

Relief Society and Church Welfare: The Brazilian Experience

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THERE WAS AN AIR OF EXCITEMENT as she explained her plans and described the efforts that had gone into the project. It didn't amount to much more than a small shop (bazaar) with a limited quantity of clothing and other items, but it was important to Ivête. Members of the ward Relief Society had responded by donating a large quantity of clothing to be sold to needy members at a minimal price. This was the first step for what she hoped would ultimately be a permanent shop designed to distribute used items to church members. Part of the reason for the excitement was that the project was patterned after the idea of Deseret Industries in the United States which she had heard about but never seen. For Ivête it was both the satisfaction of providing help to those in need combined with fulfilling religious responsibilities that made the project worthwhile.

When the idea was presented to her stake president he was supportive. But after contacting the regional representative a short time later, the stake president was informed that the project was to be discontinued. The church was not yet ready to provide long-term support for this type of welfare project in Brazil and could not provide financial assistance or allow its buildings to be used for this project. It could be done as a private enterprise but without affiliation to the church. Unable to personally accumulate the necessary capital, the idea of establishing a Brazilian Deseret Industries was abandoned.¹

Ivête's experience is not unique in the over sixty-year history of the Mormon church in Brazil. Since the time the institutional welfare program of the church began in the United States, Brazilian members have

1. Ivête Sodre da Mota Soares, Oral History, interviewed by Mark L. Grover, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1991. The project was begun in the 1980s.

been aware of its existence. The concepts of welfare, the institutional concern for the poor, and the program of storehouses, church farms, etc., have been used by missionaries to attract converts to the church. Picture books about the church have had prominent sections with photos of Welfare Square, church farms, Relief Society presidents filling out food orders, and other components of the system in the United States. It has been with some hesitation that missionaries and members inform investigators that the program has yet to be fully established in Brazil. The over 400,000 members in Brazil are still waiting for a program they have been taught is an integral part of the church.

This essay examines the question of institutional church welfare in Brazil from two approaches. The first considers church welfare and its relationship to the Brazilian female member. It shows that historically the function of religion and the role of women in Brazilian society and the church's concept of welfare are somewhat comparable. One of the primary functions of religious organizations in Brazil is to provide assistance to the poor, and it is the Brazilian woman who has traditionally been responsible for this. Second, this essay looks at an attempt to establish an institutional church welfare system in the early 1950s and why it was discontinued. This historical experience provides insight as to why the LDS welfare system has not been transferred to Brazil.

It should be understood that I am not criticizing the church. I do not have the experience, knowledge, or spiritual gifts to second-guess church authorities. Nor have I attempted to contact or interview church leaders or general authorities to determine semiofficial policy. This essay is an outgrowth of my experience watching the phenomenal activity of Brazilian female members in caring for and helping members and non-members alike. It is also the result of observing the frustration of Brazilian women who have cultural dispositions that are not being satisfied.

BRAZIL

Christ's statement that "For ye have the poor with you always" (Mark 14:7) has been the case with Brazil. Since Brazil was colonized there has existed a large gap between a few wealthy elite and a majority whose basic nutritional, medical, and material needs have not been adequately met. Under a traditional patrimonial system centered on large plantations, the majority of the population depended on land owners (*fazendeiros*) who owned the land they worked and controlled all aspects of their lives. Most remained in a subservient relationship with the plantation owner because of slavery, servitude, and debt peonage. Low wages, poor education, and a lack of opportunity remained important factors of

control through the mid-twentieth century.²

One of the consequences of recent industrialization and modernization has been the growth of metropolitan areas which have attracted large numbers of migrants trying to escape the poverty, domination, boredom, and lack of opportunities of rural Brazil. The rapid growth of urban areas has taxed the ability of cities to provide jobs, housing, medical facilities, and sanitary services which has resulted in the formation of shanty towns (*favelas*), jobs with low pay, and a scarcity of the basic necessities for certain segments of the population. A struggling national economy combined with political fragility has made it impossible for the government to provide social programs of critical emergency assistance to serve as governmental security blankets. The consequence is that in cities as well as rural areas many Brazilians are without the basic necessities of life including food and medicine. These circumstances are not abnormal in a country undergoing the phenomenal social and economic changes brought about by rapid modernization. I doubt the U.S. government welfare system would be able to cope with the problems now faced in Brazil.³

Consequently the poverty that exists in Brazil is difficult for Americans to comprehend. As a Brazilian friend recently commented during a visit to Provo, "Here in the United States you have *pobreza* [poverty]. In Brazil we have *miséria* [misery]."

