

URUGUAY: A MISSION CHALLENGE

Uruguay has an extension of 176.215 Km². It borders with Brazil in the north, and with Argentina in the west along the Uruguay River and the south along La Plata River, as well as the Atlantic Ocean.

There were 3,500,000 inhabitants in the country in 2010, half of which live in and around the Capital, Montevideo.

Soccer and politics are the two passions that unite the people of Uruguay. It is said that every child in Uruguay is born with a soccer ball under their arm! Participation in the national elections is obligatory meaning that there is no other nation in the world that is so involved in the election of their rulers.

Due to being a small country, and the bounds of accepted social conduct, people tend to be traditional and conservative. They are relaxed and neighborly. They are very receptive and hospitable with foreigners, and for this reason there are many foreign communities and people living in the country. There are no longer any original indigenous populations living in Uruguay.

An increasing number of homes are single parent households; for this reason, one fifth of Uruguayan homes are female-headed households.

The separation between Church and State has been in effect since 1916. Freedom of religious expression is enshrined in the Constitution. Sixty percent (60%) of the population considers themselves to be Christian, while 24% have no professed religion or are atheist, with 12% being spiritualist and 1.8% Jewish. Of those who consider themselves Christian, 47% profess to be Catholics and 6.5% Evangelical. At least half of the people who profess to be Christian do not participate in any church (although statistics vary widely). Given the secular nature of the Uruguayan state, Christian holidays are officially given other names. For instance, Holy Week is called Tourist Week and Christmas is the Family Feast. Many believe in God in their "own way". They live out their religiosity without identifying with any particular faith tradition, making them easy victims to moral relativism and a reversal of values. They are mistrustful of any religious apparatus. Increasingly, syncretism between traditional and African religions is gaining importance.

This creates a very different religious climate in Uruguay to that of the rest of the continent. Uruguay has often been called the burial ground of missionaries because it is so difficult to plant a church there (an activity that requires at least 5 years to carry out, but usually more than that).

The first evangelical contact made with the country was in 1806 with the English occupation, in other words by the Anglican church. The first Methodist attempt was made in 1839, but was only firmed up more recently in the 1860s. The Waldensians started arriving from 1857 onwards. It was around the same time that the Lutherans also began to arrive. The first Baptist church was organized in 1911, as well as the Free Brothers church. The Armenian Evangelical church began in 1926. The first Mennonites arrived in 1948 as Second World War refugees from Germany, and shortly thereafter their missionary work amongst the Uruguayans began. Later, many more migrants and missionaries from other groups arrived.

Over the last few decades, so-called Evangelical groups have come to Uruguay that are really get rich quick schemes. They request fees for prayer for the sick or other situations that life throws at people, gathering fortunes and leaving a terrible testimony behind for all other Evangelicals.

Despite specific efforts made to grow and to plant more churches, there are still parts of the country that have few if any evangelical churches. This is true along the coast of La Plata River from Montevideo to Punta del Este, as well as for a small number of towns in the interior. Slowly but surely the evangelical movement is being strengthened in local hands.

As Mennonites, we have received a number of missionary outreaches in order to promote church planting, and we have been able to grow somewhat in members and in number of congregations. Even so, it is still a challenge to hold onto our Anabaptist identity and work together to extend the church.

There was a concerted effort at the start of this century to plant interdenominational churches, resulting in a boom but later many gains were lost.

Missionaries who come to the country need to be given lots of time by their sending congregations and they need to have a lot of patience themselves. Some have first taken a year to get to know the secular as well as church context in Uruguay by working with a parachurch organization. Another recommendation is to learn Spanish here, or to take time to learn the local dialect, given that Uruguay has many unique expressions. Discussions about politics and soccer can be very intense, and it is recommendable to steer clear of them.

The Evangelical context in Uruguay is polarized between liberals and conservatives making for significant tensions between the two.

The percentage of Evangelicals in the country is low and we struggle to achieve consistent growth.

As such, we ask that you pray for us and for our country, Uruguay, that the Evangelical witness may increase.

Hermann Woelke