

Turning dreams into reality by Isabel Zwahlen and Bryan Bishop

Curitiba. Over the centuries, Europeans have been drawn to the mild climate of this city in southern Brazil. They built a city deeply influenced by their European roots. You can see it in the city's architecture, in the people you meet, and in the many and varied expressions of art. It's a mixture of cultures—Polish, Ukrainian, Italian, German, Jewish, Arab, Dutch—that speaks of the role Curitiba is playing in reaching out and touching peoples of other nations.

"Spiritually, it's a city with a call to be a light to the nations," says Laurenildo Santana, leader of YWAM's base in the city.

It's a calling Laurenildo and his wife Filomena feel personally, a calling that first led them to the city in 1985. At the time, they were staying as guests of the Menonitas Institute in Curitiba. They began to dream together of some day, somehow starting a training center that would send people out to the nations. Little did they know that in less than ten years, their ministry would own the property they were staying in, would have helped pioneer YWAM's work in Angola and would have 25 people overseas working among the unreached.

The Vision Begins

For Laurenildo, these dreams of reaching the nations began that same year, in early 1985. Laurenildo attended a missions conference at a Baptist church near Belo Horizonte. A man named Loren Cunningham got up to speak. He challenged his audience, "Ask God to give you a people and adopt it."

Recalls Laurenildo, "God spoke to me. It was Angola." At the time, Laurenildo didn't know what he could do about Angola. This African country was in the midst of a bloody civil war—a needy place, but almost impossible to go to. This event began to re-focus the young man who grew up wanting to be a farmer. After his conversion at age 19, he had dreamt of traveling throughout Brazil as an evangelist. He met a young lady named Filomena in his home town, a city called Governador Valadares. She was a singer and worked as a missionary of the church.

By 1985, the two were engaged and had joined YWAM, traveling around as part of a worship team. Laurenildo, who plays guitar, was thinking he would support Filomena in her music ministry.

But on their first visit to Curitiba, God showed both Laurenildo and Filomena that He had other plans. As they prayed together one morning, God led them to this verse: "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds" (John 12:24). They both felt that they should lay down their personal projects and invest together in something new God would give them in this city.

After their visit to Curitiba, Laurenildo and Filomena returned to the YWAM base in Belo Horizonte. They got married and completed a Leadership Training School (LTS). In May of 1987, they returned to pioneer YWAM's work in Curitiba with a tiny team that included themselves and just one other person, Maria Dalva. Their goal: to reach out to the southern state of Parana, to establish a training base and to send people out to the nations. In particular, says Laurenildo, "Angola was burning on my heart."

Confronting Death

But those first years in Curitiba would not be easy. Although the new YWAM work was welcomed by churches in the area, in particular because of a "man of peace" named Joao Durvalino Borba who introduced them around, Laurenildo and Filomena faced personal challenges as their children were born. They lived in a small, rented house.

Filomena gave birth to twin girls, a joyous event but also a fearful one. The girls were born prematurely. One of them almost died at five days old.

Then, three years later, they had a son, Joyson, again a happy event but also a painful one. Joyson was born with a heart defect. During the operation to correct this condition, the baby went into a coma. This lasted 20 days. When he came out of the coma, Joyson had a paralysis that lasts to this day.

"We went through much suffering," says Laurenildo. "We had to confront death."

Eventually, the couple learned lessons that, says Laurenildo, make them stronger today. "God allows us the trials but He gives us the resources to be victorious and abundant in grace," he says. "We learned to trust in God even when we didn't understand."

They also began to reach out to other families in Curitiba who have handicapped children. Today, this informal ministry continues, and is still



taking shape. As a family, the Santanas help other families with handicapped children find schooling, emotional and spiritual support, and transportation. They are training a team and hope to build facilities to do even more. Laurenildo says the whole experience has helped them grow bolder and stronger in their faith. And he says their growth as a couple has helped their staff as well. "Our experience influenced us a lot in the steps of faith we took, and our staff were looking to us, to our testimony. They embraced the vision with us, and we grew together. Today they are also bold in embracing the challenges of faith. There was a multiplication in many areas."

YWAM in Angola

And what about Angola? What ever happened to that burning desire of Laurenildo's for this adopted country? At the time Laurenildo felt God prompting him to claim this nation, people were leaving Angola due to the war. YWAM had no long-term presence there.

