouraging results, even though the attendance to Church services had only had a slight increase.

Many difficulties were pointed out:

"(...) the congregation continues showing little interest in biblical studies. It will be necessary to look for something that awakes the fervent interest of previous times"; work among the young is "pretty difficult due to the characteristics of the young in this neighbourhood"; "the young people's club has had a year full of ups and downs and the vocational element has been missing"; "For some reason or another, things have not developed as expected"; "This awakening has still not turned into new members, even though it may still happen"; "attendance to Church services is very limited".²³

The brief also pointed out that outside the capital city, there was a wide range of hard circumstances. The author of the brief wondered:

"Why is it that some churches grow and others get stuck, while some others die slowly? (...) "In some congregations there was an obvious enthusiasm, while some others were full of pessimism and even indifference."²⁴

It was unknown whether the reason behind this was related to the suitability of their location, or that they had more capable and consecrated pastors and leaders. The brief concluded that it consisted of a combination of many factors.²⁵

In one of the congregation the attendance to the services had decreased by 50% in one year. Thus, a spiritual change, as well as a new vision were needed, otherwise, "the future of this church is dark".²⁶

The briefs showed that the same congregations went through different stages from one year to the following.²⁷

The sixties

²¹ They wanted one Doctor, one Teacher, one Pastor, one Mother and one Psychologist.

²² *Minutes of the Sixth Meeting of the Annual Conference of Uruguay, January 14 – 18, 1959, Paysandú*, p. 19.

²³ *Minutes of Sixth Annual Conference*, pp 33-35.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p 39.

²⁶ *Minutes of Sixth Annual Conference*, p. 40.

²⁷ *Minutes ... January 14 – 18, 1959*, pp. 39 a 43 and *January 13 – 17, 1960*, pp. 34 a 36.

In the sixties there were positive signs, for example, a new congregation in the North and the revival of another congregation in the middle of the country.

"But this optimism must be very cautious, as the panorama in the churches along the countryside is still that of a weak church." ²⁸

Furthermore, the statistics showed that there were more pastors than were actually needed for the reduced number of members, which had only increased 3% yearly, over the previous 10 years.²⁹

During the sixties, among the parishes in the countryside,³⁰ there were two different points of view regarding church work: One of these claimed that the parishioners should deepen their spiritual life (church service and praying); while the other one claimed that they should focus on non religious activities.

Sometimes, both points of view coexisted within the same congregation; however, at times, one of those viewpoints was prioritized setting aside other activities that had been ongoing, in order to prioritize those they considered to be spiritual.

There were Church Reports talking about worldly attractions, lack of revival, almost no commitment to services, and spiritual problems.

A survey carried out in 1966, gave evidence of the crisis the Methodist Church was still going through.

According to that survey, methodist congregations consisted mainly of women and adults.

The survey led to the conclusion that,

"(...) this is a congregation of women and adults which will continue to show the typical characteristics of a group of people who want to have security and that security will lead to resisting changes." ³¹

The survey also showed that 75 % of the people who had abandoned the Church were young people.

The Women's League had got stuck all over the country, without adding a single person in six years.

²⁸ *Minutes Seventh Meeting of the Annual Conference of Uruguay*, January 13-17, 1960, Montevideo, p. 35. The number of people who attended the services was taken as an accurate indicator of the progress of the congregations.

²⁹ Uruguay and Argentina formed a single Church.

³⁰ Not in the capital city.

³¹ *Minutes of the fourth Meeting of the Annual Conference of Uruguay*, January 18 – 22, 1967, Montevideo, p. 39.

Over a period of five years before the survey, very few congregations had offered classes on methodism to future members. Thus, the congregations were not just conservative, but also uninformed.

Moreover, very little was done for the neighbourhoods where those congregations were settled.