The absence of effective government social programs means that individuals and private organizations have the primary burden for helping the poor. The individual's responsibility for assisting the poor has its roots in the plantation system itself. Because of the dependent relationship between the plantation owner and the people, it was the family of the *fazendeiro* or "coronel" who provided emergency assistance in the form of food and medicine when a crisis occurred. Society functioned within a pattern based on patronage, linkage, and connections. It was essential that a family or person be connected or linked to someone of means who could provide help and assistance when needed. In return the patron expected allegiance, fidelity, and political support.⁴

2. Riordan Roett has defined the Brazilian political patrimonial system as "the creation and maintenance of a highly flexible and paternalistic public order, dedicated to its own preservation and the preservation of the unity of the nation-state." An important element of the patrimonial system is "clientelismo" which is a system based on an exchange of substantive favors, legal privilege, and protection for support (Riordan Roett, *Brazil: Politics in a Patrimonial Society* [New York: Praeger, 1984], 26-27).

3. For recent studies of Brazil's problem of poverty, see Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); and José Pastore, *Inequality and Social Mobility in Brazil* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982).

4. For a study of the Brazilian plantation system, see Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970).

The fundamental concepts of the patrimonial system presently operate to assist the poor of Brazil. The following is an example. I lived with a family in the city of Niterói, state of Rio de Janeiro, for two months and watched with amazement, awe, and a complete lack of understanding as the lady (*Dona*) of the house traveled several times to a rural area surrounding the city and delivered food, medicine, clothes, shoes, school books, furniture, etc., to a few poor families. These poor people became acquainted with the family through various methods but primarily because the woman or one of her daughters had worked for the family as a maid. My friends had accepted responsibility to provide help when needed. I have no idea how much this woman gave to the families, but she did something on almost a weekly basis during the two months I was there. This type of individual activity is an unwritten social code that most Brazilians accept on all social levels.⁵

A second example is that of a young women without family support who had emotional and mental problems. When she became pregnant and destitute she was brought into the home of a prominent member of the church for several months until she had the baby and was able to get an apartment. This family helped her find a job and continued to provide assistance when needed, which was often due to the mental state of the women. Recently, the young woman's daughter, who was ten years old, got sick and this member spent much of the day helping. The member had a full-time job, was active in the church, took care of her own family, and still made time to care for this women and her daughter along with other acts of charity.

In addition to the tradition of the individual helping the poor, private organizations and societies are important components of welfare assistance in Brazil. Though some of these organizations are political and provide questionable help, most are active in their support of the poor. Religious organizations are perceived in Brazil to have the primary responsibility for aiding the poor. Most believe that beyond the spiritual role of the church, its function in society is to respond to social problems. The most important of these religious groups are the charitable organizations of the Catholic church. The activities of Catholic groups have gone largely unheralded and have provided considerable help to Brazil's poor.⁶

5. She continued to pay her maids the accepted traditional low salary while providing material goods to the family. She didn't want to upset the conventional social structures by paying more than an allowable salary. For an example of this type of patrimonial social responsibility even among the poor of the slums (*favelas*), see Carolina Maria de Jesus, *Child of the Dark* (New York: New American Library, 1962).

6. Fernando de Azevedo, *Brazilian Culture: An Introduction to the Study of Culture in Brazil* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1950), 139-64, and Thomas C. Bruneau, *The Church in Brazil: The Politics of Religion* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982).

