

BRAZILIAN MEMBER CARE CONSULTATION

By Márcia Tostes

National and regional member care consultations continue to happen around the globe. Such gatherings are key places to network with others and across disciplines, exchange updates and resources, and consolidate learning in the area of member care. Here is a brief report of the recent and creative consultation that took place in 2004 in Brazil.

With the theme “Growing through Conflict”, around 100 leaders from several states in Brazil, churches, mission agencies, and missionary schools, met in October 2004 in order to learn more about this relevant issue. The location of this Consultation was special—in the beautiful surroundings of the Valley of Blessing, which is the base for Antioch Mission.

Interpersonal conflict is a sad reality that is regularly experienced by those involved in missionary work. Researchers around the world have demonstrated that this is one of the major reasons for premature return. Many explanations for such premature return are cited, such as problems with health, visa, or even God calling a person to work in other areas, but many times the central issue has to do with unresolved relationship problems.

Our aim for the Consultation was to bring together leaders with member care responsibilities, and specifically go through several sessions of the popular workshop called “Sharpening Your Interpersonal Skills” (SYIS). The sessions helped the participants grow in their own attitudes, knowledge, and skills in relating to one another in love and unity, and also in learning from each other.

The Consultation was held concomitant with another event whose theme was “Strengthening the Triple Missionary Alliance”. Both events were sponsored by the three organizations which represent the missionary movement in Brazil: the Brazilian Association of Transcultural Missions (AMTB), the Brazilian Association of Mission Teachers (APMB), and the Association of Church Mission Departments (ACMI). These organizations play an important role in missions within/from Brazil, as they provide new challenges, strategies, and a forum where discussions about the need of partnership, training, and member care are possible.

These two events each had their own program, but shared the devotion time in the mornings and feed back times in the evenings. The devotions were given by Barbara Burns, who overviewed the lives of Paul, Barnabas, and Timothy, looking at their call, preparation, missionary practice, and character. Barbara was a real blessing to all of us and we could sense God speaking directly to our needs as leaders and missionaries.

Several sessions were led by Arlene Flurry and she used materials from the SYIS workshop. Participants got to know each other better, and this increased atmosphere of openness really helped facilitate the discussions in the afternoons. Discussions included care by health professionals (mental and physical), care by the sending church, care by the sending agency, and issues for missionary kids.

As with other consultations (the first one in this country took place in 1999) it was a great idea to have these two events together. It helped to bring different people together, and to participate as part of a larger and broader group of people in missions.

We noted in this Consultation the increased number of denominational agencies represented. This reflected the movement that is happening in Brazil in that churches are getting more involved in missionary work through their own structures. Yet there was a clear sense of partnership, with people wanting to learn and work together.

We also used the opportunity of being together to reinforce the links between those caring for missionaries. For the first time we formed a group of people interested in missionary kid issues. We now have a special term in Portuguese for the English term *MK*: FMs (*Filhos de Missionários*). We had a good time sharing the different approaches to MK care that are already happening in the different agencies and churches. One of the main and ongoing issues has to do with formal learning for MKs. In Brazil we still need to work more towards having a long distance teaching course that is validated by the government. A specific sub-group was formed to look at this important subject.

Still another special aspect of the Consultation was the official launch of the Portuguese version of *Doing Member Care Well*. This version contained several chapters in the original English book from 2002, yet added new chapters written by Portuguese-speaking member care practitioners and leaders.

In the last devotion time Barbara Burns addressed the subject of conflict in the life of Paul, saying that some conflicts are important, such as when Paul was zealously confronting/exhorting churches, while others are to be avoided. And then she encouraged and instructed all of us with these words:

“Do not let the conflicts take you from your aim. Do not be disturbed, do not be discouraged, do not give up. Continue your ways, glorifying God in your lives. Be faithful to what the Lord has called you!”

To finish the Consultation, the participants shared a specific word that they thought best summarized the gathering. The main responses included: challenge, understanding, partnership, friendship, sensitivity. But the one phrase that summed up our experience very well was *walking together*. That is the secret!