

Letters from Overseas

Kathleen Stephenson Writes from Brazil

April 2009

**Reflecting on the Year:
One Year as Ecumenical Officer at CESE
Coordenadoria Ecumênica de Serviço
in Salvador, Brazil**



Photo: Wolf Kutnahorsky

I arrived in Brazil in March 2008, just over a year ago, and it has been a good year.

I have new and steadfast friendships with colleagues at CESE, with members of several churches that I call "my church," with my Portuguese teacher Tatiana, and with my fellow choristers in two choirs. I am recognized and greeted by neighbours, taxi drivers, the fruit seller at the corner, and others I see regularly in the street. What a blessing!

My language skills are improving steadily although not rapidly. I need a little bit of time to prepare myself and a few notes if I want to express myself clearly during a meeting. With friends, on the other hand, I am ready to fumble along, make mistakes, and use hand gestures and body language—whatever it takes to communicate. I can manage most non-work situations and, whenever things get tricky, someone helps, almost always in Portuguese. Angels!

On the other hand, I have been assaulted twice. I have not been seriously hurt and my purse was stolen only once. But I am learning! I carry as little as possible and nothing precious or difficult to replace. I have a small purse that can go under my clothing. I use all my pockets and sometimes pin them closed.

I was shaken after the last episode in February and quite worried about the visit of my sisters in late February. It was great visit but first they had to endure a very bossy older sister. I quizzed them before we went anywhere about what they had in their purses, why they needed that watch, did they really need the camera, etc. I also threw in questions about how much water they had drunk and use of sunscreen. After a few days of this, I gave my head a shake, apologized for being so bossy, and talked to them. They said they realized it was an act of caring and really a good thing! But I knew it could spoil our time together. I continued to be vigilant but definitely changed my tone!

I am finding my place at CESE after one year. In early February, after the forums, I had two meetings with Eliana Rolemberg, Executive Director of CESE. We reviewed a draft workplan that I had prepared and discussed a range of day-to-day activities. I have appreciated regular conversations with Mark Hathaway, the United Church's liaison person for South America. He has offered many helpful suggestions and ideas from how to get my computer to put accents on vowels to courses in ecumenism, and shared his knowledge of the ecumenical agencies and movements in Brazil and Latin America.

As CESE's Ecumenical Relations Officer, I have some specific tasks and assignments. I participate in planning CESE's communications initiatives, especially for churches and ecumenical institutions. As well, I represent CESE on a local ecumenical council planning celebrations and activities through the year. For example, we will be hosting several events during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in May. We are also going to develop a self-directed workshop on prayer that can be tailored for use as a worship resource for church groups or implemented in a more traditional workshop format. In the last few months, I have brought greetings from CESE to two local churches celebrating anniversaries. They are both churches that work closely with CESE on a range of projects and ecumenical initiatives.

I have responsibilities, yes, but perhaps as in all our ministries, sometimes I am just present, that is, walking along together with folks!

My prayers and reflection focus to a great extent on how to just *be*, as appropriately and well as I possibly can! Meanwhile, I trust, with humility, that God will use me—like clay! I am working on what this earthen vessel (me!) is intended to hold and pour out!

Kathleen Stephenson

Kathleen Stephenson is a United Church of Canada overseas personnel serving with Coordenadoria Ecuemênica de Serviço in Brazil. The work of this ecumenical partner and the work of overseas personnel are made possible through your gifts to the Mission and Service Fund of The United Church of Canada.

