

Mirtha Elizabeth Coitinho Machiarena (Uruguay)

Fifteenth Oxford Institute.

The World is My Parish;: Glad Tidings of Salvation in an Age of Crisis

The Signs of the Times.

By way of introduction

From a historical perspective, the beginning of the 21st century can be marked by the advent of Covid-19, which undeniably ushered in a new era in our global society. This era, aptly characterised by the esteemed philosopher Zygmunt Bauman as the "liquid society", is emblematic of the prevailing uncertainty we are experiencing. The principles and ideals we hold dear seem to slip through our fingers like water, constantly challenged by the currents of relativism. This paper, to be presented at the Oxford Institute, seeks to shed light on the response of the Methodist Church in Uruguay in the midst of the pandemic and its aftermath. It will focus on the church's compassionate care for the isolated and anxious elderly, its outreach efforts to different age groups, and the tireless work of pastors and lay members to provide food and facilitate online religious observance.

An additional facet of this analysis will explore the pervasive sense of fear that gripped both the medical community and the general population in the face of the unknown, rapid contagion and mortality. In particular, the vaccination debate emerged as a contentious issue within Uruguayan society, with concerns raised about potential adverse effects. The Methodist Church in Uruguay (IMU) refrained from making a collective decision that would affect individuals, instead adhering to a principle articulated in the Counsel to Methodists (Works of Wesley, Volume V): "Do not condemn those whose beliefs differ from your own. Allow every man full liberty of independent thought".

It is worth noting that John Wesley had a keen interest in medicine and making remedies available to all, a philosophy he documented in "Primitive Physick", a widely respected text of his time.

In a broader global context, the year 2023 witnessed a profound challenge in Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay with a population of over 1,500,000. The city experienced a prolonged three-month period of acute water shortage, triggered by a prolonged drought that resulted in elevated levels of chloride and sodium in the water supply. This crisis is a stark reminder of the potential consequences of not being vigilant in conserving natural resources. Belief in God's manifestation in creation and his promise to restore all things is central to Wesleyan theology. In response, the IMU has established a 'Green Team' to promote environmental awareness and responsible stewardship. Although much work remains, significant progress is being made.

Throughout these challenges, the Methodist Church has acted as an active participant in society, guided by the teachings of Jesus as outlined in Matthew 25:35-36, and echoing the sentiments of Wesley: "The gospel of Christ recognises no other religion but the social, nor any other holiness but the social". This precept, underscored by Christ's love for God and his fellow human beings, remains the guiding principle of the church.

The Methodist Church in Uruguay (IMU) has a rich history of navigating moments of profound adversity. During the civil-military dictatorship of 1973-1984, the church bravely defended human rights at great personal cost, with pastors and lay members enduring imprisonment and torture. Remarkably, it was the only church in the country to serve as the headquarters of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) during those tumultuous years. The IMU deacon, Social Assistant María Teresa Olivera de Aiscar, played a key role as the UNHCR contact for the whole country.

Indeed, in this 21st century we live in a time of crisis; it is the time that God has shown us, and Methodist Christians can affirm that it is a time for the grace of God and the kindness with which he has treated us to be known. (Ephesians 2:7).

A time of change or the change of an era?

The Greeks had two words to define time: *chronos* and *kairos*. The first measures what the clock indicates, the second refers to the opportune moment, the oment, when something important happens.¹

When we think about the 21st century, we have to bear in mind that the dates that open or close historical periods are conventional; although chronologically a century is made up of one hundred years, historical events can mark something different. Even events that are important for some countries or regions may not be important for others. The British historian Eric Hobsbawm describes the last century as 'the short 20th century', which for him runs from the First World War to the fall of the Soviet Union (1914-1991)².

From a historical point of view, the beginning of the 21st century could be marked by various events: the fall of the Twin Towers (2001), the invasion of Iraq by some nations (2003), Russia's invasion of Ukraine (2022), but perhaps the most appropriate would be the Covid 19 pandemic, the first time in history that an event, in this case a health event, affected the whole world. The pandemic caused a lot of fear, affected physical and mental health, affected the economy, closed borders, isolated people, made teleworking popular, boosted digital technology even more, made science, aided by technological advances, develop a vaccine in a record time of ten months, and even made it possible to close borders in a record time of ten months and even caused that certain expressions such as "distanciamiento social", "uso obligatorio de mascarillas", "confinamiento" entered in the daily language.