Furthermore, when the pastors were asked about the changes they would implement in the Church, there were many different answers “none of which was shared by more than one pastor” and there were even “divergent views on how to face the Church, without communal theological criteria, which suggested the absence of an interactive group of pastors gathering together to talk and think as such”³²

The pastors had different opinions regarding tithe, taking part in politics and trade unions, as well as evangelism.

The survey thus concluded that might have been the reason behind the confusion and disorientation among congregations.³³

Political mobilization, conflict and cultural changes

It is necessary to remember that during the sixties was when a great variety of conflicts intensified in different parts of the world, and it was also the time of the development of the Theology of a God who manifests himself/herself through History. The traditional Christian doctrine of God manipulates the divine being such that He appears to favor the capitalistic social structure. Rather He is dynamically involved on behalf of the poor and downtrodden. God stands against oppression.

“The 1960s in Latin America, as in most parts of the globe, was a period of intense political mobilization and conflict as well as dramatic cultural changes.

The triumph of the Cuban Revolution, the spread of guerrilla movements, the emergence of new literacy, artistic, and music trends, the forging of a youth counterculture, the development of student, women, indigenous and urban social movements, the rise of new intellectual and religious approaches to the burning social issues of the era, and –last but no least- the increasing visibility of the region in world politics, all of these framed and shaped a series of local, regional,

³² *Minutes of the fourth Meeting of the Annual Conference of Uruguay, January 18 – 22, 1967, Montevideo*, p. 40.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 40. Within the Methodist Church, several people thought that it was necessary to go outside the temples to fight alongside the workers, in order to modify the oppressive economic, political and social structures of the country. As for women, there were also those who adopted these criteria, besides, not all of them were only in charge of domestic chores, but went out to work and study. Because of these activities, it is possible that the schedules in which women's societies worked were not the most convenient and, perhaps, neither were the topics that dealt with them.

and international developments that changed the contours of Latin America history.”³⁴

It was then, that a pietist theology could not answer to the wants and needs of the people. In Latin America, liberal theology had started to undergo a serious crisis. Confronted with the serious economical problems, Uruguayan Methodism, together with the Latin American one, started to look for other kinds of answers to what they were going through, from a Christian Faith.

Educating, having a hospital, helping the ones in need, no dancing, no smoking, no drinking, and no gambling, were no longer enough. Poverty began to be seen as the result of unfair social structures, which were not part of God's will.

For the IMU, the sixties and seventies were times of identity crisis: What was it meant by the term Church? How should the Church act within society? Should the members of the Church remain inside the temples or should they go out to the world?

Methodist missionaries

Also towards the middle of 1968 the Methodist missionaries in Uruguay made the surprising announcement that they intended to withdraw *en masse* at the beginning of the following year.

The President of the Methodist Church in Uruguay, Luis Odell, wrote:

“The group of missionaries made their decision without consultation with the church. This gave rise to misunderstandings which affected the life of the church. There were some who believed that the decision was taken because the “native” leaders had made the missionaries feel that they were no longer welcome. This was completely untrue. On the contrary, Uruguay was a clear case of good relationships between missionaries and national church leaders.

It should be mentioned that the decision to withdraw coincided with the implementation of a policy of the church in the USA to give Methodist churches overseas complete autonomy. In Uruguay this autonomy became effective in January 1970. (...).³⁵

We believe that the missionary friends were correct in their judgment that the Methodist Church in Uruguay had sufficient capable pastors and lay leaders to move on alone. The experience of these past years has shown that this was true, and much of the credit for this must go to the missionary undertaking. From the point of view both of church life itself and of church administration, the work continued in a manner which we consider satisfactory. But more important (...) Did the withdrawal of foreign missionaries permit the church's

³⁴ Carlos Aguirre, *Latin America in the 1960s*, www.cassites.uoregon.edu sites 2014.

³⁵ In 1969, the Church became autonomous and was named Iglesia Evangélica Metodista en el Uruguay.

achievement of a national identity? It so happens that the withdrawal of the missionaries and the announcement of autonomy coincided with a period of considerable political agitation in Uruguay.

