Purpose-driven in Brazil: Perspectives on church growth

by Jason Byassee in the April 4, 2006 issue

Brazil offers a major example of the explosive growth of evangelical and Pentecostal churches taking place in the Southern Hemisphere. Reportedly 40 new churches open every week in Rio de Janeiro (and for 50 *reales*—roughly $23—you can register your new church with the government). Estimates of the number of Pentecostals worldwide vary between 115 million and 400 million. At current growth rates, in 50 years there will be 1 billion Pentecostals.

That evangelical energy was much on the minds of leaders of the World Council of Churches when they met in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in February. So I was eager for the chance to meet one of Brazil's prominent evangelical pastors, Ary Velloso.

Morumbi Baptist Church, which Velloso started in São Paulo, has thousands of members and has given birth to several satellite churches. After 25 years in São Paulo, Velloso has moved to Londrina ("Little London") where he is hard at work planting another congregation. While in Londrina, I also met with Marcos Orison Nunes de Almeida, a Presbyterian pastor with a Ph.D. from Fuller Theological Seminary. Almeida is a professor of practical theology and director of graduate studies at South American Theological Seminary (SATS), a ten-year-old institution in Londrina.

Both Velloso and Almeida are members of what would be called mainline denominations in the U.S., but like any non–Roman Catholic Christian in Latin America they are commonly described there as evangelicals.

Both men view the tremendous church growth in Latin America as a two-edged sword. "Christians frequently go to this church for the sermon, that other one for Bible study, a third for programming, a fourth for entertainment," Velloso said. "There's no sense of the church as a body, of membership as a lasting commitment." Almeida complained that "churchgoers here are consumers looking for services."

“There’s not the depth of teaching here among evangelicals that you can find in the U.S.,” said Velloso. “Instead of in-depth Bible study, most sermons says the same thing: ‘Accept Jesus as your Savior.’”

The two contend that Brazilian churches have imported some of the worst aspects of American evangelicalism: individualistic piety, superficial catechesis and a competitive spirit among churches. Velloso sees the rise of evangelicals as a case of converts going “from superficial Catholicism to superficial evangelicalism.”

How to enrich a faith that’s an inch deep and a mile wide? Here Velloso and Almeida differ sharply. Velloso is influenced by the Willow Creek–style church growth movement. An eager participant in pastor-training conferences hosted by Willow Creek and its pastor, Bill Hybels, Velloso endorses that church’s self-described raison d’être: “a safe place to hear the dangerous and life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ” (quoted by Alister McGrath in *The Future of Christianity*). He defends his American counterpart: “People say Bill Hybels makes the gospel too easy. That is the biggest lie. The man preaches about hell—that’s hardly a way to make Christianity appealing or easy.”

Velloso is also a fan of Rick Warren. He wrote the foreword to the Portuguese translation of Warren’s *Purpose-Driven Church*, and his endorsement helped make the book a sales success in Brazil. He carries pocket versions of Warren’s *Purpose-Driven Life* in case an opportunity for witnessing comes up, and he encourages his church members to do likewise. Velloso has seen church-growth methods work to change lives, heal addictions, patch up families and mobilize Christians to serve the poor.

For Almeida, however, the strategies of Hybels and Warren are part of the problem in Brazil. “When pastors want numbers above all else, what they are really after is fame and fortune,” he insisted. When asked whether church growth can be faithfully adapted to a Brazilian context, Almeida snapped, “If I told you what I thought of that idea you couldn’t print it.”

One good way to deepen faith, says Almeida, is to seek Jesus on the margins, among the poor and those dispossessed of power. Many SATS graduates go on to do their ministry in Brazil’s favelas, the dangerous and drug-infested slums that are part of the nation’s cities. Almeida is very proud of the role of Latin American theologians in bringing about the Lausanne conference of 1974, in which evangelicals committed

themselves to ministry to the whole person—as opposed to worrying only about the soul's eternal destiny.

Despite his differing appraisal of American church-growth technique, Velloso focuses on the whole person in his Sunday sermon. I listened to him preach in a conference room at Londrina's Comfort Suites hotel (a safe, clean place in which to gather is a priority for this fledgling church until it finds suitable storefront space). "Faith," he said, "must make for the best life both now and in eternity. Faith which fails to attend either to the 'now' or to eternity is no faith at all." In Brazil, being an evangelical does not mean that one has to shun liberation theology or Jesus' strong words about poverty and power.

Velloso and Almeida also move toward agreement when asked how one will be able to tell if Brazil's evangelicals have grown deeper roots. The sign, they say, will be that the country casts off its corrupt politics.

Even with the liberal reformer Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (popularly called "Lula") as president, Brazilian politics is widely seen as an avenue toward personal enrichment. It is a secular form of the "prosperity gospel" that both Velloso and Almeida abhor. The pastors' response is not to focus on electing an evangelical president. They have seen plenty of evangelical pastors fall from grace, along with plenty of heads of state. Furthermore, in a country that is only a decade and a half removed from a military dictatorship, neither is eager for any top-down approach to government, whether by Christians or anyone else. "Politics and religion don't mix here," Almeida says as he dismisses all such suggestions.

Almeida's claim means something different in Brazil than it would in the U.S. For him the gospel naturally entails such political activities as church-planting in favelas and insisting on political accountability as a sign of successful evangelization. He simply means that commitment to Christ does not easily translate into commitment to a specific Brazilian political party.

South American evangelicals are more like their counterparts around the world than like many of their counterparts in the U.S. They support stewardship of the environment, multilateral approaches to international politics, and governmental provision for the poor. For them one's political party is far less important than one's allegiance to Christ's church. And evangelicals like Almeida and Velloso want to avoid any potential stumbling block to evangelism.

Such rich perspectives on faith, politics and society underscore why it is important that evangelicals have a place in ecumenical conversations. The World Council of Churches needs evangelicals not only because of their growing numbers, but because of the energy, intellectual verve and pastoral wisdom they bring.

The founding premise of ecumenism was missionary effectiveness. Jesus' prayer in John 17 is that his followers may "all be one . . . so that the world might believe." WCC moderator Aram I of the Armenian Apostolic Church echoed this sense of purpose when he countered a reporter's question about how the WCC could be more relevant. "The point is not for the WCC to be more relevant, but for the WCC to help the gospel of Jesus Christ be more relevant."

No evangelical could have made a more evangelical claim than that one uttered by an Orthodox patriarch. But as he made it, two eloquent spokespeople for the evangel were pursuing their ministries a short two-hour flight away—and the World Council's first assembly in Latin America had not made it onto their schedules. That's a loss for both sides—perhaps especially for the World Council.