From a chronological point of view, 2001 marked the beginning of a new century and a new millennium. We can reflect on whether this 21st century is an era of change or the change of an era, that is, whether the world is going through a temporary crisis or whether a new era is emerging. We know that the great historical changes do not happen all at once, but gradually and in preparation for future events. That is why it is always necessary to look at the past in order to understand the present. It has been said that it is no

¹ CRONOS AND KAIROS – (...) the classical literature reveals two Greek words for 'time'-*chronos* and *kairos*. These words embrace the uniform time of the cosmic system, the time which, according to Newton, aequabiliter fluit, and the time of opportunity or 'occasion' come and gone which marks the significant moments of historical action." Smith, J.E. TIME, TIMES, AND THE 'RIGHT TIME'; CHRONOS AND KAIROS, *The Monist*, volume 53, Issue 1, 1 January 1969, p. 1 Oxford Academic, Published: 22 December 2014. on line version, June 28, 2024. <https://academic.oup.com>

² Hobsbawm, Eric, *Age of extremes. The short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*. London, Abacus, 1994.

coincidence that several authors in the 20th century gave their books the titles they did because they felt that one era was ending and another was beginning. Some examples are: "The End of Ideology" and "The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society" by Daniel Bell, "The End of History" by Francis Fukuyama, "The Third Wave" by Alvin Toffler and "Before the End" by Ernesto Sábato.

According to José Amiune, there are four keys that allow us to identify the 21st century: 1. the end of the international liberal order that began with the Treaty of Versailles in 1919; 2. the rise of a new stage of capitalism; 3. the first pandemic in world history; 4. the confrontation between the United States and China³.

This new century has undoubtedly witnessed the emergence of phenomena of great importance: globalisation, the technological revolution, progress or setbacks, depending on one's interpretation, in law, the rise of social movements and the progress of science, among others. At the same time, an unjust economic system has grown that continues to increase poverty, migration and environmental destruction. Globalisation⁴ is not limited to a specific area, but is spreading rapidly throughout the world, although there are exceptions. Today, the movement of financial capital is instantaneous and works all the time. Silvela Díaz-Criado comments on Manuel Castells'⁵ book *La Era de la información. Economía, Sociedad y Cultura*, in which Castells analyses today's world. She points out that the Spanish author emphasises that digital technology has changed the way people live their daily lives, which Castells calls the network society.⁶

Society is also becoming more aware of the need to take care of the environment, as natural disasters and climate change are a strong wake-up call.⁷

For some people, certain changes in legislation, such as the so-called egalitarian marriage or abortion laws, are the result of a loss of values, that is, of certain principles that determine behaviour, principles that are essential for making decisions and that are implanted in society. In the midst of all that has been described, fundamentalisms In the midst of all that has been described, religious and political fundamentalisms have re-

³ Amiune, José Miguel, El destino del siglo XXI, *Ciclos en la historia, la economía y la sociedad*, vol 31, no. 55, Buenos Aires, diciembre 2020, on line version, June 4, 2024. http://www.scielo.org.ar/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1851-37352020000200004

⁴ "Globalization is defined as a process that integrates knowledge worldwide, has its historical reference on changes in the ways processes, methods and information are addressed, documented its inception in the late twentieth century. Manuel Castells como se citó en: María Victoria Flores *Globalization as a political, economic and social phenomenon*, Orbis Revista Científica Ciencias humanas, Fundación Miguel Unamuno y Jugo, Maracibo, Venezuela, Vol. 12, núm. 34, 2016, pp. 26-41.

⁵ Manuel Castells, sociologist and university professor. Doctor in Sociology from the University of Paris and the Complutense University of Madrid.

⁶ In Uruguay in 2022, a survey was carried out on internet use. According to it, 90% of people aged 14 or older use the Internet and 83% do so daily. Of every 10 people, 9 use cell phones daily and only 30% do so by computer. This gives us an idea of the importance of digital technology.

Encuesta de Uso de Tecnologías de la Información y la Comunicación 2022. Estadísticas. Publicado el 18/05/2023. <https://www.gub.uy/agencia-gobierno-electronico-sociedad-informacion-conocimiento/datos-y-estadisticas/estadisticas/encuesta-uso-tecnologias-informacion-comunicacion-2022>

⁷ An example is what happened in Montevideo and surrounding areas, in Uruguay, in the year 2023, when the lack of rain, the worst drought in more than 70 years, and the lack of works for a new dam, led to a limit situation of lack of drinking water, a situation never experienced before. The completion of a second project to supply drinking water was postponed government after government.

emerged strongly in some places, with implications for national and international security.

