

Tentmaking and Missions: A Reflection on the Brazilian Case

The size and extraordinary growth of the Evangelical community in Brazil is amazing! How the mission efforts take into count the socioeconomic forces and changes may determine their "success" in greater outreach in the future.

by Robson Ramos

The Third World Missions Movement grows at a rate of 13.29% every year (Pate, 1993). In 1980 there were 13,238 Evangelical missionaries from the Third World. In 1988 the numbers rose to 35,238. A 13.29% growth rate per year is 248% every 10 years.

In 1972 there were 791 Brazilian missionaries overseas. In 1998 just sixteen years later, the number had risen to 2,040. Today the number could be as high as 3,700.

Second Largest Protestant Community

This growth takes place in a singular moment in the history of Protestantism in Brazil, which claims the second largest Protestant community, second only to the United States. Evangelical Protestant publications in Brazil are simply booming. According to Publishers Weekly (September 15, 1997) Brazil is "the number-three market for such books, after the U.S. and the People's Republic of China." Protestants (including main line denomination and Pentecostal churches in general), represent 15% of the Brazilian population, close to 25 million people (Freston, 1994). To some degree, this growth rate may explain the increase in the number of mission candidates and mission agencies.

A recent phenomenon—Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God)—has been drawing attention lately and, despite its controversial nature, it highlights the presence of the Brazilian missionary force in other countries. Founded in 1977 the UCKG has put its flag in 15 different countries in South and North America, Europe, and Africa. Japan is one of their targeted areas due to the presence of the "dekasseguis"—Brazil-born Japanese descendants who are going to Japan looking for better work and living conditions (Veja, 4/19/95 p. 92). Most Protestant mission leaders in Brazil will agree about the fact that the UCKG missionary drive is quite distinct from and cannot be identified with the historic and more traditional mission groups as we have come to see them. However, from a sociology of religion viewpoint, we cannot simply overlook the UCKG missionary zeal and its implications to the missionary fabric in that it is already contributing, in one way or another, to the so-called "mission field" where Brazilian missionaries are presently working.

Despite the great number of congresses, missionary consultations and publications on the subject, a more systematized and analytical study of the actions of the missions movement

in Brazil is still lacking. This may be due to the fact that the Brazilian missions movement is still relatively young. It was only in the 70's that the Protestants in this country began to articulate their interest in missions, on a nationwide scale. A determining factor in this process was the role played by the Missionary Congress sponsored by the Alianca Biblica Universitaria (IFES related) held in 1976 (Steuernagel, 1978).

Structuring Forces behind Missionary Practice

While many articles and books have been written about the statistical growth and expansion of Brazilian missionary work, a more thorough study about the recruitment, training, sending and supporting processes involved is yet to come. A study of this nature would help us identify possible structuring forces behind these practices. Since it is not the aim of this article to do this type of analysis, I will simply state that our perception about any organized movement, religious or not, will be limited if we fail to study it in a macro perspective, analyzing external influences or forces which may determine its practices. The same is true for the study of missions. That is why, for instance, much has been written about the forces and

ideals that fueled the North American cultural and economical expansionism and how they affected the missionary work in Africa and Latin America. In the same way Brazilian missiologists need to recognize that there might be elements, apart from the move of the Spirit of God, that could be influencing, either positively or negatively, this young missions movement. We need to detect possible negative external influences on the missions movement; on the other hand, we need to consider how these post-modern days can bring about positive challenges to missionary work on the new geopolitical world scene.

The missionary enterprise does not exist in a vacuum. The missionary enterprise fails when it does not pay close attention to the socioeconomic and historical forces and changes, and how they might be affecting missionary practice from recruitment to the missionary retirement stage.

Missionary work takes place within the context of personal struggle to survive, to raise a family, to provide schooling to our children, to prepare for the future and so on. The world we presently live in is quite different from the world of the 19th-century missions. Ours is a world of virtual reality, of tribalism, terrorism, ethnic cleansing, of political correctness, of relativistic pluralism, of intense competition in the marketplace. It is a world in which unemployment and its consequences are a concern to everyone. It is a world in which diseases like malaria kill millions each year and AIDS which kills thousands, and a world of great environmental problems. It is a merciless world of fast and dramatic changes that affect institutions and the way they carry out their business in every possible level of society. If the missionary enterprise wants to be relevant, be it from a developed or from an emerging

country such as Brazil, it needs to find ways not only to address the needs of people, rich or poor, who live in a world of increasing homelessness, but also work towards reflecting these concerns in the way mission candidates are recruited, trained, sent and supported, be it overseas or within the country. Our Lord's exhortation about taking up the cross does not exempt national or foreign mission executives, mission professors as well as pastors, from their responsibility in these areas.

