

4-15-1973

Interview of Larry Williams

Larry Williams

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Recommended Citation

Williams, L. (1973). Interview of Larry Williams. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/missions-history/41>

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HARDING COLLEGE LIVING HISTORY OF MISSIONS
Volume IV, No. 5

Larry Williams from Sao Paulo, Brazil was interviewed by Don Shackelford on April 15, 1973.

Shackelford: We have Larry Williams visiting on our campus and he has been working in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Larry, I would like for you to begin by telling a little bit about your educational background and how that you got interested in going to Brazil.

Williams: I was here at Harding from 1964-1968, and at that time, I met Dorsey Traw in 1965 and was considering doing mission work in Thailand instead of Brazil. So, at that point, I became interested in missions, and then I decided to go on and finish up my work here and then at the Harding Graduate School of Religion in Memphis. After enrolling there and finishing several hours, I started working with a congregation that had an interest in mission work. Their viewpoint was that a missionary would work with them for a length of time and they would select the field. So, I worked with them 18 months and they sent me to a mission forum in Abilene at Abilene Christian College. I went through courses there. Then, they decided that Brazil was the best place where I should work because there was a group there working and they wanted me to work under a group or with a group--not necessarily under the group--for a period of time. That is it, briefly.

Shackelford: Which congregation in Memphis?

Williams: It's Floyd Avenue in the northern part of Memphis.

Shackelford: Give us a little bit of the history of the work in Sao Paulo.

Williams: The actual work started in 1957. Brother Arlie Smith, who started this work and was the first missionary to Brazil and possibly the first missionary in South America, as far as we know, was from that congregation. There was one other man with him that I can't recall the name of. They worked there until 1961, when a group with 13 families from Texas joined the work at that point. There has been a group there since 1961.

Shackelford: What is the religious background in Brazil in general, in Sao Paulo, in particular?

Williams: I read the other day in Time magazine concerning different sects there and they said that 92% of the population claimed to be Catholic. But a lot of these, of course, aren't practicing and then they join different groups there, you might say.

Shackelford: What about the cultural and economic background of the country?

Williams: Any Brazilian you talk to, you ask them when the economy began to improve and they will tell you 1964, after the military government took over. Since that point, the economic situation has improved greatly. Now, they have

the inflation down to about 15% a year which is real good, of course, for South America. In another article, they said that a lot of US citizens would scream about 15%, but when you consider a country like Uruguay to the south, which had 94% inflation, 15% is real good. Now you had mentioned the culture. Is there anything in particular with that?

Shackelford: Let's go back for a moment on something you just mentioned about the government military taking over. Is this the government that is presently in now?

Williams: They have Senators and Representatives like we do which are elected by the people. And everyone there that is of age must vote. If you don't vote, you are fined. So everyone has opportunity to vote for Senators and Representatives. Now at this time until 1975, I think it is, the President of the country is appointed by the military, but in 1975, he will be elected by popular vote. But since 1964, they have been appointing the President and there has only been one appointed up to this time.

Shackelford: Is the President there like our President and the power he has or is he more of a figure head like some more European countries?

Williams: I think he has a lot of power. I've noticed him on newsreels there and you will always notice anywhere he has given speeches, and where a lot of things are going on, there will be one or two generals with him. Apparently these generals have quite a bit of control, but he is very well respected there and I think he has some power.

Shackelford: Principally is the government runned by the Senate, by the military, or by the President, would you say?

Williams: Let me give you a little further background on it. Let's go back to the 1300's. In the 1300's, the government was set up on three basis. The heads of big families had an influence. The Catholic Church had an influence, and the military had an influence. This is the way it was set up. Well, eventually, they felt that the head of the families shouldn't have this much influence, so they no longer have influence, and, now, they are trying to get the Catholic Church so it will be strictly the military who will have influence. I think the military there definitely has control, but it's not a rule by force. They let the people influence.

