

# Pathways of Grace: The beginnings of Methodism in Latin America & the Caribbean

By Douglas Ruffle

## Introduction: A Call to Connection



The journey of faith is rarely a solitary one; it is a narrative woven from transformative experiences, resilience, and the quiet, persistent guidance of grace. In "Pathways of Grace," we explore the historical journeys that established Methodism in the Caribbean and the Americas. This history records a timeline of events and celebrates how

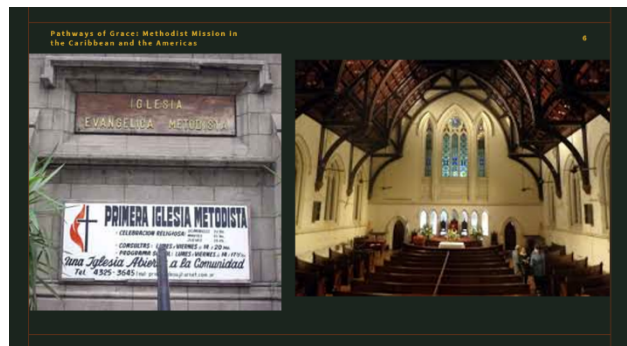
compassion and hope lead believers through the challenges of growth and the complexities of mission.

This study is firmly grounded in the biblical call to connection. As recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, the Risen Christ commissioned his followers to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations." This mandate is echoed in the Book of Acts, where the Apostle Paul receives a vision of a man from Macedonia pleading, "Come over and help us." These scriptures serve as the foundational pulse for the missionary movement we are examining—a movement dedicated to spreading "scriptural holiness" across vast and often difficult lands.

## A Noteworthy Encounter in Buenos Aires

To understand the evolution of this mission, one must look at the shifting relationship between traditions. In the 19th century, the arrival of Protestantism in Latin America was often marked by deep-seated conflict with the Roman Catholic Church—tensions so severe they occasionally led to imprisonment or even death. However, a moment from the late 1990s serves as a powerful symbol of how far this relationship has traveled.

At the First Methodist Church in downtown Buenos Aires—a stately national historic site built in 1872—the pastor at the time, Rev. Hugo Urcola, arrived to find an unexpected guest. Sitting contemplatively in the



simple, wooden pews of the sanctuary was the Roman Catholic Cardinal of Buenos Aires, Jorge Mario Bergoglio.



*Rev. Hugo Urcola & Pope Francis*

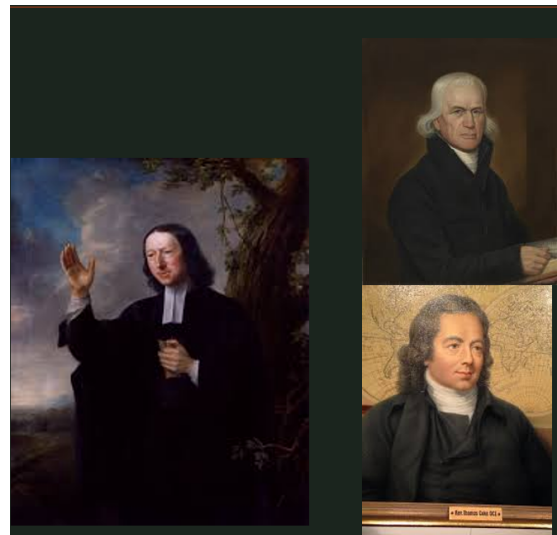
The man who would later become Pope Francis explained to Rev. Urcola that he was simply passing by and felt drawn to the beauty and serenity of the historic Methodist sanctuary. The two leaders sat together, discussing their shared commitment to the city's marginalized populations. At the time, First Methodist operated a "Solidarity Café," providing tea, bread, and fellowship to those living on the streets—a mission

mirrored by Catholic parishes throughout the city.

This quiet visit between a Methodist pastor and a Catholic cardinal, on the grounds of a church once viewed with suspicion, remains a hopeful sign of Christian unity and a testament to the "maturity" of faith that has developed over the last century.