A world such as this demands changes in our missionary practice. We cannot afford to think and do missions the same way the Church did it fifty years ago. Our Lord's missionary mandate remains the same, humanity's basic need for new life in Christ is the same, the passion which fueled missionaries in the past is also required today. But the world in which this humanity lives is different: politically, socially, culturally, environmentally and religiously. The question that is being raised is whether or not the Brazilian missions movement is seriously dealing with these concerns.

The Missionary Career

A basic hypothesis that underlies this article is that the socioeconomic conditions in Brazil may have led, or may be leading, a significant number of people to opt for visions of a promising missionary career. Due to the acute social and economic problems faced by most Brazilians, the call to become a "missionary" or a "church worker" can be easily seen as the only way to find social significance and perhaps a way to climb the social ladder. That "call" becomes even more attractive if the proposed "missionary career" includes English-language training in England or in the United States, prior to actually going to the

mission field somewhere else. The "missionary call" may represent the means to achieve a more dignified status, social recognition and the hope of being financially supported, without having to go through the hardships of going to college, which is an impossibility for most people anyway, especially for those coming from a more modest background.

This hypothesis has been formulated based on personal observation and after having participated in many missionary congresses and met with many missionary candidates during the last ten years. Three elements seem to sum up the condition in which not a few missionary candidates find themselves: 1) lack of formal professional or university training, and 2) age group higher than 23 years old and 3) originating from small cities, outside big centers. The implications of this are that if an individual does not have professional training of any sort he or she hardly has a chance to make a living on his own. His situation will get worse as he gets older, and if he happens to live outside larger centers where the chances of getting a job are a bit more promising, this individual is bound to have great difficulty in making a decent living. But even in large centers like Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte, Curitiba and others, jobs are not easy to find. On the contrary, the difficulties have increased during the last years, due to the globalization process and the modernization of the economy, with smaller chances for employment, especially for those with little or insufficient education, which unfortunately is the case for most missionary candidates.

If Brazilian Christians who are not able to compete in the job market indeed represent a good portion of those who are seeking a missionary career, as a means to obtain a pass-

port to a better future, then mission agencies, churches, mission executives and mission speakers should revise their discourse and reevaluate the models they are setting forth, as well as their recruitment procedures. Those in leadership positions should consider the scope of their responsibility regarding their influence on men and women who present themselves as candidates.

Another area of concern that deserves closer scrutiny is the financial support model still employed by most mission agencies in Brazil. The support structure model adopted is a copy of the North American model, based on contributions from churches and individuals. However, the historical, economical and cultural conditions that gave sustainability and strength to the North American missions movement are quite different from those in the Brazilian situation. In Brazil we constantly hear reports about the immense difficulties in this area, yet the missionary structure continues to insist on the same model, as if it were a working model for everyone, everywhere.

Donors and Giving Habits

A basic premise to my thinking is that not many Christian workers will be able to survive within this model. While the number of mission candidates continues to increase, resources to finance conventionally supported missionaries are becoming increasingly limited. Also, churches and donors in general are becoming better informed about missions programs and needs and are, therefore, more selective in their giving. They are also asking more questions on a money and personnel management level. Mis-

sion agencies that are not willing to adapt to the fast changes and unique challenges that await us in the next millennium will either be left in a corner doing their thing or will simply disappear. The competition for missionary support will be fierce and only highly-skilled, well-trained people and professionally-run organizations will benefit from it.

Highly-Qualified Workers

The situation in which most unreached people groups find themselves is very complex and challeng-

ing if indeed it is not already happening, what is going to happen to this multitude of missionaries, Brazilians and others, who become engaged with missionary programs without adequate psychological, vocational evaluation or even a career plan? The types of Christian workers who will meet these challenges will not be formed or trained overnight, unlike many we see today who in 6 or 12 months' time attend a missions conference for the first time, raise enough funds to board a plane and are deployed to an entirely different culture full of enthusiasm and desire to share the Good News of our Lord.

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ing. Resistance to the Gospel in areas of the world where some of the world's largest non-Christian religions, like in Islamic countries for instance, seems to be growing. These specific contexts require missionaries with more specialized skills as well as the development of more effective strategies.