Shackelford: Would you say that the military there is, politacally speaking, to the right or to the left.

Williams: Extremely right.

Shackelford: Well that's interesting. What about the culture there? What are some of the things that would be more noticeable to someone that is an immediately right and work in Brazil. What are some problems that they might be facing in the way of culture?

Williams: Things of interest to me is there the young people don't get married until, let's say, between the age of 25 and 35. They get married later and I think this has an impact on the family situation. This is good. There, divorce is illegal, so this leads to a lot of men abandoning their families. But, at this point, it

is illegal to have divorces. Also, in marriages, you're married by the government, and then three days later you can have a church wedding too. So, really, there are two ceremonies. So, that's some things about marriages that are different.

As far as clothes, you don't notice that much difference. Foods, I think are different, and would be one thing that you would notice about the culture that would be different. Of course, the language is the big factor. They do speak Portuguese there. This is the thing that would stick out in mind.

One thing that I noticed right off is all the stores are located just door after door. You don't have any lots or a lot of parking or anything like this. The towns, the cities are real compact. To give you an example, Sao Paulo has a population of 3½ to 9 million people. Yet, the size of the city is not any larger land mass wise than Dallas, Texas. So, it would have to be pretty compact.

Shackelford: Are most of the stores, say, in Sao Paulo, smaller shops owned by men or are they large chain stores and department stores like we have here?

Williams: The department stores have just started coming in the past three or four years. Supermarkets and department stores have just started coming in recently. The east section of town has their own little butcher shops, their own little shoe shops, and their own little shops. But now, the department stores are coming in, and Sears is a big department store there at this time. They are beginning to have more influence, but since the people don't own as many automobiles as we do, they need their little shops around close. So that would be one difference.

Shackelford: Let's talk now a little bit about the challenges that the work there particularly thinking around the methods that are presently being used.

Williams: I'll give you a brief run down on the work that this group is involved in. I did say that this group effort is what we are doing. We have 13 to 14 families there and we are involved--oh, first of all, I think your local congregations are the real backbone of your work in the mission field. We have 3 to 9 local congregations there in the city of Sao Paulo.

We have what we call a leadership training school. These local Brazilian congregations select men that they feel are qualified to enter this school, and that have been Christians for at least 2 to 3 years. Also, these men must have proven themselves to be faithful and the congregations must feel like they are capable of passing the courses that we offer. And then for 2 years, there is an intensive study program in this school. They study the Bible, Portuguese, English, and Greek; some communications and things like this. So this leadership training school, we finish one term of this, or two years. From the first group that entered the school, we now have men that have been selected in the local congregations that are elders. Others are evangelists, Bible school teachers, and still others who have just gone back to their secular work. These who have gone back to their secular work are active in the church also.

We have a radio program on air and broadcast throughout Brazil at different stations. We have a daily program which lasts 15 minutes, a 30 minute program on Saturday and two programs on Sunday. Then there is also our correspondence course work. This is advertised through the radio program and other sources of advertisement. We've had over 35,000 people enrolled in this course from Sao Paulo, with over 11,000 graduates. Some of these 11,000 have finished two courses. We do offer two different courses. This is a basic course on the Bible, survey of the Bible, and then of course, in Acts.

Then we have a Christian camp located about 30 miles from the city and our local congregation can use this camp and then we have camp sessions during January and July.

We do also have some work in the interior. We have a plane that we can travel in to the interior and visit congregations that have been established in the interior. So, this is basically the work that we are involved in.

Shackelford: And what's specifically your work?

Williams: When I return, my job will be following up on the correspondence graduates. Of course, I can't do it all myself so, I will be directing this program, getting other individuals in local congregations involved, getting some of these men that are in the leadership training school teaching in their spare time, and teaching myself. I also work with the local congregation there, but my main function will be to follow up on these correspondence graduates.

Shackelford: What are some of the basic problems that you see working in Sao Paulo and some of the things that have had to be ironed out perhaps between workers, Brazilians, and Americans.