As could be expect, this brought serious problems and divisions in the church, but, at the very least, we can say that the tensions arose in terms of the witness, for good or ill, of a truly national church. (...)

We know that in general the traditional missionary doesn't consider politics as something intimately linked with Christian life and witness, as Latin Americans generally do. Out of respect for these convictions and in order to avoid offending the missionaries and creating divisions, the Uruguayans might not have acted according to their conscience; the opportunity to witness in this way –and even to make mistakes – would therefore have been lost.

In our case, the moratorium affected only the presence and sending of personnel. The mother church has continued to support our work financially. Since our church is small, having a membership of some 2.000 members, not all of whom are active in the church, a total break would have been catastrophic. (...).³⁶

Civic-military dictatorship of Uruguay (1973-1984)

For years Uruguay seemed to be one of the exceptions with respect to the rest of Latin America. It was believed to have been blessed with solid democratic institutions. But this state of affairs came to an abrupt close in the sixties.

The civic military³⁷ dictatorship was the culmination of an escalation of violence and authoritarianism and happened within the context of other military dictatorship in the region. The slow road to dictatorship started in the sixties. There were crises in the economy, high inflation, social conflict, repressive politics and guerrilla Tupamaros activities.³⁸

The Tupamaros was the most important guerrilla group in Uruguay in the 1960s and 1970s.³⁹

"The Tupamaros were considered the epitome of the New Left in Latin America in the late 1960s and produce one of the most popular presidents of the so-called progressive democratic governments of the Southern Cone in the new millennium, Jose "Pepe" Mujica."

³⁶ Luis E. Odell, *Reflections on the total withdrawal of missionaries in the Methodist Church of Uruguay*.

³⁷ "The term civic-military refers to the military regime's initial use of a relatively powerless civilian President as the head of state, which distinguished it from dictatorships in other South American countries in which senior military officers immediately seized power and directly served as head of state." *Civic-military dictatorship of Uruguay*, <https://wikivisually.com>

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ Vania Markarian, *Becoming the Tupamaros: solidarity and transnacional revolutionaries in Uruguay and the United States*. <http://www.tandfonline.com>

The Movimiento de Liberación Nacional Tupamaros (MLN), founded in the early sixties reflected the frustration of the radicalized middle classes. It was made up principally of students and young professionals with some employees and workers. They were carried away by romantic visions of copying the Cuban revolution. In 1970 they carried out their most spectacular actions: they kidnapped several diplomats and murdered one of them, Dan Mitrione, an American adviser to the Uruguayan police. As a result of these kinds of actions, they lost whatever initial popular sympathy they might have had.⁴⁰

In Uruguay, these two decades were full of extreme violence, namely: robbery, abduction, and assassination by the guerrilla groups, as well as a ruthless authoritarian police and military repression through killing and torture.

Those were years of real terror for the population, with detainees who were abducted and disappeared; there were women taken prisoners, who were tortured and raped and babies abducted from their mothers to be handed over to people related to the dictatorship.

“It was along these years that the Church saw its faith tested. The report from the *Executive Council of the Evangelical Methodist Church of Uruguay* about the years 1970 and 1971 expresses:

“IDEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS- Problems that affect our country have been also present in our churches (...) practically all churches of the country report members’ desertions (...) Against critical situations in Education the Executive Council of the Methodist Church has insisted on the freedom of the local congregations to assume attitudes corresponding to the obedience of the Gospel. Furthermore, a letter was sent to the Senate about the investigation of the torture by police.”⁴¹ (...)