Migration is affected by a number of global factors, such as armed conflicts that cause people to flee their homes, poverty, insecurity and rapid demographic change. It has been observed that high- and middle-income countries are experiencing declining fertility rates, a very specific case being South Korea⁸. This is a major problem as people are ageing and there are not enough births to replace them. On the other hand, fertility rates are rising in low-income countries. It is possible that in the future the population of low-income countries will be needed by high- or middle-income countries, and the latter will have to compete to attract the most skilled people from low-income countries.

Among the causes of migration, it is also possible that climate change will have an impact, causing human groups to cross borders in search of a place less affected by floods, droughts, high temperatures and water shortages. The picture is very complex and requires profound solutions from all nations, which are not always favourable and will not be easy or quick⁹.

All of these are major challenges that the Methodist Church, with its Wesleyan heritage, will have to face in every part of the world in which it finds itself.

The Signs of the Times.

“Ye can discern the faze of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times? Matthew 16:3 The Signs of the Times.

John Wesley's sermon no. 66, entitled The Signs of the Times, seems appropriate for analysing the activities of the Methodist Church in Uruguay in the 21st century, with its advances, difficulties and problems. At the same time, it is possible that other countries will see themselves reflected in the particular situation of a country that does not reach 3,500,000 inhabitants¹⁰ and of a Methodist Church that, despite its small membership, carries out a work that covers various areas and institutions¹¹.

"A couple of young rough heads," said the Bishop of London, "what can they pretend to be? They pretended to be in the hand of God as a pen is in the hand of man. They have pretended (and do so to this day) to do the work for which they were sent; to do what the Lord wills".

The Methodist Church in Uruguay (IMU) is also made up of a small group of people who, like these young people, can be asked: What does this church think it can do? The answer

⁸ “National emergency” is how the president of South Korea has cataloged, in this year 2024, the problem of declining birth rates in his country.

⁹ *Global Migration in the 21st Century: Navigating the Impact of Climate Change, Conflict, and Demographic Shifts*. The World Bank, on line version, June 24, 2024. <https://www.world.org/en/news/feature/2023/12/11global-migration-in-the21st-century-navigating-the-impact-of-climate-change-conflict-and-demographic-shifts>

¹⁰ According to the 2023 Census, the population of Uruguay is 3,444,263 inhabitants.

¹¹ Among members, supporters, volunteers, adults, young people, children and workers in the different institutions, you can think of about one thousand people.

is the same as it was in the 18th century: in the hands of God, it can and does do the work for which God has placed it in this country.

It is interesting to note that during Holy Week in 1965, in Montevideo, Uruguay, Pastor Emilio Castro preached a sermon entitled "What to do?" based on John 13:1-17. Although so many decades have passed, and Castro's context is different from John Wesley's and our own in the 21st century, the sermon is highly relevant and highlights the Wesleyan heritage of service. But it is not just about service, it is about service being relevant to those who need it. Castro expressed that the Christian must "see life as a field of passionate service (...) with the goal of a society of mutual and reciprocal service".

The service that Jesus performed with the towel and the basin was not a symbolic service, it was a real service, the disciples had dirty feet, they had come from the street, they were wearing open sandals, the climate of Palestine during the day is hot, the streets are dusty, it was customary in more or less wealthy houses to have a servant or a slave who performed this helpful function for those who entered. There was no servant or slave among the disciples, but Jesus took that place because someone had to wash the feet, refresh the feet of the disciples so that they could enjoy their meal in peace and quiet. This service that Jesus did was not something extraordinary, something that Jesus did as a symbol, it was something effective, useful for those who needed it. The Christian must ask himself about the effectiveness of service.

Castro added that it is not a question of having a nursery to get parents to come to church later, but that we will have it if it responds to a real human need that we have to go and serve. We need to ask ourselves not only about the purity of our Christian witness in our work, but also about the effectiveness of that witness, about the way in which, with intelligence, we achieve results that express the spirit of service that animates us. Therefore, in the modern society in which we find ourselves, it is essential for Christians to be people of study. (...) that they study the economic, social and cultural publications, that they keep abreast of what is happening on the continent, and that they reflect on what it means to be a Christian at the university, in politics, at work, in the workshop, etc., in the light of that information and in the light of the Gospel".

