

THE EPHESUS PLAN IN BRAZIL

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"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19,20).

The Great Commission. With these words, our Savior outlined the work that has been entrusted to us. In a nutshell, we are to "make disciples of all nations." We will continue to do that work until it is either entirely accomplished or Judgement Day comes. But until that time, we can be satisfied with no less. We simply cannot rest easy or give up on the work at hand while there are still souls in this world that are perishing. Christ has spelled out our mission. He has given us the motivation. The work is ours to do.

And yet, while Jesus clearly outlined what he wants done he does not tell us exactly how we are to go about that work. He does not tell us where to go, when to go there, or what plan of attack we are to employ. He doesn't tell us, "Go into such and such a nation and there set up an indigenous church." He hasn't dropped a blue-print for our mission endeavors from the heavens into our laps. The specifics are left up to us.

We do, of course, have several things going for us. We have the message that we are to preach. We have some clear principles laid down for us in the Scriptures which will help to guide us. We can look back at what we as a church body

have done in the past and we can learn from our mistakes. Modern day technology has aided us greatly in doing what before was perhaps unthinkable.

In October of 1987, three WELS missionaries began work in the South American country of Brazil. There were many things there that told us that the time was right and the field was ripe for harvest. But as our newest foreign mission field, the team in Brazil knew that it was also time to look at the best plan of attack. As a result, the team there, headed by Missionary Richard Starr, came up with an interesting plan called the Ephesus Plan. Although it is still unsure whether or not this plan will in fact be employed in the Brazilian field, it has opened some eyes and has provoked some healthy thinking and re-evaluating. In this paper we will endeavor to look more closely at the history behind and the specifics of the Ephesus Plan.

ST. PAUL IN EPHEBUS

As the name implies, Missionary Starr did not come up with the idea of the Ephesus Plan on his own. He based the plan on the Apostle Paul's work in Ephesus. In order for us to more fully understand that work, it will be helpful to look at Acts 19 and 20.

Paul's work in Ephesus mainly took place during his Third Missionary Journey. We notice that immediately upon entering into Ephesus, Paul finds some disciples (Ac 19:1), and then spends time instructing them. As an expert missionary, Paul knew that he needed a strong nucleus. He

basically sets this down as his first priority. We are told that there were about twelve of these disciples (Ac 19:7).

"It is in Ephesus that we meet up with Apollos for the first time. For our purposes it is sufficient to note that, though Paul is certainly the key man, he did not lack helpers. It was the husband and wife team, Aquilla and Priscilla, who filled in the gaps of Apollos' knowledge of the gospel (Ac 9:26)" (Valleskey, "A Portrait of Paul with Application to Current Trends and Methods in Mission Work", part 3, p. 10).

Paul didn't waste any time. "Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God" (Ac 19:8). He was allowed to preach in the synagogue for three months. He used that time to teach as much about the gospel as he could. But then he ran into some opposition. He had probably come to almost expect this. But he doesn't give up his work in Ephesus. Instead he shows that his plan is flexible and he goes to the lecture hall of Tyrannus (Ac 19:9). "There Paul carried on daily instruction, and any synagogue people who wanted to hear him could easily find him" (Balge, The People's Bible, "Acts," p. 207).

We are told that "this went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Ac 19:10). After these two years, and after Paul had appointed elders there who emerged as natural leaders to take care of the Ephesian church, Paul decides to move on to Jerusalem. He encourages the disciples

in Ephesus and leaves.

We note that the church in Ephesus was apparently left in capable and willing hands. Some time later on the Third Missionary Journey, Paul sends for the elders of the church in Ephesus. He again encourages them. He no doubt got a report from them on the status of the congregation. He probably gave them a few pieces of advice on how to proceed. He warns them against certain things. He commits them to God and reminds them that they are overseers of his flock. He prays with them and then sends them back to continue their works of service (cf Ac 20:17-38).

And so we see the outline of Paul's plan in Ephesus. He spent a good deal of time preaching and teaching the word of God. He took time to train those whom he saw were emerging as leaders in the congregation. He spent extra time training and encouraging those leaders to continue the work. Finally, after two years of hard work, he leaves the congregation there, confident that the elders will faithfully carry out their work. Out of Christian concern, he makes a check on the elders after they had been on their own for a time and encourages and strengthens them. Then he picks up and moves on to spread the good news of the gospel elsewhere.