### **The Spirit of Wesley in the Americas**

The origins of this movement can be traced back to the tireless spirit of John Wesley. Early American Methodism was not just a set of doctrines; it was a reincarnation of Wesley's spiritual passion and his belief in a "living" faith. Interestingly, Wesley himself was initially hesitant to send missionaries abroad, following a difficult personal experience in Georgia during the 1730s. He famously preferred the idea of "converting people at home" first, believing that if people were truly transformed, they would naturally carry the Gospel with them as they traveled.



*Wesley, Asbury, and Coke*

However, the laity and clergy could not be contained. Despite Wesley's caution, a grassroots global expansion began. In 1771, he finally conceded to repeated requests and sent Francis Asbury to America. Following the Revolutionary War, Wesley sent Thomas

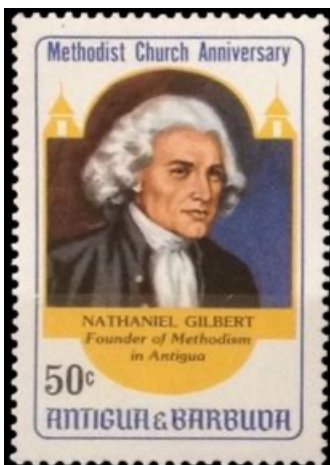
Coke to oversee the work, and at the famous "Christmas Conference" in Baltimore in 1784, the Methodist Episcopal Church was born as the first independent Methodist body.

### The Theology of an Open Invitation

At the heart of this expansion was a revolutionary message: **Grace**. In a world dominated by rigid ideas of predestination—the belief that only a few were "chosen"—the Methodist message was a radical alternative. *Everyone is invited*.

This theology is defined by three distinct movements:

1. **Prevenient Grace:** God's "reaching for us" before we are even aware of a need for God.
2. **Justifying Grace:** The moment of God's acceptance and the beginning of a new relationship.
3. **Sanctifying Grace:** The ongoing process of God changing and perfecting the believer in love.



For the poor and marginalized in Latin America and the Caribbean, this was a message of profound dignity. It taught that God's love and hope were gifts given by grace, not earned by merit or restricted by status. It was this "pathway of grace" that fueled the early missionaries, such as the layman Nathaniel Gilbert, who brought these teachings to Antigua in 1759, laying the groundwork for a movement that would eventually span the entire hemisphere.

### The Providential Detour: The Caribbean Gateway

The movement's first organized foray into the region was less a planned incursion and more a divine redirection. In 1787, Bishop Thomas Coke was sailing for Nova Scotia when Atlantic storms battered his ship, blowing it wildly off course. On Christmas Day, he made an unexpected landfall in **Antigua**.

Coke arrived to find the seeds of Methodism already planted by the layman Nathaniel Gilbert decades earlier. Seizing this "unforeseen voyage," Coke began organizing immediately, establishing a core structure on Antigua and neighboring islands like Dominica and St. Vincent. This Caribbean spark ignited a missionary fire that would eventually reach the Southern Cone. Today, that legacy lives on in the Methodist Church of the Caribbean and the Americas (MCCA), a vibrant body of 70,000 members across 27 countries.

## The Pioneers of the Southern Cone

In 1835, the "Macedonian Call" from Buenos Aires English-speaking residents reached the ears of Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States. They identified **Fountain Pitts**, a 28-year-old minister from Nashville, Tennessee. He became the first to carry the Methodist message to Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina, organizing foundational "class meetings" in all three nations.

