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The Church in Brazil: An Interview with CES Director Paulo Grahl

PAULO GRAHL

Paulo Renato Grahl (grahlpr@lds.org) is a Church Educational System (CES) area director and a counselor in the São Paulo Brazil Missionary Training Center presidency.

Roydon Olsen (olsenroydon@yahoo.com) is an instructor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at BYU.

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The Church reached the million-member milestone first in the United States, followed by Mexico, and then Brazil. Church growth in Brazil has been particularly astounding, and the national media report it to be the fastest-growing religion there. The first stake organized in South America was the São Paulo Brazil Stake, located in the same city as the first modern-day temple to be built on the continent.

In order to gain a more global perspective of the value, need, and adaptations of CES programs in different parts of the world, we visited with CES area director Paulo Grahl in São Paulo and talked about the impact of the programs in Brazil. Brother Grahl holds a BA in English and Portuguese from the University of the Sinos Valley (Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos) in São Leopoldo, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. He learned English on his mission, and it became a lifelong study. He taught English at various prestigious institutions and later received an MBA from the National Institute of Post-Graduate Studies in São Paulo, Brazil.

Brother Grahl's journey of service began with a call at age seventeen to be a construction missionary from 1965 to 1967. At that time most Brazilian young men were called as building missionaries because all meetinghouses in Latin

America were built with the help of such missionaries, along with local members and proselyting missionaries. Brother Grahl worked on meetinghouses in Pelotas and Uruguaiana, both cities in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Not long after this, he was called as a counselor in the Brazil Porto Alegre Mission presidency (1973–78), where he served under three presidents.

He returned to his roots in December of 1978 as president of the Novo Hamburgo Brazil Stake, where he served until 1982. The stake was unique because of the many communities it served that were settled by German and Italian immigrants. In 1988 the call came for him to preside over the Brazil Brasilia Mission, which covered a vast area, including the Amazon Basin, where shortly before Brother Grahl's release the Brazil Manaus Mission was organized as part of the Brasilia Mission. He then served as an Area Seventy from 1995 to 2007, four years of which were spent as second counselor in the Brazil Area Presidency under Presidents Neil L. Andersen and Mervyn B. Arnold.

Olsen: *Could you comment on the importance of the seminary and institute programs in helping the youth in Brazil?*

Grahl: There is no question about the vital importance of the seminary and institute programs of the Church. They help to strengthen the youth of Zion and better prepare them as missionaries, parents, leaders, and citizens of the nation.

For our youth to stand firm and strong in a world where the influence of evil is growing at an astonishing rate, they need clear, inspired, and qualified teaching. They need to learn how to identify key principles and doctrines as they study the scriptures and to be able to explain them, share them, testify of them, and apply them in their lives. This is the broad scope of our training and the essence of what we call the Teaching and Learning Emphasis, which comprises a set of principles that establish a common ground for all those involved in seminary and institute teaching, regardless of geography, language, or culture.

To provide you with a general picture of our situation, young people everywhere seem to love to go to seminary and institute. In most cases in international areas, the institute program is the only organized and structured vehicle where young adults, single or married, can participate and associate with each other in a lofty, edifying environment. In countries such as Brazil, we have, over the past few years, seen significant growth in the participation

of young adults in the institute program. I believe that to be the case in all Latin American countries, as well as in other parts of the world.

The Brethren have challenged us to increase the exposure and impact of seminary and institute programs in the lives of our young people. We are to do that by working very closely with leaders, parents, and teachers and by providing effective training to all involved.

Some of the challenges we face in international areas are that:

- Most of the seminary and institute teaching is done by a host of wonderful volunteers throughout the worldwide Church, but volunteer teacher turnover becomes a matter of constant reworking for those who are charged with teacher training.
- There is growing concern among parents and leaders about security, and they are sometimes reluctant to let their children go to seminary or institute classes in the early morning or in the evening.
- Financial circumstances sometimes represent a challenge to students attending class on a regular basis.
- Young adults are usually very busy with school and work, and some of them have a hard time finding a place for seminary or institute on their calendars.
- A large number of our youth have parents who are neither members nor attenders of the Church. This poses a challenge to young people in terms of regular attendance and of encouragement and support from home.

But these and other challenges only make our task so much more exciting. I sincerely believe that, as was the case with Nephi, the Lord will continue to prepare a way for the seminaries and institutes to fulfill their sacred role of helping our youth come unto Christ through “feasting upon the word” (2 Nephi 31:20).

Olsen: *How did you become employed in the Church Educational System?*

Grahl: In February of 1973, I accepted an invitation through David A. Christensen, who had started the seminary and institute program in Brazil in 1971, to give up my career as an English teacher and to work for the Church Educational System. I began working as a coordinator in Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul. I later served as an institute director on three different occasions in Porto Alegre. At the beginning of 1983, I was invited to be the area director for the Europe West and South Area, comprising Spain, Portugal, Italy, France, and the French-speaking parts of Belgium and Switzerland; I replaced Christian Euvrard, who had been called as a mission president to Italy. I currently serve as the director for the Brazil Area, which has recently been part of a consolidation of the former Brazil North and Brazil South Areas.