Is there anything that we can learn from Paul's work in Ephesus? Is any of this feasible in today's mission fields? It certainly isn't what we are accustomed to doing. "We have long accustomed ourselves to accept it as an axiom of missionary work that converts in a new country must be

submitted to very long probation and training, extending over generations, before they can be expected to be able to stand alone. Today if a man ventures to suggest that there may be something in the methods by which St. Paul attained such wonderful results worthy of our careful attention, and perhaps of our imitation, he is in danger of being accused of revolutionary tendencies," (Allen, Missionary Methods - St. Paul's or Ours?, p. 4). While this may be over-stating the case to a degree, there is some truth to what Allen says. But in looking at the situation in Brazil, Missionary Starr and others feel that St. Paul's method should definitely be considered. Let us next look closely at the Ephesus Plan itself.

THE EPHEBUS PLAN IN BRAZIL

In 1975, a small congregation of the Lutheran Church of Brazil in Gravatai contacted the WELS for some help. They had left Igreja Evangelica Luterana Brasileira, a former district of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. This group was found to be in fellowship with the WELS, and was served for the time being by a school administrator who was only able to give the group a minimal amount of time.

Interim committees and exploratory teams and convention pleas to enter into Brazil kept the field in the back of many people's minds. And yet, for several reasons, we were just unable to do anything extensive to serve the people there and to spread the gospel among the people of Brazil.

The 1985 Synod Convention passed a resolution to send a three-man team into Brazil at first, with two more missionaries to follow later. In October of 1987, Missionaries Starr, Flunker and Marggraf arrived on the scene in Brazil and began working. In 1988, Missionary Charles Gumm arrived on the scene and in 1989 Missionary Ken Cherney rounded out our current five-man team in the country of Brazil.

Since arriving on the scene, work may appear to have been moving slowly. But all five missionaries have now learned the somewhat difficult Portuguese language. We currently have congregations in the cities of Porto Alegre and Dourados. There are a total of about ninety souls between the two congregations. Both congregations hold weekly services. The first 4 adult converts were confirmed in July of 1989, a blessing and a milestone for the young Brazilian field. The missionaries in Brazil have done a wonderful job of adapting to life in Brazil. They have learned the language and customs of the people among whom they work. They have stabilized and maintained our two congregations with great success. But now the inevitable question: What do we do next?

Missionary Starr asked himself this same question. He analyzed the existing situation in Brazil. After prayerful consideration, he was led to come up with the Ephesus Plan. Much of the information I am about to share came from personal interviews with Missionaries Starr and Marggraf and

from a 5 page report that Missionary Starr gave to the Latin American Missioners' Conference on September 6, 1989 entitled, "Future Plans for WELS in Brazil."

The first question that Missionary Starr had to address in looking to the future of WELS in Brazil was, "Is the 'traditional' mode of operations of the WELS foreign missions the best approach for our work in Brazil?" As the newest WELS world mission field, our team in Brazil recognized that they had some unique opportunities. They had the advantage of gleaning the best ideas from the strategy and self-analysis statements of other WELS mission fields. They had the benefit of a proliferation of books on missiology which have been written in recent history, books that they knew contained some valuable insights.

In assessing the situation in Brazil, one has to first of all come to grips with the fact that this is a huge country to evangelize. "The country is as large as the forty-eight contiguous states of the USA; we have five WELS missionaries. In contrast, Zambia is the size of Texas and has ten WELS missionaries" (Starr, "Future Plans for the WELS in Brazil," p. 1). Brazil ranks sixth in world population. Its projected population for the year 1990 is 150,368,000. Approximately 70% of Brazil's population is under the age of 30. Although 90% of the people of Brazil claim to be members of the Roman Catholic Church, only 10% of those people actually attend church anywhere near regularly. The field is obviously ripe, but how can five men cover that much ground?

Is a 200 communicant congregation with a two-room Christian day school and one 'Herr Pastor' what we want to see in Brazil by the year 2010? If it is, then we can start working right now on six such congregations and we had better place them well from the very beginning for that is all the congregations we shall have in Brazil for a long time. That is what will happen if the BWM and the Latin America Executive Committee and, more importantly, we missionaries ourselves view us simply as pastors serving in a foreign land (Starr, p. 2).

Another unfortunate but yet realistic factor involved is that we have limited financial resources. Until money becomes no object in carrying out the work that we need to do, we will have to budget what we have very carefully so that we aren't forced to simply ignore one field in order to explode in another. The Ephesus Plan, as we are about to see, takes this factor into consideration by keeping the WELS missions in Brazil subsidy-free apart from the salaries of the missionaries that we have called there.

All of these factors really led Missionary Starr to one conclusion. He proposed that we try something a little different from what we're used to in Brazil.

