

Brazil's Surging Spirituality

Churches of all stripes have been growing for decades, as have the controversies and challenges facing evangelicals.

By Kenneth D. MacHarg



That the evangelical and pentecostal churches in Brazil are strong is immediately evident to any visitor. Compared to other Latin American countries where non-Catholic congregations are often small, hidden away on back streets and decidedly not influential, the church in Brazil is almost brazen in its visibility and self-promotion.

From one or more churches on every block in some sectors of Rio de Janeiro to billboards for a Christian bookstore overlooking downtown Sao Paulo's popular central square; from numerous radio and television stations broadcasting fiery sermons around the clock to two teenaged sisters unashamedly singing Christian hymns and choruses on an extended bus trip; from glaring neon signs proclaiming "Assemblies of God" atop the largest buildings in some rural towns to evangelicals in the president's cabinet and a strong evangelical bloc in the nation's congress, Brazilians are filling churches as fast as they can open and sharing their faith in a way that would put fellow believers in other countries to shame.

"There are 40 churches opening in Rio every week," says Roberto Inacio, the Director of an Assemblies of God Bible institute in Rio de Janeiro and writer of Sunday school material used throughout the country. "In particular, there has been an explosion of pentecostalism in the country in the past decade," he says.

While the pentecostal expression of faith is most obvious, other evangelical churches are experiencing rapid growth as well. "The Presbyterian church in the central area of the country is growing," says missionary Alan Mullins who has served in the country for 30 years. "The churches are very alive, the churches are full and the people are excited about what is going on in the church."

While Alan says that Presbyterian growth has slowed in large cities such as Sao Paulo, with its metropolitan population pushing 20 million, Baptists are encouraged by their 900 congregations in Sao Paulo state. And, while this denomination has traditionally worked with lower and middle class groups, it is now reaching out to more affluent, harder-to reach residents of the big cities. But, such a ministry takes time says Danny Rollins, a Southern Baptist missionary in Sao Paulo. “You don’t just set up the Jesus film on the street corner like you do in a poor community and think that they’ll come, because they won’t,” he explains.

Even youth in Brazil are openly active in witnessing to their faith. In Campinas, a city of one million people located an hour and a half west of Sao Paulo, the teenage youth group from a 3,000 member-strong charismatic Nazarene church spends every Saturday giving concerts, plays and puppet shows in city parks. “Our goal is to lead one-thousand people to make professions of faith for Christ this year,” says Beth Kinas, the group’s adult leader.



The rapid growth of evangelical churches is not without its tensions and problems, however.

Referring to the 40 new churches a week, Roberto says “many of them are Baptist, Methodist, Assemblies, Pentecostal people who want their own churches and following. On the good side, many of them open up and within a year they have up to a thousand new members who have come to know the Lord. On the bad side, many (leaders) are uneducated and know very little.” Roberto says that some students who attend his Bible institute ask, “What is Matthew?” in their first New Testament class.

Unfettered growth can also lead to lack of control or discipline. “Many of the small pentecostal groups are break offs from a larger church by people who aren’t willing to obey all the rules of the bishop,” explains Alan. “Also, within many of these groups there is no discipline if you are involved in immorality. They think that your behavior is your business and the church should not be involved in it.” Alan says that many new groups do not maintain a member roll so there is no way to remove a wayward person.

But, such churches are responding to a need according to several church leaders. “Their main appeal is that they present a God that you can use,” says Dinho Pereira, a Brazilian Presbyterian pastor who directs a Christian camp near the interior city of Tres Ranchos. “Most Presbyterians have a God that’s so great, so big that they cannot even talk with Him openly because He is far away. The pentecostal groups have the kind of God that will solve my problems today and tomorrow. People today are looking for solutions, not for eternity.”

“Many mainline churches are losing members very rapidly to pentecostal churches,” says Alan who is also a Presbyterian. “It’s because the pentecostals are offering people the chance to live without any stops. There are no more rules.”

