

Chapter 28

Ministry in Brazil

In the fall of 1997 I made my second trip to Fortaleza, the beautiful coastal city of Ceara in the North-east of Brazil. This again was for one month and I was accompanied this time by Anne. I had made many friends on my first visit so it was my delight to introduce her to them all and to enjoy again the taste of fresh fruit drinks and my favorite drink, Guarana. I had a lot of ministry, both with YWAM and in local churches. We stayed at the YWAM base, a short distance from the city, but were able to travel to many locations for ministry, shopping, beaches, etc. Anne was showered with love by my friends and she soon felt at home, though not all could communicate in English and she certainly could not communicate in Portuguese. I at least had some Spanish to fall back on as several could understand Spanish if not English.

We returned to Canada via Rio as a young couple from my first visit had married and moved there. Claudia and JudeClair were working in a favella – a crowded slum area of the city - so we stayed two nights with them. They took us in a downpour of rain, to a two-roomed apartment half way up the mountain that contained the favella. There we had mattresses on the floor and were warned that if we heard some shooting or shouting in the night, NOT to get up and look out as we would probably be the next shooting victims! Then they showed us a photo taken the previous night of a body that had been thrown down from above, landing on their doorstep. This area was full of gangs and drug barons. The next morning I asked JudeClair if I might climb to the top of the mountain so that I could take a photo of the nearby mountain where the famous statue Christo Rey (Christ the King) was prominently erected. “Do you have any identification?” he asked me and then, taking my proffered Canadian ID card, he walked out of the door, both arms raised above his head, holding aloft his and my cards. “Around here, they shoot first and ask questions afterwards” was his cryptic remark. On arriving at the top of the mountain I found another YWAM base that catered to the children of the favella. It was next to a small gravel football pitch about 50m x 30m, surrounded by a wire fence. At one end there were, what I assumed used to be, dressing rooms made of cinder blocks. They had now collapsed and were good for nothing. JudeClair told me that shortly before, some men from the favella were playing here when a group of policemen had come up the mountain another way, had suddenly appeared over the top and started shooting, killing all the men. Their ‘reason’ was that these men included some who were well known as criminals and drug runners! We really appreciated the work these young people do for the Lord in the most dangerous of places

The international leadership of YWAM were to meet the following year in Brazil as their current president was a Brazilian missionary. Tony’s base at Fortaleza was chosen by all the other Brazilian bases to be the location for this gathering of YWAM leaders from around the world, so it was with excitement he began to plan for this event. He decided to call all the local pastors together to discuss the possibility of hosting a missions conference to coincide with these YWAM missionaries descending on their city, and anticipated hosting them at the base – which could accommodate a hundred or so in its small chapel – until a local hotel (5*) offered to host a luncheon at an economic cost. Imagine our surprise and delight when over 250 men came together and enthusiastically endorsed Tony’s idea to host not only a missions conference but also a city-wide evangelistic campaign. Such was the favour this young man had with local church leaders!

As Tony would be very busy with all the work needed to pull these two events together, as well as arrange for the International YWAM leaders own conference, he invited me to return the following year, for three months, to oversee all the YWAMers as they coordinated the meetings. Anne and I agreed to return and so it was that in the fall of 1998 we returned to Fortaleza for three months. Our hosts were Marcello and Aline Ramos, a godly young couple who could not do enough to bless us. Their apartment was on the fifth floor of an apartment building near the beach and a delightful walk took us to the large office downtown which became the nerve center for all the arrangements. The weather is always warm in Fortaleza but, every evening, a cooling breeze would whistle through the apartment shaking all the pictures off the wall if we were foolish enough to leave all the windows open! I learned to communicate in Portuguese and to trouble-shoot some of the conflicts arising at the office, especially due to culture differences between the local workers and overseas YWAMers who had come to participate in the evangelistic outreach, working in the streets and schools prior to the three days we would be in the local football stadium to conclude the campaign. One example would seem humorous in

afterthought. A group of young people from USA had made coloured tee-shirts bearing the logo “No compromiso”, believing this meant “No compromise”. My Brazilian friends were non-plussed by this as the words in Portuguese really mean “no commitment” – opposite to what was intended!

