

Implications From Brazil For Missions In A Covid Crisis

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This article considers how the COVID-19 crisis is prompting missions rethinking in Brazil. We can confidently affirm that God's mission has not changed, although we might be learning to view it in some different ways as a result of the crisis. There remains a lot of uncertainty around what impact the pandemic will have on global missions, and we know missions will need to adapt. Some changes have needed to come for some time and this disruption is accelerating those, as well as helping new innovations to emerge. This article discusses some of the major factors that will influence change from a Brazilian perspective.

In these days of considerable uncertainty, much has been said and discussed regarding the future of the missionary work. I think this issue is essential and extremely relevant, but only if it focuses on our missionary action and not on the mission of God (Missio Dei) itself. God's mission, although many people want to argue to the contrary, will not change. Indeed, the missionary work as we do today, it has already changed and will continue to change. I see no harm in that. Changes, for the better, are always welcome. Amid the current pandemic, we can be sure of one thing: we have gained time to think, reflect, and analyze our past, present, and future situation.

1. Pausing Pragmatism

Over the years, I understand that the Brazilian missionary movement has become very pragmatic, which is not necessarily bad. But, pragmatism can cause, in some cases, an attitude of disregarding God's work, basing our action solely on our plans and methodologies. From this point of view, the pandemic forced us to stop and realize that our plans, projects, and methods were not infallible. Many of them were affected with the arrival of the pandemic, interrupting many of our activities.

I do not ignore the risks of this pandemic involving the lives of people and our organizations. When I consider the conversations I am exposed to, I notice two distinct groups. One minimizes the effects and results of COVID-19, and thinks that everything will go back to normal. On the contrary, the other one maximizes the pandemic effects, announcing a worst scenario or, as I saw recently, uses the expression "Missionary Ice Age" to predict chaos.

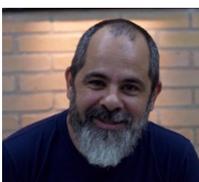
2. Cautious Optimism

All of this discussion has led me to position myself in a more optimistic way than the vast majority of leaders and people I have talked to. Some have assumed that I have not been watching closely the pandemic's current and future consequences. My optimism is based on my belief that **God remains God, and his mission will continue to be accomplished until the last individual on**

earth hears the good news of salvation. Our practices and projects will change, but God's mission will continue, with or without our participation.

In my understanding, another important factor is that it is risky to predict the future of missionary action. We are still in the midst of uncertainty, and our future difficulties will be localized and specific. Therefore, our Latin American movement is very different from other missionary movements. To expect the same impacts on Brazilians, Americans, or Asians is very simplistic. I'll get to that later. Others dare to make suggestions or proposals for the immediate future, but I understand that we are still living day by day, and we will need to wait a little bit more. Once we have a clearer idea of the consequences of this pandemic, we will finally be able to visualize, discuss, and project the future.

My optimism does not ignore the fact that some missionary sending countries, in my view, are at a disadvantage. For instance, the Brazilian Evangelical movement has always struggled to establish its missionary work. Our economy has always been unfavorable and because of that we became experts in sending missionaries under economic pressure. We always complain about our financial situation, but in analyzing our current situation, I would say that it has helped us to get through this moment. All of this should help us be more resilient in light of the difficulties we are facing.



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3. Brazilian Resilience

I have seen research and even heard different global leaders say how there is a generation of Brazilian missionaries who know how to deal with diversity well and remain firm in their calling and ministerial purpose. Are all Brazilian missionaries like this? Obviously not. However, today we have a second or third wave of Brazilian missionaries on the field who are enduring this challenge and many other crises we have faced over the years.

Christianity Today mentions in one of its articles online that missionaries from the Global South apparently have advantages over other missionary cultures. The account highlights missionaries from Africa and Latin America:

“Enduring such hardships requires significant faith and perseverance, which many in the Global South have in abundance. This spiritual grit has often been shaped by decades of poverty, war, colonization, and political instability.” Tatenda Chikwekwe further comments on that: “Growing up in poverty, being not as privileged, has given us a sense that we can do so much with very little.”¹

That said, I think some questions for reflection need to be presented before projecting any scenario.