Olsen: Both your early service in Brazil and this move to Europe were pioneering efforts. Could you share some of your experiences serving in the trenches?

Grahl: Before my arrival, the implementation of the early-morning seminary program had already been started, especially in Spain and Portugal, with the great work done by devoted coordinators under the direction of Jim Stevens, Cory Bangerter, and Christian Euvrard. Having had a great experience with early-morning seminary in Brazil, soon after my arrival in Europe I realized that the youth were ready for the challenge of daily participation in seminary, so that became one of our top priorities. With the support of leaders and parents and the hard work of coordinators and volunteer teachers, the program was expanded and was eventually established in all of the countries in our area.

Olsen: What were some of the challenges of cultural adaptation you faced?

Grahl: Although the former area director had lived in Paris, France, we chose to settle in Madrid, Spain, because we thought it would be easier to learn the language since we had some exposure to Spanish before. At first my family had to struggle with the differences in terms of culture, food, climate, and language. But with time we were able to cope with the challenges and to make many new friends and serve the Lord in various assignments in the Church in Madrid. We learned to love and appreciate the people and the fascinating history of those great Latin cultures. We saw faith and devotion among the Saints in those lands. We saw wonderful miracles among the members as they left their ancient religious traditions in order to embrace the restored gospel of Jesus Christ and to join his true and living Church. We saw the new generations going through experiences with the scriptures in seminary and institute, changing their own lives, and rising to higher standards of living. We saw the devotion of leaders, teachers, and coordinators who worked together for the common good and the happiness of our youth. It was marvelous to see how the true doctrines and principles of the gospel are able to influence the lives of people everywhere in the world, regardless of nationality, culture, or traditions.

Olsen: What were some of the day-to-day struggles you faced as you implemented the various CES programs in Europe?

Grahl: The youth were ready for the challenges of participating in the daily seminary program, even when it was held in the early morning hours. The greater challenge usually lay with leaders and parents who were not always

willing to pay the price and to sacrifice in order to make things happen. That was the reality in Europe: everywhere I went I could see the readiness and joy of the students, along with the loving care and dedicated service of teachers. With time and concentrated effort, we saw the daily seminary program become an important tool and benefit in the eyes of students, parents, and leaders alike.

Olsen: How did this experience help you later in your homeland?

Grahl: Those three years in Europe were very important for me to more clearly see the powerful effects of the gospel in the lives of people and how much it can change lives and behavior, especially in the young people. As I returned to Brazil, I felt I had gained more experience and maturity and was able to make a more meaningful contribution in my new assignments in my homeland. Two years after our return, I was called as a mission president, and then I could see the great effects of seminary and institute in the lives of the missionaries and how helpful the knowledge of the holy scriptures was in their increasing ability to teach people and to bring souls to Christ.

Olsen: What progress and benefits have you observed as a result of implementing CES programs in the areas where you have worked?

Grahl: I believe I have observed greater preparation of these young people to become more effective missionaries, parents, leaders, and citizens. Having served in various leadership positions and having participated in the calling and training of numerous new bishops and stake presidents, I could see the great effects of those seminary and institute years in the lives and service of those who had experience in CES programs. They were men of greater spirituality, devotion, preparedness, vision, and willingness to magnify their callings. This is especially important in Latin America because, in many cases, those called as bishops are between twenty-five and thirty years of age, and a good number of stake presidents are called who are not yet in their forties.

Seminary and institute programs also play an important role in helping parents cope with the challenge of raising their children in the pathway of virtue and righteousness. It is also a means to help leaders in their challenging task of orienting the youth in the strait and narrow path of the gospel.

Olsen: Let's talk about international students from your area who come to the United States. What suggestions do you have for North American religion teachers who instruct an ever-increasing number of international students? How can they become acquainted with and try to understand the culture of each one of these students?

Grahl: This is certainly an important issue, and we must do all that can be done. Teachers need to realize that even within Latin America, each country has significant cultural differences and customs, different things they can relate with.

One important contribution would be for teachers to always encourage students to go back to their countries of origin after finishing their studies and to help their own people and the Church to grow, using the skills and training they have received. There is so great a need for leaders who have excelled in different careers and who can represent the Church in all segments of society in addition to helping the Church to be stronger through their dedicated service in various callings and responsibilities. The Prophet Joseph Smith had the vision that the Church would fill North and South America, and it is coming true. These new generations of leaders are the ones in whom the Lord will trust to make his work move forward with power and glory.