“Brazilians have tried everything,” explains Walter Aiken, a missionary who teaches at a Baptist seminary in the Rio suburb of Niterói. “They are not satisfied with the system or their lives, so they are open to a spiritual experience and expression.”

At the center of the Brazilian Pentecostal revival is the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, a 500,000 member denomination whose large, warehouse type church buildings are visible throughout the country. While not the largest denomination in the country (two Assemblies of God denominations together boast 4 million members), this body has impacted every denomination while drawing worldwide attention.

Begun by Bishop Edir Macedo in 1977 with four members, the church has now spread worldwide and is a major economic as well as spiritual force within Brazil. The denomination owns a television network and multiple radio stations throughout the country, a publishing house, a newspaper, a bank and a recording company.

In 1995, the church created a world-wide stir when Sergio von Helde, a senior pastor of the church, called the likeness of Our Lady of Aparecida, the nation's patron saint, a "horrible, disgraceful doll" and told viewers of a Sao Paulo-based television program that the "Catholic Church lies. This image can't do anything for you." Von Helde repeatedly kicked and slapped a ceramic image of the saint bringing outrage from millions of Brazil's Roman Catholics. He fled the country and was later tried and found guilty of religious discrimination and desecration of a national sacred treasure and sentenced to two years in prison.

Most evangelicals outside the Universal church respect its success but at the same time find fault. "I think they are a blessing for Brazil," says Presbyterian Dinho. "Their preachers are not the kind that are jumping or climbing the pulpit. They are intellectual, clear and powerful. The thing about the Universal church that bothers many in the Presbyterian Church is that they have two things that we always wish we had," he says. "One is thousands of people and the other is millions of dollars."

Terry Johnson, a third-generation Assemblies of God missionary in Brazil, reflects a dimmer view. "They are rejected for the most part and considered to be radical. They are basically pentecostal and charismatic in doctrine and practice, but they take it to the extreme." While Terry acknowledges that they are dynamic and growing, he questions their theology of "inviting people to come to church but not to Jesus."

All outside observers point to the denomination's financial practices. "They are distinguished by asking for money," Roberto says. "If you need prayer, you had better take an offering. If you need help, you had better take an offering."



While universally recognized and criticized for their emphasis on money, the Universal church has, so far, escaped any official charge of wrongdoing. "They've been investigated a number of times by the government for money laundering," says Terry. "But, they haven't been able to prove anything yet."

Many evangelicals do not see pentecostalism or even Roman Catholicism as their main challenge. "If anybody makes the statement that Brazil is a Catholic country, he is completely out of the game," states Dinho. "Brazil is a Spiritist country, not a Catholic country. If you ask people, they say they are Catholic. But, if you really start to analyze, they are Spiritists but they are ashamed to say that, so they say they are Catholic."

With a large black population, Brazil is known for its polyglot mix of ethnic groups and a large Spiritist population. *Operation World* reports that there are over 14,000 Spiritist centers throughout the country. Spiritist worship takes two forms according to Danny Rollins, "One is lower Spiritism that came over with the African slaves involving black magic with what we consider voodoo, casting of spells and witchcraft," he explains. "The other, which is popular among the upper class folks, has a new age kind of emphasis involving reincarnation, dealing with spirits and talking with the dead."

"People say that Brazil is real receptive to the Gospel," says Danny's wife, Leann. "But what we have found is that they are really just receptive to anything. That's why many people practice several things. They will go to their Catholic mass on Saturday and their Spiritist meeting on Tuesday. Many of them have been part of a charismatic church, and when you offer them the gospel they will say yes to that and they will just add that to the other things they already had."

Leann says that "They're very receptive because this nation is very open to religion but that means all kinds of religion. They are looking for something and if we don't reach them with the gospel, then somebody is going to reach them with something else."

