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Interview of Glover Shipp

Glover Shipp

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Glover Shipp who has been engaged in evangelistic work in the city of Belo Horizonte, Brazil, for the past three years was interviewed by Winfred Wright on April 25, 1970.

Wright: I would like for you to tell us something about your experiences in Brazil. First give us something concerning the historical background of the work from its beginning up to the present time.

Shipp: The work in Brazil got off to something of a shaky start back in the 1930's when two men went to Brazil from the States, but as happened frequently back in that time, they weren't sufficiently supported. They weren't sufficiently assisted from the States financially, and I suppose spiritually as well. As a result, one of them became discouraged, drifted off into another religious body. The other one stayed on, we understand. Although we haven't been able to verify it completely, we understand up in the northeastern part of Brazil there are some congregations that he established. These congregations are still meeting. Some contact has been made with them, but they know nothing of us. They are strictly Brazilian and so far they have been hesitant to tie in with a bunch of maverick Americans.

Now, our present work began when Brother Arlie Smith went to Brazil about 1957. He developed the work first in Sao Paulo and had been there for a period of time when the team from Abilene Christian College arrived in Sao Paulo in 1961. This was a team of some eleven families augmented later by others who arrived. The work in Sao Paulo has blossomed especially from 1961, but the work of Arlie Smith was important because some of the Brazilian evangelists who are preaching regularly in Brazil are the result of his training and guidance of their development in those early years. He moved on to Rio and started the first work in that city and has now recently begun the work for the first time, at least in modern history, in Portugal, preaching now in Lisbon.

In 1967, as I recall, the work began in Porto Alegre, Brazil, when Allen Dutton moved to that city with Carlos Bouguet. They have a good work going in that major city of Brazil.

In the summer of 1967 the Operation '68 Advance Team arrived in Belo Horizonte which is the third largest city of Brazil, a city of about 1,500,000 people. This work has developed from that point we feel with gratifying speed. It has not been as fast as we would like but more rapidly than in many other fields of the world.

In 1968 the work began in Curitiba when Walter Kreidel went from Sao Paulo to Curitiba. So we have five major centers of work. We are also in regular contact with and have joint conferences with the Independent Christian Church missionaries in Brazil. Some of these men have grown very close to us, and we to them. We feel that eventually there will be a unity among these two teams in Brazil, at least among many members of them.

Wright: What is the religious background of the people with whom you work there in Brazil?

Shipp: Most of the people are Catholics. Ninety percent are Catholic by birth and tradition, but not by practice. Most Catholics are not really sound Catholics. They are not practicing a religion. Many Brazilian men boast that they go to the church three times in their lives--when they are born, when they are married, and when they are buried. The younger generation, the college university level people, have almost completely departed from Catholicism in Brazil. They are in a time of searching for something better. They are searching for some alternative to the traditional religion which has held Brazil under its control for 500 years. There are many signs that the traditional Catholic religion in Brazil is slipping in its control over the people.

Other religious groups of importance in Brazil are the Baptists, Methodist, Presbyterians, Lutherans and the Assembly of God which is probably one of the fastest growing bodies in Brazil of those bodies that have come from the United States. There are two strongly indigenous religious groups, Barzu par Cristus and Como garson Criston du Brazil. Both of these began in Brazil and are Pentecostal in nature.

Spiritism is the final major group in Brazil. Spiritism probably influences the thinking of the majority of the people of that country. Spiritism is a combination of African Vodoo and Catholicism and various other elements including the higher spiritism that has come out of Europe. Most Catholics in Brazil are also spiritists in one form or another. They practice some of the superstitions and some of the traditions of spiritism taking the Catholic saints, giving them new names, and giving them magical qualities out of spiritism.

Wright: What is there in the culture and the economic situation in Brazil that you have had to deal with specifically?

Shipp: The culture is basically Mediterranean or Iberian to be more specific. The Portuguese people who settled Brazil had been influenced strongly by Islam. They had been influenced by the Romans, by the Celts, by many other backgrounds. They have also during their history been influenced strongly in Brazil by Africa. There were millions of slaves brought to Brazil. These slaves, of course, brought with them their animistic gods. These gods have found their way into spiritism and into other religious and other social attitudes of the people. The culture is also influenced by the Indian tribes of Brazil and influenced to some smaller extent by the neighboring nations, the Latin American and Spanish nations. The culture has also been influenced more lately by the United States and western Europe. Brazil is very conscious of the latest styles from Europe and the States. One hears all of the modern recordings by singing groups, one sees all of the latest styles from France and the States. I take some of this with a grain of salt. I hate to see people with an interesting culture being so strongly influenced by the culture and fads of the day from the States.