Olsen: *We have talked about those who come here to study at BYU. How can BYU professors better train students from the U.S. culture who are called to foreign missions?*

Grahl: The *Preach My Gospel* handbook has come through the inspiration of prophets, apostles, and other inspired leaders. It has become a powerful and effective tool in the training of missionaries, so that they may (1) understand the purpose of missionary work; (2) have a deeper comprehension of the fundamental doctrine and principles of the restored gospel; (3) learn how to find and teach by the Spirit; (4) learn how to help people receive the basic ordinances of salvation; (5) learn how to better organize and use their time; (6) learn how to work more effectively with leaders and members; and (7) develop other skills and abilities that make for a successful missionary.

I now have the privilege of serving in the São Paulo MTC, and it is wonderful to see the great benefits in the lives of the missionaries that come as a result of studying the *Preach My Gospel* handbook and to see how prepared they are as they leave for the field.

The institute missionary preparation course has recently been rewritten and totally adapted to the *Preach My Gospel* handbook to help prospective missionaries have a better grasp of the new approach, even before they enter the MTC. I believe it would be wonderful if BYU professors could somehow look for ways to emphasize the principles and contents of this great volume.

Olsen: *Let's speak specifically of Brazil. Are there basic things about the culture we should be more aware of as we prepare missionaries to serve in your land?*

Grahl: Brazilians are, by nature, very friendly, warm, and tenderhearted. This is evidenced by the use of the diminutive endings of endearment—*inho* and *inha*—in most of the nouns in conversation. They are diminutive endings that express tenderness and affection. Brazilians like to greet those of the opposite sex and who are friends or relatives by hugging and kissing their cheeks. It is interesting that when communicating by telephone, email, or other means, the caller or sender will usually end by saying or writing *um abraço* (“a hug”) or *um beijo* (“a kiss”). Knowing about these and other cultural features may be helpful for those preparing to come to Brazil. Although missionaries are not allowed to embrace or kiss people of the opposite sex, it is important that they become familiar with the culture so that they can more readily adjust. All of this may be quite true about other countries in Latin America as well.

Olsen: *Of course, exposure to the history of the region and positive personal experiences of others and the like would be helpful for anyone coming into our culture. Do you have any thoughts about this?*

Grahl: While living in Spain, I once told a missionary that I was from Brazil. He asked where that was and if it was close to Switzerland! I believe some preliminary notions of the geography, culture, and history of the country would help those called to serve in Brazil. They would be able to appreciate the experience much more and develop a greater appreciation for the people and the land before arriving in the field.

Also very helpful would be a grasp of the early beginnings of the Church in Brazil in a place called Ipomeia, in the state of Santa Catarina. Before World War II, missionaries were sent to that rural community from Buenos Aires, Argentina, at the request of a German sister who had been baptized in Germany and then moved to Brazil with her family. The reason for the move was that her husband hated the Church and all that had to do with it. He thought that moving to Brazil would separate his wife from the Saints forever. But somehow she found out that the Church was established in Buenos Aires, and she wrote the mission president there, who sent missionaries to Ipomeia. The antagonistic husband later began to secretly read the Book of Mormon and ended up requesting baptism. Because he was crippled and unable to walk, he was carried into the river that ran by the meetinghouse built by the members. The records say that he walked out of the river after baptism.

Wouldn't it be wonderful for the missionaries going to the Brasilia Mission to know that Elder Ezra Taft Benson dedicated the land of Brazil for missionary work during a visit to the city of Brasilia?

Olsen: We have talked about pioneering efforts. What has your experience been with the Perpetual Education Fund? What has it done for Brazil, in your experience?

Grahl: The Perpetual Education Fund came to be through the prophetic vision of President Gordon B. Hinckley, who declared that education is the door to opportunity. Among other countries, he certainly had Brazil in mind when he expressed his deep concern about those who wished they could have access to education and training but did not have the means to afford it. There was great anguish in the heart of our dear prophet when he thought of the many returned missionaries who had to go back to the almost miserable life (in terms of economic status) that they had before entering the mission field. And then, when they came back home with lots of hope and plans, having had their lives transformed for the better during the mission experience, they would again face the sad and cruel reality of not being able to find a good job for the lack of skills and training. They were not able to go about the most important responsibility in life: getting married and raising a family in the gospel. They were not able to serve the Lord the way they had always taught their investigators and new converts to do. Many of them would become less active because of discouragement and depression.

The Perpetual Education Fund has come as a wonderful resource and relief to thousands and thousands of these wonderful young men and women, restoring self-confidence and hope, opening the doors to education and jobs, and providing a way for these children of God to remain in the pathway to eternal salvation. This has been the reality in Brazil in these past seven years since the implementation of the Perpetual Education Fund program. This has been the history of Brazil, where we currently have more than ten thousand students. The results are very positive: students who have graduated, 77 percent; students who are working, 73 percent; and students who have found better work, 75 percent.

Among the challenges we have faced is the repayment of loans, which is not at the level we would like it to be. But we have a strong team, composed of Church employees, volunteers, and local leaders who work hard and in great harmony in the search for answers to these difficulties. I strongly believe that this program will continue to grow and be a marvelous blessing in the lives of thousands more who will have the burning desire to reach higher levels of performance in life. **RE**