New bills and laws of the 21st century

In this 21st century, the Methodist Church in Uruguay has analysed several issues that, after a deep debate in society, have been transformed into laws and have modified ethical values that were previously considered fundamental. The law on "voluntary abortion", the law on "equal marriage" and the law on "equal rights".

In this 21st century, the Methodist Church in Uruguay has analysed several issues that, after a deep debate in society, have been transformed into laws and have modified ethical values that were previously considered fundamental. The law on "voluntary abortion"¹²,

¹² Law number 18.987 of October 22, 2012.

the law on equal marriage¹³ and the law on the legalisation and control of cannabis can be mentioned¹⁴.

There is also a bill on "euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide" that has not yet become law. Since the world is my parish, the IMU has analysed the laws from a pastoral, theological and legal perspective to know what position to take as a church in these cases¹⁵.

Analysis of the 2003 pastoral document on homosexuality

In a 2003 document, Methodist pastors stated that homosexuality is a reality that cannot be denied. Not all times and countries have treated homosexuality in the same way¹⁶. At the time, a group of people who identified themselves as homosexual asked for a place in an IMU building to meet as a group and hold religious services.

The pastors also discussed this situation to see if it was appropriate to respond in the affirmative. They recognised that homosexuality was not an easy issue and that they were also conditioned by social context and personal experience. They did not have a single definitive opinion. It was stated that homosexuality is one thing and sexual abuse is another, which occurs in both heterosexuals and homosexuals.

They understood that a very important factor in being able to take a position on homosexuality was to be well informed; to investigate the opinions of the different branches of science: Biology, Sexology, Psychology, etc. It was concluded that the good news of Jesus Christ is for everyone, without excluding anyone because of their sexual orientation. Therefore, the group of people who had asked for a place for their religious celebrations had to be accepted¹⁷.

Over time, this group has shared with the local community at Easter, Christmas, community birthdays, etc.

Equal marriage law

With regard to the law on equal marriage, it should be remembered that civil marriage has been compulsory in Uruguay since 1885 and is the only one valid throughout the country, so churches do not perform marriages.

¹³ The Equal Marriage Law was approved in 2013. Previously, in 2007, concubinal unions between people of the same sex had been approved. The adoption of children by people of the same sex has also been legalized.

¹⁴ Law number 19.172 of December 20, 2013.

¹⁵ Other laws refer to trans and Afro-descendant people.

¹⁶ Even in some countries it was a cause of imprisonment, such as the case of the writer Oscar Wilde.

¹⁷ Methodist Church in Uruguay, Reflections on the topic of Sexual Diversity, p. 37, October 13, 2003.

Equal marriage has been recognised in the country since 2013. Faced with such a delicate issue, on which there are different positions, the IMU gives pastors and congregations the freedom to decide what to do if a request for blessing is made by a homosexual couple¹⁸.

A Methodist View on Reproductive Health

Also in 2003, under the title "A Methodist Position on Reproductive Health in Uruguay", the Methodist Church affirmed that life is a gift of God, and therefore it does not support abortion or any other method that serves to end human life. Despite being against abortion, it could not be denied that abortion existed with or without the law.

The law does not create abortion, it regulates something that already exists. They were against abortion, but in the light of the Gospel, neither the Church nor its members are called to be judges against the woman who decides to have an abortion. It should be the woman who makes the decision, not the state, and applying the criminal law that existed up to that point was not the best solution.

It was said that "thinking and letting think" has historically been part of the identity of the Methodist Church and that different opinions are respected, even if not shared. As the Methodist Church in Uruguay, it was stated that

1. We do not support or promote the indiscriminate practice of abortion.
2. We must help to ensure responsible motherhood/fatherhood and avoid unwanted pregnancy.
3. In extreme or life-threatening situations, the woman must have the right to choose.
4. We affirm our respect and support for the conscientious choices made by our members in their social responsibility within the framework of the Gospel and before God.

This position was adopted by the XVIIIth General Assembly of the Methodist Church in Uruguay on 18 July 2004¹⁹.

Bill on euthanasia

In September 2001, the Methodist congregation of the Department of Salto, in the north of the country, received a request from a member of the Uruguayan Parliament to express the congregation's opinion on a bill concerning the only thing that is certain about man, namely death, a bill on euthanasia.