Non-Catholics churches have also become involved. Almost all Christian churches have programs to respond to the material needs of their members and the poor. That institutional responsibility extends to non-Christian Afro-Brazilian religions which have extensive programs of social help for their members.⁷

Women, in most cases, manage the welfare activities of these organizations. This concept again comes from Brazil's past, where it has been considered a social responsibility of elite Brazilian women to be involved in helping the poor. This notion is an important tradition that permeates all class levels of Brazilian society.⁸

This concept can be seen in the activities of the wife of the Brazilian president. Though during the years of the military dictatorship their activities were not well known, many presidential wives either began or took over institutions whose purpose was to provide basic necessities (food and medicine) to the poor. The most recent example was that of Rosane Malta Collor, wife of the former president, who headed the Legião Brasileira de Assistência (LBA), an organization that distributed food and assistance to the poor. Though her role was controversial since the organization was used to funnel money into the pockets of friends and family, the image was important. Her obligation was to provide basic help and assistance to the poor. A contrast can be made with that of the activities and projects of recent wives of U.S. presidents: Barbara Bush—illiteracy, Nancy Reagan—drug prevention, Lady Bird Johnson—highway beautification, etc. There is an important difference in the focus of their activities.⁹

THE MORMON CHURCH WELFARE PROGRAM

The Mormon church's welfare program theoretically harmonizes with the Brazilian concept of private institutional involvement in provid-

7. Boanerges Ribeiro, *Protestantismo e cultura brasileira: aspectos culturais da implantação do protestantismo no Brasil* (São Paulo: Casa Editora Presbiteriana, 1981); David Hess, *Spirits and Scientists: Ideology, Spiritism, and Brazilian Culture* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991); and Paul V. A. Williams, *Primitive Religion and Healing: A Study of Folk Medicine in N.E. Brazil* (Cambridge, Engl.: D. S. Brewer, 1979).

8. Edward L. Cleary, *Crisis and Change: The Church in Latin America Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985). This is not unlike many female societies in the United States, primarily in the South, in which wealthy women actively work in thrift shops and food kitchens in direct assistance to the poor. For studies of the female in Brazil, see Mary del Priore, *A mulher na história do Brasil* (São Paulo: Contexto, 1988); June E. Hahner, *Emancipating the Female Sex: The Struggle for Women's Rights in Brazil, 1850-1940* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990); and Heleieth E. B. Saffioti, *Women in Class Society* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978).

9. The most notable Latin American example of this concept is that of Eva Perón in Argentina and her involvement in the Eva Peron Foundation. See Nicholas Fraser and Marysa Navarro, *Eva Perón* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 114-33.

ing for the needs of the poor. Though there are some fundamental differences—How do you require the poor to work for their assistance when the father and mother already work ten to twelve hours a day?—the general ideas are similar. The church should be involved institutionally in providing basic assistance to the poor along with the private activities of individual members. It is also an area which the members, primarily females, become involved in helping the poor. The role of the Relief Society in determining needs and dispersing food and clothing fits within the Brazilian concept of female and religious responsibility.

Few would disagree that the LDS church welfare system would be valuable to the members of the church. The question is why has it not yet been fully extended to Brazil. I propose to examine an experiment in church welfare in the early 1950s that provides some insight into this question.

Rulon S. Howells's Welfare Program

Between 1949 and 1953 the Brazilian Mission president was Rulon S. Howells. The church was small, missionaries having gone to Brazil in 1928 to proselyte among the German population of the south. Branches were established and functioning in the major areas of the south, but the number of members remained modest. Proselyting activity among the majority Portuguese-speaking population began in 1939 but was cut short in 1943 by World War II when American missionaries went home. Returning four years later, missionaries helped reestablished the church in most areas but growth in the number of converts was slow. The church Howells found upon his arrival was small but dedicated.

Howells was a compassionate man with strong beliefs. He believed that the church could provide more than ecclesiastical and social activities and should be involved in all facets of members' lives. His experience with several welfare projects in Utah during the latter part of World War II convinced him of the necessity of helping members with "temporal" as well as spiritual needs. He decided that one of his goals would be to establish, as much as possible, the complete welfare program of the church. His initial approach was to emphasize some lesser-known aspects of Mormonism's health code in order to encourage small plot gardening, food preservation, and home industry among members. Once aware of this part of the gospel members would be ready for the complete welfare program of the church.¹⁰

10. Rulon S. Howells, Oral History, 77-80, interviewed by Gordon Irving, 1973, James Moyle Oral History Program, archives, historical department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter LDS archives); Rulon S. Howells, "Editorial," *A Liahona* 3 (Sept. 1950): 172-73.

