

Happy Campers; Brazilians use Christian camping as a tool for evangelism

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

LAM News Service

Tres Ranchos, Brazil (LAMNS)--Dinho Periera is justifiably pleased, and just a bit proud of Estancia Victoria, a Christian camp 250 miles south of Brasilia. Sitting on a 150-acre peninsula jutting out into a recreational lake, the LAM missionary shows an admiring visitor all that the Lord has done in just a few years. A beautiful windowed lodge sits on a bluff overlooking the lake. Next door, a three-story dormitory that will house 150 people is taking shape. Temporary cabins, a non-competitive game area carved out of the woods and other facilities demonstrate that this is a model camp.

But Dinho isn't talking about the facilities. "The most important things are not the buildings, but building lives," he explains. "I cannot tell you that yesterday I talked to a building and the building really helped me. But I could tell you that this morning I talked with a friend that I hadn't seen for two years and it was a blessing to me. To me building lives is the key for my goal in life."

Dinho and his wife Ginny live in Tres Ranchos, a vacation town on the edge of Blue Lake, just 15 minutes from the camp. They just moved here two years ago to develop Estancia Victoria not just as a camp site but as a facility where camp leaders from all over Brazil and even from around the world will be trained in camp leadership.

"Our goal is to train people who are going to be full-time workers," says Ginny. "There is a real need for this all over Brazil. Camps are always asking us if we have someone who can come and direct their facilities and program."

Many church camps were begun and operated by missionaries who are now retiring according to Dinho. "We have campsites that have some buildings but nobody to be the camp director," he says. "The idea is to train people that have a vision to serve the Lord through camp ministry. People who are able to plan programs and site development, who are able to get things going." Dinho says that he has a three-year waiting list of people who want to take the ten-month training program at Estancia Victoria.

"Most of the 500 Christian camps in Brazil today are under Brazilian leadership," says Alan Mullins, an LAM missionary who lives in Campinas, Brazil, but travels around the country with his wife Ézia training camp counselors and advising directors. "We provide staff training manuals and we have written books on games and outdoor activities," Ézia explains.

The training of qualified full-time and volunteer camp leadership is a continual process. "We have to start from scratch every year," Ézia says. "We try to pass on to them the idea of Christian camping and its full potential. The idea is to reach the whole person, working not only in leading the person to Christ, which is our main goal, but working with the

teenager in his or her life as a whole; emotionally, socially, mentally, intellectually. We are trying to encourage and develop the whole person.”

Ézia says that camping is one of the best tools for reaching people for Christ. “Many unbelievers would not go to church, but they will go to camp because it is a neutral environment,” she says. “Camping is successful because it offers an opportunity to share with somebody they may never see again who they hope will keep their confidence. It’s a time when they can let down their guard.”

Many of those who attend the evangelical camps in Brazil are not Christian according to Alan. “Many are Roman Catholic, some are Spiritist. Some do not have a relationship with a church and have not known the Lord personally,” he explains. “Camp is a great place to reap what has been sown in the church.”

In addition, camps are a good breeding ground for future church members. “We urge leaders to send campers on to a local church that they can join and grow in their faith,” Ézia says.

The need for camp leaders is urgent not only in Brazil but also across Latin America and around the world. To that end, Dinho plans to offer training for people from many nations. “Camping ministries are growing faster outside of the United States,” he explains. “Not only that, there is a tension between training a Brazilian in a North American setting and training them in a Brazilian or Bolivian setting.” Dinho says that training people from developing nations in Brazil would be more culturally appropriate than taking them to the United States for the same instruction.

He says that there is also a difference in philosophy. “The main goal of many camps in the States is to give the kids a good time, a recreation time, a fun time. For us here in Brazil, camps are a tool of evangelism.”

Both missionaries report that they could use more help. “We can use short-termers who would like to work at camp,” Alan reports. “They would not need to speak the language because they would be doing things like helping in the kitchen, cleaning and serving as part of the staff. We could use them for two months in July and January.” Alan says that Christian Camping International-Brazil is also looking for two couples to help train camp leaders nationwide. “We need personnel who have experience in camping and would be willing to come to Brazil for five to ten years to be involved in helping to develop courses and teach leadership.”

Dinho says he also needs missionaries who would work in his training institute at Tres Ranchos. “We’re looking for someone who can teach, for example, how to use overhead transparencies. We would love to have them come down and stay a week and teach two classes every day on how to use overhead transparencies at the campsite.” The camp would provide translation and can use people with experience in many disciplines.

The Latin America Mission has provided missionaries to camping programs in Brazil for many years. Paulo Ney, the director of Lar Rogate, a Christian retreat center in the southern Brazilian city of Curitiba and vice-president of CCI-Brazil says, "The two men who know more about how to do Christian camping than anybody else in Brazil are Alan Mullins and Dinho Pereira!"

SIDEBAR STORY

To emphasize his focus on people, LAM missionary Dinho Pereira tells of a young person who attended the first camp he directed almost 30 years ago. "We had a place that was terrible, it just didn't have anything. The two buildings were falling down and it was really bad," he explains. But at that camp there was a young girl out of the 15 young people who attended. "She made a decision for Christ there for the first time in her life."

Seven years ago, Dinho crossed paths with that young girl again. "Now she was a young lady, married to a fine Christian guy that really loved the Lord and they had a drug store. Someone told him about a camping ministry and he decided to see what it was all about. He discovered that camping is much more than just employment; it is a place to build lives. The Lord started speaking to his heart about camping."

The man, Dirlei Bruder approached his wife, uncertain what her reaction would be to the idea of closing a prosperous business and entering the mission field of Christian camping. "I've been praying also that the Lord would use us in His ministry and I'm going to take the training also," was her response.

Today Dirlei and his wife Nadia have just moved to Tres Ranchos to work with Dinho and Ginny in directing the training program that God is using them to establish.

HOTBOX

For information on missionary service working with camps in Brazil, write to the Personnel Department of the Latin America Mission.

The Latin America Mission works in partnership with churches and Christian agencies throughout Latin America and supports missionaries and projects in many Latin countries as well as in Spain. LAM is seeking to place new missionaries throughout the region. The U.S. headquarters can be reached at Latin America Mission, Box 52-7900, Miami, FL 33152, by e-mail at info@lam.org, or by calling 1-800-275-8410. The mission's web site may be found at <http://www.lam.org>. LAM's Canadian office is at 3075 Ridgeway Drive, Unit 14, Mississauga, ON L5L 5M6.

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