Under the title "Suffering and Death Make Sense in Christ", the congregation and its pastor asked various experts, including theologians, to respond to a questionnaire in order to begin analysing the issue. Finally, the congregation shared the final text with the leaders of the IMU and with deputies from the department of Salto, deputies from different political parties. The text emphasises the advances in medicine and the great

¹⁸ Divorce has existed since 1907. Uruguay is the country with a significant number of divorces. Since 1917 Uruguay has been a secular country, without an official religion. Today marriage has weakened for several reasons, perhaps a very important factor is that the woman goes outside the home to work, therefore, she is no longer economically dependent on a husband.

¹⁹ Final draft: October 7, 2004.

capacity that the doctor has to act with these advances. Thanks to these advances, people are living longer, but in a society that worships youth, health and pleasure.

The text goes on to say that in the face of euthanasia, four questions arise from an ethical point of view that each person must answer: what do I want to do? what can I do? What can I do? What should I do? And what should I not do? Furthermore, as a church, when faced with any ethical question²⁰

It was understood that as Methodist Christians it was essential to enter into dialogue with society, so the question should be: "What do I have to do as a Christian in the midst of a plural society?" In this sense, it was necessary to recognise that there were other ethical references outside the Church that could help in reflection, being instruments of God (even without knowing it), so that the Church could better understand the truth.

It was good for other sources to give their opinion, even if it seemed to be wrong, and to look for some common ground among us all.

Everything that has been said so far has not meant that the Church and other leaders have not given their opinion, but rather that they have recognised that it is necessary to bring it from a confessional or philosophical identity so that society can find solutions to its pressing problems.

The answer to the question: what does it mean to die with dignity? was very difficult to understand. Some ideas could help. On the one hand, reflecting on euthanasia means reflecting on the place of death in life. The Apostle Paul wrote in his letters: "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21), and by saying Christ, the Apostle speaks to us of a personal way of life and a plan to live in society in love, truth, justice and forgiveness. Since then, the Church has affirmed that death should be a companion of life and not an intruder that comes at the end.

The text of the Salto meeting stated that we all have the right to real and guaranteed access to the best medical services. This raises the question: how is power over illness and death distributed in an economically unjust society?

Furthermore, we all deserve to die surrounded by the affection of our loved ones, not alone in a hospital room. No matter how advanced technology becomes, nothing can replace the healing and comforting power of love.

Human beings are constantly changing. From the perspective of our faith - the faith that our elder brothers have tried to follow all their lives and that we follow - God holds our times in his hands (Psalm 31:15) and we must trust in his providence. Therefore, to die with dignity is to die in peace with God. If we affirm that every person has the right to life, does that same person also have the right to dispose of his or her life?

It was a dangerous question, and even some people in the reflection group described it as "delicate" in its simplicity. Because, starting from a human right that is consecrated as the basis of all other rights, such as the right to life, one should not arrive at a conclusion that is completely alien to it: that of an alleged right to dispose of that life.

²⁰ 1 Peter 3:15.

The articles of faith of the Evangelical Methodist Church in Uruguay state that "the Holy Scriptures contain all that is necessary for salvation, so that no one should be required to receive as an article of faith, nor consider as a necessary condition for salvation, anything that is not read in them or cannot be proved by them"²¹.

That is why we turn to the Bible for the nourishment of our common thought, and there, in that Holy Word, it is clearly stated that God is the Creator of all that exists and, as such, also its Owner and Lord. "In the beginning God created..." (Genesis 1:1), with this definitive statement our Holy Book opens and begins the founding story of the faith we share with the rest of the Christian Churches.

It was understood that in a liberal society like Uruguay, the right to life is not the same as the right to dispose of one's life, even if it is one's own. This is because it is not possible to recognise a right of ownership over life. Property always has to do with things, and things have no value in themselves. Therefore, they can be eliminated or destroyed when the common good requires it. On the other hand, human life has a value in itself because it is an inseparable part of the human person, a value in itself.

The group concluded by saying that "For those of us who confess Christ as the Saviour of our lives, all the questions that arise in the face of ethical issues are reduced to one: what place do we give to God in our lives? Nothing escapes the infinite power of God. God has ways that we cannot understand, but they always mean the best for us, for our life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3).