In light of the spectacular growth among pentecostal churches, more traditional denominations are renewing their ministry while struggling with how to maintain their traditional integrity. "Of the 30 percent of our (Presbyterian) churches that are growing, all of them are involved in one way or the other in a renewal that involves a new experience of the Holy Spirit," reports Dinho. "These churches are experiencing a live fellowship and worship, not the kind where you sit down and go to sleep and somebody kicks you when it's time to go."

"What has come out of our seminaries is an Americanized version of Christianity," reflects Danny Rollins. "They have church bulletins and choir robes in 140 degree weather and a lot of hymns translated into Portuguese. In an indigenous Brazilian church the music would be different. When we came here we were shocked. We expected a Latino spirit. But what we have doesn't match the personality of the people."

Leann agrees, "Their worship services need to express their normal tendency toward being emotional, loving and enthusiastic."

A charismatic-style renewal raises issues in traditional denominations. "The Baptist churches moved toward Pentecostalism in the 60's and a lot of churches split and a lot of folks went out and focused on tongues, so they lost a lot of churches," Danny reports.

One of the Baptist conventions even went so far as to develop a list of “do’s and don’ts” for Baptist churches. Their guidelines permitted hand clapping and the calling of the people down front for prayer, but prohibited anointing with oil.

Presbyterians are also afraid that charismatic renewal will get out of hand. “Some elders at a church where I used to pastor told me that they are afraid it will get out of control,” says Dinho. “We want renewal to happen, but we don’t quite know how to deal with it.”

Even the Assemblies of God find some disputes over worship style. Roberto Inacio characterizes “neo-pentecostal” churches as those whose worship is “more active, more emotional, with more physical movement and contemporary music,” than the traditional congregations. “These churches are appealing more to the youth,” he reports, though both traditions are experiencing phenomenal growth.

What are the issues for church members and leaders when they meet? “Theology,” says Presbyterian Alan Mullins. “Our biggest fights are over theology. We are especially concerned about the G-12 movement right now. (G-12 is a cell group strategy that began in Colombia and has now spread worldwide. While credited by some for enhancing church growth, others have criticized the movement for secrecy and divisiveness). “The real concern that our Presbytery has are what are they teaching these people and why is it so secretive. If it is the good news, then why is it a secret?”

Ethics and morals are another concern according to Alan’s Brazilian wife Ézia. “Carnival is a sensual time of nudity and sex,” she says. “Churches are working to offer alternatives with Carnival camps where young people or families can come to get away from all that goes on.” Ézia reports that while the “Just Wait” movement is spreading among many Brazilian youth, some pastors and parents do not support the campaign because of their own extra-marital activities.

Opposition to ecumenism and the lack of education for pastors and church leadership is a common theme. “The Presbyterian Church in Brazil is a very conservative church and is against any ecumenical involvement,” Alan says. “Relations do exist between some of the more liberal churches such as the United Presbyterian Church of Brazil and the Methodists.” While the Roman Catholics have the largest political and social influence in the country, he says that, “If the evangelical churches were to unite in this country, they would have a force that the Roman Catholic church would be surprised about.”

Relationships between evangelicals and Catholics are rare. “On issues like abortion, religious education in the schools, we may join forces if we have a common position,” reflects the Assemblies’ Terry Johnson. “Most of the time we are at odds. The Catholic church still does not accept our existence here in Brazil, so we will have nothing to do with them. The Assemblies of God in Brazil does not use the cross as a symbol on their churches because the Roman Catholic church used it first.”

All evangelicals agree that homosexuality is not an issue for the churches in Brazil as it is in the United States. “Here, we still believe that homosexuality is a sin, even though some cities, such as Rio de Janeiro, are centers for homosexual activity,” says Dinho.

“It’s not out of the closet, in your face here like it is in the United States,” Leann says. Husband Danny agrees, “If we were winning homosexuals, it still would not be allowed for them to come into the church if they were still practicing.”

