



FRIDAYFAX 2.0

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Brazil: A movement of God in the making

No children exist without fathers and mothers. In this issue of the Friday Fax, I like to introduce you to a new groundswell of home based churches and networks that are just starting to emerge in Brazil –and, I have reasons to believe and report, will prove to be the beginning of a new church era. Brazil, with 185 million population, is the sixth most populous country in the world – and by far the biggest country in South America. But before we have a look at the children, let me introduce to you two or three parents of this movement.



John Walker



On February 4, 1964, John and Ruth Walker arrived from USA in Brazil to be non-traditional missionaries – not sent by any church or agency - and emigrants to this great land. John, in his book “My Spiritual Journey”, reports how he and his wife had “church in their home” from the time of their wedding in 1947. Influenced by John Fox (founder of the Quakers), Watchman Nee and many others John searched all his life for a true expression of church as described in Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-35. In his desire to see a reformation and revival that leads to a restoration of such a church, he engaged, together with his family, in a far-flung literature ministry, established a Christian school, a prayer ministry and numerous other works. In many ways, John Walker and his life has been a prophetic statement for the desperate search of so many for a truly apostolic body of Christ in our days. Many saw him as a lone voice in the desert. He literally became another kernel of wheat falling into the ground in Brazil: John died in January 2007. His work and vision, however, is carried on in his six children. Some of them are now on the editorial board of a magazine called “Revista Impacto” (www.revistaimpacto.com), part of a growing network of individuals and ministries across Brazil that focus on a return to biblical principles for all of life.

Elza and Offini Franco

Traditionally, Brazil experienced a very similar pattern like the rest of Latin America: most of those who came to Christ in the last decades left the Roman Catholic church and joined Evangelical churches, that experienced a huge boom. However, as most Evangelical churches are molded after Protestant/Lutheran/Reformed churches that, in turn, are patterned after the Roman Catholic church system, a highly programme-based, event-driven and priest-centered pattern, many have changed their religious affiliations, but life itself – and society- remains remarkably unchanged. “Evangelical Christians now compose 18.35% of the population (in Latin America). This percentage has been the result of a massive church planting effort in the last ten years”, says Thomas Moreno, who works with DAWN Ministries (www.dawnministries.org). But changing the location of pews – from catholic to evangelical pews – and the location for a Sunday service from a catholic to an evangelical building, does neither touch nor change the core of society. Moreno therefore states that “the harsh reality that challenges us is the urgent need for the integral transformation of our society – we need healthy, holistic and harvesting churches”. Unhealthy, imbalanced and self-centered churches have the ability to fill Latin America – but they will not disciple it. This is why the story of family Franco is a beacon of hope – and, as in the days of Elijah, the sight of a fist-sized cloud on the prophetic horizon. With the beginning of the Protestant and Catholic charismatic renewal in Brazil around 1972, a couple, Offini and Elza Franco - he was Presbyterian; she was Catholic - got a promise of God, that they will be the “parents of many children.” “It started when a few young Catholics, all thirsty for God, were sent by a



Catholic priest, Eduardo Dougherty, to go to the house of the ‘family Franco’ and study the Bible. But it became more than that, as the Francos not only taught the Bible to the young people, but transmitted Jesus Christ’s person to them”, writes Edward Coltri (Sorocaba), an engineer and house-church planter who is part of the movement today. The young people were transformed by this, but didn’t find space inside the Catholic Church. With many difficulties the small group of young people that met at the table of the Francos grew into a movement of churches in the homes that today connects more than 3.000 persons in more than 200 house churches. Another 3.000 people have been strongly influenced by the movement, but have decided to remain inside traditional churches. A small organization of leaders exercises a plural leadership together with the couple Franco and Pedro Arruda, a gifted teacher living in Barueri near São Paulo. In a recent conference at the beginning of June 2007, more than 120 people from all over Brazil came to connect and interact in a retreat center in Sorocaba near São Paulo to discuss the future of housechurch planting in Brazil. Much of this is being lead by the spiritual and physical children of John Walker and the Francos: three sons of John Walker, Christopher, Robert and Harold, 4-6th from left, are on the picture, with Pedro Arruda at the right side.



Daniel Allen, a missionary with the IMB (International Mission Board) in Brazil, summarizes the development in a report for NEXUS – a brand new reader on the development on housechurches compiled by Rad Zdero (see www.missionbooks.org). Daniel writes: “There is an increasing frustration among church leaders who are dismayed about their stagnant church growth. This is especially true in southern Brazil. In Rio Grande do Sul, the hard numbers of Evangelicals are declining, according to SEPAL (Serviço de Evangelização para America Latina), a non-denominational organization dedicated to evangelism and church planting. Traditionally, the population has been Roman Catholic (80%), but according to government statistics the fastest growing religion in the nation is now spiritism. Many have questioned whether or not a house church movement exists in Brazil. All indications are that there is a grassroots house church movement. It has become increasingly more visible in recent years. While house churches have existed for some time, they are only now beginning to surface seeking like-minded people to discuss specific issues that relate to house church. Because of their growing visibility, they are learning to speak out. The size of Brazil’s house church movement is not easily discovered. Research is showing that the movement cuts across all social and ethnic lines. However, it is the middle-class in Brazil that is most visible at this time. Most of them have come out of mainline Evangelicalism. After drifting between several churches and/or denominations, they are finding the option of meeting in homes intriguing. This is leading them to search for resources. These resources include books, web sites, and believers who are already participating in the house church movement. Part of their interest comes from their desire to be a part of a highly participative and inclusive church that is organic in nature. In recent years there have been several highly esteemed books translated into Portuguese on the topic. Loose-knit networks are also beginning to form. The first goal of one network is to promote house church awareness and training on a national level. The people involved in these plans are coming from successful business backgrounds and are made up of all ages. Almost without exception, those who are participating are calling themselves Evangelicals, but avoid any denominational affiliations. This places the movement in a position that is parallel to traditional Evangelical churches.