4. Focus Points

Are we at the beginning of a transition from one missionary era to another? I hope so. I really wish that we will indeed experience change, especially in our missionary practice. I hope that we can let go of the great structures that have been built around missionary activity. Throughout our short history, we have overestimated structures. We invest in things that we can no longer maintain. In this sense, we will need to learn to be more flexible, deal with more organic standards, change leadership models, develop local church participation, and so on. But it is essential to say that these changes were already necessary *before* the pandemic. The current situation may only have forced us to realize that we were already struggling.

It is also worth remembering that throughout missionary history, God needed to intervene at times, to refocus or redirect the Church. What about God’s intervention in Peter’s life in Acts 10? Such an initiative occurred only to reaffirm something that the Lord had already defined and predicted through Jesus, in Acts chapter 1:8—The Kingdom testimony was defined and made available through the Holy Spirit to all the ethnic groups of the land, not only to the Jews, as was the disciples’ missionary practice shortly after Pentecost.

If we could start a primary discussion, I would say that these are some areas that today demand our attention:

Finances

The most recent report on the situation of sending agencies and churches presented by COMIBAM² on the COVID-19 crisis shows that finance is highlighted as one of the most significant challenges to be faced. This includes the struggle to maintain financial support getting to missionaries on the field. Due to the interruption of public services because of government regulations, churches have seen their giving decline dramatically.

This report expresses the responses from 30% of Brazil’s missions organizations, but the results do not differ much from the total responses. It is worth noting that in the Brazilian case, the problems related to finances predate the pandemic. Missionaries, especially those serving overseas, were already facing many difficulties due to exchange rate changes. With the dollar getting 30% stronger in relation to the Brazilian real in January and March and with a further increase in April and May, the situation has undoubtedly worsened. However, there has been a drop in the exchange rate in recent weeks. It is also worth noting that financial problems have always been a challenge in our reality. But, as AMTB (the Brazilian Association of Transcultural Missions) research shows³, finances have never hindered the increase in the number of missionaries sent out.

As I have talked to leaders and missionaries on the field, I realized that, after about 90 days of the pandemic, the number of missionaries leaving the field due to financial issues is minimal. ***Would it then be possible to affirm that the crisis brought financial difficulties, but not to the point of jeopardizing the workers’ continuity on the field?***

At this point, it is necessary to express gratitude to part of the Brazilian Church, which has always been very generous to the missionary movement. In my view, during this pandemic, it has shown even more generosity. I speak of the church as an institution, local church members, and their pastors and leaders. I say this from experience because I am a missionary, and I need to raise financial support for my own livelihood.

Clearly, missionary structures are now suffering much. In my view, they will suffer even more, especially in contexts of organizations that never bothered to have adequate financial planning and never exercised much financial stewardship. I have mentioned the overvaluation of the structure. At this moment, this begins to have a very strong reflex. The question that many leaders are asking is: ***How will we maintain our structure with reduced resources?*** Along the way, some

organizations built large white elephants, and today they suffer to keep them. I am not against building structure, I understand that it is necessary, but it cannot be costly, and it cannot absorb most of our efforts and our financial resources. The structures must be functional and must always seek to **‘do more, with excellence, with fewer resources.’**

Another factor related to finances is that we always ‘deal with other people’s money.’ As a consequence, we do not think very much about emergency plans. My ministerial journey as the head of a missionary organization has taught me a lot about it. Today, we have financial reserves for 2 to 3 months of operation for emergencies in case we face no financial input. It is essential to say that our financial reserves are not higher than our support funds for our missionaries.

There is something to learn about structures and finances. Fat and lean cows and healthy and thin ears of corn, in Joseph’s story, have something to teach us: *Planning in times of abundance is the guarantee for coping in times of scarcity.*

Missionaries on the Field

Here is our greatest asset and where most significant concern should be. Ensuring our workers’ emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing on the field must be the focus of all our efforts. Therefore, we must allocate resources to our teams and all our other initiatives.

