

A History of the Wisconsin Synod
Mission to Brazil:
A Tribute to God's Patient Grace

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Jesus commanded his disciples 2000 years ago to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." He confirmed that command with a promise, namely that: "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

How could the Lord of the Church make such a bold claim? After all, wasn't he leaving his work of spreading the Gospel to a world of sinful people whose natural inclination is hatred toward God?

The story is told of a conversation between Jesus and the angel Gabriel after Jesus' ascent into heaven. Gabriel asked Jesus, "Lord, now that your work of redemption has been completed, who will tell the world about it?" Jesus is said to have replied, "I have commanded my disciples to proclaim my Gospel. They will do it for me." Gabriel replied, "Lord, what if they don't? Do you have another plan?" Jesus is said to have answered, "I have no other plan."

Again, we are led to ask ourselves how the Lord of the Church could count on his sinner-saints to proclaim his Gospel? The answer is found in the very fact that he is the Lord of the Church. Jesus empowers his disciples to proclaim his message. Jesus helps them overcome their fears and shortcomings. Jesus provides them with "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."

In short, the reason that Jesus entrusts his work to his people is because he enables his people to do his work.

The Lord of the Church also supplies his people with opportunities to proclaim his Gospel. That's why our study of mission endeavors is so valuable. When we study the histories of our different WELS mission operations, we see God's abundant grace, wisdom, and patience in leading us to his harvest fields. We see how he has opened the door for our missionaries to enter new lands, and how he has blessed their efforts to the glory of his name.

Brazil is certainly no exception. The story of God's patient grace in bringing the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod into Brazil is a tribute to his love for his "other sheep that are not of this sheep pen." It is also a tribute to his love for WELS that he would so graciously give our church body the privilege of being his witnesses in a land so ripe for his Word.

Brazil is an outstanding mission field by human standards. It is the sixth largest country in the world, covering 3.3 million square miles, equal to our 48 contiguous states with Texas added twice.

"Brazil is also one of the world's fastest growing countries in population. Since 1950 its number of people has more than doubled, from 50 million to over 130 million, making more than one third of Latin Americans Brazilians. Of its inhabitants 70 percent are under 30 years of age" (BoRaM, 1985, p.87). Brazil's projected population by the

year 1990 is 150,368,000 souls.

These souls are very familiar with Christianity, although in many cases it is a corrupted form of Christianity, or nominal Christianity. As many as 90% of Brazilians claim membership in the Roman Catholic Church, yet only 10% practise their faith. The Roman Catholic Church of Brazil is full of corruption, as witnessed by the fact that many of Brazil's priests openly father children.

The Catholicism practised in much of the country is a syncretistic combination of Catholicism and spiritism. Missioner Starr reported that a special celebration on New Year's Eve is particularly appalling. The Brazilians make little rafts to offer the best of whatever they do to the Goddess of the Sea, who also happens to be the Virgin Mary. They leave these rafts near the sea so that the tide can carry them to Mary. If the tide takes the offering, then the Brazilians believe they will have a good year. If the tide does not take the offering, the Brazilians believe they will have a bad year. Those Brazilians frequently quit their jobs, and even contemplate suicide. The procession of Brazilians that offer their best to the sea is often led by the local Catholic priest.

This religious, misguided people have been very responsive to the Gospel in recent years, especially among Protestant missionaries. In the two most recent decades Protestantism has increased four-fold, so that over 10% of the people classify themselves as Protestants. One Baptist

missionary who serves in Brazil considers that country to be the showpiece of his church body's mission endeavors.

Into this highly populous, highly religious nation God patiently led the WELS. Our contact with Brazil began in 1975 when the Orthodox Lutheran Church of Brazil (Igreja Luterana Ortodoxa Brasileira da Consolacao) appealed to us to send it a pastor and a missionary. This small congregation located in Gravatai had left the Igreja Evangelica Luterana Brasileira, a one time district of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, for confessional reasons in 1972. Liberalism, especially involving charismatic gifts, infected their church, and led this small group of orthodox believers to form their own church, and seek the help of a church body equally dedicated to teaching and practicing Scripture in its truth and purity.