In that report to the *General Assembly*, the situation is defined as division among branches of the congregations, antagonism among part of the church and its pastor and distrust toward the authorities of the *Methodist Church*.⁴² The division came from different political and theological positions confronted with the social context and how the Methodist Church should act. The Council report adds that there was a spirit of intolerance in the Church,

⁴⁰ Jeffrey Klaiber, *The Church, Dictatorships, and Democracy in Latin America*, <http://www.books.google.com.uy>

⁴¹ Minute *Executive Council*, “Informe del Consejo Ejecutivo a la II Asamblea General de la Iglesia Evangélica Metodista en el Uruguay”, 1972, p. 78.

⁴² So that Rev. Emilio Castro who came to be Secretary of the *World Council of Churches*, once needed to be defended by the Executive Council “faced with the seriousness of the facts, and with the purpose of doing justice.” By accepting Rev. Emilio Castro invitations from a Political Party “(...) to participate in reflection and study meetings (...) has provoked a great reaction by certain people who have criticized him because of that (...) we encourage every person to (...) ignore the slander (...)” Minutes of *Executive Council* 27 May 1972, p. 100.

"Those of us who emerged in the religious level in Uruguay fighting intolerance, have found we can't be tolerant with one another."⁴³

Although the Dictatorship began in 1973, some years before the region lived a period of political, economical and social instability.

"Since the early sixties, human rights have been violated in Uruguay. Insurgent groups did it through some kidnaps and murders, repressive forces of the successive governments did it, civil- military dictatorship did it in an unprecedented way with methods of State terrorism."⁴⁴

The Dictatorship lasted from 27 June 1973 to 1 March 1985 when a Government chosen by the citizenship assumed power. During those years the *Methodist Church in Uruguay* worked defending *Human Rights*.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, the methodists didn't have a unanimous opinion on how the Church should act through those difficult troubled times. What's more, there was a schism inside the very congregations themselves: some people remained, while others left the Church, be that temporarily or permanently.

Many people, deeply committed to Christianity and the Methodist Church, had (and had had it long before those years) a more individualistic interpretation of the gospel, which could be considered as part of the missionary heritage. Others had a viewpoint which reinterpreted the biblical message, in search to modify not just the people, but those structures of society which produced injustice and oppression.

Once Democracy was restored, back in 1984, the Methodist Church realized that the number of its members, had dramatically declined. Some had had to flee the country during the Dictatorship, while other had left the Church due to ideological reasons.

The support of political prisoners and refugees resulted in the parting and distancing of a significant number of members of the Church. Leadership and membership were greatly lessened.

Thus, in the following years, the Church faced a very difficult internal situation, that was solved along the way. It kept its interest in the affairs of the country, and accompanied the demands for justice of those who had been political prisoners during the Dictatorship.

The Iglesia Metodista en el Uruguay in the 21st century

⁴³ Minute of the *Executive Council*, January 1972, p. 81.

⁴⁴ José Rilla, *La actualidad del pasado. Usos de la historia en la política de partidos del Uruguay (1842-1972)*, Montevideo, DEBOLSILLO, 2013, p. 28.

⁴⁵ Mirtha E. Coitinho, *When History teaches us to think theologically*, Oxford 2013, p. 5.

In the twenty-first century, at the 2008 Assembly, we were informed that the National Board for Life and Mission had worked on a Missionary Proposal which would last for 10 years, adopting the motto of "Growing in Everything". Thus, each congregation was asked to examine its own challenges and possibilities.

The congregations showed contrasting situations. Some of them worked with children and adolescents and were worried the lack of young people; many of them lacked leaders and the biggest group of members were people of advanced age.

On the positive side, some of them had Bible study groups, significant help working social activities with the neighbours, as well as working with children and adolescents, having changed from "snacks and christian education" to "christian education with snacks".

Furthermore, many Church projects kept going on helping society in many ways.

We can read the following observation in the reports for the the 2008 Assembly:

"(...) many congregations have expressed that there is a large number of deaths and a significant emigration, which is not offset by the yearly growth in the number of new members." ⁴⁶

The challenge was to develop into an "ecumenical, inclusive" church "committed [to society]"⁴⁷

In August 2010 a "Proposal for the sustainable growth of the Methodist Church in Uruguay" was put forward to the Assembly.

