

JourneyPartners

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In February of this year, I finally made it to Brazil. The trip was on behalf of *JourneyPartners*, the culmination of three years of thought and conversation and “wishing,” delayed by the challenge of finding time and funds and window of opportunity all at the same time. A friend who grew up in Brazil accompanied me – as interpreter and traveling companion. We went to three towns and cities, were hosted by six congregations, and visited in ten communities. As I’ve learned to expect in these kinds of journeys, our reception was warm and welcoming; the hospitality extended by our hosts was phenomenal; the relationships fostered were deep and genuine, and will remain rich and lasting. But other lessons learned in Brazil were unexpected; I returned overflowing with a sense of opportunity, challenge and possibility, energized for engagement, partnership and solidarity.

We visited in a rural village – Ze da Rochas – where wealthy sugar plantation barons are the only employer, the company store the only supplier of goods, the law of the landlord the only law of the land. Housing is shoddy, price controls on basic foods and goods result in an economy of forced indebtedness; young girls are exploited and impregnated by their powerful “patrons,” then thrown away to be replaced by others, and returned to their communities as “damaged goods.”

We visited in the *favelas*, the urban “slums,” where houses are constructed of cardboard and scrap materials, where child malnutrition is the norm rather than the exception, where violent crime is rampant and unchecked by civil authorities, where drug trafficking is the only path to a future that many adolescents think they have. We attended a house church meeting there, a new mission named *Igreija Vasco da Gama*, where a young couple asked for prayer for their community: four people, two of them their relatives, had been murdered that week in drug-related shootings.

We visited in the *grotas*, communities hidden “under the hill,” just below but out of sight of multi-million-dollar homes of wealthy urban dwellers, hidden from view of luxury beach homes. Houses are connected by a maze of countless paths – some narrow horizontal “shelves” cutting across the face of the mountain, some steep vertical chutes carved out by millions of footsteps of those who trudge up and down the mountain to find firewood or food or water or work. When it’s dry, these paths are challenge even for the most surefooted; when it rains they become treacherous conduits and culverts, certain injury for many, death for the unwary or unlucky few. These are invisible people – thousands of families trying to scratch out a living doing anything they can to earn a day’s wage. They’re squatters mostly, so unregistered and “unnoticed” by the government, and unrecognized for health and education services. Public schools are too few to accommodate far too many children, and too far for access to all but a few. Lack of running water or sanitation facilities or indoor or outdoor toilets means illness and infection and disease for children already compromised by poor nutrition. The cycle of ignorance and poverty and poor health grinds out generation after generation of under-development and early death and wasted potential.

With each visit, each “dip” into the reality of daily life in these places that most tourists – even many “mission tourists” – don’t see and won’t go, I came to a new and personal and haunting shift in focus: just beyond the walls of luscious gardens and just beneath the rich topsoil of vast plantations and just under the patios of manicured estates are people, invisible no-people, whose lives and futures are delimited by perpetual deprivation, shortened by excruciating labor, diminished by the daily companions of futility and despair.

But in each of the places I visited was a community of faith – a church or a mission or a prayer group or a national missionary – working in tangible and effective ways to thwart the system of exploitation and the ethos of oppression, and offer hope and help to those in the margins of their culture and their communities.

