



Mission News

Mission Activities of the Canadian Reformed Churches

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Brazil – Hamilton Mission Board

Escola Cristã João Calvino – Maceió, Brazil

“Till now the Lord has helped us.” 1 Samuel 7:12

“Why, from your perspective, was there such wonderful growth in enrolment 2015?” asked a group of brothers and sisters excited for the increase in the number of students in our school. We have set the record since 2003, when school started. Year after year we have tried to increase the enrolment of students, looking to reach more homes through a good Christian education, and also to address the budgetary needs of the school. Our school maintains an evangelistic aspect, as the majority of the children we teach come from outside the church. In the darkness of the secular educational system, which expels the Word of God from the classrooms and tries to destroy families and basic truths, our school tries to shine a light. We depend on so much from God! To run our school we need a balance of essentials that need to come together. We need Reformed, Christian personnel, we need new students each year to make the project sustainable and affordable, and we need financial support from partners. Looking at our small church in Maceió, and at our neighbourhood with poor vision and provision, we realize how much we depend on our partners. Looking further we realize how much we depend on our God for all things.

Although we are not able to offer more grades at this time, which would help us to increase our revenue, we are blessed that all of the staff members have a Reformed background! Although we know that there are lots of beautiful and faithful projects around the world which need assistance, we are thankful a group of beloved churches chose to support us in Maceió, Brazil! And despite the poverty of the neighbourhood, God has sent new families to our school! Far be it from us to measure the Lord's care in our lives based on results. We will continue to praise him even if the school would not be able to operate.

Disappointment

While we believe in the sovereignty of our Almighty God, we also understand that he tasks us with respon-



sibility and now I can draw your attention to the answer to the question made at the beginning of this article. In 2013, we worked with the same strategy that we have done years prior: we delivered roughly 2000 brochures about the school throughout our neighbourhood, we hired a motorcycle or bicycle driver with a speaker advertising our school, we had a special meeting with the parents presenting the program and offering some promotion for those who could get new students to our school, and we organized a parade through the streets of Village Campes- tre II in which we were followed by the marching band of the Escola Bíblica Cristã from São José da Coroa Grande, and for sure, we prayed! But despite all of those efforts, at the beginning of 2014, while I was on my vacation, I was informed by the Committee of Education that we didn't get enough students to run the school according to our budget. So, because of a lack of students, the school was in a dilemma. We could use our reserves to run the school for this year and close the school at the end of 2014, or we could close the school immediately and use the money to pay the labour taxes related to dismissal of staff.

In this article I don't have space to describe the heartache of staff and church members, but it was a little bit like those days when you prepared to go to the beach,

and when everything is ready, dark and heavy cloud rolls in and you have to change your plans. We had about a week to make a decision. In 2013, we had lost a staff member, and on the budget 2014 we had planned to find a new person for that position. We also knew that our school secretary planned to be married and move to another country, so we would also need to find a new person for that position. The solution to maintain the school was to forget hiring new staff, and the consequence was that we would have to do the work planned for eleven people with nine people. This would give us time to rethink the school structure and then propose changes to continue running the school past 2015.

2015

So for 2015, after much deliberation with all involved, the solution was to cut some of the benefits that were given to the staff. This included health insurance, bonuses for extra planning activities for teachers, and limiting the staff to ten members. Thanks be to God that despite the cuts no staff left the school. It was clear however that if new opportunities arose, they would consider them carefully. Those tough decisions put the school in a position to run based not on what we wanted in the number of students, but on what we had experienced in practice. Still we were afraid we could be deceiving ourselves. We had studied the local context and already knew that lots of non-registered schools were offering education at a lower price, and not paying attention to the amount of students in the classroom or the Brazilian salaries policies. So how could we compete with this? In our conversations with Gospel Action Brazil, they agreed to support a special sponsorship program at the school to offer free text books and teaching material to all the students. We announced that!

Blessing

Our school building has enough space to accommodate 120 students from grade 1-5. We also decided to open a Kindergarten class in the afternoon. In total we would be able to accommodate 135 students. We had made cuts in the budget and planned our year on the average of students in previous years; we were expecting at most eighty students in total to run the budget without problems. We did the same steps to promote the school as in previous years, along with the announcement of books and teaching materials. And God has blessed us, with a total of 127 students. What a blessing! We were all amazed at it! It certainly doesn't mean that all the problems at the school are solved but we don't want to be under that dark cloud again. We still need help, as running the school in Brazil demands a lot, but now we have space to continue improving our school image to attract more students. People know our school, but sometimes, when you live a simple life, you need to speak up and have others take notice, which can make a big difference. These kinds of things fall under our responsibility, we need to see the reality and to change habits. But I have to add that regardless of the strategy of men, without God's blessing it will be in vain. Why do I say this? "The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the Lord" (Prov 21:31).