Fellow Belo Horizonte LTS grads, Marcos and Marcia Azolin, though, were undeterred. Along with Jim Stier, now YWAM's President, they went to Angola and met some people Jim knew there. Marcos and Marcia returned in 1991, despite the concerns of many, Laurenildo included.

"It was the middle of the war," he recalls, "and many were asking, and we were asking ourselves, if this was the right moment to go there."

The team in Angola was forced to move quickly from one city to another. But still, Marcos and Marcia and the others persevered. The Curitiba base got more and more involved, until they became the Brazilian coordinators of the project. Laurenildo himself visited the work in Angola, including the church planting work among the unreached Mukuando people.

Today, there are 33 YWAM staff in Angola, the majority of them Angolans. In addition to their DTS, and other discipleship training in churches, they do local evangelism, feeding programs, run a home for orphans of the war, and minister among three remote unreached tribal groups. A church has now been planted in one of these groups, the Mukuando.

They still persevere despite hardships and even tragedy. In April, a Brazilian YWAMer in Angola died of Malaria.

Jim Stier says that Curitiba has provided invaluable help in supporting the work in Angola. "Curitiba has supplied new people, money and new

supporters, prayer support and pastoral visits. These sorts of things are very encouraging to the team and help a lot in building the ministry there.” Laurenildo gives the credit for the Angolan success to God’s working through the team’s leaders. “Success is dependency on God,” says Laurenildo. “Marcio and Marcia had a deep conviction of their call to go and endure in the middle of the war. They faced many trials and their determination was very strong. Their boldness and faith were a special example for me.”

Pioneers in the Church

Laurenildo also credits Curitiba’s involvement with local churches for enabling them to do as much as they have done. Today, more than 40 percent of the churches in Curitiba are involved with YWAM Curitiba’s work in some way, thanks to the attitude Laurenildo and Filomena had when they first arrived.

“The strategy God gave to us was personal relationship with the local church. He gave us key people in many churches. Until today they are our friends and continue to support us.”

In their own church, Laurenildo teaches adults and youth and Filomena teaches the teenagers. In the city as a whole, they help churches with mission conferences and seminars, and they host a monthly meeting for pastors, at which about one third of the city’s pastors attend. Laurenildo has also facilitated trips for pastors to visit YWAM’s work in Macau or Africa.

It’s more than just programs, though, says Laurenildo. It’s the kind of life you live among church members that really counts. “When you have an open heart and start to live here as though you were already on the field, through intercession and being involved with the people, the church will follow through. They need models of pioneers. When you start to cry for the nations, you influence the church to get involved.”

With the help of these kinds of relationships, Laurenildo hopes to recruit 100 more missionaries, give them cross-cultural training, and send them out into the Muslim world.

Already, including Angola, Curitiba has 25 workers out in unreached areas, and six more are planning to go to Pakistan.

Be More Open

Laurenildo doesn’t have a problem with expanding Curitiba’s sights beyond



Angola and their local ministry. In fact, he encourages it. "Each project reaches a level of maturity and begins to walk by itself. So we are able to direct our attention to each project because the oldest are more mature and walk alone. As much as you are open to God to have other projects, the more mature you become. My personal testimony is that after we decided to adopt new projects besides Angola, our base grew more. More students for our DTS, more respect and consideration from the leaders in the body of Christ toward us, more recognition and support.

"We recommend: be more open and don't be afraid to expand your tent and enlarge the vision. Let it multiply. Allow the people who come to the base to have freedom to seek God and to receive from God guidance for new projects. Don't limit God."

He adds that this kind of expansiveness should be under the umbrella of YWAM's missionary calling. "We are a missionary agency called to worship and serve the Lord and His body, the church," he asserts. "Fidelity to the call to be a missionary agency helps us to be humble and not see ourselves as owners of truth. It is very good to know who we are, without being proud."

The boldness that Laurenildo and Filomena have learned in the pain they've gone through continues to help them go forward, despite the uncertainties of life and of Brazil's economy.

"I don't believe that the economic situation in the world will hinder us or influence in a negative way our missionaries because we have a long history of unstable economy," says Laurenildo. "On the contrary, this challenges us to trust God more and makes us see that money is not a problem to reach the world."

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This article reprinted from the International YWAMer, February 1998. While the article dates back a few years, the principles are timely.