As a Church, we are in favour of science and technology, which are an expression of the grace of the Father, with regard to the health of the body. But when curative medicine has reached an insurmountable limit, the elimination of pain is supported. And if this shortens the patient's life, because it is an end that is not directly sought, the decision taken would be irreproachable. It would be quite different to promote active euthanasia, to which a resounding no is given.

Christians are called to prepare our whole lives for the final encounter with our God, who holds our personal history in His hand. By what criteria could we legitimise an action in this sense, without in reality contradicting the faith that our lips proclaim?

But we also know that, faced with the patient's request to deliberately shorten his life, we cannot avoid entering into a deep relationship of respect and support in love. Those whom we accompany as they face their departure at a deep level of existential anguish must feel that we are not at their side as judges, but as companions in suffering and hope. **Evangelical Methodist Church of the Cross, Salto - September 2001".**

In July 2022 the Salto Bioethics Committee and the Salto Lawyers Association invited the Methodist Church of Uruguay to offer their reflections on this topic in the "*Conference on Euthanasia. Is it viable as an option in our country?*" Pastor David Waszuk, pastor of the Methodist Church in the city of Salto, in the north of the country, said:

²¹ Constitution of the IEMU, article of faith V. In that year the name of the church was Evangelical Methodist Church in Uruguay.

“First of all the Methodist Church share that life is a gift from God. Likewise, we believe that life cannot be reduced to its biological aspect, but that it is in close communion with biographical life. That is, experiences, relationships with other people, feelings, In the Gospel of John we read that Jesus came so that let us have life, and life in abundance (Jn 10,10). It is not, then, about mere existence. (...)

Ethical and pastoral reflection is based on the premise that, ideally, all possible treatments and care, including palliative, psychological, spiritual and, eventually pastoral care, are available to all patients, both in the public and private spheres of society health. (...) We have to recognize that in our societies in general, and in the church in particular, despite defending the right to life, we face situations in which taking it is exempt from guilt (...) murder in self-defense and “justified” wars. (...)

So, a first question for reflection could be: Can the church condemn those who, in a terminal and irreversible phase of their illness, and faced with the suffering that it entails, decide to end their existence in a dignified manner? (...) there are other pains, psychic, moral, spiritual, that only those who experience them can feel and form which we do not always have an answer. And we have to recognize that in such circumstances it is our duty to accompany the patient so that he can discover, in his relationship with God, the best response to his suffering and to go through that time in the trust and security of his unconditional love. (...)

Thus, from our faith, other questions may arise. Can I impose on another person, in a situation like the one presented, to continue living a life that leads to extreme deterioration? Can we affirm, with certainty, that God is on the side of the senseless pain of an incurable patient? (...) When life is a humiliation without hope, are we in a position to condemn “to hell” those who responsibly decide the end of his life? (...) We are aware that the reflection on this topic is not exhausted in this brief presentation. The Church has reflected for decades and, surely, will continue to do so in light of scientific advances, theological reflection and accompaniment to those who go through the final stages of a terminal illness.

We defend life and the use of palliative care in all cases of terminal illness, but we do not judge or condemn those who, in circumstances of extreme pain and deterioration, make the considered and responsible decision to end their existence. Nor to those who participate in the process. Our thinking is based on our faith, but it cannot and should not be imposed as a moral law on those who do not profess it.

We seek to contribute to a respectful and profound debate that allows for greater commitment from society in the search for those who must go through their last moments of existence to have all the elements available to do so with dignity. And trusting in a god, whose grace and mercy surpass all understanding”.

Various activities of the IMU in the 21st century

In this new century, the Methodist Church in Uruguay has not limited itself to reflection, but has also carried out its mission through various activities, both inside and outside the

church. When we live in a time of crisis, this time is a challenge to move forward. A few examples may help to understand some of the work carried out by the IMU in these years.

Music

In the area of music, the Methodist Church in Uruguay recorded an album of Christian tangos entitled "We have hope". Performed by Noelia Méndez, a member of the Methodist Church in Uruguay, the album was nominated for a Latin Grammy in 2011 (among 600 albums) in the Christian music category. In 2012, it was nominated for best tango album in Christian music and best female artist at the Sion Awards.

Covid 19

Although the Covid19 pandemic affected the Methodist Church in Uruguay like the rest of society, it also helped us to reflect on how to be a church in the midst of a great difficulty that it had never faced before. It was a time of crisis and, at the same time, of continuing the mission that God had entrusted to the Church. There was no doubt that the signs of the times had to be discerned. Like Wesley in the eighteenth century, the UMC had to be creative in using all available resources to find other ways to continue the mission and care for the people. It has been observed that not all that globalisation brings is negative.