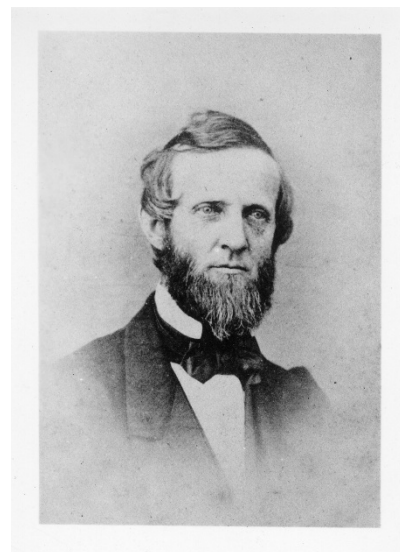
His exploratory work paved the way for **Rev. John Dempster**, who founded the First Methodist Episcopal Church in Buenos Aires in 1836. These early years were defined by immense sacrifice. Consider **Rev. Daniel Kidder**, who arrived in Brazil in 1838 after a turbulent 56-day voyage. Kidder spent his days studying Portuguese and distributing Bibles, often facing isolation and financial hardship before returning to the U.S. to teach at Garrett Biblical Institute and Drew Theological Seminary.



*Daniel Kidder*

When financial indebtedness of the US Mission Society occurred in 1840, it decided to pull out of South America Work in Uruguay and Brazil were cut off of funding. The missionaries sent to Brazil returned to the United States. The same would have been true for Rev. John Dempster, the missionary assigned to Buenos Aires. However, the local congregation at First Methodist Episcopal Church pledged to take up Dempster's support themselves. Thus, Methodism in Argentina has a continuous history of presence since 1836.

## The "Anchor" of Argentina



*William Goodfellow*

By 1857, the U.S. Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, although back in operation in South America, was discouraged. The South American mission was struggling, and **William Goodfellow** was sent out with a grim mandate: if prospects didn't brighten, he was to close the mission and abandon the field.

Goodfellow, however, possessed a relentless "grit." He refused to take a salary from the mission board to ensure the work survived, serving as both Pastor and Superintendent. Because he refused to quit, Argentina became the "anchor" for Methodism on the entire continent. Crucially, Argentina was the first country in the region to legalize Protestant

worship in the language of the people, allowing the message to move beyond English-speaking expatriates to the local population.

### **Colporteurs: Peddlers of Grace**

How did the message travel from the bustling ports to remote villages? It traveled on foot, carried by **Colporteurs**. Derived from the French word for "peddler," these were primarily laymen who walked from town to town selling Bibles and religious tracts.

This was dangerous work. To preach in Spanish was often illegal, and the "Pathways of Grace" were frequently paved with real sacrifice. **José Monglieadino** was murdered for his work in Bolivia. **Francisco Penzotti**, an Italian immigrant who found his faith under the preaching of Juan F. Thomson in Montevideo, became perhaps the most famous of these travelers.



*Francisco Penzotti*

Penzotti spent fourteen months away from his family, traversing the coasts of Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, and Peru. In 1890, he was imprisoned in Peru for eight months for violating the constitution by preaching in Spanish. His eventual release required the direct intervention of **U.S. President Benjamin Harrison**.

### **The Self-Sustaining Vision**



*William Taylor*

While some relied on missionary societies, **Bishop William Taylor**—a "force of nature" from Virginia—advocated for a different path. Having traveled from the California Gold Rush to Africa, Taylor spent nine years in South America (1875-1884).

His secret was "self-supporting missions." He believed the ministry should pay for itself through the creation of schools and hospitals. He expected missionaries sent to the region to find their own financial support. Many became bi-vocational in their new lands. By building institutions that served the community's practical needs, he envisioned that the newly formed Methodist churches could sustain the cost of its own ministry. This vision was

bolstered by a "gallery of saints" from across the U.S.:

- **Thomas Wood** (Indiana), who mentored Penzotti and founded schools in Rosario, Uruguay, and Peru.
- **Jenny Chapin** (Massachusetts) and **Luisa Denning** (Illinois), sent by the Women's Foreign Missionary Society in 1874 to start schools for girls in Rosario, Argentina.
- **Henry Godden Jackson** (Indiana), who carried the torch after Goodfellow in Buenos Aires.



These men and women did not just build buildings; they built relationships, proving that grace is most powerful when it is shared through the labor of the hands and the devotion of the heart.

