

Brazil Teaches Gringos How to Worship

by Terese Thonus

Just over one year ago, after our wedding and honeymoon, my husband Richard and I found ourselves setting up housekeeping in a small town in a southern Brazilian state. Richard, an urban Brazilian, went through a mild form of culture shock. As a music education graduate from Andrews University with a graduate degree in linguistics from the University of Texas, my reaction was much the same.

The local Seventh-day Adventist church, Templo Adventista, was just seven or eight blocks away from where we lived. Our experience with this congregation would play a key role in our not-so-pleasant adjustment.

On our first Sabbath, I noted with delight a small electronic organ at the front, still unopened, and told a deacon I would be glad to play it if no one else was scheduled. I was not invited to play. We sat through Sabbath school and church. People stared at my sleeveless arms and Richard's tieless neck. No one spoke to us on the way out, and no one invited us home for lunch.

On the way home, somewhat crestfallen, we discussed the advisability of continuing to worship just down the road. Wouldn't it be much better, we reasoned, to drive an hour away to the state capital, where we knew the sermons and social life would be more like what we were used to? For some reason we chose to return to the Templo the next week. And this is what we have done every Sabbath since.

The second week I again offered my musical talents to the deacon. My services were not required. During Sabbath school, the deacon asked my husband to write our names and our parents' names on a piece of paper. Richard complied, though mystified.

Three weeks into our adventure, we met Pastor Dorvalino. "I understand you play the organ," he said. "Why don't you accompany us next Sabbath?" A few moments later the deacon came to apologize. "I'm sorry. It's just that we didn't know if you were Adventists or not. You understand." We tried. Dorvalino did his best to make us feel welcome, but we saw him rarely. His district of eight congregations was widely scattered, and he needed to get around by bus. Most sermons were preached by laymen, and a place on the speakers' roster was a much-coveted privilege.

We requested that our memberships be transferred to the Templo. First the board would, of course, need to check us out. Jorge, the head elder, came to speak to me urgently. "There's a problem," he said. "It's Richard's beard. Don't you think you could convince him to shave it off?" I was taken aback. My husband had (and still has) a well-trimmed, attractive beard which did a lot for his self-esteem, and I told Jorge as much. "Oh, I understand, but some of the board members are having a hard time. But don't worry, we'll work things out. Just don't tell Richard." The subject never came up again, and a few Sabbaths later, we were voted into membership.

A sort of "honeymoon" ensued. Richard began substituting for missing Sabbath school teachers, and I was invited by Clarice, the music director, to

Terese Thonus has an MA in linguistics from the University of Texas at Arlington, and teaches at Cultura Inglesa, Curitiba and Porto Alegre, Brazil.

rehearse two small choruses, one female and one mixed. I was surprised at the complete lack of fear and trembling demonstrated by the groups when they got up to sing. They had learned all their pieces by ear and when they erred, they erred boldly. Not one of them could read a score. I took this as a challenge and set out on a “musical literacy” experiment. Richard warned me not to expect too much. I could see why after I discovered that the average education among the women was at the third grade level and not much higher among the men. In many instances, reading the *notes* was not the main problem; reading the *words* was. I tried to be patient. After all, hadn’t I found a real ministry? In a year, I determined, I would leave the Templo with something palpable: a musically-literate congregation.

After a few weeks, I began to pay attention to their music—not the pieces I had taught them, but the ones they had learned before or put together themselves on the spur of the moment: Borba and Arcelino’s duets from the hymnal, in thirds, with *portamentos* borrowed from local folk tradition; Clarice’s family trio warbling “oldies but goodies” from *Harpa Crista*; choruses they had “learned” in the wrong rhythm. Nevertheless, the gospel message seemed to get through. I was the only one bothered by the fact that they couldn’t follow the organ, whenever it worked.

We began to help with neighborhood evangelistic meetings. Richard was in his element as children’s story-teller; I organized the music. The slide projector broke, the tape recording was indecipherable, but the place was packed every time. We went to Sister Diva’s home meeting on Sabbath afternoon to sing. There were three non-Adventists in attendance. A round, stern woman with a two-foot braid, Diva had once told me that God didn’t like it when women cut their hair, looking meaningfully at my bare neck. But in her own territory she was magnificent in her care for an alcoholic woman. We found Diva’s spirit in nearly everyone in the church: severity on “standards” with themselves and the brethren, but tremendous openness and soul-winning zeal towards “them who are without.” The most illiterate among them knew how to give a Bible study to his next-door neighbor, and very often did.

We began inviting church people over for rehearsals and meals. They “oohed” and “aahed” over our stereo and computer. Most got their first taste of Bach and Beethoven sitting on our living room sofa. Knowing that we would be leaving

Having a spiritual (or material gift) doesn’t mean that I have the right to demand that the gift be accepted and/or used. And I got frustrated at times because mine wasn’t.

soon, some began to make offers for our car, our small gas stove, even my clothes. “Mrs. White says that we should offer our possessions to our brothers and sisters first if we have to sell something,” one reminded me. I didn’t press her for a reference. I didn’t need convincing. We knew that our weekly Dorcas offering of rice and beans went straight onto the tables of at least some church members, and I had often “met myself” in the person of sisters wearing clothes I had donated. As a matter of fact, a wardrobe I once considered scanty now seemed luxurious, even after being purged of all possible charity.

Still, frustrations mounted. Why did they never show up for rehearsal? Why were we always asked to sing the moment of, and not a week beforehand? Why couldn’t they learn the names of the notes just a little faster?

The Christmas program was a near disaster. I had planned something which was much too complicated, and then threw a fit when the chorus members went to an impromptu campmeeting instead of showing up for rehearsals. But with a little of the grace of God, something was communicated, something was sung. My husband said to me at the end, “They don’t want what you have to offer. You have to accept that.” He was right.

Having a spiritual (or material) gift doesn’t mean that I have the right to demand that the gift be accepted and/or used. And I got frustrated at times because mine wasn’t. The gift that I needed was much more like that of Maria’s. She sewed for Dorcas and spent every Sunday afternoon with a large group of ladies putting the church’s

closet in order. Or that of Romilda's, who made sure there were three bouquets of fresh flowers on the platform every Sabbath, even if they had to come from her own garden. Or that of Daniel's, who cleaned up the church on Friday afternoons and distributed tithing receipts during the lesson.

I had originally thought of coming to this

country as a missionary, but the people of Templo have taught me the lesson which any missionary anywhere must learn: that having a first-world background and college education does not credential one for service.

Who is the missionary and who is the mission? For me the distinctions have blurred.