In 1976 a native born Brazilian and president of that newly formed church body, Luiz Rauter, traveled to Medellin, Columbia to meet with the WELS Latin American Committee. Subsequently he met with President Naumann in Milwaukee, where it was established that the new church body was in doctrinal fellowship with the WELS.

The primary concern of the congregation was that it be served by a pastor who would share its doctrinal position. At that time it was being served by a Brazilian, Rev. Abrelino Borgos, who because of his duties as a full-time school administrator was able to offer little more than weekend help. Therefore in 1976 the Board for World

Missions resolved to call a seminary graduate who would serve both as pastor of the congregation and mission explorer for the possibility of further outreach. "Plans for this arrangement did not materialize" (BoRaM, 1979, p.106.)

In April of 1978 the Board for World Missions again resolved to call a seminary graduate as pastor and mission explorer. "At the end of seven months the arrangement was terminated when it became evident that the assigned goal could not be reached under the arrangements which had been made. It is established policy to send a three-man team to open new mission fields. It has become clear that no less than two or three men should be sent out also on a short-term exploratory assignment" (BoRaM, 1979, p.106.)

So again the request of the fledgling church body in Brazil had to be turned down, but not without some regret, and not without renewed resolve to serve that mission field. The Interim Committee in March of 1979, represented by Executive Secretary Theodore A. Sauer and Professor Ernst H. Wendland, investigated more closely Brazil's potential. Those who had personal contact with the congregation were encouraged at the prospects for the future. Therefore the Interim Committee presented the following resolution at the 1979 Synod convention:

- "WHEREAS 1) exploration of the potential for mission work in Brazil is incomplete at this time; and
- WHEREAS 2) there are indications that there is a vast mission potential in this South American

nation; therefore be it

Resolved, a) that we continue the exploration of the Brazilian field; and be it further

Resolved, b) that we send a two or three man team to carry out this exploration in keeping with the suggestion of the Board for World Missions; and be it finally

Resolved, c) that the Coordinating Council and the Board of Trustees determine when this is feasible, based on budgetary considerations and program balance in the Synod" (Proceedings of the 45th Biennial Convention of WELS, p. 110.)

Even though the synod responded favorably to the renewed attempts to serve this field, the resolution was not implemented. Budget stringencies, and our already established involvement in Columbia left the Brazilian mission field without WELS workers for the time being.

But as has already been established, the Lord of the Church sometimes accomplishes his plans and purposes in spite of, rather than because of his people. This would certainly prove to be the case in Brazil. Even though WELS was unable at that time to enter Brazil, God graciously kept the door open.

At the 1983 Synod convention the Interim Committee of the Board for World Missions again stressed the urgency of entering Brazil's open door. The Interim Committee presented the following resolution, which was subsequently passed at convention.

"WHEREAS 1) Four years ago the Interim Committee reported to the Synod Convention that Brazil appeared to be a country of vast mission potential, and that further in-depth evaluation was

warranted; and

WHEREAS 2) The convention responded with the resolution that a two or three man team be sent to carry out an exploration of the Brazilian field subject to funding by the Coordinating Council and the Board of Trustees; and

WHEREAS 3) Due to the budget stringency of the past four years the resolution has not been carried out; and

WHEREAS 4) The Interim Committee and the Board for World Missions' executive secretary have kept in contact with this field and are still convinced of the vast potential of this field; and

WHEREAS 5) There is an extreme urgency to go into the open door of this field before it is closed; therefore, be it

Resolved, That Synod authorize an exploratory team be sent to Brazil and that this team report back to the 1985 Synod Convention with their recommendations" (Proceedings of the 47th Biennial Convention of WELS, 1983, p.75.)

