

Reflections on the Church in Argentina. By Charles S. Morrice.

For far too long Argentina has been the land of missed opportunities as far as the Protestant missionary cause is concerned. In 1957 another South American country, Bolivia, had fully seven times more ordained Protestant missionaries in proportion to the population as did Argentina (cf. A.W. Enns: *Man, Milieu and Mission in Argentina p.13*), and when the figures for any of the South American countries are compared with those of other continents, the story of lost opportunities becomes even more apparent. Thus, of the 128 missionaries of the Church of Scotland in the mid-1970s, not one was working in South America, and of the 31 chaplains only 7, of whom only 2 were serving in Argentina. So Argentina has, indeed, been a country of missed opportunities.

Of course, there is an historical reason behind this situation. When the Spaniards occupied Argentina four and a half centuries ago, they not only subjugated the Indians, but with passionate religious fervour and dedication, thousands of Roman Catholic priests set to work converting the people and engraving the marks of medieval Catholicism on the Argentine mentality. The consequence was that the fear of any charge of proselytising led the Protestant Missionary Societies, met in 1910 for their Edinburgh Missionary Conference, to make the well-intentioned but ill-advised decision to leave Argentina and South America to the missionary zeal of Roman Catholicism. If ever any decision was fraught with a tragic outcome, in my opinion this one was. In the 1970s the Roman Catholic hierarchy admitted this. 'The task and opportunity in South America,' declared the Bishop in charge of the Roman Catholic Commission on Ecumenism. 'is more than my Church can do, more than any Church can do, more than all the Churches can do.' It is, indeed!

What, then, of our own Presbyterian Church? Our Church started in Argentina in 1829 as a chaplaincy to the Scots, and throughout its 180 years ministers and elders of intellectual and spiritual calibre faithfully served the Scottish immigrants wherever they settled as business-men, engineers or farmers in the fertile pampas of the north, the barren plains of Patagonia, or the seething metropolitan area of Buenos Aires. Wherever the Scottish folk settled, there they were faithfully ministered to, special assistants known as 'camp' assistants being appointed from 1907 onwards specifically for this task.

Fortunately, however, it was not long before the Rev. Dr. J.W. Fleming, one of the most distinguished Scottish ministers ever to serve in Argentina (1883 – 1925) began to be exercised by the fact that even this work of 'church extension' was an inadequate response to the Church's missionary charter in St. Matthew 28: 19. His concern was two-fold.

First, many of the Scottish immigrants were being assimilated through inter-marriage. Protestants by birth, often Presbyterian by Baptism, their knowledge of English was increasingly defective, sometimes even altogether absent. These are our own people, Dr. Fleming realised, and unless he and

the 'camp' assistants, the elders and Church members communicated the Gospel to them in the language they understood they would be lost to the Church and never experience the joy of salvation.

Second, Dr. Fleming was profoundly exercised by the immense population around them in Buenos Aires and throughout Argentina who had no attachment to the Roman Catholic denomination, and he was determined not to allow any possible charge of proselytism from preventing a ministry in Spanish to both these groups.

Consequently Pastor Jose Felices, educated in Spain and at Christ's College, Aberdeen, was appointed in 1912 for the purpose of developing the Spanish work of the Church. Pastor Felices lost no time in launching out into his mission, holding Services in Spanish and starting Sunday Schools in Spanish throughout the city and province of Buenos Aires. Eventually at a meeting of church workers in February, 1920, it was agreed to found the Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Church in the Argentine Republic. By then there were 450 children on the roll of the Spanish Sunday Schools, about as many as were in the English Sunday Schools. There were also an increasing number of Spanish-speaking members in full communion with the Church. Nor were these members all of Spanish origin. They included Greeks, Italians, Spaniards, Argentines, Dutch, Poles and others, in addition to a large number of people of Scottish or part-Scottish descent. Under Pastor Felices and his band of willing and capable helpers the Spanish-speaking mission of the Presbyterian Church was, indeed, flourishing.