One of the great challenges we must face, for instance, which requires highly-trained and competent workers, is the tremendous lack of translations of Scripture, especially for those relatively-small people groups that represent Missions' final frontier. More than 4,000 languages have no scriptural translation yet, representing 180 million people with no access to the Word of God in their native language. (Yamamori, 1993)

If this is what is going to happen,

Resisting the Test of Time?

Perhaps the consequences of some of the issues that are being briefly pointed out in this essay can be perceived, as far as the Brazilian context is concerned, in the analysis of a prominent mission leader in Brazil, Bertil Ekstrom:

"We had a decrease of 26% of the Brazilian missionary force during the last three years. Missionaries who either didn't finish their first term of work or who decided not to return for their second term. Most of the missionaries do not receive clear orientation about their job description on the field and almost half of the mission agencies do not offer pastoral care to their missionary.... We raise an average of R\$ 1.30 (about US\$ 1.30) yearly per Evangelical believer in Brazil, meaning that we need 10,000 believers in order to support one missionary on the field." (Ekstrom, 1995, p.1)

Will the Brazilian Missions Movement resist the test of time? What will it take for the Brazilian missionary force to position its ranks in order to make a difference now and in the coming millennium?

Professionals in Missions

A new alternative opens up. As an attempt to address some of the above issues and create alternative models for Christians in Brazil, a group of mission-minded professionals and Christian workers who had the vision to see Brazilian professionals serving and witnessing for Christ as "tent-makers," or "bi-vocational missionaries," established an agency called PROEMI (Profissionais Em Missao, or Professionals in Missions). That vision is growing and gaining momentum within the Evangelical community.

1. To help challenge and mobilize Christian professionals to engage themselves in missionary and local community outreach projects.

2. To develop human resources for mission agencies, churches and related institutions.

The tentmaking concept is not new in Brazil. In recent years Brazilian mission leaders and specialists have begun to talk about it as an alternative response in order to counterbalance the financial difficulties as well as the social, religious, political and economic impediments to deploy "traditional missionaries" to restricted and closed countries. Even though lay participation in the ministry is not a widely talked about topic in Brazil, in reality it is not totally foreign.

Having had the tentmaking model and perspective embedded in their own origin and history, a few missionary agencies in Brazil have been pioneers in promoting the "tentmaking concept" model. The IFES related member movement in Brazil, for example, was pioneered in the late 50s and early 60s by professionals who came to Brazil to teach in secondary schools and universities. This voluntary "tentmaking" mentality has filtered down throughout the history of the Alianca Biblica Universitaria do Brazil history in different ways. In the

first missionary congress held in Brazil, in 1976, sponsored by the Alianca Biblica Universitaria, with participants from several Latin-American countries, great emphasis was given to lay participation in missionary work. Many projects led by professionals and students have been started and continue to serve as models to following generations.

In 1987, during COMIBAM, the first Ibero-American missions conference, held in Sao Paulo, Brazil, a PROEMI pamphlet was widely distributed by Ruth Siemens, then Global Opportunities Executive Director. More than 500 pamphlets were handed out to participants from various countries. In the following months after COMIBAM's conference PROEMI received many inquiries from many in Latin America.

The Centro Evangélico de Missoes, CEM, a missionary-training center based in Vicosa, Minas Gerais, has been an important advocate of the tentmaking model in more recent years, and through its publications and missionary training it is encouraging its students and others to consider the tentmaking model as a viable alternative to the "traditional missionary" one. In 1993 CEM sponsored the first missions conference in Brazil focusing specifically on the "tentmaking" model.

That same year an important contribution was made with the timely publication of J. Christy Wilson's book "Today's Tentmakers," in its Portuguese version. It was a great honor for me to receive an invitation from the publisher in Brazil to write an additional chapter to Dr. Wilson's book, which was soon to be released, in order to share with a wider public what was being done and what the future prospects for Brazilian professionals were in terms of strategic missionary involvement.

Since the early 90s PROEMI has been organizing meetings and conferences which have been well attended by professionals from various parts of Brazil. These events normally focus on a variety of experiences and projects started by Christian professionals. Normally these sessions are led by the professionals themselves.

We had the privilege of having Dr. Robert and Inga Young, from the U.S. based International Institute for Christian Studies—IICS, present in one of these conferences. They shared with the participants how Christian professors are being positioned in schools and universities in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and in the Middle East, to teach and witness for Christ in those contexts. They encouraged and challenged the participants to consider a more strategic involvement in the Kingdom of God. Dr. and Mrs. Young have since been closely associated with PROEMI's vision.

In 1993, a PROEMI representative led workshops about tentmaking at the Brazilian Missionary Congress sponsored by AMTB (Brazilian Association of Cross-Cultural Mission Agencies), held in Caxambu, Minas Gerais.