This next section of our narrative transitions from the early pioneers to the formal establishment of the Methodist Church across the Southern Cone and into the Andean highlands. It is a story of transition, where the leadership began to shift from North American missionaries to the local voices of South America, and where the "Pathways of Grace" encountered both the corridors of political power and the humble homes of indigenous peoples.

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### **Stability and Song: The Jackson Era**

As we have seen, the survival of the mission in Argentina was often a matter of sheer grit. Following William Goodfellow, **Rev. Dr. Henry Godden Jackson** arrived from Indiana in 1868. Jackson provided a longer period of stability than many of his predecessors, serving for a decade. He understood that faith is carried not just through preaching, but through music and space.

Jackson compiled a Spanish-language hymnal that included nearly sixty of his own compositions, giving the growing Spanish-speaking congregations a voice to sing their faith. Furthermore, he was instrumental in the construction of the landmark church on **Avenida Corrientes** in 1872—the very sanctuary that remains a national historic site today and served as the meeting place for Pastor Urcola and Cardinal Bergoglio a century later.

## A Beacon in Uruguay: Cecilia Güelfi



*Cecilia Güelfi*

While Argentina's mission was anchored in its capital, work in Uruguay was re-initiated with vigor after the U.S. Civil War. In 1877, Thomas Wood moved his family to Montevideo from Rosario, Argentina, to serve as pastor and educational pioneer. It was here that he met **Cecilia Güelfi**.

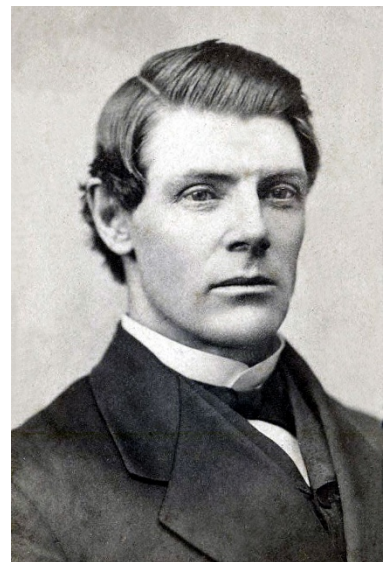
Born in Buenos Aires to Italian immigrants, Cecilia was a brilliant, licensed teacher in the Uruguayan public schools. In 1879, she made the courageous choice to leave her secure public position to join Wood in starting evangelical schools for girls. Supported by the Women's Foreign Missionary Society, Cecilia founded nine schools across Montevideo in just seven years.

These schools were the seeds of the **Instituto Crandon**, which remains today one of Uruguay's most prestigious educational institutions, embodying her belief that education is a primary vehicle for grace.

## The "District of Chile" and the Rise of Local Leadership

In Chile, the mission followed a unique path. Bishop William Taylor explored the country in the late 1870s, but it was **Bishop John Morgan Walden** who, in 1889, formally integrated the Chilean work into the Cincinnati Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. This formal "District of Chile" allowed for the systematic organization of the mission and, crucially, the ordination of the first Chilean ministers.

The transition to local leadership reached a milestone in 1936 with the election of **Roberto Elphick Valenzuela**, the first Chilean-born Methodist Bishop. By 1969, the Methodist Church of Chile became fully autonomous, electing Roberto's son, Dr. Raimundo Valenzuela Arms, as its leader. Today, the church is a vibrant presence in Santiago and across the northern and southern regions of the country.



*Bishop John Morgan Walden*

## Peru: From Chaplaincy to Religious Freedom

The Methodist story in Peru began in 1859 with **Rev. J.A. Swaney**, sent primarily to serve English-speaking seafarers. A fascinating moment in this history occurred when **William Wheelwright**, a Scottish shipping magnate, was so appalled by the dilapidated state of the local church that he ordered a prefabricated wooden church to be built in New York and shipped entirely to Callao.



