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- Works of Evangelism
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WRITE THE NEXT CHAPTER

Trip to Uruguay 2024

“Take your Bibles and turn to Acts 29,” I spoke these words as an opening to my sermon on Sunday morning in Vergara, a small town in the interior of Uruguay. With the rustling of pages in the background, I quickly gave an overview of the book of Acts using the familiar words of Acts 1:8 as an outline. *But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.* “Have you found Acts 29?” Someone in the congregation softly giggled. I went on to explain how there was a literal Jerusalem, a literal Judea and Samaria, and how by the end of the book of Acts the gospel was accomplishing its task of advancing to the ends of the earth. This congregation gathered together in Uruguay was evidence of the power of the gospel’s message as it has expanded into the uttermost parts of the earth.

Many of you reading this know that there is no Acts 29. I had accomplished my purpose of getting the congregation to the end



of the book of Acts which abruptly concludes with chapter 28 and verse thirty-one. Paul is under house arrest and the gospel is going forth in power.

And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, 31 Preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him. (30-31). That last phrase describes an adverb in the Greek that if literally translated means “unhinderedly.” And then the story ends. Or does it? I challenged the church that God wants us to write the next chapter, not by way of revelation or inspiration, but that we are to continue the mission given by Jesus before His ascension. We are to be witnesses unto the uttermost parts of the earth. That is why I was in Uruguay. That is why we had invited David and Maribel Bell to join us for two-and-a-half weeks of ministry at Campamento Emanuel and in our churches in Montevideo.

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David grew up on the campus of Bob Jones University. He is the son of Dr. Robert and Kathy Bell. His father served for 50 years in the Bob Jones University Seminary where he laid the foundation for the Seminary and Graduate School of Religion as it is known today. Maribel is from Spain. They met while students at Bob Jones University where they both received bachelor's and master's degrees. They were married in 1995. Upon completion of their studies and with a new baby in 1998, the Lord led them to Alicante, Spain as missionaries. During their first eight years of ministry, David served the church as its pastor, and he also served as director and professor at the Emanuel Bible Institute, in Elche. During that time, David and Maribel both received PhDs at the University of Alicante. David's work was in translation theory applied to Bible translation and Maribel's is in Applied Linguistics related to the teaching of English to speakers of other languages.



On Sunday morning, Chicha Rodriguez joined us for breakfast and then she and I drove to Pando to Templo Bet-el. We were greeted by Pastor Carlos Olivera, as people began to fill the meeting room and an additional overflow room. With the help of Chicha as my translator, I preached with great liberty an appropriately titled message on Jacob called, "Back to Bethel." We enjoyed fellowship with Carlos and his wife Mabel at their new house. We then visited with Ursula Thiessen, the oldest member of our mission and one of the first graduates of our Bible Institute in Uruguay. She lives with her sister in a small house on property owned by her niece. Though she can't get out like she once did, she is still faithfully serving the Lord from home. She turned 96 on February 24. Chicha and I then made our way to Campamento Emanuel.

The Bell's journey began without incident. David had prepared twenty-three teaching sessions, and Maribel had prepared a lesson for the ladies. They were excited and a little bit nervous for the trip. Maribel stated, "We had never been that far away, never thought we would, but God gave us the opportunity and we took it happily. Going to a summer destination in the middle of winter sounds like a good idea, but a 16-hour trip makes one think twice before embarking, especially if you know very little about the place and the people that you will meet at the other end of the journey."

When Ken Jensen recommended to me that we invite David to speak at our camps in Uruguay this February, even though I did not know him personally, I thought that he would be the perfect choice. I contacted the Bells and they were thrilled with the opportunity. We began preparations in anticipation of an exciting trip to Uruguay together, not knowing how God would have the story unfold.

For my part of the journey, my flight from Greenville, SC to Charlotte, NC, on Wednesday, February 7, was delayed for three hours, causing me to miss my connecting flight to Miami, and miss my flight to Uruguay. It was a frustrating way to begin the trip. My flight in Miami arrived after midnight and I spent a long, sleepless night walking around the airport and working on my laptop. I had to take another airline through Panama to Uruguay. I finally arrived late on Thursday night and Matias Espinel picked me up at the airport. I spent the first three nights in Montevideo with his family. I caught up on some rest and enjoyed time with family and missionary friends from other agencies. On Saturday evening, I attended the ordination service for Exequiel Parente, the new pastor at Iglesia Siloé. He was one of the first graduates of FEBU, the Bible College in Uruguay, where Matias serves as Director.



They arrived in Montevideo early Thursday morning, and Pedro Donzé met them at the airport. He drove them to one of the biggest stores in town to have breakfast and get supplies needed for the few days before camp started. David commented on his sticker shock when he saw a small grill that cost \$400 US dollars. Everything in Uruguay is very expensive. Maribel described how that first trip to the store introduced them to new words in Spanish. She said, "People were very kind to work with us as we struggled with jet lag, new money, new meals, and new words, even if we spoke the same language."