Keeping missionaries healthy in different aspects of life will guarantee the continuity of what we have already planned, initiated, and implemented. ***Can you imagine what difficulties could come if we lost all our missionary presence in the different fields in a short amount of time?***

There are many people today claiming that local workers should replace foreign missionaries. Some argue that all the support should be shifted to national workers, as the time of “foreigners” is over. I think it is premature to argue this, even though I defend that the whole church planting process should aim at sending local missionaries to reach their own people. Also, it is worth remembering that the mission of God is polycentric—from everywhere to everywhere—as has been stated in recent years by the World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission (WEA-MC)⁴. We need to remember that the Great Commission is a task to be fulfilled by the Church of Christ spread out over the nations. As a Church, we do not take turns in its fulfillment based on our country of origin. God’s action through the Church in one particular country does not diminish God’s call to the Church in another. The divine calling is for the Church everywhere.

New Missionaries

I have a significant concern in my heart about the new missionaries; those who are in the process of being sent out or in the near future. It is fair to say that today we have a generation that is not as resilient as past generations. Through no fault of their own, the current generation did not learn about suffering as something inherent to Christian faith and service. As organizations and training centers, we need to teach and help the new wave of Brazilian workers. I pray that this new wave will be large and that it will learn to deal with adversity Biblically. According to Ronaldo Lídório⁵, in one of his lectures, Brazilian missionaries are considered today to be among the ones that struggle the most with cultural adaptability. That does not mean that Brazilian workers never see difficulties as part of their ministries. It just reveals that in many instances, they react inappropriately or in a victimized way.

We need to take care of those willing to go out into the fields and train them well to handle future adversities. Handling adversities and taking risk are valuable aspects in the lives of those who trust God, as Richard Malm highlights:

If I insist on playing it safe, being in control, and knowing what’s going to happen when I step into obedience, I’ll never obey. I’ll never leave the boat. I’ll miss the adventure with my Lord. Because God’s not going to give me those answers ahead of time. If He did, He’d remove the risk, He’d remove the faith. Where there’s no risk there’s no faith. Risk and faith go hand-in-hand.⁶

Now, talking about security, Malm asserts:

If our goal is safety, then we need to stop sending missionaries. But if our goal is to glorify God with our lives, then we are left with only one option—obedience. As Mark Batterson, pastor of National Community Church in Washington, D.C. and author of “Chase the Lion” says, “There comes a moment when you have to quit living as if the purpose of life is to arrive safely at death. The will of God is not an insurance plan. The will of God is a dangerous plan. The will of God might get you killed.”⁷

The more we invest in teaching, preparing, and helping our missionaries, the more resilient they will be in the face of adversity in the missionary work. Likewise, the more we will be able to move toward the unreached; the fields that are still waiting to hear the good news of the gospel and represent the most challenging scenarios from a religious, political, and geographical point of view.

Conclusion

Indeed, many other factors need to be studied and considered at this time, and they may affect or even change our future actions. It seems very clear that it is not possible to make big plans and/or big predictions at this point or follow some of the plans previously established.

We need to move on cautiously, step by step, analyzing the structural changes that will happen in our new world in order to define new missionary practices.

Some of us (and I am one of those) are very proud of our policies, history, and tradition. Although our policies are good and history exists to be celebrated, the truth is that, at times like the one we are facing, traditions, history, and even policies will not help us. According to Malm: "Policies tend to shut down thinking."⁸ This will be a time to exercise creative thinking and deep search for God's presence and direction for our lives and institutions. We need to respond to the challenges and also in a wise way that reflects the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.

One thing will certainly not change our hope amid this pandemic: *Christ's presence with us on our missionary journey* (Matthew 28:20).

Footnotes:

1. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2019/august/what-majority-world-missions-really-looks-like.html>

2. <https://www.comibam.org/pt/>

3. <http://www.amtb.org.br/forca-missionaria-brasileira-transcultural/>

4. <https://weamc.global/category/conferences/panama/>

5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0VaTH1T5atY>

6. Malm, Richard. *Commission To Every Nation: How People Just Like You Are Blessing The Nations* (pp. 53-54). Ore Publishing. Kindle Edition.

7. *Idem* pp 33

8. *Idem* pp 64