

Mission service is a family affair

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

For the Johnson family, mission service is a family affair.

Children's crusades, which the family's Children of Brazil Outreach (COBO) ministry sponsors, find missionaries Terry and Beth and ten-year-old Michael preaching, leading music and donning clown costumes, all in an effort to win Brazilians to the Lord.

Up to 700 children from nearby schools are invited to their huge tent for the hour and a half program. "It's like a field trip for them," Beth explains. "We have clowns to teach kids choruses, ventriloquists who do Bible stories and a drama presentation."

All of those activities are followed by an altar call and coordinated efforts to channel the children into local churches."

Michael acts as a clown at the crusades. "My face is all painted up and I have big shoes and a top hat," he explains. "We teach the kids how to sing songs and they follow us until they get the hang of it."

"Music is something that reaches beyond preaching," Beth says. "Where people will not listen to a sermon, a song can penetrate the heart."

The crusades are a small part of COBO's ministry. "My father, Bernhard Johnson, saw the need to minister to children here in Brazil, so he formed COBO to minister to poor, underprivileged children throughout the country," Terry says.

"Through COBO we have built 12 schools and day care centers, we provide Bible curriculum for classes in public and private schools and we hold the children's tent crusades."

Terry points with pride to a school built by COBO in cooperation with a large Nazarene church in the city of Campinas. The two-story building adjoins a low-income neighborhood and provides tutoring assistance and other social and evangelistic services to the area's residents.

"This school is registered with the city as a religious institution for social assistance, not as a school," explains Jucilene Rodrigues Lisboa, the center's director. "The children go to elementary schools in the neighborhood and come here the other part of the day to do homework, take refresher courses, get music lessons, take PE classes and receive Bible teaching," she says.

Terry says that the center also feeds lunch to many of the children. "Even during vacation time many will continue to come here for lunch because this will be their only meal during the day," he says.

Students understand that the neighborhood school helps to improve their lives. "The school has helped me with my school work and has tutored me," says Jocilene, a 13 year old who receives sponsorship assistance from Compassion International to help pay fees at the school. Jocilene's father is unemployed and her mother is a maid. After attending the programs of the COBO-related school, Jocilene made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ, Now, her brother, who also comes to the center, has accepted the Lord.

COBO is committed to help a school in western Brazil build a new facility. "We have four other requests for assistance and we are planning to help with these projects over the next few years," Terry reports.

While the COBO ministries could consume all of the missionary family's time, they are really just a small part when compared to the Johnson's primary effort, the Brazilian Evangelical School of Theology (BEST).

The BEST school, which was started in 1979 by Terry's father, currently has 17,000 students throughout Brazil and in other countries, studying on 420 extension campuses. Over 13,000 students have graduated from the four-year ministerial training program since its founding. A more advanced program, the Brazil Advanced School of Theology (BAST), currently enrolls 800 students who are working on an Associate of Arts degree. Two hundred and fifty students have received degrees since the BAST program was started almost a decade ago.

"Each extension campus is set up in a local church with the pastor serving as the director," Terry says. While using textbook and teaching material provided by the BEST and BAST programs in Campinas, Terry explains that "the extension campus becomes part of the ministry of the local church."

Students in the BEST program study 32 subjects over their four-year course, most of them oriented toward biblical and theological issues. Courses include the Pastoral Epistles, eschatology, the Gospels, Old Testament History, an overview of the New Testament and the book of Acts. Practical ministry subjects such as homiletics and missions studies are also included.

"This is ministerial training," says Terry as he and his wife Beth show visitors around their modern facility in Campinas, a city of one million people about an hour and a half west of Sao Paulo. "Pastors with no training, Christian workers and Sunday school teachers are the type of people who want to take these studies," he explains. "The BEST program is designed to make Bible school education available to the thousands of ministers, Christian workers and laity who have no access to Bible school education or who could not leave their home, church or work to go to school."

The spacious campus contains warehouses where textbooks are shipped to schools around the world. Student exams are sent to the central office for grading and the diplomas are issued by the organization rather than the local campus.

In addition to Brazil, BEST serves campuses in Portugal, Canada, the United States and Japan and BEST material is used in the Portuguese-speaking countries of Angola and Mozambique.

Terry, a third-generation missionary in Brazil, plans to expand his ministry's educational efforts. "We are going to build a residential school here in the next few years," he says. "We could use new missionaries to teach once we get the residential school going." The new school will offer more advanced courses and missionary teachers "have more teaching experience and their level of theological knowledge will be higher," he explains.

Meanwhile, the BEST and BAST schools are making a difference in Brazil. "A pastor in Brasilia said that the thing he likes about our extension campus in his church is that the students have four years to study which gives them ample time to absorb the material," Terry reports.

“When the Brazil extension school started, most of our leadership had never attended school. But, after four years a big change happened in the pastor’s minds,” says Terry’s secretary, Beth Kinas. “They changed their attitudes, how they taught the Bible, and how they handled their church members.”

“This school made a big influence, starting with my own father and the pastors in my home town who never had the opportunity to go to school,” she remembers. “They went to school in my church where we introduced the BEST program. I’m very proud to be the secretary for this program which did such a big thing for this country.”

SIDEBAR STORY

God often moves in miraculous and even humorous ways. Witness the story that goes back three generations to Terry Johnson’s grandparents. “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.”

Some results were miraculous even if slow to materialize. Terry says that his grandparents went out to a 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. 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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