Many Roman Catholics themselves, however, have also formed a kind of house church movement over the past 40 years. They are known as ‘Basic Ecclesial Communities’ (BEC) and are focused on Bible study, prayer, mutual support, and practical service to the community. The groups are often made up of about 40 people and are led either by trained laypersons or clergy. Many people on the fringes have been touched, including the unemployed, the elderly, peasants, laborers, and frustrated youth. Though the movement is formally recognized by the Vatican, some Catholic clergy have had mixed feelings, wanting the communities to have closer ties to local parishes and priests. BECs have spread throughout Latin America. By 1975, there were 40,000 communities in Brazil; in 1985, there were approximately 100,000 groups in existence.” One of the strongest voices for BECs was the Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff.

Motivations for Involvement

Daniel continues: “What is motivating Brazilian believers to consider house church as a viable option? There is a profound distrust of political, business, and religious institutions and organizations that few would deny. This distrust has fuelled a growing perception that institutions and organizations are too bureaucratic, i.e. not relational in nature. All too common, moral failures among leadership are lending to this perception. Churches and denominations are not above suspicion and are seen as being a part of this problem. They are perceived as inwardly focused and, therefore, more interested in the life of the organization, rather than that of the people.

However, it should not be considered as the primary factor. It is not merely a case of disgruntled Christians forming themselves into house churches.

Interest is also growing because of a desire among believers to become full participants in the gospel. This is evidenced in web articles and forums. The discussion deals with the issues that surround questions like: What is a house church? What defines it? Where can it meet? How is it organized? Who leads it? How do we handle tithes and offerings? etc. There is also much discussion about the church being organic in nature, like that of family rather than like an organization. They are not stating that all organization is unnecessary, but rather that they want to participate in church where relationships are family-like.

There are signs that they are approaching this change with a holistic purpose and not simply as another model to place in the church planting portfolio. There is a sincere desire to change the content, rather than merely revolt against the old structure. They are keen on finding what they believe to be the true essence of the church: a spiritual family. Within the movement, the family and its importance is always stressed. This is not a quest for independence through division in order to form a new church or one more denomination. It is a reform, and according to Jamê Nobre, focused upon changing “the vision, the practice, and the experience of the people of God” (see Jamê Nobre, *A Igreja nas Casas: Revolução ou Reforma?* on www.odiscipulo.com). At this point, the movement has been in an experimental phase and needs to make the next crucial step by becoming intentional in their disciple-making and their house church planting”, concludes Daniel.



Scott MacLeod

Here in a picture with his wife Sarah, has a prophetic ministry (www.provisioninternational.com). Living in Nashville, Tennessee, Scott has visited Brazil some time ago during which God had shown him a prophetic picture of the role of Brazil in God’s parade of nations. Scott has written an unpublished book about his experience called “The Diamonds of Brazil” in which he has seen a long parade of nations following Jesus. The very first

nation in this parade was: Brazil! Quoting Scott, he writes:

“This was very fascinating to me. Of the hundreds of nations represented, those from Brazil had been granted a lead position at the front of the line. I grew very curious and began to wonder how they had obtained this privileged position. I thought it might be due to alphabetical sequencing or something else. I knew there had to be a good reason why the Lord had revealed this to me, so I did what I have learned to do: I inquired of the Lord. ‘Tell me, Lord, why are Brazilians at the front of the parade?’ I asked. The Lord immediately answered, ‘Because of their great zeal for Me and their humility, I have placed them at the front, and they have been given a lead role.’ (There were a couple other nations near the front with them, but I could not see who they were. I was only allowed to identify the Brazilians.)

The Lord continued, ‘Watch them closely now, and you will see firsthand why I have chosen them for this place of honor. I have been preparing them for this lead position because they will bear My standard.’ I watched as the Brazilians worshiped the Lord. They danced and sang and waved banners and flags to the Lord with all their hearts. Their enthusiasm was contagious as their glorious adoration and celebration rose like a fragrant offering to King Jesus. I was seeing a corporate passion and zeal for the Lord that I had seen before in only a few individuals. They were ablaze with love for the Lord! This kind of passion and spiritual hunger is rare, and I had certainly never seen it poured out corporately to this degree. The people’s worship wasn’t for show. It was authentic. I was amazed to see that the majority of these worshipers had their eyes closed as they were swept away into a realm of deep adoration and heartfelt communication with their King. It was incredibly intimate and corporate at the same time. It was explosive! Their faces literally glowed with love and passionate affection for their heavenly King.”

(Pictures: In June, 2006, 3 Million “marched for Jesus” in São Paulo)

