

# Reflections from Utila

CHRIS HAINES

*Chris Haines shares reflections of the time that he and his wife Linda spent serving as a Mission Partners in Utila (an island in the bay of Honduras, Central America).*



In 2024, the number of Mission Partners serving the British Methodist Church overseas since Methodism began was drastically reduced. Linda and I opted to return from September 2024, after two years serving the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas (MCCA) on Utila, off Honduras in Central America. Our calling to serve as Mission Partners (Ordained MP and Accompanying Volunteer) came through prophecies received during a sabbatical in Brazil and visiting Methodist Churches there. After due process and training at Cliff College, we were stationed to Utila, and left with our luggage (which arrived a week later) and 12 boxes of freight (two months later).

On arrival, while the Mission House was prepared, we stayed in a hotel, acclimatizing to the heat (mostly 30-35 degrees centigrade), local wildlife (house lizards, cockroaches, scorpions, and mosquitoes, with sandflies, beautiful birds and endemic iguanas outside), friendly people and cultural differences. When we moved in, we also experienced life on Main Street, with its busy traffic (Utila is virtually car-free but has many golf carts, motorcycles, jumbos (motorcycles with trailers) and some commercial vehicles) and loud discos (four within 100 metres) - not conducive to sleep or sermon preparation!

We worked alongside a local minister in Utila's largest church: (membership around 100, congregation around 60, afternoon Sunday School with 127 members and 150-200 on special Sundays) and a Methodist school with around 180 students aged 4-17. They held assemblies in church at 7am every Monday, and everyone had one Bible class a week, which I coordinated and church volunteers



(including us) taught, prepared and marked termly exams. Our time was spent bringing the gospel to all church groups of all ages, through preaching and teaching in church and school.

The other circuit churches comprised a small church on the Cays (coastal islets, accessible in most weathers by a beautiful coastal boat trip), and three active ones on the mainland: La Ceiba, the ferry terminus (forty members), El Pino (twelve members, 45 minutes away by taxi), and Puerto Cortes (twenty members, seven-plus hours away). With no minister on the north coast and a non-resident Superintendent, my duties included coordinating the circuit plan, ensuring monthly communions and training local preachers. The latter was hampered by shortages of theological books, electricity - making online ministry challenging (!) and lack of accredited mentors, along with high travel and accommodation costs.

Every church had English services except El Pino, whose were in Spanish. My Spanish was worse than I'd thought initially, but improved with regular use, especially at school. The school was bi-lingual, with half its lessons in English, but the Principal, half the staff and an increasing proportion of students, only spoke Spanish! Linda's Spanish went from almost nil to getting by, and she's still learning.

The people were amazing. One family took us in for special events, (islanders value their British heritage and language) including Christmas and Thanksgiving - and occasional random hospitality with an invitation that might be along the lines of: 'We've got pigtail bando for lunch, come round for 12'. The sassy Women's Fellowship loved Linda, and took her for a farewell mini-break on the mainland. 'Teen Tuesday' had a great bunch of teenagers, who regularly took services



on Utila and the Cays, as did the Men's and Women's Fellowships.

The island is beautiful - we particularly enjoyed swimming and snorkelling in the Caribbean and the wonderful wildlife. Linda became accustomed to regular trips to the small shops after the twice-weekly food boat had arrived, and water arrived twice weekly into storage tanks.

Meetings were challenging. Circuit meetings (usually on the mainland) lasted three days; District meetings in Belize lasted a week! The climate ensured prayer meetings were at 6am on Saturdays (before it got too hot or noisy). When it rained hard, meetings were cancelled and the mission house acquired a temporary moat! Due to the heat, funerals occurred within 24 hours, and the burial occurred during the service while we sang hymns and read scriptures.

Though the heat, noise and power cuts were irritating, it was such a privilege to be able to serve as Mission Partners - partnering in the gospel - alongside such wonderful people in such a remarkable part of the world.

## REV CHRIS HAINES

*Rev Chris Haines is a Methodist minister and his wife Linda is a Local Preacher. They have served in south Devon, Greater Manchester and Honduras (as Mission Partners), before moving to London last September.*