*Rev. Thomas B. Wood*

However, the real push for a Spanish-speaking mission came through the familiar faces of **Francisco Penzotti** and **Thomas Wood**. Penzotti founded the first Methodist church in Callao in 1889, but he and Wood faced immense opposition. Wood was harshly attacked in the press and even briefly imprisoned in 1899. Despite this, he founded the Callao High School and a theological seminary, tirelessly advocating for the religious freedom that was finally granted by the Peruvian Congress in 1915.

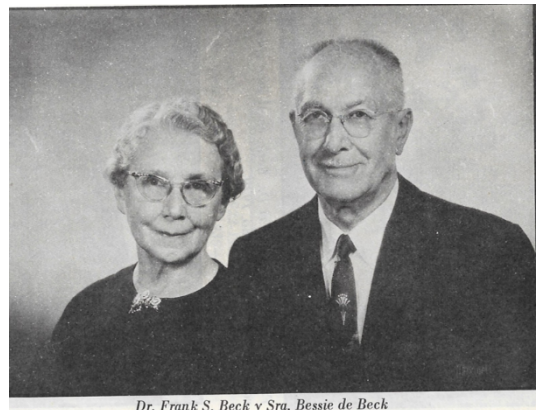
In the late 20th century, the Methodist Church in Peru experienced a profound shift. Once dominated by Spanish-heritage leadership, the balance of power shifted toward the **Indigenous populations**. This growth, particularly among the Aymara and Quechua peoples, has shaped the modern identity of the church, which now has over 32,000 members.

## Bolivia: Faith in the High Plains

Bolivia's Methodist history is inextricably linked to the hardships of war and the bravery of those who worshipped in secret. Early pioneers like **Carl Beutelspacher** held clandestine services in his home in La Paz at a time when non-Catholic worship was considered a crime against the state, carrying the death penalty.

Religious freedom arrived in 1906, paving the way for the "Golden Age" of Methodist institutions in Bolivia. Medical missionaries **Dr. Frank and Bessie Beck** founded the *Clínica Americana* in La Paz, which became a cornerstone of Bolivian healthcare.

Like Peru, the Bolivian church transformed following its autonomy in 1969. While it began as an urban, middle-class institution, it found its



*Dr. Frank S. Beck y Sra. Bessie de Beck*

greatest modern growth in the high plains among the Aymara people. In the 1980s, the church elected its first Aymara bishop, **Eugenio Poma**, signaling a return to the grassroots, inclusive spirit that John Wesley first envisioned.

The narrative now turns toward the expansive mission fields of Brazil and Cuba. This chapter is marked by record-breaking tenures of service, the complexities of post-Civil War migrations, and the remarkable resilience of a Cuban church that flourished against all odds.

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### The Record of a Lifetime: William Patterson McLaughlin



Dr. Wm. P. McLaughlin, 1892-1921

In the heart of Buenos Aires, a plaque stands in memory of **Rev. Dr. William Patterson McLaughlin**. It bears a simple but profound tribute: "He went about doing good." Originally from Ohio, McLaughlin was serving as a Superintendent in Louisiana when he was appointed to Argentina in 1892.

What followed was a journey of unprecedented dedication. McLaughlin served as the pastor of First Methodist Church for twenty-nine years, from 1892 until his death in 1921. At that time, it was the longest pastoral appointment in the history of denomination. His life became synonymous with the church on

Avenida Corrientes, providing a bridge of stability that allowed the mission to transition into the 20th century.

### Brazil: A Divided Mission and a New Home

The return of Methodism to Brazil in the mid-19th century was entangled with the painful history of the U.S. Civil War. In 1867, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS)—which had split from the northern church over the issue of slavery in 1844—sent missionaries to Brazil. They were initially sent to minister to American expatriates from the South who had moved to Brazil to reconstitute their way of life in a land where slavery remained legal.

However, a different kind of mission was taking root in the north. **Justus H. Nelson**, a Wisconsin native educated in theology and medicine, arrived in the Amazon region in 1879. Nelson was a fiery advocate for a "pure" Wesleyan faith. He organized the first Methodist church in Belém and edited a publication called *O Apologista Cristão Brasileiro*. His bold critiques of local religious practices even led to a four-month imprisonment, yet he remained a pivotal figure in the Amazonian mission for decades.