The excitement in the city was tangible as everywhere one went, there was evidence of the ‘invasion of the Gospel’. The YWAM Leadership Conference was excellent and gave me opportunity to meet again with several whom I had known during my time on the Anastasis. Missionaries from many countries came to speak at the Missions Conference, attended by many hundreds of Brazilians – a great success that would introduce many new missionaries to the world. My friend Marcello is an excellent translator so it was he who would translate for most of the evangelistic campaign. This was also a great success in its impact and in the number of enquirers’ cards that we were to present to local pastors afterwards for them to follow up. When I asked Jon, responsible for these cards, how many we had received, his words will never be forgotten. “Gareth” he said, “we stopped counting at 45,000!”

I was very impressed by the music team that led the worship at each of the three evenings in the football stadium. They were a brother and sister team, with back-up musicians from a large church in Belo Horizonte. It was noticeable that, whenever the young people would be enthusiastic in their response to the music, either the brother or sister would immediately turn them back to solemnity by quietly kneeling at the microphone and praying. I met the brother while walking with Marcello at the beach on the following day, and commented on this to him. His reply was very encouraging as he said they were aware how ‘soulful’ such times could be so he and his sister were determined to focus all enthusiasm back on the Saviour who alone deserves the adulation. No wonder they see the Lord do such wonderful things through their ministry!

I would return to Fortaleza in 2002, four years later, and was pleased to see that every church I visited had at least doubled in number since my last visit. Again I spoke at many churches and ministered to many people touched by my teaching on ‘Release’ (see my book *The Key in My Hand*). Among the highlights, were speaking to the Assembly of God pastors’ conference for North-East Brazil. This was a three-day event and had about 150 pastors in attendance. Another highlight was ministering to a young couple who had been married just six months but were now in a poor relationship with no intimacy. Petite Maria came to me with great sorrow saying that Alfonse had withdrawn from her. As her story unfolded I was pained to hear yet again of the abuse so many receive from their fathers. I will not go into all the confidences that Maria shared with me but suffice to say there was much verbal abuse from her father. When in her late teens she came to Christ, met a young man (Alfonse) and was married. As the pastor believed rumours that she was a whore, rumours that she denied, he refused to marry them in the church, opting instead for a small ceremony at the groom’s home, attended only by his parents. Shortly afterwards they came to Fortaleza to work with YWAM. I taught Maria that her father and pastor had sinned against her and that she needed to ‘release’ them so that God could begin the process of healing in her. She should write a letter outlining all her grievances against her father so that she would have a record of all she was willing to release him from. The next night she stayed up late to write the letter (which would never be sent) and had just finished it when Alfonse woke from sleep, came into the room and angrily snatched the letter from her. He re-entered the room a few minutes later weeping and saying, “I did not know! I did not know!” They embraced and the night ended in intimacy. In the morning they came together to see me, having decided to ‘release’ her dad and to pray blessings on him.

The next day Christine, Tony’s wife came to me saying, “Gareth, every month the couples from the base meet together for an evening of fellowship and fun, after which we take an offering so that one couple can have a romantic evening at a local hotel away from the base.” “This month the money was offered to Maria and Alfonse but they turned it down.” I knew why. “Now they have come and asked for it so they will be going off-base at the end of this week. Are you aware that they never had a proper wedding, have no wedding photographs and never had a reception? I was wondering what you think about this idea. I have my wedding dress here and I’m the same build as Maria. Do you think they would be offended if I offered my dress to them so they can have a nice photograph before they go the hotel?” Though Christine had no idea of my counseling involvement with the couple I assured her that would be a good idea, so we went together to tell them, also giving me the opportunity to assure them that I still held their confidence.

The next day I was leaving for Canada so, as Tony drove me to the airport, I suggested to him that he might call all the base together on the weekend and have a ‘celebration of love’ ceremony for Alfonse and Maria, at which

they could dress in their 'wedding attire', have vows and photos for remembrance. He thought that a good idea. He then added his own. As he was scheduled to drive them to the hotel, he would 'get lost' *en route* ending up at a beach house, which had its own swimming pool, owned by Romeo a friend who had given it freely for the weekend. All the others from the base would be there with a 'wedding cake' and a reception for the couple. Thus, within two days of having 'released' her father, Maria would enjoy all the blessings of a wedding, a reception with friends and photographs. I flew home rejoicing at the goodness of our God!