Before this resolution could be carried out, however, another request came from Brazil in January of 1984. Dr. Paul Oserow, a former pastor of the Igreja Evangelica Luterana Brasileira, asked for aid in serving a small group of Lutheran Christians in Dourados, a frontier town 600 miles west of Sao Paulo.

As a result, in February the Board for World Missions appointed an exploratory committee to meet with both Luiz Rauter of Porto Alegre and Dr. Oserow of Dourados in July. The exploratory team consisted of: Professor Ernst H. Wendland, member of the Interim Committee; Rev. Martin P. Janke, member of the Interim Committee; and Rev. Richard E. Lauersdorf, member of the Latin American

Executive Committee. The team was also to explore the country's potential as a mission field, and obtain the information necessary for foreigners to do mission work within the country.

Because the exploratory team returned with such a favorable report, the Board for World Missions recommended that Synod enter the Brazilian field as soon as possible. The report mentioned several observations that made Brazil such an important mission field. One is the legal situation which provided an open door to our missionaries. "A comparatively recent law passed in 1981 provides for missionaries to enter the country under a temporary visa, which is periodically renewable until a permanent visa can be obtained. From all information received both in the USA as well as in Brazil, the obtaining of such visas is dependant upon a sponsoring agency within the country itself. This we have in the OLCB" (BoRaM, 1985, p.91.)

Not only did the Lord supply WELS with a sponsoring church body through which to enter, but he also supplied fertile fields to serve. "Both Gravatai and Dourados would offer prospective areas in which to begin our work. Gravatai would present us with a facility and a nucleus with which to begin in a promising urban development area. Dourados, lying in a frontier area would point more to the future" (BoRaM, 1985, p.91.)

The culture and economic conditions were also cited as positive attributes of the new mission field. "Cultural

change as it pertains to living conditions for expatriates should not constitute too great a problem. In general, living conditions as they pertain to transportation, shopping centers, etc., are similar in many respects to ours in the USA.

The acquisition of mission property does not seem to be a major problem as matters stand now in world economic affairs. A plot of land, even in a better Porto Alegre area, can be purchased for an estimated \$10,000. The cost of a modest chapel would come to anywhere between \$25,000 to \$40,000 depending on the area. Suitable housing can be purchased or rented" (BoRaM, 1985, p.91.)

Because of all these favorable aspects in the Brazilian field, the Board for World Missions recommended the following resolution:

- WHEREAS 1) God has given us an open door to do mission work in at least two areas of Brazil; and
- WHEREAS 2) We have the government-required invitation from a group which is a registered church in Brazil; and
- WHEREAS 3) This door could be closed at any time; and
- WHEREAS 4) Brazil offers a large field of vast potential for mission work; and
- WHEREAS 5) Entry into Brazil has been studied and recommended repeatedly by exploratory teams requested by the Synod; and
- WHEREAS 6) Experience has shown the wisdom of providing adequate manpower to carry out the many duties involved in establishing a new world mission field (cf. BoRaM, p.91, section E); therefore, be it

Resolved, That the Synod through the Board for World

Missions enter the Brazilian field; and be it further

Resolved, That this be done with a five man team; and be it finally

Resolved, That this urgent task be undertaken at the earliest possible time" (Proceedings of the 48th Biennial Convention of WELS, 1985, p72.)

Thus were set in motion God's final plans to draw the WELS into Brazil. The Synod convention passed the resolution to send three men into Brazil, with two more to follow. The Lord of the Church also supplied the necessary funding: "At its meeting on April 11, the Coordinating Council authorized the calling of three missionaries for Brazil as soon as possible. The first two-year costs will be carried by the Brazil Development Fund, which has received a number of special gifts to cover start-up costs. The fund presently totals about \$200,000" (Northwestern Lutheran, May 15, 1986.) Eventually the fund grew to over \$370,000, allowing the Board for World Missions to carry out the first step of the WELS mission to Brazil.

