

**Church Planting in Urban Slums:
A Case Study with Living Bread Ministries**

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to describe the process Living Bread Ministries (LBM) utilizes to church plant in the Brazilian *favelas* (Portuguese term meaning slum or shanty town). Our church plants in urban areas of southern Brazil demonstrate three primary aspects of church planting. One piece is identifying, training, and mentoring pastors in slum communities. A second facet of church planting is the process of evangelism, discipleship, and social ministry. A third feature is the role of global partnerships in the church planting process. A study of these three aspects provides a well rounded overview of LBM's church planting efforts among the desperately poor in Brazil.

A basic understanding of the history and structure of LBM will help to bring clarity to this case study. In 2006, LBM founded *Ministério Pão Vivo* (MPV); a church planting ministry focused on the urban poor in Brazil. MPV is led by a national board of directors and is supported, in part, by partnerships with Brazilian churches and individuals. For the first half of fiscal 2013 partnerships in Brazil have provided 21% of the total operating budget for MPV and our church planting activities. This is in addition to the giving of the members to their individual churches. The day to day operations of MPV are under the leadership of Pastor Joacyr Magioli, a Brazilian pastor with over thirty years experience in church planting. Since 2006, LBM has worked in partnership with this organization to plant eight churches in slum communities in southern Brazil.

In preparing this study, four church planters along with the leadership of MPV were interviewed. The church planters have been working with MPV for up to three years, and Pastor Magioli has been with the ministry since its inception. Each church planter comes from a similar community, and has a good understanding of life in the *favelas*. Their church planting

experience is clearly limited, but their understanding of ministering in a context of urban poverty is profound.

Calling and Equipping Pastors

There are unique difficulties inherent in planting churches in a context of severe urban poverty. One of the more significant difficulties is in identifying pastors who are called to work among the desperately poor. This problem is compounded in a region like southern Brazil, where the evangelical population is very small (Myatt). The approach we have taken to identify, train, and mentor pastors has been very relational in nature.

The process of identifying potential pastors begins at the local church level. Through the discipleship process, which includes hands on ministry together, local pastors and leaders identify members of their congregations who exhibit spiritual gifts and abilities that reveal an aptitude for pastoral ministry. Competency, or ability for pastoral ministry, is “extremely necessary because whatever community he [the pastor] is in, he will be the leader, the pastor, and the counselor” (Magioli). A potential pastor must have received gifts that equip him to fulfill these roles.

Several of our church planters have described their call as coming through the process of ministering tangibly with their own pastor. Pastor Lindomar, in recalling the year he spent ministering directly with his pastor, states; “I believe that these experiences with my brother in Christ Jesus allowed me to be called to be a church planter” (Jacques). Pastor Bira speaks of how God used many people to call him. He cites the same type of relationship with his pastor. However, he also credits the church, his family, friends, and seminary professors for contributing to the “formation” of his call (Alves).

Pastor Magioli, Executive Director of *Ministério Pão Vivo*, has been responsible for identifying church planters for our work among the urban poor. He has utilized his own network of pastors and leaders to find candidates. For him, an essential part of affirming someone's call is the affirmation of their church and pastor. Involvement in local church ministry is essential. Regarding the call to church plant among the poor and needy, he states that it is also important for a church planter to have "the face of the community where he works" (Magioli). So, an aspect of calling is the ability to identify with the people to whom you are being called to minister.

In most cases, the understanding of the call to ministry has come through a relational process. The call has not been understood simply by the individual, but has been arrived at in community. The call has been affirmed and confirmed in the context of relationships including the local church body, family, pastors, and other church leaders. It has also been affirmed and confirmed through the process of hands on ministry.

Once a pastor identifies someone whose gifts and abilities reveal a potential call to pastoral ministry, they begin the training and mentoring process. The process is essentially the same for all believers. Pr. Magioli notes regarding Pr. Lindomar's training: "It was the same discipleship used for the other members; however, he stood out because of his dedication which afforded us more opportunity to be together" (Magioli). The latter part of this statement reveals the relational nature of the training and equipping for ministry where training is done through a process of modeling by the more experienced pastor. Thus, being together is essential.

This is extremely important in a context of urban poverty where people have limited education and formal education may not be an option. Pastors called from the urban slums often

lack the foundational education to attend a formal program. In addition, poor pastors from smaller cities do not have the ability to commute for classes. This is the case for Pr. Lindomar.