Many needs were restated: strengthening work with children and adolescents, continuing work among children at risk, working towards overcoming violence among children, young people, women and families, as well as working with issues such as HIV-AIDS.⁴⁸

The last Assembly of the IMU covered the period between 2012 to 2016.

In order to modify the situation of the IMU, some decisions were made: deepening leadership, teaching about the importance of the joy of giving, integrating new people to the different groups of the congregation, strengthening worship and evangelizing outside the temples.

⁴⁶ XX General Assembly of the Church, July, 18 – 20, 2008. Statistical data as of July 2008.

⁴⁷ Report from the National Board for Life and Mission to the XX General Assembly of the IMU. September 2006 - June 2007.

⁴⁸ Document 6, Pastorals and Commissions, (Summary of the evaluation carried out in 2008-2009 as well as contributions and ideas to be presented to the XXI Assembly.), p. 2

EXAMPLES OF THE WORK IN THE 21st CENTURY

We shall offer some examples of the work of the IMU in this 21st century.

Pastoral Institute

In 2004 a Pastoral Institute was created for the on-going formation of the laity and the renewal of pastoral studies. Two large programmes are the focus of the mission of the church: the integrated rural mission in the North (in the most impoverished region where the church is growing more than elsewhere), and the urban mission in Montevideo. Both are challenges to the whole Church and areas of voluntary service of professionals and lay people from the congregations and the wider community.

MONTEVIDEO: MISSION TO THE CITY

It includes three congregations and two institutions.

These congregations⁴⁹ work in the poorer neighbourhoods with the highest birth rate in Uruguay and with difficult social problems.

One of those institutions is the *Instituto de Buena Voluntad (Good Will Institute)*, in Villa del Cerro, in the north of Montevideo.

In 1925 the Industrias de la Buena Voluntad (*Good Will Industries*) were founded with the main aim to make places for physically disabled people to work in. It was founded during the depression years to help the unemployed, the first of its kind to be founded outside of the USA.⁵⁰

Its name was later changed to Instituto de Buena Voluntad (*Good Will Institute*), as it is still known nowadays.

This educational programme is devoted to working with youth facing various types of disabilities,⁵¹ which are caused by their difficult living situations at home.

The Programme is sustained by supports through conventions which are conducted by governmental programmes. Additionally, other organisations and firms support it too.

The priority is a sensibility for social treating and peaceful behaving, as well as preparing students for their future professional life.

Several activities are offered: Carpentry, Bakery, Clothing, Hairdresser's, Art Therapy, Social Treating, Computer studies, Group Radio, Activity Pool.⁵²

⁴⁹ Neighbourhoods' names: Belvedere, La Teja and Villa del Cerro.

⁵⁰ <http://worldmethodistcouncil.org>.

⁵¹ Bio-psycho-social disabilities.

⁵² *Instituto de Buena Voluntad. Un proyecto educativo*, Montevideo, 2014.

HOGAR AMANECER

It is in the care of the Iglesia Metodista en el Uruguay (IMU) and the Iglesia Evangélica del Río de la Plata (IERP).

They have kept an agreement with the government since 1986, through the Instituto Nacional del Menor (INAU), (Institute of Children and Adolescents of Uruguay). The children that go to this foster home come from this Institute.

It gives the children the resources and support needed to build a better life.

The Hogar Amanecer seeks to prevent the repetition of those circumstances that led to these children and adolescents being referred to the Institution. All children keep in touch with their families. Some of them go home for the weekend, while others receive visits from family members at the Institution.

When possible, the children return to live permanently with their families.

Education is put forward as one of the pillars to encourage and foster the development of personal achievement through effort. Thus the importance of sports and foreign languages. Christian formation is very important too.

The Hospital Evangélico (Evangelical Hospital) allows the Hogar Amanecer to receive high quality care in all medical specialties.