This first step consisted in commissioning veteran missionary to Puerto Rico, Charles Flunker, as the initial member of the Brazil mission team in May of 1986. Calls were later extended to fill the other two positions. "A visit by the executive committee and Missioner Flunker was conducted in early February 1987. During this visit we initiated plans for entry into Brazil. The obtaining of visas for the missioners and their families, the search for

potential housing and the selecting of a site for language training in Portuguese were a part of this visit" (BoRaM, 1987, p.67.)

God continued his marvelous plan for Brazil during that visit. The WELS received a third enquiry for aid from Espirito Santo, a separate state of Brazil. Our executive committee met with these interested individuals on the exploratory trip in February as well.

God was inviting us through the open door, and he graciously supplied the means whereby we could enter. So we did. On June 28 of 1987 Missioners Richard Starr and Bruce Marggraf were commissioned for Brazil. Our three man team stepped onto Brazilian soil for the first time in October of 1987. Missioners Charles Gumm in 1988, and Ken Cherney in 1989 filled out the desired five man team to Brazil.

Because our entry into Brazil was made through the Orthodox Lutheran Church of Brazil, and was aided by the president of the congregation, Luiz Rauter, it went much easier than expected. All that was necessary was a certified Seminary diploma and information about the families entering Brazil. The Rauter family helped a great deal in cutting through the bureaucratic red tape. Ronald, the son of Luiz, especially helped in obtaining CIC numbers for the missionaries. Without these numbers any major purchases would have been impossible, including owning cars or renting homes.

The missionary team is presently placed in two towns, Gravatai and Dourados. Missioners Starr, Marggraf, Cherney and Gumm, and their families live in Gravatai, home of the Orthodox Lutheran Church of Brazil. It is one of the fastest growing cities in Brazil with a population of 140,000, and one of the most highly developed in its country. Agriculture and industry make up much of its economy, while its good roads make for easy transportation. The living conditions are similar to the United States, with super markets and shopping centers to buy the necessities.

Gravatai has a church building owned by Luiz Rauter where weekly services are held. There is a nucleus of 70, with about 40 communicant members. Because of God's abundant grace we were able to confirm our first four adults in July of 1989, along with our first adult baptism.

Dourados is the home of veteran missionary Charles Flunker and his family. They are about 800 miles northwest of Gravatai on the western frontier of Brazil. The town of 150,000 people, situated on a vast plateau, is known for its agriculture and cattle. It is a good area for growth because so many people are moving out of the cities to the frontier areas of Brazil.

The church in Dourados has about twenty souls meeting weekly in the Flunker home. The people are natural evangelists, so it is the prayer of the missionaries that the Lord inspire the Brazilians to use their natural skills

to proclaim his message of salvation.

For all intents and purposes that is the history of the WELS mission to Brazil. What can we learn from these lists of facts and figures? First we see God demonstrate his patience in leading us where he wanted us to be, when he wanted us to be there. At no time, no matter how long the lapse of action on our part, did God give up on us, or those souls awaiting help in Brazil. God patiently allowed us to enter his open door at the right time, and in the right circumstances. For that he deserves our thanks and praise.

We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the work of the various committees on our Board for World Missions in entering Brazil. God has obviously blessed our Synod with wise and faithful workers who are dedicated to doing God's will in his good time, and not before. Again, to God alone be the glory.

Finally, and somewhat sorrowfully, we must acknowledge our own shortcomings. The door to Brazil was open long before we were able to enter. That God's will was accomplished in our entering Brazil in 1987 is unquestionable. But we must honestly ask ourselves if shortages of money or manpower should ever be a just cause for our not carrying out God's great commission to the extent he intends, to the ends of the earth. This is not intended as a cut against our Synod, rather it is intended to reaffirm what has already been said, namely that the

Lord of the Church always accomplishes his plans. He enables his people to do his will, yet he must sometimes accomplish that will in spite of, rather than because of his people. Yet what a privilege to be chosen by God to do his work. May we ever treasure that precious privilege, and glorify God for the work he accomplishes through us.

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