Ze da Rochas, that small rural village, is about two hours from Maceio, its residents almost all workers on the sugar plantation owned by Europeans. It's a village literally "abandoned" by the church: the Catholic priest formerly assigned there gave up and moved away; convinced that "no church would ever make it in that village," he donated the land where the Catholic diocese had planned to build a church to the small Baptist prayer group meeting in a house. Emanuel de Oliviera – Mano to us – is a baker. He works in Maceio during the week, and travels the two hours each way, each weekend, to Ze da Rochas, to pray with that small house church, to listen to their stories, to hear their hopes and dreams, to be part of their lives. With the help of Pinheiro Baptist Church in Maceio – you will remember their pastor Wellington Santos, who came last year to the Alliance Convocation representing the *Alianca do Brasil* – with his help and that of his church, Mano and a few community leaders managed to secure a micro-enterprise loan, and started a manioc co-op – the first self-directed income-producing project this small community has known. It's hard, hard work – digging the manioc root, scraping the tough skin, mashing it to a pulp, then drying and grinding it into a meal, perhaps like our corn meal – a staple in the diet of northeast Brasil. But it's their work – they own it, and work it, and run it, and are using the proceeds to improve their houses, and plant their own gardens and orchards – mango and jaca and avocado and papaya, and manioc – and to pay a teacher for a local school, and change lives in that community. And the people of Ze da Rochas have worked together with volunteers from Pinheiro Baptist Church to build a new church building on that land given up by the Catholic priest, complete with an "upper room" house for their new pastor Manolo, and a basement space for their next community co-op – a bakery, where Manolo will, in his words, "tell people about the Bread of Life while teaching them to bake their daily bread."

Igreja Batista d'Esperanza in Salvador, pastored by our friend Raimundo Barreto, offers a program called "Life with Hope," a nutrition and education program for mothers from the *favelas* and their malnourished children ages 6 months to 5 years, providing nutritional supplements and education and support for more than fifty families each week. Just this month, they launched "Life with More Hope," enrolling 200 mothers and babies, birth to six months, providing education about proper and affordable nutrition, and encouraging breast-feeding as alternative to imported and expensive baby formula. They work in liaison with the medical community, and have developed a reciprocal referral system. Next year they will enlarge the circle of hope, to include 250 mothers-to-be, with prenatal medical supervision, child care education, and nutritional supplements. Leticia, a trained nutritionist in the "Life with Hope" program, said "If the good news of God's love is not about sharing health and hope along with the stories of Jesus, then it's not good news is it?" And despite their grief and loss from drug wars and urban crime, Moises, the pastor of the little prayer community of *Igreja Vasco da Gama*, challenged his people "to be the church in the world," to be in the community, engaged in the lives of the people around them, to be committed not only to bringing the community to the church, but to "taking the church to the community."

Igreja Batista de Pinheiro, Wellington's church, is a strong church – perhaps 500 members or more, the majority of whom we might label as "lower middle class," or "working poor." Most do not live in the *grotas*. But they have a thriving ministry there, providing concrete and volunteer labor to "pave" some of those paths in the *grotas*, mold and pour steps between levels, allowing its residents to walk through their own communities – even when it rains – without fear of sliding down the mountain, or falling off.

And they've begun a new ministry to improve housing and provide running water and indoor toilets and sanitation – house by house – there in the *grotas*. They partner families, one a church family, and each contributes sweat equity to the next. The church assists in securing funds for materials – about \$2500 per house – and finding volunteer expertise when necessary. It's slow work, but one by one, family by family, God's people in Maceio are bringing hope and help and liberation to their neighbors too long bound by poverty and oppression and neglect.

I returned from Brazil with a sense of hope that soared beyond any feelings of helplessness or futility, an optimism that overpowered despair or even objectivity, and an almost uncontrollable urge -- even in the clattering echoes of "NO" -- no jobs, no future, no way -- to shout a resounding YES! They have so much to teach us --about how to be engaged with our communities, about crossing economic and social barriers, about how to be authentic church, about doing and being good news in the places we live. The churches in Brazil -- at least the churches I visited, our partner churches in Brazil -- already "get it." They don't need us to help them know what to do. They're already doing it, often in ways that might put some of our churches to shame. They do need our help -- our time, our friendship, our solidarity, our partnership, our resources, and our willingness to go and see and be a part of what they're about there. They need us to understand and hopefully to embrace the principles of liberation for all God's people; they need us to share their deep commitment to personal and community transformation. They need -- and we need -- to live into this ever-bright vision of a God always at work in the world, always inviting and calling and urging people of faith -- me, and you, and all of us -- to join with them -- with God -- in the work of bringing redemption and healing and restoration and hope to the people of Brazil, and the people of the United States, and all God's people everywhere.