In the parishes, in the social and educational work of the Church, social networks were used in a way that had never happened before. It is noteworthy that the elderly, aged eighty and over, quickly learned to use the Internet, and religious celebrations and other activities continued without interruption through virtual platforms. From the beginning, the recommendations of the World Health Organisation and the Scientific Advisory Group appointed by the government were followed. This meant, at least in the first few months, social distancing, wearing masks, avoiding face-to-face encounters and, above all, taking care of the elderly.

There was a global sense of fear and uncertainty about an unknown disease and treatment. The media reported the death toll day after day, adding to the anxiety. Health workers were particularly affected, as they worked directly with the sick and were at high risk of infection and death.

It should be noted that in some Methodist congregations there was a discrepancy, not insignificant from a theological point of view, which will be analysed in the future. Some people understood that it was not necessary to take these precautions, since God had all the power to protect against the virus and all evil, so at the height of the pandemic they chose to meet in person, outside the temple and church facilities, in private homes, without distance or masks, while the rest of the congregations followed the scientific guidelines.

It was also necessary to learn how to help children in the post-pandemic phase. Behavioural changes were observed which, in addition to the attraction of social networks, affected children's ability to relate to others beyond the virtual. For this reason, when the pandemic was over, a Methodist congregation organised the workshop "The impact of the pandemic and social networks on the social relationships of our children", which was held in person and via zoom.

Centenary of the Evangelical Women's League of Uruguay

In 2021, the centenary of the Evangelical Women's League of Uruguay, later the Uruguayan Evangelical Women's League, was celebrated with the motto "Deep roots bear good fruit", based on the text of Matthew 13:8. Over the decades, Methodist, Waldensian, Adventist, Baptist, Free Brethren, Armenian and Pentecostal women have participated in this league. As we had just come out of the pandemic, the event was organised for 40 people from churches and institutions.

Uruguayan-Argentine mission circuit. Bird River

The Methodist Churches of Uruguay and Argentina work together in the mission circuit "Litoral Río de los Pájaros". Among the activities, the evangelism meeting "Working for the Kingdom of God", which brought together about seventy Methodists from Argentina and Uruguay, with guests from Paraguay and Brazil, was sponsored by Global Ministries and the National Evangelism Team of the Evangelical Methodist Church in Argentina. Theory and practice came together as the group toured the city of Colón, in Entre Ríos, Argentina, visiting homes. The meeting was also used to work on hospitality, Wesleyan small groups and an evangelistic singing workshop.

Still on the Río de los Pájaros²² circuit, a training meeting for ministry with children and young people was held in Uruguay in September 2022. It was a time to share experiences, teaching materials, plans and future projects. Always in the circuit of the River of Birds, in this year 2022, in September, in Uruguay, a training meeting was organised for the work with children and adolescents. It was a time to share experiences, teaching materials, plans and future projects.

A year later, in September 2023, again with the support of Global Ministries, some 50 Argentinean and Uruguayan pastors and lay people met in the same city of Colón, Argentina, to promote and strengthen the call to "Wesleyan small groups" in the congregations of both countries. Participants had the opportunity to discuss the theology, practice and significance of these groups in the Methodist movement of Wesley's day. We then considered how to update these groups in our time and contexts. The aim is to strengthen these groups for spiritual growth and mutual care²³.

In relation to work with children and young people, work in a deprived neighbourhood can be highlighted. The difficulties faced by this community are similar to those in other countries: poverty, drug abuse, family violence. The doors of the church are open every week and the children and young people feel safe there. They can play and listen to Bible

²² The river that divides Uruguay and Argentina is called Río Uruguay which, in the indigenous Guaraní language, could mean River of Painted Birds. Other possible meanings are River of the conch shells or River of the Uru, name of a bird that inhabited the area.

²³ Inside and outside churches and in other places in the world, various opinions also emerged around Covid19: unsafe vaccines, conspiracy theories, misinformation, punishment from God, that if hospitals collapsed, older people would be left to die. That is why it is a topic to analyze Covid 19 and its effects in the religious sphere.

stories. Doctors, psychologists, teachers and pastors also offer workshops for the whole family. Older people share what they have, such as food, which everyone uses to prepare meals. No one should feel that they are so poor that they cannot help in some way. In December 2021, it was finally possible to buy the land on which this community operates, which had previously been rented. Children's rooms were added, and the kitchen and play areas were enlarged²⁴.