## The Path to a Brazilian Identity

As the 20th century dawned, the call for a truly Brazilian church grew louder. **Bishop John M. Moore**, a Kentucky-born scholar with a Ph.D. from Yale, became a primary advocate for this shift. Overseeing the mission from 1918 to 1922, Moore recognized that the church had matured in both leadership and financial capability.

In September 1930, during a historic Conference in São Paulo, the Methodist Church of Brazil achieved its autonomy. It was no longer a mission field governed by a distant American board; it was now a self-governing national body. Today, while smaller than some Pentecostal movements, the Methodist Church in Brazil punches significantly above its weight in social impact, operating two major universities and educating over 70,000 students.

## Cuba: A "Macedonian Call" from Havana

The birth of Methodism in Cuba was triggered by a direct request from the people. Young residents of Havana reached out to the Methodist community in Key West, Florida, pleading for spiritual guidance. In response, clergy and laity from the Florida Annual Conference crossed the straits to establish the mission.

A key figure in this era was **Bishop Warren Candler**, the first Chancellor of Emory University (and brother to the founder of Coca-Cola). Candler was instrumental in organizing the work that allowed Cuban Methodism to thrive.



*Bishop Warren Candler*

## Resilience and Rebirth

The most modern chapter of this story is perhaps the most miraculous. Following the Cuban Revolution, the church faced a period of intense struggle; by 1966, 64 of the 70 Methodist pastors had left the country. **Bishop Armando Rodriguez** was one of the few who stayed. Despite being imprisoned five times, he navigated the church through decades of official state atheism.

The result of that faithfulness is staggering. From a low point of just 1,000 members in 1966, the Methodist Church in Cuba has experienced an explosion of growth. Today, confirmed membership exceeds 43,000, with over 65,000 people attending worship—a vibrant testimony to the "Pathways of Grace" that continue to unfold in the Caribbean.

## The Foundations in Mexico: 150 Years of Faith



In 1873, the first Methodist classes were organized in Mexico by **Bishop Gilbert Haven**. Joining him were **William and Clementina Butler**, a legendary missionary couple who had previously served in India. The Butlers brought a holistic vision of ministry, establishing not just churches, but printing presses, schools, and orphanages.

Their legacy was carried on by their children: John, who spent 44 years in Mexico, and Clementina, who became a prominent author and advocate for women's ministry. Another key pioneer, **Rev. Dr. Thomas Carter**, preached the first Spanish sermon in Pachuca in 1873, a bold act that occasionally incited riots in a religiously tense landscape.

### Sacrifice and Sovereignty: The 1930 Unification

The early 20th century brought the "**Comity Agreement**," a strategic pact where Protestant denominations divided Mexico into exclusive regions to avoid competition. For Methodists, this required a profound sacrifice, as they turned over many established congregations to other churches.

Despite the turmoil of the Mexican Revolution, the church moved toward independence. In 1930, two American Methodist branches united their work to form the **Methodist Church of Mexico**. The first General Conference was held on September 16, 1930—the anniversary of Mexican Independence—signaling a new, autonomous identity. Today, the church is organized into six episcopal areas, led by local bishops like **Juan Nicanor Pascoe Gómez**.

### The Isthmus of Panama and Costa Rica

Methodism on the Isthmus of Panama began with the quiet, persistent work of a laywoman known as **Mother Abel**, who started a ministry for those of Antillean descent in the early 19th century. By 1906, formal missionaries like **Rev. Jaime Elkins** arrived to serve both the workers in the Canal Zone and Spanish-speaking Panamanians.

In 1917, **Bishop Jorge Amós Miller** and Mexican Pastor **Eduardo Zapata** expanded the mission into neighboring Costa Rica. They emphasized education and youth development, founding institutions like **Pan-American Institute** and the **Methodist Rural Center** in San

Carlos. In 1973, both national bodies achieved autonomy, evolving into the Evangelical Methodist Churches of Panama and Costa Rica. A unique "de-professionalization" movement in 1979 sought to bridge the gap between clergy and laity, empowering every "soldier of Christ" for the struggle of faith.