If we, as missionaries, want to be pastors and do everything by ourselves, the nationals will let us, human nature being what it is. We missionaries will work faithfully for our Savior and thank him for the privilege, feeling we have done the best we could and that the Lord's will was done. However, the result will be a dependent national church constantly relying on expatriates. That may stroke our ego, in a perverse sort of way, but, in my opinion, it is not serving God's kingdom of grace in the best possible manner. So, what do we do? WELS in Brazil is trying to look to the biblical example of the consummate missionary, the Apostle Paul, in formulating a plan to bring about a four-selfs

(propagating, governing, supporting and disciplining) church within the next twenty years (Starr, p. 3).

The Ephesus Plan is, of course, named for the work of the Apostle Paul on his Third Missionary Journey. Paul spent approximately three years in Ephesus planting a church. Our WELS missionaries would like to spend three years (more or less) in each new field or area with a two-man expatriate team planting a church. The time frame is flexible. The mission council will periodically review the situation in each area and decide with the two-man team and the congregation when the expatriate team should move on to a new area. Any such decision would be made by all the parties involved, so that we would not move on to a new area and leave the newly planted congregation feeling completely helpless. It is hoped that this method will keep the missionaries from becoming long-term pastors of individual congregations and congregations from becoming too dependent on a missionary as their full-time pastor.

It goes without saying that we want to serve all people with the gospel, without any regard for their race, education, social status, wealth or customs. That is the reason that we are in Brazil in the first place. But in Christian freedom, a target group without discrimination and exclusivity, can be a tremendous aid in planning an orderly and effective outreach. Our WELS missionaries in Brazil have looked to the middle class there as their "target group." Generally speaking, the middle class in Brazil has some

education. This means that they would be able to read any printed materials which the missionaries might distribute. This would be a tremendous help not only as they work on planting a particular congregation, but also after the two-man team has left that location. This way the people there could read materials (for Bible study, instructions, etc.) that the missionaries may send to them. The middle class also has been found to have more of a religious interest than others in Brazil. This would mean more of an open door for our missionaries. Finally, because the middle class is not poverty level, they would have the capability to support the work financially without any staggering subsidy from the WELS. This targeted middle class group in Brazil is mostly lapsed Roman Catholics, who do have some knowledge of the Scriptures.

In an ideal situation, two expatriate missionaries would work in a proven rapidly growing area for three years establishing a congregation. The ultimate aim would be to train them so that they can one day function with an active lay ministry without a full-time pastor until national pastors are available. This lay ministry would function with materials supplied by the expatriate missionaries and national pastors. A supervising missionary or national pastor would make monthly visits to the congregation to consult with the lay leaders, deliver printed materials and give any needed advice about how to handle different situations. The lay leaders would teach, read sermons

written by the expatriate missionaries or national pastors, make calls, administer sacraments and totally administer all secular affairs of the congregation.

It is anticipated that as these congregations grow and develop, natural leaders would emerge and become evident who would be encouraged by their peers to pursue further training in a Bible institute or seminary. Really, this is no different than what we see happen in our own state-side congregations. When we see a young person who seems to be gifted and has a desire to share the truths of the gospel, we encourage that young person to seriously consider full-time service in the preaching or teaching ministry. The same would hold true in our plan for Brazil.

How would all of this be funded? Primarily by the nationals. The members of our Brazilian congregations would be responsible for subsidizing their students. They would pay their own rent for their meeting place or church. They would pay their own national pastors after they become available. They would fund work done in new exploratory areas to a certain extent. There would be no WELS subsidy whatsoever, other than the salaries and expenses of the expatriate missionary teams. This may be a difficult idea for some of the nationals to swallow at first, but with the help of our gracious God it does look to be a reasonable goal.

Exactly how would we begin in a new area under the Ephesus Plan? First of all, future expansion work of any

kind would be planned with the Brazilian Lutheran Orthodox directors. They would have the most insight and would be the best ones to advise in any way. We would also be sure to serve contacts from current church members. Perhaps a family of members at one of our Brazilian congregations has relatives or friends at a location some distance away who are interested in the Lutheran faith and would like to learn more. If it is feasible, we would send a team there to scout the situation and make a determination on whether or not this would be a good area to start work in. Admittedly, this may not always get us into ideal "Church Growth" localities, but it would show the people of Brazil that we are interested in saving souls and the Holy Spirit may be leading us into an area that would have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Having gotten into a new location, we would then begin to fulfill one of the greatest perceived needs of Brazilians, that of improving English language skills. Most everyone in Brazil, particularly our targeted middle class, wants to learn English well. This is their ticket to improving their salaries and promotion possibilities. Anyone who knows English well will get an eager Brazilian audience. It appears that the way to go about this would be to open Bible Information Centers in which we would teach a class on the Bible in English perhaps two days a week and then offer the same class in Portuguese two different days during the same week. It is important to note that the emphasis of these centers would always be on teaching Bible truths, not

English. This would be clearly stated before the classes even begin. We don't intend to "trick" Brazilians into getting to know their Savior. However, we could always be prepared to help with English language problems and provide an opportunity for the Brazilians to speak with native English speakers. This is a high priority for many people in Brazil. In this way, we could show ourselves as Christians who are warm and caring people with something worthwhile and wonderful to share.