Pr. Nivaldo led Pr. Lindomar to the Lord and then also disciplined him. Pr. Lindomar spent one year following Pr. Nivaldo. During this time he was taught basic doctrine and practical ministry. He was able to assist Pr. Nivaldo and be involved in tangible ministry at the local church level. In much the same manner in which the Disciples learned by following and observing Jesus, Pr. Lindomar was also equipped for ministry.

After a year of intensive training, Pr. Nivaldo connected Pr. Lindomar with the leadership of MPV. Lindomar's call to ministry was affirmed by Pr. Magioli as well as the leadership of MPV and he was called as a church planter. In this role, Pr. Magioli became his mentor in ministry and continues to train and equip him.

Through his role as mentor, Pr. Magioli is imparting practical ministerial wisdom into the lives of young church planters. He believes "mentoring varies according to who the worker is and the work he will be doing" (Magioli). Regardless, this mentorship process is based on relationship. Pr. Magioli believes that the church planter should not be isolated and values an open relationship. He firmly believes that church planters "need friends and helpers to facilitate their work more than bosses determining what they are to do" (Magioli). The concept of facilitating is an important value between the church planter and MPV, as well as MPV and LBM. The organizations exist to assist church planters in fulfilling their calling.

MPV invests in Pr. Lindomar and the other church planters through the mentor relationship with Pr. Magioli. Regular visits by the other church planters in the organization also provide time for encouragement, sharing of ideas, and mutual edification as they sharpen one another. In addition, MPV routinely provides books and educational resources, including

hosting routine training sessions with national and North American leaders. These relational approaches to mentoring and training are essential and fruitful.

Church Planting Process

There is no cookie cutter approach to church planting, it “should happen in a natural way” (Marques, Jocelito). Every church planter is different, as is every community. Also, among the priesthood of believers the gifts and calling of each individual are unique. For these reasons MPV does not implement strict models in its church planting efforts. As mentioned above, the role of MPV is to assist called church planters and local bodies in reaching their communities with the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ. For the purposes of this paper, we will take a general look at three aspects of church planting: evangelism, discipleship, and social ministry. It is not my intent to communicate a distinct separation of each, but rather to communicate their practical outworking.

Before discussing these three aspects, it will be beneficial to understand how MPV pastors view church planting in general. In most cases, the incarnational themes of relationship and modeling are recurring. When asked what he had done from a human perspective to plant the church, Pr. Jocelito stated he had “developed true friendships; I cried with those who suffered and rejoiced with those rejoicing” (Marques, Jocelito). Pr. Ubiratan echoes this sentiment when he states, “The church has to live the pains and joys of the community” (Marques, Ubiratan). They see the gospel advancing through proclamation in the context of relationships.

Pr. Lindomar points to Acts 2:42 as being a guiding verse in his church planting vision. He reflects on the necessity that he be equipped in the doctrines of the Apostles. He also emphasizes the importance of the biblical model of Jesus’ life and ministry. He believes the

church will grow only when people are prepared to “live here [on earth] as if we were already with our God” (Jacques). Thus, he sees church growth happening when the world sees the church living and acting according to the teachings and example of Jesus (Jacques). “Nowadays, people do not want to be with Jesus, they do not see the need to be in the church because they look at us and how we live, and they see people conformed to this world like them. It is necessary that we live what we preach” (Jacques).

Pr. Bira discussed the importance of walking with Jesus. He understands the need for his ministry to be incarnational; “In essence therefore this is the mission of Jesus’ followers, to walk in Jesus’ steps” (qtd in Ott, Strauss, and Tennent 99). As he walks with Jesus, attempting to “do the same as he would do,” (Alves) people are drawn to Christ. A life of holiness (walking like Christ) is a clear contrast to the fallen world, and is attractive in nature (Alves). Likewise, Pr. Lindomar explains the necessity for him “to be the example of a relationship with Jesus; it is not through our words but through daily living the word that we become imitators of our Savior” (Jacques).

He goes on to explain the importance of not only modeling Christ, but identifying with the community: “I need to show the church, my brothers and sisters in Christ, that like them I face trials, suffering, and persecution, and we reach the victories in all things if we remain faithful to the end, living united in prayer, in communion in the church, sharing what we have, placing it all at the feet of Jesus...” (Jacques). The themes of incarnational ministry, including identification with Christ and the community, and relationship in and outside of the church, are important in the practical outworking of their church planting efforts. Their understanding of mission is clearly shaped by Jesus’ commissioning of his disciples in John 20:21.