Towards the end of 1993 PROEMI was invited to a missions consultation that took place in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in February 1994, sponsored by Tentmakers International Exchange (TIE). By the grace of the God I was able to go and present a report about the progress of tentmaking in Brazil.

In the latter part of 1994 I attended a conference sponsored by USAT (United States Association of Tentmakers), in Charlotte, North Carolina (USA), which focused on tentmaking businesses and opportunities around the world. Three Brazilian businessmen went with me.

As a result of participation in that event one of the Brazilian businessmen who went with him formed a

As a result of participation in that event one of the Brazilian businessmen who went with him formed a partnership with an American contractor and established a "kingdom business" in Iowa, in the U.S., with the intent of providing funds for missions and then starting a similar project within an unreached people-group region. Another member of that group, a Chinese fellow who came to Brazil as a young boy, became actively involved with literature distribution and other missionary related projects in Asia. The third businessman who went along is a leader in his local church. He has just founded an organization that helps and ministers to children who are victimized by AIDS, or who have parents with AIDS.

In 1994, PROEMI's board chairman, Mr. Rubens Osorio, took part in the Latin American Missions Consultation sponsored by COMIBAM International, held in Panama in December of that year. That consultation was attended mainly by Latin American mission leaders who were invited to that event.

Early in 1997 PROEMI was represented at the Second Conference sponsored by TIE—Tentmakers International Exchange, held in Melbourne, Australia, where I had the opportunity to, once again, interact and learn with others who are also involved with the mobilization of professionals and businessmen (both men and women) towards God's work around the world. Opportunities such as this have provided inestimable encouragement and have strengthened PROEMI in its commitment to partnership and cooperative ways of working together toward effective witness for Christ.

Networking and partnership with

churches and mission agencies to avoid duplication of efforts and create greater effectiveness in the Lord's work are basic commitments for PROEMI. Just recently, for instance, PROEMI was invited by AMTB—Brazilian Association of Cross-Cultural Mission Agencies—to assist mission agencies with regards to special health needs presented by their missionaries. As a result of AMTB's request, PROEMI is forming a core group of Christian

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medical doctors with different types of expertise (dentists, psychologists and others) from the Sao Paulo area initially, to provide special assistance to missionaries and their families on furlough or who may return home for health related reasons. Once this core group is established and a basic program of assistance to missionaries is put in operation and evaluated, hopefully early in 1998, PROEMI will then branch out to other regions with similar programs.

Up until now PROEMI's activities have focused mainly on educating Christian professionals about the role they can play in world missions, through meetings and conferences, publications, and correspondence with professionals from different parts of Brazil. In the last years PROEMI has received many invitations to participate in mission conferences across the country. The number of letters requesting information has been

great, leaving no doubt as to the importance of the work that is being carried out in this area. In order to continue its mission and assist the Brazilian missions movement more effectively, PROEMI is moving from being a volunteer run organization to creating the necessary operational structure with hired staff and a working budget.

PROEMI's Activities

1. Education:

This consists in organizing workshops to help churches develop an awareness of the need to mobilize human resources available within their congregation and a plan to engage them in local community building and missionary projects. It also involves developing courses to be offered at seminary and missionary training schools.

2. Christian witness and community-building leadership:

This involves mobilizing of professionals towards the development of community-building, income-generating and health-related projects, as well as toward the strengthening of their Christian witness in their areas of activity.

3. Job placement referral:

This involves identifying and screening of qualified candidates who will be referred to partner organizations, churches, etc., looking for personnel for positions either in Brazil or overseas. It also means serving as a catalyst agent to help unemployed Christian professionals find job placement through a network of contacts that are being developed among Christian businessmen, Christian institutions and others.

Usually it also means fostering an entrepreneur mentality among young

In Conclusion

The statistics and dynamism that point to the tremendous growth in the numbers of Brazilian missionaries should not blind us to important aspects of reality which can have great influence on all levels of missionary sending and practice.

For one thing, missionary agencies need to adapt to the fast changes that are taking place on all levels of society. Among other things, missionary support will be fierce and only highly-skilled, well-trained people and professionally-run organizations will benefit from it.

Furthermore, the Evangelical church in Brazil needs to find alternative and more suitable models of missionary involvement in order to fulfill its role and leave a lasting mark in today's world. PROEMI, in partnership with existing mission agencies, can and should be instrumental in the conceptualization and development of new strategies and new missionaries for the coming years.

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