While addressing social issues such as a rising crime rate, poverty and the new landless peasant movement, most churches are focused on evangelism according to Carlos Trindale, a Computer System Analyst and member of a Methodist church in Londrina. "After a long period of semi-stagnation that lasted for 25 years the church is growing and most of the regions of the country are having a time of revival. Some specific regions had a revival experience in the 70s and 80s and are known as charismatic."

Surveys show that in the southeastern region of Brazil, which contains the cities of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, evangelicals make up nearly 12 percent of the population (reaching as high as 15 percent in Rio de Janeiro state) while the northeast portion of the country reports only about 7 percent. The Amazon region claims between 10 and 15 percent evangelicals.

"One issue the Baptists need to deal with before we make an impact in this nation is to put lay pastors out there," says Danny Rollins. "The Assemblies of God have a church in every neighborhood. As soon as they can, they will get a man out there. He might not have much training, but he will be there trying to start a church." Danny says that Baptists will not consider anyone as a pastor until they have seminary training. "Consequently, we have been very slow getting people out where we need to have them."

Brazilian churches are increasing their missionary force. "Brazilians are accepted in many countries around the world where Americans would never be accepted," says Alan. "There are churches supporting up to 15 missionaries, many of them in Europe, some here working with Indians. There is a real move for missions in Brazil that I've not seen in my 30 years here."

Terry says that Brazilians are successful missionaries because they have a natural affinity with many in the third world. "They look similar, they have common roots in the Moors and Berbers, and they share a love of soccer," he reports.

Brazilians are reaching out not only to their neighboring countries, but also to other Portuguese-speaking parts of the world. The Brazilian Extension School of Theology (BEST), a ministry of the Assemblies of God, has extension campuses in Portugal, Canada, the United States and Japan and BEST textbooks are used in the Portuguese-speaking countries of Angola and Mozambique. "There are over 200,000 Brazilian descendents of Japanese immigrants to Brazil living in Japan," Terry explains. "Now, two, three, four generations later, many have gone back to find their roots, go to school or earn a living. The Assemblies of God and other denominations are involved in an effort to evangelize these Brazilian Japanese."

"Pray for us next year when we will be bringing Brazilians from all over Europe to a conference in Switzerland," asks Samuel Lima Malafaia, a businessman from Rio de Janeiro who travels to Europe several times a year for evangelistic purposes. Samuel is typical of a growing group of Brazilians who are approaching retirement and quitting their jobs to enter full-time Christian service.

That call to missions is evident in young people as well like 18-year-old Sarah Juliana da Cunha who spent part of her summer as a counselor at a Presbyterian camp near Ceres. "If I can tell the kids how good it is to follow Jesus' path, that's what I want to tell them. I'm waiting for God to tell me if I should work as a missionary in Christian camping all my life."

SIDEBAR

There was a time when Protestants in Brazil were subject to persecution and violence from the Catholic church. Today it is more subtle according to Terry Johnson, a third-generation Assemblies of God missionary in Brazil. “The persecution we face is more hidden, unseen. They will go to the city council and complain about our buildings and the noise we make.”

Terry tells about the persecution his grandparents faced as they tried to plant churches. “They arrived 60 years ago when persecution of evangelical believers was still strong,” Terry reflects. “In the city where they set up their residence, there was a lot of persecution, but they eventually gained the respect of the city. Today, the neighborhood where they lived is called “The Good Shepherd”” in honor of my grandfather.”

Terry says that his grandparents went out to one neighborhood to preach at an open-air meeting one Sunday afternoon. “They tried to preach on one street corner, but every time they tried to start, the crowd would stone them. They never were able to start a church in that suburb.”

Twenty years later the story was different. “My father wanted to build a Christian school through our children’s ministry. So, he went to the mayor and asked him to donate some property to the ministry. The mayor picked out a piece of property, did all the paper work and showed it to my father,” Terry relates. “It was the exact street corner where my grandparents had been stoned 20 years earlier!” Today the school serves 120 students and had recently been expanded to hold up to 500.

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