The economic level is much lower than the United States. The minimum salary would be about \$30 per month. The average salary, perhaps in our part of Brazil at least, would be around \$100 a month. Most Brazilians do not own a car. They don't have refrigerators. They don't have telephones. People of the cities, however, live much higher than those in the country area. Those in the interior still live 100 years in the past.

Wright: What are the methods which you are now using which you feel to be effective?

Shipp: In our work in Belo Horizonte, we had opportunity to spend some years in planning before we went. A team of us met together frequently to consider various methods, to consider the culture of Brazil, and to plan our approaches. These plans that we made have been adjusted frequently since, but we are using basically a combination of house churches or cell groups with a central meeting in the center of the city. We have started a number of these groups in various parts of the city and work with them on a regular basis. Most of these groups meet in homes. Then, we encourage those attending in these homes to come together on Sunday nights in the center of the city for an evangelistic service. This combines the personal contact, combines the intimacy of small assemblies with the dynamics of a larger assembly in the center of the city. We are also using for out-of-town outreach and for plowing the soil throughout Brazil radio broadcasts, correspondence courses and a monthly magazine that we distribute throughout much of Brazil.

We have a downtown school of the Bible in the same facilities in which the church meets on Lord's days. The school is something of a front organization. We have a lot of drop-in traffic--people coming in to study basic courses in the Bible with us in a school setting. After they have become used to our presence, used to the courses we teach, then we begin to introduce the church to them. We don't do this at the beginning. We believe that a neutral ground is a useful tool, some place to which people can come to study without feeling that they are entering into some kind of church building.

Wright: Although other religious groups have used this house church approach, I suppose your group is unique in our brotherhood, or at least the first to try it in any extensive way. How would you evaluate the effectiveness of this approach and what are the main disadvantages and advantages you see?

Shipp: We believe it is effective because it gives the church many, many contacts that we otherwise would not have. It places the church in a suburb of the city under the auspices of a family in that suburb. Through this means, some in this group have grown very very rapidly. The oldest of these house meetings in Belo is about two and a half years old now and has around 200 people in attendance. Just in a short period--slightly less than three years--we have 12 of these groups meeting and the total attendance of these 12 would be several hundred people which would indicate the possibilities for this kind of outreach in a large city. In a small village this might not work as well. In a metropolitan center it seems to work quite admirably.

There are some important considerations in this. One is that the host family be stable, that the host family have a good reputation in the community, that the host family have a spirit or a desire to see the church succeed in its community. Without this, a work may be started in the home and then damaged or destroyed by the failure of the host family to cooperate or to set the right tone for the work in that community. There are other problems as well. The success of services in the home may depend on the physical health of some of the people involved. It has been common for us to have to put up with dogs, cats, goats and chickens running in and out of some of these houses. People tend to be somewhat casual. They arrive late for the services, they wander in all the way through these services, but despite these handicaps we think the advantages make it well worthwhile. We plan to continue with these services in homes, and we hope to encourage Brazilians to start such meetings on their own. Some already have.

Wright: What serious obstacles or challenges have you had to overcome in this particular method?

Shipp: We are Americans, and we've had to begin most of these ourselves until Brazilians could be developed to the point where they would begin them. Americans are always considered millionaires by Brazilians. They are held either in awe by Brazilians or they are held in contempt in some cases. Brazilians, many of them, will want to tend to see how much they can get out of an American, how much money they can get. Some of them will use an American to enhance their own prestige level, but all in all, we feel that this approach has been successful.

We have had to modify our downtown services some. We've had to adjust the time of meetings to fit the cultural patterns there. We've had to adjust our thinking because many of the Brazilians who have become Christians have not been able to come downtown for lack of bus fare. We have hesitated to get involved in bringing them all to the center of the city in cars. We've tried to encourage them to come by themselves. Many of them do. They come and sometimes they will give their last few cents in the church contribution knowing that they will have to walk back home several miles at night. Others have not come downtown. They haven't felt a part of the overall church in Belo. They have been too oriented just toward one suburb. We don't know how to overcome some of this yet. We have found that the individual suburbs (districts) can in many cases tend to be many individual districts or villages such as the villages from which they came in the interior. Because of this, they seldom set foot outside of the suburb, and it is difficult to get some of them to come downtown.