People forgave our dialect and we tried to adapt to theirs. Uruguayans are very friendly people, and many seemed to have a friend or relative who lived in Spain. That first afternoon, we discovered the Rio de la Plata beach, got to rest enjoying the sound of the thousands of parrots at Emmanuel camp, and even spotted the camp owl that same evening.” Over the next couple of days, they enjoyed their time at the camp and Pedro led them on a fun day trip to the nearby resort town of Piriápolis. Pedro also wanted to introduce them to Uruguay’s national dish, the chivito al plato. It is made with a beef steak, 2 or 3 slices of bacon, an egg, ham, mozzarella, tomato, onion, and lettuce, on a bed of fries.

Sunday morning, Pedro drove them into Montevideo to Iglesia Getsemani where they were greeted by Pastor Gabriel Gomez and his wife Rosanna. “One of the things that impressed me the most,” Maribel stated, “was that the young people came to greet us on their own. We were told they had not been prompted. That blessed my soul, as did the fellowship we had with the brethren.” Following lunch and exploring some of the sites in downtown Montevideo, they made their way back to camp, arriving around the same time Chicha and I did.

After unloading my luggage, David and I stood in the casita talking for the next two hours. We had video chatted and gone back and forth on email, but this was our first time talking face to face. We would spend a lot of time together over the next two weeks talking about ministry in general and missions in particular. David was a big help to me as he helped me translate for a few of my interviews. They both interacted well with the campers and our workers. Many people commented to me what an excellent choice it was to have them as our featured speakers.

February 12-17, we had a good group attend Family Camp. The first service was extremely hot, but as David began to preach the skies grew darker, and then the rain began to fall. The temperature dropped a good thirty degrees which resulted in pleasant temperatures for the rest of the week. On Thursday and Friday, I made a quick trip with the Espinel family to visit another camp in Paysandú, an interior town on the border of Argentina about four hours away.

On Saturday, Maribel spoke for a ladies' meeting at Iglesia Getsemani, while Pedro took David and me on a tour of Montevideo. We were together again at Iglesia Templo Calvario in Montevideo on Sunday morning, February 18, where David preached for Pastor Gustavo de Oliveira. Chicha and I left to meet Evangelist Juan Gonzalez at La Feria de Tristán Narvaja, the largest and most popular street market in Montevideo, which takes place on Sunday mornings. For seven decades our mission has had a presence sharing the gospel at a table on one of these street corners. We handed out stacks of gospel tracts and Juan preached to the bustling crowd. We then gathered back at the church for lunch with the church family.



February 19-22 was our Workers' Conference at the camp. God blessed us again with beautiful weather. We enjoyed the smaller group and relaxed atmosphere. We were able to hold interviews with each of our workers. One of the special privileges for our group this year was to have joining us in our sessions, Nico Gomez, the new pastor at Iglesia Evangélica Calvario Tacuarembó. He is the son of Hector and Graciela Gomez. For many years, he has served as our camp cook. We had a great kitchen crew this year who picked up the slack and did an amazing job serving our missionaries.



Following the camps, David and I sat down for a debriefing. I shared earlier about the Bell's call to missions. I asked David to describe their current ministry.

“In 2006, God placed a call in our hearts to start a new congregation in the city of Petrer, about 30 minutes inside Alicante. Trusting in Christ's promise to build his Church, we began holding services in the garage of our home in the summer of 2007. Six years later, we rented a public facility for our congregation, and God opened the door to meet many more people and to continue ministering the word publicly. Christ continues to fulfill his promise and we give glory to Him for how his church in Petrer continues to grow. This year God has provided the funds to purchase a building for our congregation. We hope that this site will be a tool that God will use for others to hear the Gospel message.”

I told him how much I had enjoyed our time together. We had spent hours discussing theology, ministry, family, hobbies, etc. He stated, "It was great to get to know you, Jeff. We were just far enough apart in age that I had never met you, but when we started talking, it seemed that you knew everybody that I knew, and we enjoyed some great times of fellowship, sharing about the ministries that God has put us in over the years."

I asked, "So, this was your first trip to South America?" "Yes! Maribel and I had never been to South America; we'd never been anywhere below the equator. In fact, Maribel had never been to another Spanish-speaking country. So, it was a new experience for both of us."

I asked to describe the differences in culture between Uruguay and Spain. "Uruguay has a very European population. The majority of the people trace their origins back to Spanish or Italian families. So, I assumed that the culture in Uruguay would be very similar to the culture of Spain, but the truth is, there were several differences. Uruguayans eat lunch earlier than most people in Spain, but otherwise, it is pretty similar to our normal meal schedule in Spain. The food was somewhat different, being a bit heavier on carbs and lighter on vegetables as a norm. We really enjoyed the Uruguayan asado (meat grilled on wood). The Uruguayans are famous for their mate drink (a caffeine-rich infused herbal tea), and it was interesting to see so many people walking around with a thermos under their arm and their mate cup with the silver drinking straw, sipping the drink during the day. We did try some, but I have to admit it is a bit of an acquired taste. It can be a bit bitter at first, but as you continue to refill with hot water, the taste mellows out some. We can actually buy mate in the grocery store in Spain because so many Uruguayans and Argentinians have immigrated there; there is a demand for it, but I don't think we'll be buying any when we get back."