"Up to now the Lord has been our help." He is taking care of us, using also our responsibilities as partners, and as brothers and sisters. Thanks for all of your support. Please, continue praying for us.

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Update about the Mission work in Brazil, Spring 2015

I would like to give you an overview of the ongoing mission work in Brazil. I'll start with a general view of what has been happening and then focus on the mission project in Maceió and finish with what's been keeping me busy over the last months.

General overview

My last update was written after the general synod of the IRB that was held in November 2014. The period immediately following Synod is normally calm until December

when things get busy with festivities and commemorations. December is also the month before the big holiday season (our summer break) so everyone is busy wrapping up essential tasks, and leaving their work to be continued in March. The next two months are not very productive, January because it is the big holiday season and February because of the Carnival outside the church and the Carnival retreats organized inside the church. It is in March that work begins to return to normal and the churches and the synodical committees start to organize themselves again. At the

end of March the committees have to enter their provisional reports that will be discussed at the synod in May.

The minister of Caruaru, who entered the confederation with his congregation in 2012 and studied some years at the IJC, was examined in November 2014. In December he was installed as minister of the Word in Caruaru and he is pastoring the congregation and doing evangelism with the help of Rev. Ken Wieske. Now that he has returned to preaching and teaching, I no longer have to visit the congregation in Caruaru regularly to administer the Lord's Supper. That's how it works. The missionaries may help, but it is always provisionally. We have to become smaller and the Brazilian ministers and federation have to grow and take over.

The national synod was held in May and a key point was the discussion and subsequent decision to not automatically include the foreign missionaries to be delegates of Synod. In my November 2014 report I already mentioned that there is a move by the IRB to become more autonomous and this is another signal that the churches are maturing. They no longer rely on the voice and opinion of the foreign missionaries. If they would like to hear how the Reformed churches in Holland or Canada deal with a certain topic they may call a missionary and ask him to inform the delegates. Going forward, missionaries will not be automatically included as counsellors to Synod with a right to speak. The same will be applied to Brazilian ministers or elders who may be present without being a delegate of one of the churches. A very good decision!

Another highlight was the exam of student Marcel Matos Tavares. He had to be re-examined and was successful in sustaining his examination. He is now allowed to do his internship in the church of Recife. I should say which church in Recife (I think it is Grande Recife), because another important item was that Synod approved that the church in Recife be separated into two churches. There is now the church in Grande Recife and the church of Iribeira. In the hall some spoke (with a smile) about the "Kingdom of the North" and the "Kingdom of the South." It is a separation that took place in peace and will strengthen the pastoral work in both churches. At the next synod there will be an extra two delegates present from the church in Iribeira. We thank the Lord for that.

Maceió

At the end of 2014 the Council in Maceió was looking for a preaching point in the neighbourhood of Salvador Lira. There were two potential options, but both of them didn't work out for different reasons. In December and January people are busy with many other things making it difficult to find something new. So the search for a place to worship continued through February and in March it seems they finally found a new location. I say it this way because, while the paper work may be complete, until now, they have not received the key. This may seem a



formality that means nothing, but here in Brazil it may also mean a lot. So we wait patiently.

Meanwhile the student evangelist has arrived. His name is Lucio Mauro Manuel da Silva; he is busy with preaching and teaching and questioning me about my plans for evangelism. We talk a lot about it, but until recently progress had been stalled on that point as we await the Council of Maceió with its preparations. It is not as simple as me doing whatever I like as a missionary, because whatever I do in Maceió is tied to the church in Maceió. For that reason I have to wait for the church to initiate the project, to ordain me as their missionary, and thereby to give me the official status to work.

I do not want to give you the impression that Council in Maceió is slow. Not at all. They have been very busy over the last months, but there is also a lot on their plate and Brazilian bureaucracy is like a jungle that you don't easily cross. So, again we have to be patient and wait until things fall into place. In the meantime I look for other opportunities to serve the Kingdom of God.

As you know there are three elements in my mandate here in Brazil:

- 1) start a new mission project in Maceió with the help of a Brazilian Evangelist, so I could drop out after two or three years;
- 2) continue to help the Aldergrove Missionaries that are involved in the teaching at the seminary;
- 3) help the Brazilian Confederation via my participation in some ecclesiastical committees.

So let us go to the other missionary activities.

