



Walking Arm-in-Arm into the Future

Connecting with Brazilians through the PW Global Exchange

BY ANN FERGUSON

Getting to Know Brazil

When you think of Brazil, what comes to mind? Rio, white beaches, Carnival, the samba, the Amazon, Corcovado and its statue of Christ? When Presbyterian women traveled to Brazil in October, we found all this and much more. *Caminhada*, a Portuguese word and the key theme of this Global Exchange, carries with it a sense of walking arm-in-arm in solidarity and support for one another. As we came to know our Brazilian sisters and brothers, as they shared a small portion of their beautiful country with us, they allowed us to walk with them—to connect.

Brazil, the largest country in South America, is slightly smaller than the United States. Besides being similar in size, Brazil and the United States share several historical similarities. European nations colonized both countries. Both were shaped by European immigrants who introduced labor-intensive agriculture—sugarcane, tobacco and cotton—grown on vast plantations that depended on slaves to work the fields. In both, the Europeans moved relentlessly westward, shoving native peoples aside, destroying their cultures and exploiting the land and its resources.

The Global Exchange is about connecting. In Brazil we connected with the people, their land and its history. Caminhada. Now we must walk together into the future.

But Portuguese Brazil, different from Anglo North America in its dominant religion and its form of government, has progressed along a different path than its northern cousin. Since its independence in 1822, emperors, landowners, dictators and the military have ruled Brazil. Today it is a federal republic with elected executive and legislative branches of government and

an appointed judicial branch. While its foreign debt is large, its economy is growing. With the largest and most stable economy in South America, Brazil is becoming a power player in the global market. And it is the largest Catholic nation in the world. More than 70 percent of its people claim Catholicism as their religion, although only about 20 percent attend Mass on a regular basis. Protestant religions garner a mere 15 percent of the population.

Presbyterian Brazil

With nearly one million members—less than one percent of the population—Presbyterians are a minority within the Protestant minority. Despite the small numbers, Presbyterian churches in Brazil are alive and vibrant. The first Protestant missionary to Brazil from the United States, Ashbel Green Simonton, planted



Nicole Johnson



the seeds of Presbyterianism. Since his arrival there in 1859, Presbyterianism has grown and thrived, overcoming a hostile social structure, yellow fever and schisms over such issues as dependence on the United States church and ordination of women. For an introduction to Presbyterian history in Brazil, see “Brazil’s Tenacious Presbyterians” in the May 2003 issue of *Presbyterians Today*.

As we traveled across Brazil, we experienced the warmth and hospitality of the PC(USA)’s two partner denominations, the Independent Presbyterian Church of Brazil (IPIB) and the Presbyterian Church of Brazil (IPU). The IPIB and IPU share an enthusiasm for spreading the gospel, but express that enthusiasm differently. The IPIB, older and more conservative, is the larger of the two denominations. Its evangelical spirit takes it into developing communities where it plants churches, opens schools, and ministers to the people as it shares the Good News of Jesus Christ. The IPU’s commitment to justice and the prophetic voice of the church gives it the energy to challenge the forces that cause death and destruction. Education, health and social activism are hallmarks of the IPU.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.
—Romans 12:9–13

Born out of the struggle for justice in an oppressive society, it continues to reach out to those who are on the margins of society.

I saw a glimpse of the IPU’s commitment to ministry with “the least of these” in Vitória. On Sunday morning, our IPU hosts took us, in groups of two to four, to various churches. I was privileged to visit a “children’s church.” Except for the handful of adult helpers, children—preschoolers through teenagers—make up the entire congregation on Sunday mornings. As I followed the young worship leaders, singing, praying and hearing the Word proclaimed by adolescents, I was amazed at the maturity the young

Christians showed. Our hosts informed us that most of them are from troubled homes where drug addiction, alcoholism, prostitution and violence are the norm. One or both parents might be in jail. The adults I saw were IPU members, many of whom came from other congregations to work with the children—and not just on Sunday, but every day of the week.

Beyond Sunday Morning

Sunday morning worship in Rio de Janeiro took us into two of its many *favelas* (slums or shantytowns). Each of the IPU churches we visited housed schools and social programs during the week. In Brasília we visited one of the IPIB’s new church developments in the settlements surrounding the city. The tiny church was more than a building. It was a symbol of solidarity and belonging among people struggling for the right to live decent lives. It was a church, a school, a cooperative, a center for growth and progress. From schools, cooperatives and vocational training centers to health clinics and women’s shelters—a few of the many ministries we saw—the churches are never empty, never still.

As in other developing nations, Pentecostalism is growing rapidly,



challenging not only the dominant Roman Catholic Church, but the traditional Protestant denominations as well. One disturbing aspect of the evangelical fervor in Brazil is the rapid growth of the Universal Church of the Reign of God, a neo-Pentecostal sect that claims 3.5 million members in Brazil and has missions in 35 other countries, including the United States. Founded in 1977, the church preaches a variation on the “theology of prosperity,” teaching that God will bless those who give money to that particular church. In spite of charges of corruption leveled at the church and its leaders, the sect continues to flourish. Recently, its criticism of the Afro-Brazilian religion, *candomblé*, has become more aggressive, going beyond verbal condemnation and heckling of those who practice it. The harsh rhetoric from its leaders is causing concern among Catholics and traditional Protestants alike.

The Economic Gap

The gap between rich and poor in Brazil is one of the largest in the world. Luxury housing developments next to cardboard-, plastic- and tin-constructed *favelas* provide a stark visual reminder of the disparity between classes. While there is no

accurate count, authorities estimate that 20 to 30 percent of the population in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, the two largest cities, live in *favelas*. São Paulo, with a population of more than 10 million, teems with people. Depending on how you count, São Paulo is either the second or third largest city in the world. In Rio the *favelas* cling to the hillsides. *Favela* dwellers build their makeshift houses one on top of the other. Rocinha, the oldest *favela* in Rio, functions as a community in itself, with banks, businesses, neighborhood schools and social welfare programs.

The Soul of Brazil

The jewel of the trip was Salvador, “the gem of the Americas,” “the soul of Brazil.” The first capital and the port of entry for a million Africans—one quarter of the total

slaves brought to Brazil—Salvador is rich with history. Dining at Solar do Unhan, facing the arched entryway through which Africans disembarked from the slave traders’ ships, unnerved me. Three years earlier, I saw a similar, though much smaller slave entry point on the opposite side of the Atlantic, when the Global Exchange took women to Ghana. A strange feeling of connection struck me. Memories of the visit to Elmina Castle on Ghana’s Cape Coast—the departure point for many of the slave ships—came flooding back. Reminders of centuries of brutality that occurred on two separate continents collapsed into one evening.

Having seen, smelled and sensed the evil of the slave trade at its point of departure and then dining on the other side of the ocean, where some of those same ships may have docked to unload their human cargo, was disturbing. The dots of history, a history I share, connected.

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Ann Ferguson is program coordinator for Presbyterian Women and lead staff for the PW Global Exchange.

Learn More

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