Shortly after arriving, he published in the mission magazine, *A Liahona*, a series of articles on the church's health code beginning with the first Portuguese translation of Joseph Smith's "Word of Wisdom" revelation. Succeeding articles contained little on the prohibitions of tobacco, alcohol, tea, or coffee, but emphasized the lesser-known positive aspects of the revelation. The first part of Howells's program was to encourage members to strive for a complete observance of the Word of Wisdom, emphasizing the (1) consumption of less meat, (2) eating of vegetables and fruits, (3) use of unrefined sugar, and (4) avoidance of white flour. Howells felt members needed to be introduced to and be living what he considered to be the "complete" gospel. He stated, "The gospel is a plan of progression. If we don't show progress made by members in personal cleanliness, better living conditions, home improvements, proper food and eating habits as we know them, and the general improvement of our members, how can we expect to have an investigator judge the 'fruits of Mormonism.'"¹¹

Missionaries were assigned to teach women in Relief Society those selected principles of the health code. Missionaries spent a significant amount of time helping the Relief Society, since these changes resulted in notable dietary changes, especially with regards to the use of white flour and refined sugar. Missionaries became so involved that some even began to use the program in their proselyting. They would tract by giving out samples of home-baked whole wheat bread and talking about the church.

One of the results of the program was that the Relief Society began to grow and preserve food. "We are endeavoring to get our members to be more conscious of conserving what foods are appropriate so that they will not be completely dependent upon going to the store for every day's provision." Branch members purchased plots of ground where large communal gardens were planted. Women learned canning procedures developed in the United States, and branchwide projects of preserving food were held. Storage units were set up in the mission home and local branch buildings for wheat, molasses, sugar, and canned fruits. Food exchanges among branches occurred in order to save money on the cost of basic food staples. The Relief Society also sold to members certain types of foodstuffs which could not easily be obtained, such as a coffee substitute made from barley called *cevada*.¹²

11. "Uma Palavra Sobre Sua Saúde," *A Liahona* 3 (Jan. 1950): 12-13. See also Rulson S. Howells, "Digest of Brown Book," LDS archives.

12. "Annual Statistical and Financial Report of the Brazilian Mission, 1950," 12, Church Library, Brazil Church Office Building, São Paulo, Brazil; Weldon B. Jolley, "O Plano de Bem Estar Tem Início no Brasil," *A Liahona* 2 (June 1949): 131; "Haverá Quando Precisar," *A Liahona* 3 (Feb. 1950): 25; and Howells, Oral History, 35-36, 59.

A second aspect of the program was the encouragement of home industries. One of the missionaries had worked with hand looms, so Howells arranged for the purchase of several which were placed in homes throughout the mission. After receiving instructions from missionaries, the Relief Society began making cloth, from which they sewed their own clothing. Some branches were so proficient that surplus articles were produced and sold to local stores. Though most of the projects were church supported, some individual families also began home industries.¹³

Howells's programs were well accepted by members, especially women. Some activities required total participation, resulting in improved relationships among members. Members were able to work together on projects that benefitted less fortunate members. In some ways it reached Howells's objective "to become a source of security and independence for the members to learn to work together toward the accomplishment of the collective objective. It is strengthening their testimonies." The project did, however, demand so much time that other more ecclesiastical aspects of the church received decreased emphasis.¹⁴

When Howells was replaced by President Asael Sorensen in 1953, most of the projects the Relief Society was sponsoring were eliminated in favor of more traditional activities. Many members protested, feeling that the unity and closeness that had resulted would be lost, but to no avail. Sorensen was chastised by Howells for doing away with his programs because he felt that without it the Brazilians were not being given "the fullness of the gospel." Sorensen did not see the purpose of the church during this period being fulfilled with the establishment of the welfare program. He also did not agree with storing and selling food in chapels. Much of the wheat was being destroyed by weevils, and the canned food was rotting due to heat and humidity.¹⁵

This brief incident and Sorensen's reaction provide possible reasons why the church is reluctant to establish the welfare program in Brazil.

(1) Welfare is expensive and time-consuming. One of Sorensen's concerns was that energy, time, and money were being diverted from what he considered to be critical activities, such as missionary work and organizational development. This is still a concern as the church struggles to expand and establish itself in all parts of the world.

(2) The welfare program cannot function properly within the church

13. "Manuscript History of the Church in Brazil, Mission Home," Curitiba, 29 May 1950, and Porto Alegre, 18 July 1950, LDS archives.