The Methodist Church in Uruguay and its history at the University of the Republic

It is noteworthy that in this century, through some historical researches, published or unpublished, the history of the Methodist Church in Uruguay has entered with renewed interest within the framework of the University of the Republic, through researchers, both Methodist and of other denominations or non-religious. At present, research into the history of Methodism is continuing at this public university in a secular country. This situation of growing interest had not occurred before the 21st century.

You may ask: Why is it important to know the history of Methodism and Methodism in Uruguay in a university environment? Because in the university you study history, and Methodism is part of this history that is gradually being known by teachers and students. From the moment it settled permanently in the country, Methodism contributed to the culture of Uruguay. "From its theological understanding and within the territory it entered, it influenced the formation of thought and contributed to the struggle for the demands made by different sectors of Uruguayan society²⁵.

Methodism in Uruguay began evangelical work in Spanish, managed to build a school that continues to this day, built a hospital where many people are treated, worked in prisons, leper colonies, fought against white slavery, against dictatorship, gave the world ecumenical leaders, journalists, writers, people committed to their context, some of these people are currently remembered in the street gazettes of the cities of Montevideo and Trinidad. Methodism in the country is present in culture through music, theatre, writing and conferences on current affairs.

Uruguayan Methodism gave birth, possibly, to the first Protestant newspaper in Latin America (*El Evangelista*, 1877-1886), and in the same century Methodist work began in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The Methodist Church in Uruguay has cared for and continues to care for those in need, it participates in different areas of society, because it is in its DNA that the world is its parish. Throughout its history it has always been a church small in numbers and great in the hands of God.

In conclusion

We are in a new millennium, a new century and probably a new era. This is a challenging time for the Methodist Church in the world and especially for the Methodist Church in Uruguay.

²⁴ But another part fell on good soil and produced a good harvest." Matthew 13, 8.

²⁵ Coitinho, Mirtha E., *Testigos de un silencio. Metodismo y masonería en el Uruguay del siglo XIX*, Montevideo, Planeta, 2009, p. 7.

Questions arise: What can the church do in this new era? What does the Methodist Church have to share with society? How can the Methodist Church fulfil Jesus' command to go and make disciples? What does our Wesleyan heritage mean for society in this century? What of John Wesley and this 18th century movement is relevant today? It is possible for the Methodist Church in Uruguay to discern the signs of the times?

Using Albert C. Outler's well-known Wesleyan quadrilateral, we note that Wesley began with the Bible, through which grace, the love of God, could be known. "God's love desires to save the souls He has created ... but He will not force them to accept it. ... Grace, according to Wesley, manifests itself in three forms: in our creation, in our transformation and in our recreation, that is, in prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace"²⁶. This message is still relevant today.

But we cannot and should not read the Bible as Wesley did. On the one hand, the biblical sciences open up a very rich panorama in the analysis of the biblical text, which Wesley did not have at his disposal, because these biblical sciences have developed over the centuries and new readings continue to emerge. On the other hand, we cannot read the Bible as Wesley did, because his context and ours are different, so we must know how to read the signs of the times. In this analysis, the Bible and reason come together. The message of God's love is the same throughout time because, as the biblical writer says, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

For Wesley, experience was fundamental, he interpreted the reality around him and wanted to change it by doing everything in his power. We too look at our reality, seek theological and pastoral answers, and try to change what does not allow people to live abundantly. We interpret this world and do what we can. Bible reading and the experience of other Christian groups made a significant contribution to Wesley's life. Today ecumenism is a distinctive feature of the Methodist Church in the world.

Bible, reason, experience and tradition. We have received this tradition as a treasure to be recreated for our present in Uruguay, for our signs of the times. The present that does not come from a majority church like Wesley's Anglican, nor from a movement within a church, but from a formed church, autonomous, small in number, open to society, working with Christian groups or not, and with people, Christian or not, and in the end, for all that is done in its name, we can affirm that it is a time for the grace of God and the kindness with which he has treated us to be known (Ephesians 2:7).

Julio 2024

²⁶ Arias, Mortimer, *Gracias responsable*, Revista Teología e Historia, Volumen 6, Año 2010. Online version, July 5, 2024. <https://teologiaehistoria.ucel.edu.ar/author/mortimerarias/>