Other missionary activities

In March 2015 I taught at the seminary about the exegesis of the NT. This time the gospels had our attention and the students had to prepare their exegesis on Luke 24. A nice chapter about the resurrection of Christ. It is an interesting topic to deal with two weeks before Easter. As I write this my next course will be at the end of May and the first week of June focused on the Book of Acts.

Since January I have been participating in a study group, along with Chris Boersema, Shaun Raap, and

the Aldergrove missionaries, under the guidance of Otto Bouwman. On a weekly base we came together via Skype to discuss the book of Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations*. It was very nice to sit together, discuss, and learn from that book. I enjoyed it very much.

The last two months I have focused a lot on the publication of Reformed literature. I am the moderator and coordinator of the committee and I work together with our translator, Rev. P.K. Meijer, and our corrector, Izabel Lins. We have accomplished a lot these months. At this moment the book of C. Bijl, *Jó o Rico* has been presented to the synod and it was nice to see that the delegates were very pleased and received this first product of the CLIREF with a lot of enthusiasm. The Commentary on the Catechism and the first volume of the book *Cuidando da Igreja* have been sent to the editor for a quote. If everything goes well they will be edited by the end of May. Once they are complete we will continue with the commentary of C. van den Berg about Acts and with the second volume of *Cuidando da Igreja* that deals with the work of deacons.

I can tell you that we are very grateful with the financial support that we have received from the churches to publish two of the books. If we can sell these books we will create a little fund that will help us to edit other books that are on our waiting list. Our printings are small (300 books of each author) but we hope that they will work well and serve our Reformed churches in Brazil.

The month of March was extra busy for me, because my wife had to undergo an operation. As a result of that she had to rest for six weeks and was not allowed to work or drive. This placed a lot of domestic things on my plate (doing groceries, getting the children to school) and kept me busy. But once again I discovered that God provides things in his wisdom. There is a time for everything. There is a time to take care of my house hold and there will be a time to take care of the household in Salvador Lira; there is a time to publish books and there is a time to publish sermons.

That brings me to another project I have started in the past months. I know that there is a need for Reformed sermons to read in Brazil. Previously I had put my sermons on the website of the Church in Maceió, but that website went down at the end of 2014 because the provider disappeared. So, I decided to start my own website and upload my sermons. Since January I have put various sermons about the Old Testament, New Testament, and the Catechism on the site. In doing so I also reread the sermons and update them, because some of them were a little outdated from ten years ago. I also use the site to share blogs and articles about Reformed topics. In such a way I'm busy evangelizing via the web. And I'm not disappointed about the results, because there were about 428 visitors in March 2015. Feel free to visit the site at www.bramdegraaf.com.

Let me finish with encouraging information that I received, when I was coming back from Recife to Maceió. The evangelist that was driving with me told me that he had contact with a minister of the IPB church in the north of Brazil, close to the border with British Guyana. This minister it seems is one of my bigger "fans." He is using my catechism sermons in special morning services. Normally the IPB churches don't have worship services in the morning, but only a Bible study. The minister challenged the members and instead they started services in the morning using the sermons from my website. Hearing that, it seems that I "preach" more often than physically is possible. May the Lord bless these sermon readings, that his Spirit may bear fruit thirty, sixty, or a hundred times in the hearts of the listeners.

Highlights:

- 1) The student Lucio Mauro Manuel da Silva started to work in Maceió;
- 2) The preparations for the mission project in Maceió are in progress and probably it will start in May 2015;
- 3) In the meantime the missionary concentrates himself on the other two parts of his mandate;
- 4) The Brazilian churches become more and more independent;
- 5) Marcel Mattos Tavares passed the exam and started his internship;
- 6) The church in Recife has been divided in "a igreja de Grande Recife" and "a igreja de Iribeira."

Prayer requests:

- 1) Thank the Lord because he blessed the efforts of council Maceió to acquire a building for a preaching point;
- 2) Pray that this building may soon be transformed in a preaching point;
- 3) Thank the Lord that there are now two churches in Recife; may both of them be fruitful in their region;
- 4) May the Lord strengthen the office bearers in all the Brazilian congregations;
- 5) May the Lord bless the work of the missionaries, because we know they are servants and it is the Lord that uses them to spread the gospel, but he will give the faith and the fruits of the Holy Spirit;
- 6) May the Lord strengthen all the Canadian missionaries and their families. Keep sickness, sin, and evil far from us, so we may work in peace and harmony and in good health.
- 7) Pray for all the supporting churches that they may continue to support the mission work in Brazil.
- 8) Thank the Lord for all the support we have received to publish Reformed literature and may our Lord bless the reading of these books, so people may come to faith and grow in faith.

Rev. Bram De Graaf