ARTIGAS ⁵³

FISHING PROJECT IN PRISON REHABILITATION

It is located in the north of the country, in a town called Bernabé Rivera, in the Artigas department, home to 400 people.⁵⁴

This project is part of a proposal put forward for the improvement of the nourishing of children and adolescents by having a self-supply of fresh fish. The project is conducted

⁵³ Uruguay is divided into 19 departments whose local administrations replicate the division of the executive and legislative powers. Artigas Department is the northernmost department of Uruguay, located in its northwestern region. Its capital is the city of Artigas, which borders on the Brazilian city of Quaraí. It is bordered on the north and east by Brazil, from which it is separated by the Cuareim River. To the south, Artigas Department borders on Salto Department, and to the west is Argentina, from which it is separated by the Uruguay River. Artigas is the only Uruguayan department that borders two other countries. The department and its capital city are named after José Gervasio Artigas (1764–1850), leader of the Orientales (inhabitants of the *Banda Oriental*, the Eastern bank of the Uruguay River) during Uruguay's wars of independence.

⁵⁴ In 2011 Bernabé Rivera had a population of 380. "Censos 2011 Artigas", Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, 2012. <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>

by the Methodist Church using the fish ponds located in the Bernabé Rivera State School. The fish is for consumption in the dining room of the school.

This Programme received the approval from the local and national authorities and it has been incorporated into a Prison Rehabilitation Center. Every week a female pastor together with lay people visit the Centre. They share Bible studies and music.

The Methodist Church has been acclaimed for this contribution. The interaction in a prison setting, presents the opportunity to offer spiritual support to those who need it and also an opening to those prisoners who seek spiritual help.

ADVICE TO PEOPLE ABOUT DRUGS

It is vital to foster ongoing healthy and open dialogue with factual information about addiction prevention. Drugs problem must be understood as a social, economic and spiritual problem. This programme is intended to give guidance for pastors and lay people through seminars, delivering educational information and working with the congregations. It is a task of awareness-raising, training and prevention.

It is important to note that Uruguay is the first country to legalize and regulate every level of the market for cannabis. The cannabis regulation bill was signed into law December 2013, but it was not until May 2014, that the executive branch released the regulations accompanying the law.⁵⁵

“José “Pepe” Mujica, Uruguay’s President from 2010-2015, became an international phenomenon during his time in office. The sandal-wearing, Volkswagen-driving guerrilla turned president made head-lines around the world not only for his modest, plain-spoken image, but also for his support for cannabis legalization. Under his administration and with the support of lawmakers from his Broad Front coalition, Uruguay has become the first country in the world to legalize and regulate every aspect of the cannabis market.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Individuals can purchase up to 40 grams of the drug in licensed pharmacies with or without a prescription (10 grams per week, according to the regulations) at licensed pharmacies. To access the drug, users must first register with the Instituto de Regulación y Control de Cannabis (IRCCA). Users can grow up to six female flowering cannabis plants per household for their own consumption, so long as they have first registered their plants with the IRCCA. The total annual production must not exceed 480 grams. Instituto de Regulación y Control del Cannabis (IRCCA). John Walsh and Geoff Ramsey, *Uruguay’s Drug Policy: Major Innovations, Major Challenges*. <https://www.bookings.edu> 2016/07

December 2013, Law 19.172, Article 2: “(...) the State will take control of regulating the activities of import, export, planting, cultivation, harvesting, production, acquisition in any capacity, storage, marketing and distribution of cannabis and its derivatives, or hemp when appropriate through the institutions to which it grants legal mandate.”

⁵⁶ John Walsh and Geoff Ramsey, *Uruguay’s Drug Policy: Major Innovations, Major Challenges*

Foreigners are not allowed to purchase cannabis in Uruguay and the country does not offer a separate system for medical cannabis users.