Williams: Let's take the missionaries first. I think we have no problems about ideas of what the Bible teaches or no scriptural difference. I think that the main differences that missionaries face are over how to do the work--methods. Any two men will disagree on methods, so it is just a matter of what one man may say. In this leadership training school, our big difference is that we now get scholarships from the US for these men. Some of the missionaries feel like we shouldn't do this. Most people there that study, work in the day and go to school at night. So why should we come back to the US and raise funds for them to pay them to go to school? This is one big difference that the missionaries face. Another would be over buildings. Should we raise funds back here and help them build their buildings. So, it mainly enters in this area of methods.

Now, with the Brazilians themselves our basic difficulty, you run into a cultural difference: what is really honesty? You talked about a country you served in and this is the problem that you run into there and we do here. So that's one thing. This causes problems and when we employed people--I'll give you an example--there was one man that was employed for a great length of time that was embezzling. He was considered for elder material for a particular congregation. He was embezzling from the group and also from the congregation where he was a treasurer. He had been a member under the congregation for 5, 6, or 7 years. This is the type of problem that we do run into.

Shackelford: Problem of the matter of honesty there.

Williams: Yes.

Shackelford: There are no real irritations between Brazilians and Americans over the Brazilians or Americans?

Williams: I don't think it is to the point that we really do. The Brazilians are deeply hurt when the Americans leave. I have seen several leave and they are very emotional people. So, they are not rejoicing each time one of our men leaves.

Shackelford: You mentioned training that you received for going there to work and similar sessions that you attended. Tell us a little bit about your personal language training. Did you receive any of it here?

Williams: I studied Spanish in high school and one semester at Memphis State. Personally, I think it was a mistake. This is just a personal opinion, however. I think a person is better off to study the language in the country. I suggest this to most of the people that I talked to about going to Brazil. Now it may be different in Germany or Italy or some other countries. I suggest that the congregation allow the missionary one year to study the language and the culture. If they spend this year, apply themselves, and continue to study after this year on a part-time basis, then I think they will be a little better off than trying to assume that we can study three months here, or, let's say two years here, and in less than a month, be ready to teach upon arrival. I think the congregation that sends the people will be disappointed. The man that goes is going to be disappointed and maybe even disappointed to the extent that it will cause him to return because he couldn't get to work within a month, even if he has received language during the year.

Shackelford: What would be some of the difficulties that one would face as they try to get settled and try to get into the work there, family wise, and otherwise.

Williams: We had some heartbreaking experiences about getting our visas for going to Brazil and other families have run into this. I called the consulate and the lady told me that all I would have to do is come to New Orleans and within 24 hours, I would be able to get the visa. I was a little skeptical, but I made the trip. Once I arrived there, she gave me all the forms, and I came back home. Five months later, I got the visas. We had already set up a date to leave the congregation, therefore, the people in our particular congregation wondered what was going on. So, I think a person should check thoroughly about visas, whatever country it is.

I think one mistake a missionary makes is that we attend school, lectures, and everything, and are all fired up. However, our wives aren't able to attend a lot of these things. So, we are ready to go and maybe the wife isn't. So, she should be able to attend the seminars and things also.

Shackelford: What about on the field. Is the training provided there for the wife just as it is for the husband in language and other things?

Williams: There, in Brazil, we have orientation by the group and this helps. They give classes for several weeks on culture and other things. Not language, however, because one employs his own language teacher. One can't tie up the missionary by wanting him to teach another one the language.

Shackelford: Turn just a moment to your training that you received in college and also the training that you received in graduate school and in those mission seminars. I think you know a little bit about our program here. What would you see as some ways that we could improve our job here of training in order to help people who are making their decision in going to the field to do mission work?