Evangelism

With this in mind, we will begin our discussion of the three aspects previously listed; first is their practice of evangelism. In light of the above, it is to be expected that their view of evangelism is one of proclamation in the context of relationships. Individuals in the churches are equipped and encouraged to share their faith through relationships. Pr. Jocelito notes that tract distributions and large events are not effective. He describes how he attempted these approaches until he finally realized that evangelism should be done “one on one” (Marques, Jocelito). He says this one on one approach has been much more effective because it is personal (Marques, Jocelito). Events are occasionally utilized as a means of evangelism, but they are connected with a long term church planting effort that is relational in nature.

Each church planter has utilized multiple approaches to evangelism, but one is universal. They all speak of the importance of home visitations. The poor love to have the pastor visit them in their homes and this is a necessary part of relationship building (Marques, Jocelito). Lindomar does home visits most days, but he is intentional in who he visits. He focuses his efforts on the families whose children attend the weekly Bible study or people he is referred to by church members (Jacques).

His approach is to begin a relationship from the outset. Initially, he does not force the conversation to spiritual things. He focuses on learning about them and building a friendship based on mutual respect. If he is asked directly about spiritual matters he is quick to respond, but he does not force it (Jacques). He has learned that because of the suspicion in the community, resulting from the damage done by the prosperity gospel, this is the best approach (Jacques).

In general, the approach to evangelism is one of an incarnational model. As the church walks with Christ, they see and respond to needs in the community. The relationships that

blossom from these encounters become the basis for evangelism and discipleship. As the church loves God, they love their neighbor. Since they love their neighbor, they respond to all of their needs; spiritual, physical, emotional, and relational. In the context of relationships, their message is both proclaimed and validated.

Two difficulties stand out among the several mentioned by the pastors in regards to evangelism. The first is the religious pluralism prevalent among the urban poor in southern Brazil. The people are animistic in their worldview and are quick to add other beliefs. They are seeking only what works. As Pr. Jocelito put it, “things don’t have to make sense” (Marques, Jocelito). The second is the neo-Pentecostal movement and its prosperity message. Many of the poor have been taken advantage of by the proponents of this movement and have become suspicious of “Evangelicals.” These issues are best dealt with in the context of a relationship built on mutual respect and trust.

Discipleship

The next aspect of church planting is discipleship. Two things are seen as essential when it comes to discipleship: it must be biblical, and it must be relational. The process of discipleship is simply teaching someone to obey all that Christ commanded (Matt 28:20), that is, to surrender to Christ in every facet of their lives. “The person who hears the gospel and responds positively sets out to follow Jesus, a process of transformation lasting a whole lifetime and extending to every aspect of life” (Yamamori and Padilla 29). Knowledge of the word of God is an absolute necessity in this process. Additionally, it is the word of God that the Holy Spirit uses to transform us; therefore, there can be no discipleship apart from knowledge and application of the Bible.

In general, the church planters believe that this type of teaching is done best in the context of relationship; specifically one that includes not simply teaching, but the modeling of obedience to the commands of Christ. MPV's pastors all speak of disciple making in the terms of "walking with" someone. Initially, each new believer is discipled by the pastor, either individually or in a small group setting, in preparation for baptism and church membership. This beginning phase can take up to several months and includes not only teaching basic doctrine, but performing tangible ministry together. Throughout this process the members are equipped to pass along what they have learned and are plugged into ongoing discipleship ministries.

Since everyone is different and responds differently, the pastor must "know his sheep well to know what each one needs" (Marques, Jocelito). This reveals the personal nature of disciple making, which is to say, walking with the sheep. Programs are considered less important and ineffective when compared to relationships. Love and patience are important attributes for a pastor in this process. In a context where people are imprisoned by addiction, idolatry, lack education and culture (manners), over time, love can make a difference (Marques, Jocelito).

The difficulties expressed with discipleship are the same as in other contexts. "The difficulties that I have today, I believe, are the same [as] in the time of Jesus: people prefer to be religious..." (Jacques). "The problem is the commitment required by Christ" (Alves). People's unwillingness to submit to the Lordship of Christ in all facets of life is a recurring theme:

Today no one wants to deny self, take up their cross and follow Jesus. No one wants to upset their parents, husband, wife, or children by sharing the gospel; no one wants to face difficulties... No one wants to be a living sacrifice or renew their mind to experience the good and perfect will of God (Jacques).

These difficulties are best addressed through bold preaching and teaching and the modeling of faithful application of the word of God.

