

## Letters from Overseas

### Kathleen Stephenson Writes from Brazil

Coordenadoria Ecumênica de Serviço  
Caixa Postal: 041  
Salvador—Bahia  
CEP 40015-970  
BRAZIL



*Photo: Wolf Kutnahorsky*

### **Celebrating 2009 and Welcoming 2010      Feb. 2010**

Today is Ash Wednesday and the city of Salvador Bahia is righting itself after a week-long Carnaval break. Many buildings are boarded up during Carnaval, including CESE's. CESE is Coordenadoria Ecumênica de Serviço, the Brazilian social service organization and a United Church global partner of many years. By tomorrow, things will be more or less back to normal and we will go back to work.

I celebrated Christmas Eve with Lutheran friends at an early evening service with many familiar elements including a traditional Christmas tree. At the end of the service, before we sang "Silent Night," the candles on the tree were lit and other lights extinguished. On Christmas Day, a diverse group of four sat down to a traditional Canadian dinner in my home: a peppery fresh mango relish with lime accompanied the otherwise Canadian dinner of turkey and stuffing, mashed and gravy. That relish may become the new Stephenson tradition instead of cranberry sauce!

New Year's Eve is an important celebration in Brazil. Here in Salvador, streets and beaches were crowded with music and dancing. It was a beautiful scene with multitudes dressed all in white watching various displays of fireworks over the Bay of All Saints to the west or facing east, over the Atlantic Ocean.

Then came Carnaval. Salvador holds the record for the biggest street party in the world. I participated for a few hours each day and was jostled about, almost deafened, but never felt unsafe. I did wear earplugs!

### **Looking Ahead, CESE 2010**

It has been clear for some period of time that CESE should anticipate funding cuts, and the global financial crisis has brought that home. In response, for the last year or more, the number of staff has been reduced through natural processes and vacant positions have been left unfilled. It is however fair to say that the need to diversify funding sources has been recognized but neglected for several years. This is a very familiar reality for many organizations, as we know.

The global economic crisis has taken a significant toll on many international development agencies, including ecumenical agencies and national churches especially in Europe that have been generous and steadfast supporters of CESE's work. These agencies have regrettably been forced to make major cuts in their own budgets and to cut their grants to organizations like CESE.

### **Recent CESE Statistics**

CESE's mission is to support, promote, and defend human rights in Brazil and, through participation in national and international ecumenical networks, to defend and promote human rights globally. CESE's goals are achieved through advocacy and education and providing small project grants to all kinds of groups involved in human rights work. CESE supports established non-governmental organizations as well as churches, informal groups, networks of agencies, and social movements.

In 2009, about 350 small projects were supported with an average grant of R\$7,000 (equivalent to about \$4,000 Cdn). In 2010 it is clear that fewer projects will be supported: about 300. In total, in 2010, CESE's funding will be reduced by almost 1 million Brazilian *reais* (\$600,000 Cdn), which is a decrease of about 14 percent of 2009 revenue. All aspects of CESE's work will be affected. The United Church of Canada, including co-funding from the Canadian International Development Agency, will continue to provide support to CESE for the foreseeable future (with a formal commitment made through to 2013). The United Church will also support my work here in strengthening ecumenical relations through to at least 2011.

Finding new sources of funding—especially Brazilian sources such as national churches and congregations—remains a CESE priority. I hope to be able to contribute to those initiatives as we invite churches and congregations to learn more about and to support CESE's work.

### **Ecumenism as a Priority**

Although financial considerations were an *almost* overriding concern during the weeks of evaluation and planning last December, CESE's role in fostering ecumenism and encouraging inter-religious dialogue also emerged as a priority. An independent evaluation in 2009 also underscored the importance of reinforcing CESE's roots as an ecumenical organization founded by Christian churches some 37 years ago. In the deliberations, it was clear that for CESE, ecumenism is not a program or project or series of activities, but rather an overarching set of values and principles. In 2010, we will devote ourselves to understanding what that means and figuring how we can behave as "ecumenically" as possible in everything we do—institutionally and as individuals. Recognizing diversity as a blessing and unleashing a natural curiosity to learn about the "other" are both goals and strategies.

We should remember that The United Church of Canada itself is an ecumenical happening...a soon-to-be-85-year-old unfolding project!

### **Home Assignment 2010**

I will be in Canada for two months in May and June this year on home assignment and leave. I am happily looking forward to reconnecting at some leisure with my family and with friends. Also, I am pleased to be attending meetings and events as are being arranged by Montreal and Ottawa Conference to provide a range of opportunities to share and discuss my work here and the importance of our support for the Mission and Service Fund. So, I can say "See you soon" and really mean it!

Blessings all! Kathleen

**Kathleen Stephenson** is a United Church of Canada overseas personnel serving with Coordenadoria Ecumênica de Serviço (CESE) 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.