Williams: Unfortunately, this program was started one year after I left here, so I really am not aware of all your program has to offer. I know of some of it and wish that I had been able to take many of the courses that you offer and could have been able to listen to a lot of the missionaries that came in for longer than to give just a few lectures. You have the missionary here all year. Therefore, I actually could not judge your program. The only courses that I had in missions were at the graduate school. I had two courses there and the seminar courses strictly in missions.

Shackelford: That's two more than I had in mine.

Williams: So I really couldn't say. I think your approach is tremendous and we need to let these young people see all the different areas here and get a taste of all of those areas that they can go into. I don't know what your approach is on language, though. I may have a different view all together than you would teach.

Shackelford: I don't think that we have an approach yet. We are working on this and trying to make some decisions ourselves. This, we haven't done yet. What, perhaps, are some things that I haven't covered that you would like to discuss and that you feel might be important to someone that is thinking about Brazil or missions in general.

Williams: I think that one real mistake the missionary makes is in his approach to getting support to go to the mission field. So many of our people start writing congregations and going to speak to these congregations and raise a little bit here and raise a little bit there. I found the approach, for myself and other men that I have talked to, that it is better to work with the congregation. I worked with the congregation for 8 months. They know us and they love us for what we were there. They know my idea that is: If a man can't do the work in the US, he certainly can't do it on the mission field. A lot of people think that missionaries are misfits. We send them overseas because they don't fit in here. If people, if congregations, would be willing to take the man in, and train him how to work in his community there, the missionary would get good support while he is overseas, not just money. Everybody knows we have to have money, but the people would write the man, which is vital, I think to a fresh man on the field. It was vital to me to receive letters. In five or six years, I may not need that emotional charge of receiving letters, but I need it now. So receiving letters from local congregations is a real boost. I know I've talked to men in Brazil. They told me I received more letters the first three months I was there than they had in 11 years of being on the mission field. That could be a mistake of the congregation who is supporting them. More than likely, it is the mistake of the missionary for not getting to know the people that sent him. So, it works both ways. So, working with the congregation is one thing.

Another thing that I can't quite understand is why a missionary has to spend all of his time raising funds. Let's say that he worked with a congregation that has eight elders and 16 deacons. Why should one man spend all of his time raising funds when these eight elders and 16 deacons have 24 contacts that this one man doesn't have. So, when I talk to my elders about funds, and if they feel like the funds are not in that congregation, will, then my suggestion is for them to find it instead of tying the missionary up. I don't think this is unrealistic.

Shackelford: What do you say is the amount of time that a man should stay in Brazil before he takes some time off to come back to visit with the congregation?

Williams: The denominational people have their men spend four years and return for one year on furlough. They are very unhappy with this because you have children in school and you have to pull them out and four years is entirely too long in Brazil. Now, in Australia or somewhere else, say Canada, it may not be too long. My idea is that between two and three years, a man should return. One of our men--I like to refer to this--Brother Howard Norton, has written a book about a missionary-elder relationship. In this, he talks about the furlough. He suggests 13 months to 24 months return. I feel more like 24 to 30 months return, or somewhere along this line.

Shackelford: How long of a period of time are you thinking of for the return?

Williams: The set-up I have with my congregation is three months return. Now Howard Norton says 18 months on the field for every 6 weeks return. So, it works out either way.

Shackelford: I think there are several fields which are probably going to do that. I know that in Italy, it used to be that we were fairly free in the summer. I mean, there weren't many things going on. However, now with the camp work and other work, you are busier in the summer than you are in the fall, so several of the men are coming home every other year. During the Christmas season, they have a month off, and just stay at home for a month. This seems to be working out.

Williams: The group in Guatamala comes home every year for a month or goes somewhere every year for a month.

Shackelford: What are your immediate plans now? When are you returning?

Williams: I will leave here the 24th of this month and return to Sao Paulo. I plan to definitely work there two and a half more years. Then, I will either continue to work in Sao Paulo or move to another city.

Shackelford: I will certainly be praying for you and ask you to do the same for us. Anything that we can do here to be of help, let us know.

Williams: I appreciate that very much.