I asked what some of the highlights from their trip were. "Obviously, my greatest highlight was being able to open the Scriptures and share those truths with brothers and sisters in Christ from so far away. We enjoyed meeting and getting to know so many believers. There were moments of sweet fellowship. In my case, there were a few believers that I had heard about before through EMU. It was wonderful to connect a face with a name I had heard before. We also enjoyed spending time with some friends that we knew from the USA. We knew the Steels from when we were in college, and they had visited us in Spain years ago on a mission team, so it was great to catch up with them. And we had met Matias Espinel when he was training for the ministry years ago. What a blessing to see their families and how God is using them in the ministry in Uruguay."

David also thanked me for including him in some of the interviews. He stated that it was his goal to be like a fly on the wall. In his words, to be there but not really there. He commented, "This is a very healthy situation between the board and workers. This is the way it is supposed to be. You don't have the American mission board controlling the churches. You are present for advice, prayer, and partnership. I wish that we had more of that philosophy in missions today."



We talked about his preaching plan. "For family camp, I preached a series of messages from the book of Daniel. The theme verse was Daniel 11:32, about what it means to know God. We saw that behind Daniel's boldness, confidence, assurance, and testimony was the fact that he knew his God. Then for the workers' retreat, we looked at the book of Titus. Our focus was on how healthy doctrine produces healthy faith (2:1-2). I came ready to share with these brothers in Christ what the Lord has been teaching me in our ministry in Spain, and I trust it was a challenge and a blessing to them."

I asked him to share his impressions of the camp. "We had a wonderful time at the camp. That was our home base for the two and half weeks there in Uruguay. The camp has a beautiful location and wonderful facilities. The first few days we were there before the camps started, we enjoyed leisurely walks down to the beach, getting acclimated to the South American summer in February. But by far, the greatest asset the camp has is its staff. Their goal, although never stated publicly in my hearing, was clearly to serve the believers. Pedro and his entire team tirelessly and selflessly serviced us and every single person who attended one of the camps with love and humility. It was such a blessing to watch them in action. That is one of the wonderful blessings that we are going to take back with us from Uruguay." He commented to me about how much he respected and grew to love our missionaries. On their last full day in Uruguay, they spent the day with the Steel family exploring Colonia. On their way out of Montevideo, John Mark pulled off at a gas station. To their surprise, they were greeted by one of our missionary families, Ovidio and Yusara Acevedo. In addition to one final hug and Uruguayan kiss, they left them with personalized coffee mugs. David's mug had written on the side, "Dear David, thank you for leaving your teaching in Uruguay. With a good coffee, pray for us. Titus 3:4-2." This was a very special gift and a reminder to pray for all of our friends in Uruguay."



I asked him what the differences are between our work in Uruguay and that of Spain as far as churches and church planting. "As far as the churches are concerned, the size of the congregations was similar to many churches in Spain. But what was really neat for me to see was the depth of the church. The gospel ministry in Spain is still fairly young. Back in the 1960's missionaries were not able to go to Spain to preach the gospel. In Uruguay, however, I found that God raised up churches through the missionaries who started preaching the gospel there in the last century. All of the churches had a Uruguayan pastor supported by the local churches. They are generations into church planting, far ahead of where the churches are in Spain. At the same time, the churches are facing some of the same issues that our churches face in Spain. There is a lack of workers who are interested in training for the ministry. There are lots of people who are serious about their faith and who are studying the Word of God, but many times, we do not see people who feel called to the ministry. This means that sometimes, as one generation of pastors looks at retirement, they struggle to find men called and trained to continue leading the church. In Spain, as in Uruguay, the solution is to pray for the Lord of the Harvest to send forth laborers into the harvest fields. But it was a tremendous blessing for me to see how God had raised up Uruguayans to serve in the pastorate. It was also a tremendous blessing to share the Word with them and encourage them in their ministries."

On Friday, February 23, Chicha and I traveled into the interior of Uruguay to serve in three different churches. I plan to share an update on those last few days in next month's newsletter.



On Saturday, February 24, Pedro dropped the Bells off at the airport early. After they checked their luggage, they noticed a piano near the security checkpoint with a note that read, "Leave your music before you travel." David sat down and played a couple of hymns, "Amazing Grace," and "In Christ Alone." Several people gathered and identified with the message. This was a fitting ending to another chapter in God's story to advance the gospel to all nations.

Please pray with us that God would send forth laborers into His harvest in Uruguay and Spain. If you are interested in how you can help us write the next chapter, I would love to correspond with you at jeff@emuinternational.org. Thanks to all of you who prayed for us and followed along through the many photos and updates I shared on my Facebook album: <https://emuinternational.org/uruguay2024/>

To connect with David and Maribel Bell or subscribe to their updates: davidnmaribel@gmail.com

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Attention Pastors

I am currently planning my calendar for 2024. In addition to traveling and visiting the EMU International missionaries on their various fields of service, I have had the privilege of preaching in Christian School chapels, Pastors' Fellowships, at Christian Camps, Missions Conferences, Revival Meetings, and Family Conferences. I am also available for single meetings to promote the work of EMU International. Contact me if you are interested in me visiting your church.

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