In 2017, the government authorized 16 pharmacies to become cannabis distributors, allowed to sell only to the nearly 5000 cannabis consumers registered with the government. (...) Registered consumers must be Uruguayan, 18 or older, and are limited to 40 grams per month. (...) According to polls in 2012-2013 by Equipos Mori, Cifra and Factum, 58-66 % of Uruguayan opposed legalizing the sale of marijuana while 24-29% supported it.⁵⁷

PROGRAMME THREE BORDERS

Uruguay (Artigas and Salto departments), Argentina and Brazil

The programme “Churches without Borders” was initiated in 2003, together with the Methodist Church of Argentina and the Methodist Church in the South of Brazil, as a joint mission and pastoral project in the border zone between these countries.

The aim of this programme was to find a common mission for the three churches in shared geographical boundaries. The example was drawn from a pastoral couple who pastored at churches in Quaraí (Brazil) and Artigas (Uruguay), two border towns.

CITY OF TRINIDAD, DEPARTMENT OF FLORES

Cooking together

This activity enables the Church to open its premises to something different from services and biblical studies. The neighbours benefit from this, without an age limit.

In addition to learning a craft, there is a time for socialising at the end of the class, when they share what has been made and talk about everyday stuff.

The teacher says:

“We started this some years ago in a very poor neighbourhood where two groups were created: between 12 and 64 years of age. Although the neighbourhood was very poor, and more than once a participant has been unable to bring the necessary ingredients and materials, we've always been able to do what was planned because, as if by magic, the necessary butter or eggs appeared. They ended up writing a play impersonating the teacher... it's just thinking about it and my eyes fill with tears.

⁵⁷ <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>

Half of the regulars were people of the church, while the others came from different neighbourhoods. The attendance on Mondays and Fridays was highly committed, never missing a class. We would share some time with the children from the neighbourhood who came to church.

Some people were outstanding: in one of the groups there was a man in his fifties (50s), who was very poor and very eager to learn; in the other one, there was a twelve-year-old girl, who was always ready to cook.

At the moment, most of the people in the course are neighbours. Although they do not usually come to services, they join the members on special occasions, such as Christmas, Easter, etc".

CITY OF MERCEDES, DEPARTAMENT OF SORIANO

This congregation thinks that children are the Church of today. It works with children every week. Young people come and help them. The main focus is on Saturdays, with an emphasis on Christian formation. In addition to providing snack, the young people can pray and play with the children and create space where they can experience God.

CONCLUSIONS

Surely there may be many reasons for the dwindling of the IMU. A deep study should be done, covering the changes in society as well as the challenges related to postmodernity.

However, we may mention some possible reasons. The most important one, being the Dictatorship (1973-1984), which emptied the congregations, especially of lays and some pastors.

Thus, one or even two generations, which could have become part of the church, were lost.

On the other hand, through the decades, the IMU could not, or did not know how to keep the young; maybe because they did not find the answers they were looking for, and thus searched for those answers elsewhere outside the Church.

To a lower degree, we could mention some other factors which also intervened, such as some internal affairs, as well as the lack of team work.

Therefore, looking back at its history, nowadays, Uruguayan Methodism, has numerical growth as a priority. It also takes into account the fact that, beyond institutional care, its vocation is to be a witness of Jesus, in the midst of a society as challenging as the present one.

As we have already stated, because of everything it has done over the decades and because of everything that the IMU is doing in the country nowadays, people think that the Methodists in Uruguay are more numerous than what we actually are.

We resemble the small grain of mustard seed of the parable (Mark 4) which grows and spreads its branches for the benefit of so many people in the most diverse situations.

Despite the dwindling, the IMU has always shared the good news of Jesus Christ in different ways and to many people. It is important to point out that to achieve this, help has been given by individuals and by private and governmental organizations in the country, as well as by churches and individuals abroad.

Without the commitment of so many people, it would be impossible to do this and much more.

Thanks to all.

MAY THE GLORY BE TO GOD.