14. Ross Vienweg, "Trabalhos Missionários no Brasil," *A Liahona* 3 (May 1950): 193; and Aline Siegrist, Oral History, interviewed by F. LaMond Tullis, Joinville, Santa Catarina, Brazil, 1976, copy in my possession.

15. Asael T. Sorensen, Oral History, 29-32, interviewed by Gordon Irving, 1973, James Moyle Oral History Program, LDS archives.

unless there is a strong structural and organizational base, or priesthood foundation. During Howells's presidency the priesthood was weak, and though the present church is much stronger there is still a deficiency in terms of the priesthood. This is due partly to the tradition of dividing wards and stakes earlier than might happen in the United States.

(3) The spiritual aspects of the gospel are more critical in the development of the church. Consequently money is funneled into temples, education, missions, and chapel construction before welfare.

(4) The environmental and cultural challenges involved in transferring a system developed in the cool, dry climate of Utah to the hot and humid tropical climate of Brazil would mean that the system would have to be modified. Just as it is more complicated to store food in a tropical climate, some aspects of food and relief distribution, for example, would have to be altered.

An important concern is how the church deals with poverty at the level found in Brazil. Historically when the possibility of establishing the welfare program has been examined, leaders have feared what would happen if assistance were available in a society in which *miséria* is so prominent. One concern is that there would be a rush to join the church to obtain welfare aid and that the amount of assistance required could be so great that the system would not be able to adequately respond. Some, probably falsely, claim that presently many join the church in hopes of obtaining assistance and then leave when their expectations are not met.¹⁶

One of the interesting misperceptions and miscommunications between Brazilians and American that results over the issue of welfare is the question of attitudes towards the poor. There are doubts in the mind of many Brazilian members that Americans are truly concerned for the poor. The misperceptions may be the consequence of different opinions as to how poverty occurs and how best to react to it. The American Protestant view of poverty as a symbol of a lack of salvation is not understood by Brazilians whose traditional Catholic Aristotelian view of the world posits that a person is born into a social level or economic station for a reason and cannot be changed.

In fact many Americans who have had little experience with *miséria* do not know how to react. I offer two examples that occurred in the 1950s to emphasize my point. These incidents were described by a Brazilian female member who was serving as a missionary at the time. One day a woman came to the door of the mission home explaining that she had found two men on her door step who needed immediate medical help.

16. This view is common throughout the history of missionary work in Brazil as well as the rest of Latin America. Whenever baptisms increase significantly, this claim is often made.

The woman was asking for money to pay for a taxi to take them to the hospital. This missionary went to the president and explained what was happening. The president said the church does not give money or charity to non-members. The missionary then took money from her own pocket to give to the woman.

Another incident occurred when this sister was in Relief Society in the southern city of Curitiba. A woman came to the door of the church requesting money to feed herself and her young children. The American president of the Relief Society indicated that the church did not give charity to non-members. This native-born sister and the rest of the Brazilian members were so upset that they pooled what money they had and gave it to the lady, while the American Relief Society president protested. Whether this Brazilian sister's perception was correct, she believed that Americans are not charitable to the poor, especially non-Mormons. My own perception is that Brazilians tend to believe the poor are telling them the truth, whereas most Americans do not.¹⁷

It should be pointed out that many church-sponsored welfare activities do occur in Brazil. The 22 August 1992 *Church News* reported that two stakes in the Santo Amaro region of São Paulo donated 1,800 hours to a local hospital. The project involved collecting used clothing, making sheets and blankets, and repairing the building. Projects such as this are important elements of the church's commitment to helping the poor. These projects are primarily local activities and do not include the same elements of church welfare as exists in the United States.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

It is ironic that within a country such as the United States which has wealth, luxury, and limited poverty, the LDS church has an institutional system of welfare that has succeeded in eliminating basic need emergencies among members. Whereas in areas of the world in which the level of poverty is often at crisis stages, the institutional reaction of the church for various reasons has been limited. Brazilians have asked for the program often and have been frustrated by the lack of response. The consequence has been heroic efforts by local Brazilian members, primarily women, to respond as best as possible to emergencies in the lives of the poor.

17. This woman has requested that she not be identified.

18. "1,800 Hours Donated," *Church News*, 22 Aug. 1992, 12.