Social Ministry

Social ministry is a third aspect of church planting. A wide range of social ministries are found at our various church plants. There are several types of feeding ministries, counseling, help for addicts and their families, clothing and blanket distributions, sports programs, children's programs, music programs, assisting local elementary schools, etc. These are all the result of the different community needs and the gifts and abilities of the churches. Rather than focusing on specific ministries, we will discuss the common undergirding principles for all of these.

The first principle to be discussed is the need for the church to be in tune with the Holy Spirit. The church must be walking by the Spirit as it seeks to minister in the community. This is necessary because the Spirit is already at work in the community. If the church would join the Spirit where he is already working, they must be in tune with him (Jacques).

The second principle is the belief in incarnational ministry. This is best explained by Alberto Fernando Roldán: "The Son of God remains active in the Father's world through the action of the Spirit, but for that very reason the church, constituted in Christ as a body, furnishes the means whereby Christ continues to do his work on earth" (The Priesthood of All Believers and Integral Mission in Yamamori and Padilla 163). Christ who has been given all authority in heaven and on earth continues to work by the power of the Spirit through his church. Therefore, social ministry is not a means to an end, but Christ continuing his work through his body; thus the mission of Christ is the mission of the church.

The third principle is derived from the understanding of Christ as our model for mission (John 20:21). This leads to a view of the church as "a servant to all" (Jacques). This is true because Christ himself was a servant (Mark 10:45, Luke 22:27). "He [Christ] supplies us with the perfect model of service, and sends his church into the world to be a servant church" (Stott

39). Pr. Bira expresses his desire for the church to serve the community when he asks: “If this church did not exist, would that make a difference to this community?” (Alves). Pr. Jocelito echoes the same thought when he explains that their social ministry benefits the community more than their members, but that is good because it “actually helps the community see the work being done” (Marques, Jocelito). This, he says, leads their church to be well respected and has given them a reputation as being different from other churches (Marques, Jocelito).

A lack of leadership and the need to get church members involved have been two of the difficulties found in social ministry. The needs can become overwhelming when they become the focus. Like many other churches, the majority of the work is done by a minority of the members. The process of cultivating leaders in an environment with rampant addiction and lack of education is difficult. However, Pr. Bira notes that the Lord builds his church, and he has given “growth and the development of both local leaders and healthy believers” (Alves).

In summary, four incarnational themes are recurring. The first is relationship; where in all three aspects of the church planting process the pastors speak of their importance. The second is the understanding that Christ continues his work through his body, the church. The third is modeling; where more mature believers model the Christian life for less mature believers, and all believers model it for the surrounding community. A fourth theme is the Lordship of Christ; where the goal of discipleship is orthodoxy and orthopraxis.

Global Partners

Having discussed three aspects of church planting, we will now explore the role of global partnerships in our church planting strategy. There are two ways in which global partnerships affect the church planting work in Porto Alegre. The first is through the facilitative role of

Living Bread Ministries. The second is through partnerships between LBM and Western churches.

LBM was founded in early 2004 with a vision to church plant among the urban poor in South America and beyond. From the beginning, a driving principle of LBM was to work behind the scenes to facilitate church planting by national pastors. Realizing the needs in southern Brazil and the lack of an organized vision to reach the urban poor in that region, LBM committed to begin working in the metropolitan area of Porto Alegre in the state of Rio Grande do Sul.

With the desire to be a catalyst for a national church planting movement among the poor and needy that would spread into neighboring countries, *Ministério Pão Vivo* was established by the founders of LBM and a group of national believers. MPV was conceived to be a Brazilian led and supported church planting ministry focused upon the poor and needy. LBM played a facilitative role in beginning a movement that is being led by MPV and continues to work behind the scenes as partners to plant churches in southern Brazil.

Pr. Magioli captures the nature of the facilitative role LBM has played when he states, “LBM has been the spring board of our work” (Magioli). He goes on to say that the leadership of MPV is “encouraged by the vision LBM has passed on to us, this vision keeps us going” (Magioli). This demonstrates a blending of what Tom Steffen calls the pioneer role and the facilitator role (Steffen 62). Similar to a pioneer, LBM has cast a vision for ministry and has facilitated the beginning of a movement of nationals to implement this vision. Currently, LBM fulfills the role of a “Facilitative Church Multiplier” by working behind the scenes to encourage a sustainable, national, and holistic church planting movement (Steffen 39).