### **New Frontiers: Ecuador, Venezuela, and Beyond**

The late 20th century saw a resurgence of Methodism in areas once ceded during the Comity Agreements. In **Ecuador**, an ecumenical partnership between Presbyterians, the Church of the Brethren, and Methodists led to the birth of the **Evangelical United Methodist Church of Ecuador** in 2001, led by its first bishop, **Dr. Salomon Cabezas**.

In **Venezuela**, the story is one of both growth and tragedy. In 1996, a young leader named **Carlos Gonzalez** dreamed of uniting independent churches under the Methodist banner. Tragically, Carlos died in the crash of ValueJet Flight 592 while returning from a mission trip. However, his dream was realized eleven years later through the formation of the **CIEMVE**, which now serves over 10,000 members.

### **Resilience in the Wake of the Storm: Honduras**



*Rev. Armando Rodriguez*

The newest mission in the region was born out of tragedy. In 1998, **Hurricane Mitch** devastated Honduras, leaving millions homeless. In the wake of the storm, hundreds of Volunteer-in-Mission (VIM) teams from the U.S. arrived to help.

These relief efforts, led by missionaries like **Bishop Armando Rodriguez** and **Rev. Roberto Peña**, forged deep bonds that transformed a relief initiative into a permanent mission. By

2003, it became an official mission of the United Methodist Church. Today, led by **Bishop Rubén Saenz**, the church celebrates milestones like the 2026 ordination of its first four Honduran elders—a clear sign that the pathways of grace have truly come home.

### **Conclusion: A Legacy of Connection**

The history of Methodism in Latin America and the Caribbean is not merely a record of institutional expansion, but a testament to the power of **Connectionalism**. From the "Macedonian Call" that brought Fountain Pitts to the Southern Cone to the grassroots lay movements that sustained faith in the wake of political turmoil, this story highlights three enduring pillars of the Methodist mission:

## 1. Grace as a Social Force

Whether in the 19th-century streets of Buenos Aires or the modern-day high plains of Bolivia, the Wesleyan message of grace has consistently served as a tool for empowerment. By establishing schools like **Instituto Crandon** and **Pan-American Institute**, and health centers like **Clínica Americana**, Methodists proved that the "Good News" is most effectively shared when it addresses the holistic needs of the community—mind, body, and spirit.

## 2. Resilience Through Sacrifice

The pathways we have walked were often paved with profound personal cost. We remember **Francisco Penzotti** and **Thomas Wood** facing imprisonment for the crime of preaching in Spanish, **Mother Abel** initiating lay ministry in Panama long before formal missionaries arrived, and **Bishop Armando Rodriguez** staying to lead a shrinking flock through decades of official atheism in Cuba. Their "grit" ensured that the mission survived even when institutional support from the North faltered.

## 3. The Journey Toward Autonomy

Perhaps the most significant shift in this history is the transition from "Mission Field" to "Mission Partner." The establishment of autonomous national churches—beginning with Mexico and Brazil in 1930 and continuing through the recent ordinations in Honduras—reflects a church that has truly come of age. Today, the leadership of figures like **Bishop Lizzette Gabriel Montalvo** and **Bishop Juan de Dios Peña** demonstrates that the region is no longer a recipient of mission, but a vibrant source of theological leadership for the global Methodist family.

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## Final Reflection: The Ongoing Struggle

As John Wesley once famously said, we are "directly engaged in the same struggle." The stories of **Carlos Gonzalez** and the recovery efforts following **Hurricane Mitch** remind us that mission is not a static historical event, but a living relationship.

The "Pathways of Grace" remain open. They continue to be paved by the same spirit of inquiry, sacrifice, and connection that defined the pioneers of 1787. As we look toward the future, we do so with the assurance that the peace of the Lord—the *Paz del Señor*—reaches to everyone, bridging the miles between Nashville, Montevideo, Havana, and beyond.