On his retirement from the active ministry in February 1938, Pastor Felices continued to assist in the Spanish outreach of the Church, but by the time of his death in June 1941 the missionary-hearted Rev. Dr. Fleming was already long dead, and unfortunately the disastrous decision was taken not to appoint a successor, apparently because the English-speaking congregation, devoted to its Scottish Presbyterian roots, was afraid of 'being taken over' by the Spanish-speaking congregation. Meantime their own sons and daughters were marrying out of the English-speaking circles and most of them were consequently lost to the Church. Hence, as the older generation died off there were increasingly few to replace them since in the early 1920s the Kirk Session of St Andrews Scots Presbyterian Church, unlike the Methodist Church in Argentina, lacked the vision to form the 'Iglesia Presbiteriana Argentina'. If only they had taken the Brazilian Presbyterian Church as an example. From the outset its worship and work was in the predominant language of the country – Portuguese – and it is now one of the strongest Presbyterian Churches world-wide with its own schools and hospitals..

The relationship of St Andrews Scots Church with the Church of Scotland was over a long period exceedingly harmonious, and remained so as long as the congregation functioned as an Overseas English-speaking chaplaincy. But by the 1950s the Scottish-Argentine community was becoming integrated into its Spanish-speaking environment, and the Overseas Council was deeply concerned that the various congregations which made up St Andrews should

increasingly engage in worship and outreach in Spanish. While the more enlightened members of the congregations were in agreement with this new approach, there was unfortunately a very vocal element who strongly opposed any such development.

The Area Secretary at that time was the Rev. W.R.Y. Marshall, and when he visited Argentina around 1968, accompanied, I think, by his Convener, the Rev. John B. Hood, they met with rather acrimonious opposition from a very vocal, powerful minority. This minority was at its most vigorous in the City Church and in the suburban congregation of Olivos. The other suburban congregations of Temperley, Quilmes and possibly Belgrano were much more sympathetic to the missionary vision of the Overseas Council, not least because integration with the Argentine community had proceeded further there than in the more affluent City and Olivos areas.

When I was invited in 1971 by the Overseas Council to go out to Buenos Aires to be minister of the City Church, it was made very clear to me by Mr. Marshall that part of my remit was to attempt to reconcile the die-hards, and as tactfully as possible to promote outreach in Spanish while at the same time continuing the work in English. My wife, Margaret, and I attempted to do this during our four years contract, and, though initially we had a little opposition in the City Church, gradually this disappeared. In 1973 I willingly accepted the additional responsibility of Temperley when a vacancy occurred due to the departure of the Rev. Girvan C. McKay, and the attitude there to the Overseas Council was entirely cordial. Hence, it was with considerable reluctance that my wife and I declined an invitation in 1975 to renew our contract for another four years, due to family responsibilities.

When the Overseas Council decided in the mid-1980s not to send out any more ministers, the Church in Argentina did an ecclesiastical UDI connecting itself for a time with the Reformed Church. Unfortunately this did not work out, and the Argentine-born evangelist, Pastor Ortiz, recommended in 1986 that they should link up with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) in the USA, and so the various Argentine congregations became a Presbytery of that denomination. The reason for this cleavage with the Church of Scotland in the post-Falklands War period may have been partly political but it was mainly theological. A conservative evangelical element in Olivos seems to have swung the ecclesiastical leanings of many of the leading elders away from the Church of Scotland towards the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of the USA.

Now, however, the Presbyterian Church in Argentina – **Presbiterio San Andres** - is an independent Church consisting of some thirteen congregations, its work and worship being almost entirely in Spanish. Thus, for example, **Olivos**, formerly a bastion of English only work and worship, has now gone over entirely to Spanish, and with a Sunday morning congregation of around 400 and has so outgrown its building that it now worships in the much larger St. Andrew's Scots School Hall. As for another of the suburban congregations, **Temperley**, apart from a monthly united English Service with the Anglicans both morning Services are in Spanish. The traditional Service

with organ and the familiar hymns is attended by no more than 15 people while the modern one with guitars, drum , organ and choruses instead of hymns is standing room only. Sadly the **City Church**, for long the thriving 'mother kirk' of Argentine Presbyterianism, has only a small attendance at its monthly English Service while its worship and work in Spanish are only beginning to develop.

As for the ministers of the Church, they are now entirely South American, and are normally trained locally either at the rather conservative **Instituto Biblico Buenos Aires (IBBA)** or at the more liberal **Instituto Superior Evangelico de Estudios Teologicos (ISEDET)**.