With this type of relationship, dependency is always a concern. However, we agree that “the problem of dependency is rooted more in Western practices that express our sense of superiority than in indigenous propensities for seeking subsidy as a way of life” (Rowell 25). We have worked to diminish this by humbly transferring power from the onset of our partnership. While the relationship between LBM and MPV is currently unequal, from an economic perspective, it is “...interdependent, relying on reciprocity. It’s bi-directional because both need each other in order to succeed” (Steffen 106).

Virtually all agree that interdependence is the proper response to a concern of dependency and paternalism (Ott, Strauss, and Tennent 219). According to John Rowell, it is more important to foster interdependence than to fear dependency, as interdependence is God’s design for his church, the body of Christ (24). Furthermore, René Padilla states “The corrective for paternalism is not independence but interdependence; interdependence comes with a deeper understanding of the nature of unity in Christ and of the situation in which other members of the body of Christ live” (Padilla 137). Interdependence describes the partnership between LBM, MPV, and the individual church plants.

Through LBM, Western churches are able to work with national leaders to plant churches in southern Brazil. These global partnerships are an expression of what Samuel Escobar calls the “cooperative model of mission” (Escobar 67). Within this partnership model, the relationship with MPV provides the additional benefit that resources go “...through a local accountability structure of mature Christian leaders” (Pocock, Van Rheenen, and McConnell 294). The benefits of these types of partnerships are many.

The poor and needy benefit because a local church is established in their community ministering in a way that is contextually relevant. The Western churches partnering with LBM

are blessed as well. They learn about mission and the importance of the local church (Araújo). The partnership keeps them connected to the global church, and by reminding them of the needs outside of their four walls, it helps guard against self-centeredness (Ward Jr.). In keeping with the desire for interdependence, it also allows for an opportunity to be involved in meaningful short term missions, where long-term relationships are cultivated and both sides learn from one another.

Conclusion

As revealed in this study, a theological understanding of incarnational ministry is essential to the church planting process utilized by MPV and LBM. The recurring themes of identification with the community, modeling as a means of discipleship and pastoral training, and ministering in the context of relationships all flow from an incarnational approach grounded in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. René Padilla summarizes this using the words of John Perkins, “the church is called to be the replacement of Jesus in a given community, doing what he would do, going where he would go and teaching what he would teach” (Yamamori and Padilla 37).

When Christ took on flesh he identified with humanity. As a result, he is a High Priest who is able to sympathize with us (Hebrews 4:15). Likewise, the missionary or church planter working among the poor and needy must be able to identify with the people he desires to reach (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). Regarding incarnational ministry among the poor, Viv Grigg states identification “is not becoming destitute, but demonstrating, by actions of love and deeds of spiritual power, the fullness of Christ” (Grigg 61).

The incarnational concept of modeling as a means for training and discipleship is grounded in the life and ministry of Christ and his disciples. When Jesus called his disciples to follow him, his intention was that they would physically follow him and become trainees (Gaebelein vol 8 119). When Jesus sent them out, he not only instructed them to proclaim what he had been proclaiming, but to do what they had observed him doing (Matt 10:7-10). Likewise, Paul, in discussing what can be described as an incarnational approach to ministry, instructed the Corinthians to “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1 ESV).

Beyond training and equipping church planters, modeling is important for the church as a witness to the community. “Just as Christ’s life revealed in word and deed what God is like, so too the Christian witness’ pattern of living must reveal what God is like and be commensurate with the gospel” (Ott, Strauss, Tennent 98). The believer’s mission is to make disciples whose lifestyle reproduces the example of Christ: exhibiting unconditional love of God and neighbor, humility, solidarity with the poor, a commitment to truth and opposition to hypocrisy (Padilla in Yamamori and Padilla 31). This type of modeling of the example of Christ marks both ends of the discipleship process at our church plants.

In stating that our church planters minister in the context of relationships, we are not saying ministry outside of this context is inappropriate. There is a place for proclamation and social ministry outside of personal relationships. However, we maintain that the most biblical and effective way to advance the Kingdom among the poor and needy is through an incarnational approach that requires one to enter into their existence. This necessarily requires the establishment of personal relationships.

In addition to the importance of a theological understanding of incarnational ministry, this study has illustrated the necessity for missionary facilitators. The role LBM is playing in

this church planting movement demonstrates the implementation of a new era for Western missions (Steffen 32). This facilitative role is both effective and biblical. It incorporates the global body of Christ in mission in a way that is reflective of the interdependence the church has been called to and effectively utilizes the joint resources and talents of all participants.

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