Under the Ephesus Plan, at the close of the three-year period of work by the expatriate missionary team the English "crutch" would be phased out of the program and the centers would continue to operate only in the native Portuguese language. This center would be run by lay ministers who are equipped to teach the truths of the Bible to anyone who would stop by and become interested. If all goes according to plans, this would only be the beginning of a solid, orthodox congregation in a given area. After that, the growth possibilities are endless. In his book, Missionary Methods - St. Paul's or Ours?, Roland Allen lays down five principles which he finds to be essential in establishing churches. It is interesting to note that the Ephesus Plan employs all five of these principles. Allen's five principles are:

1. All teaching to be permanent must be intelligible and so capable of being grasped and understood that those who have once received it can retain it, use it, and hand it on.
2. All organization of like manner must be of such a character that it can be understood and maintained.
3. All financial arrangements made for the ordinary life and existence of the Church should be such that the people themselves can and will control and manage their own

business independently of any foreign subsidies.

4. A sense of mutual responsibility of all the Christians one for another should be carefully inculcated and practised.

5. Authority to exercise spiritual gifts should be given freely and at once.

EVALUATION

Will the Ephesus Plan work? This, of course, is the great unanswered question. And while it looks good on paper, we will never really know if it will work until it is tested. There are some areas that could cause it to fail. The Ephesus Plan will not work if the native members do not commit themselves to lay ministry. This much is obvious. The two congregations that we already have in Brazil are used to having an expatriate serve as full-time pastor. They are also used to heavy subsidy from the LCMS. Will they be willing to exist as a congregation led only by lay ministers? Will they accept the fact that they will have to fund all facets of their work themselves, without heavy doses of subsidy from the WELS? We need to put ourselves into their shoes and realize that at the outset such things may seem a bit overwhelming to them. How would our state-side mission congregations feel if they were suddenly forced to exist without their pastor and without subsidy from our BHM? Will such lay ministers be able to tackle some of the difficult problems that come from trying to keep a small mission congregation running smoothly? Will they be able to remain orthodox without a life-long background of Lutheranism? It is a stated fact that superstition and spiritism greatly vex the people of Brazil and this is a hard

thing for them to shake. Will the Ephesus Plan lend itself well to encouraging young men to become national pastors so that our churches there can become truly indigenous? Can we expect that a plan that is based upon the work of the Apostle Paul many years ago will work in a situation that is far different? These are just some of the many unanswered questions that have been asked and studied by those familiar with the Ephesus Plan.

But as many questions as there are, there are also encouraging facts and prospects. We all have to agree that the Ephesus Plan is, if nothing else, exciting. Think of the possibilities! Congregations that are without a full-time Herr Pastor are going to be forced to come together in Christian love. They are going to be forced to grow in their knowledge of God's word. They are going to be led into some meaningful Bible study. While the idea of functioning without a full-time pastor and without heavy subsidy may frighten our existing congregations who have gotten used to such things, will it necessarily seem unthinkable to congregations that are formed out on the Brazilian frontiers who have never experienced such things? Our missionaries have thus far been greatly encouraged by the way in which the Brazilians have received the gospel. They have found the people there to be warm people who are busy looking for the meaning of life. It is truly encouraging that we can give them the comfort and the peace of the gospel. It is encouraging to know that we have our Lord's promise to be

with us and to bless us in our work. The end results of the Ephesus Plan would, of course, be left up to the Holy Spirit.

As of the writing of this paper, the Ephesus Plan is still being prayerfully considered to the best of my knowledge. Whether or not it is actually employed in Brazil is yet to be seen. But one thing is sure, the Ephesus Plan has gotten us to step back and evaluate the most effective ways to spread the gospel in a given area. Perhaps one day twenty years down the road, the Ephesus Plan will be in place and highly successful in several different fields. That would be a wonderful blessing from the God who has given us all we have and all that we are. But only time will tell whether or not this is the most effective means of outreach in the country of Brazil. Whatever the case may be, may we always be found faithfully using the opportunities that our Lord has placed before us to carry out his Great Commission!

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