The downtown services have been helpful in maintaining a spirit of oneness in the church throughout the city. This is a major city, a city that is growing extremely rapidly. In this effort to bring people together downtown, we have been able to maintain the unity of the church in Belo and a fellowship of the saints in that city that very seldom happens. There isn't any feeling at all there of jealousy over territory or of proselyting members from one other cell group to our own cell group in order to build it up. We have been able to avoid some of these problems that exist so strongly in the church here in the States.

Wright: What are you doing specifically to train local Christians to carry on their work?

Shipp: In Sao Paulo they have a leadership training school at the college level. This has just started recently and has a sizeable number of Brazilian men and young boys in it. Our men in the church in Belo are not ready we feel for that level of study so we are preparing to begin our own courses for them at a lower level. Those who complete these will be encouraged to participate in the courses in Sao Paulo which is about eight or nine hours away from Belo.

We are strongly opposed to sending Brazilians to the States for their study. We had rather they study in Brazil and work among their own people. We have on a primarily individual basis, assigned Brazilians with a capacity for leadership to individual missionaries. These Brazilian men now go with us to our classes, to our cell meetings, to our services, and some of them are already able to conduct services themselves. They are able to present simple lessons. Some of them are visiting the members, encouraging them, strengthening them. Some of them are coming. It is a very slow process. We've started from zero in that city. We started with people who knew almost nothing. Many of them knew absolutely nothing about the Bible, so it is taking time to build them up and strengthen them but they are making progress.

Wright: How do you feel about putting these people on American support?

Shipp: My personal feeling is no. My experience with some who have been on American support in different countries has not been good. I believe that a national can very easily be spoiled. We brought one man up from Sao Paulo to work with us as a language teacher. He is a Christian, taught us the language, but we've even had difficulties at that level because he was a member of our mission team and at the same time being paid by the families for language study, and even at that level, even on that arrangement, we've had some problems. We have hired two or three young men to work with us in our correspondence course work. These young men are members of the church. There has been some static in this relationship. Although they are not hired as preachers or teachers, still they have developed some problems with pride and superiority because they have been hired by the Americans. We have tried to keep the hiring of Brazilians at a minimum.

Wright: I believe that Portugese is your language in Brazil. What do you suggest concerning language training for the missionary who would be interested in going to Brazil?

Shipp: I would strongly recommend that they, if at all possible, learn some of the language before coming. This will ease the culture shock that they face upon arrival. They will be able to order a box of aspirins in a drug store. They will be able to order at least a simple meal in a restaurant. In this way they will be able to function on their own. They will be able to perhaps rent a house and buy furniture without being aided at every step of this by someone else. Of course, the bulk of their language study should come in the country to which they go. No one can learn adequately from books alone how to speak another language. A language is in a cultural setting. He doesn't understand the hidden meanings of expressions, of words, the gestures that go with them, until he is in that culture.

Wright: To close our discussion, could you give us some suggestions concerning the overall mission program of the church? What do you think we need to do to improve our work? Briefly what is your philosophy concerning missions?

Shipp: I believe that the word "church" or the expression "church of Christ" and missions are practically synonymous. No church can be a true church of Jesus Christ unless it is completely involved in the mission of saving souls, not only at home but everywhere possible. We haven't yet learned this adequately in the church. We are still very lackadaisical about our participation in soul saving everywhere in the world. Many countries of the world have yet to hear the voice of any missionary in the body of Christ. This to me is a tragedy and especially so considering the fact that American Christians are the wealthiest people probably who have ever lived in the body of Christ in the history of the church in 2000 years.

My own philosophy of missions is that a person should be very well prepared not only in the Bible, not only in soul saving, but also in cultural preparation. He should understand the cultures. He should, if at all possible, visit other countries before going into this kind of work. He should be a flexible person. There is no one mission method. A person must be able to adapt and to adjust to whatever the situation is. In his methods, he should be able to experiment to find the most effective methods because a method that will work in one part of the world will not work in another.

Wright: We appreciate your coming today. We appreciate your work in Brazil, and we thank you for your contribution to those who are training to do mission work elsewhere.

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