

Letters from Overseas

Kathleen Stephenson Writes from Brazil

Coordenadoria Ecumenico de Servico
Caixa Postal: 041
Salvador—Bahia
CEP 40015-970
BRAZIL



Photo: Wolf Kutnahorsky

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Forty Days and Forty Nights*

Only occasionally in the wilderness!

In July, together with 23 people from six countries, I participated in a four-week course on Ecumenism and Inter-religious Dialogue. The specific focus this year was “Religion in the Construction of Peace.” Courses in ecumenism have been given annually by CESEP (Centro Ecumênico de Serviços à Evangelização e Educação Popular) for over 15 years.

Like CESE, where I work in Salvador, CESEP is one of The United Church of Canada’s global partners supported by the Mission and Service Fund.

The courses are well-known and highly respected and now I know why. The course content is rich, the approach is holistic, the learning environment is positive; and the speakers were esteemed theologians, philosophers, pastors and padres, professors and facilitators.

We lived together in a large house, our Casa Comunitária, and ate all meals together. We helped in the preparation and especially in the serving and cleaning up after meals. We had free time some evenings to read, watch movies, chat. We sang and danced. (It is Brazil, after all.)

The experience was educational, exciting, invigorating, and a blessing—and not without its challenges!

Nosso Grupo

Twenty-three participants from Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Cuba, Brazil, and Canada attended the 2009 CESEP course. The youngest participant was Dionata, an 18-year-old Lutheran theology student from the south of Brazil. I was the lone Canadian working in an ecumenical social service agency in Salvador Bahia. I was also the oldest member of the group. Our religious diversity included Catholic (about half the group), Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal (Universal Church of the Reign of God), Candomblé (with roots in African traditional religion), United Church of Canada, and one

* Actually my July adventures lasted 37 days. I used a little poetic licence for the title.

participant without a religion. Whenever we worked in denominational groups, I chose to work with the Methodists.

We held two “cultural nights”—two grand parties!—celebrating our diverse cultural backgrounds. Argentina, Brazil, and Canada worked together to plan one evening. People wore their party clothes, we had special meals and appropriate wines, we shared information about our countries, and we sang and danced!

As the representative of Canada, I wore everything I had with me! I piled my winter coat, a big sweater, a fleece jacket, gloves, a scarf, long pants, two pairs of socks, a jacket with a hood, and my heaviest shoes over my party clothes. I explained that as I knew it was winter in Brazil I had come prepared. I set up a flipchart with relevant weather statistics from Ottawa and as I stripped off my multiple layers of clothing I shared the stats. It was fun. My Brazilian colleagues here in Salvador truly do believe that temperatures of 20°C below freezing would kill them.

An aside: I am always stumped when asked about the traditional Canadian music, songs, dances, dishes, and costumes. Any advice you can provide will be very welcome.

Another aside: An intrepid group of CESE friends is planning to visit Ottawa. I really hope they do! They are planning a *January* holiday because CESE is closed then. I explained that they should do a bit of cross-country skiing and skate on the canal! Aren't they wonderful women?

Nossas Visitas

Lectures and presentations about various religions provided history and insights into common beliefs and practices and the differences among Christian churches and between Christian churches and other religions. Equally important were our visits to places of worship throughout the city of São Paulo. The following list is in Portuguese but I am sure you will understand. We visited

- Templo Budista Zua Lai
- Tekke Islâmica
- Aldeia Guarani (a settlement of 500 Indigenous people within São Paulo)
- Congregação Israelita Paulista (a synagogue)
- Casa de Oração do Povo da Rua (House of Prayer of the People of the Street)
- Templo Hindu
- Catedral Metropolitana Ortodoxa
- Igreja Brasil Para Cristo (Pentecostal)



- Igreja Evangélica de Confissão Luterana
- Igreja Católica Romana Santa Rita
- Casa das Minas de Thova Jarina (Candomblé religion, based in African traditional religion)
- Tupã Óca do “Caboclo Arranca Roço” (Umbanda, a Brazilian religion incorporating African and other religious belief and practice)

In each of these communities we talked with worship leaders including the priest, padre, minister, pastor, rabbi, mother, Muslim sheik, Hindu swami, or Buddhist monk and with the people of faith. We were almost always invited to share an appropriate meal or snack depending on the time of day or night.

Minha Esperança, Minha Oração **My Hope, My Prayer**

In the coming months, I am going to work on—meaning that I will discuss with others, ponder, read, ponder, study, pray—how to clarify and when necessary and appropriate respond to the beliefs and practices of other people of faith. Sometimes listening and learning is all that is appropriate or required. Often my response is positive and enthusiastic. I benefit from stretching my thinking to accommodate other perspectives. However, other reactions could range from “I don’t understand, I understand but don’t like it, I have a different perspective, I don’t agree...” all the way to “I reject it.” There are lots more possible responses. I think we are neither used to nor comfortable in potentially confrontational situations. Not us polite Canadians at any rate. I need to get better at it!

Over the coming months, at CESE, we are going to replicate aspects of the course I took in São Paulo. We will invite theologians and religious leaders to tell us about their church, beliefs, and practices. We will have discussions and debates, and reflect on our mission both institutionally and individually.

CESE is an ecumenical agency founded by Christian churches 35 years ago. The organizational goals and objectives, programs, and processes reflect Christian morals and values—essentially, to follow Christ’s commandment “Feed my sheep.” I trust that by enlightening ourselves, we will reflect our Christian values more brightly and respond with renewed vigour.

Koinonia and a Youth Leadership Encounter

At the end of the four-week course, I left São Paulo by bus and travelled to Rio de Janeiro, a six-hour trip. I was going to Rio to meet with Koinonia. Like CESE and CESEP who coordinated the course in ecumenism, Koinonia is an ecumenical agency and global partner of The United Church of Canada. I had a couple of hours with two senior staff members, Rafael and Atilio. We talked



about ecumenism in Brazil, about Koinonia's work and mine. As well, during those two days in Rio I participated in an ecumenical youth leadership training course.

Just one story about my time in Rio, which is justifiably known for its violence and poverty. The Youth Leadership Course was held about an hour outside Rio. We travelled there by public transit mostly through back streets to the youth centre where the course was being held. In the early evening, my colleagues put me on the bus they thought would get me back to the central subway station. From there it was a very short and safe walk to my hotel. However, during the bus trip, it began to dawn on me that I was actually not going the right way. I asked one of my fellow passengers who spoke to the driver and confirmed that I did need to change buses. Yikes! But then, with directions from the bus driver, my fellow passenger handed me over to a public transit employee at the next bus stop and he stayed at my side (I stayed at his side, really) until the right bus came along and he spoke to the driver on my behalf. I continued my journey feeling quite confident with such helpers.

On to Piacatuba

On Wednesday, I went on my own by interurban bus (a five-hour trip) heading west from Rio to Leopoldina where Tatiana (my Portuguese teacher) met me at the bus station. Then we got another bus to Piacatuba (pop. 3,000). That bus dropped us on the highway at about 10 p.m. and we were almost immediately met by a family friend (and taxi driver) for the final half-hour of the trip.

The bus trip from Rio was beautiful through the mountains of the state of Rio de Janeiro. They are not as big as the Rockies, of course, but are substantial. The highway snakes around; climbing and then descending. Beautiful and also harrowing—as it is when you are in a big bus looking straight down the side of a mountain or alternatively straight into the side of a rock face.

Blessings to all,
Kathleen

Kathleen Stephenson is United Church of Canada Overseas Personnel serving with in Coordenadoria Ecumenico de Servico 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.

