

Compass Rose Society Offered Intimate View of Anglican Life in Brazil

By Norris Battin

“There’s a life to this Church that’s quite impressive,” said Compass Rose Society President Bishop Philip Poole summarizing our April visit to the Episcopal Anglican Church of Brazil where members explored the Diocese of Rio De Janeiro and the Diocese of the Amazon. “There were no highlights for us on this trip,” quipped Bishop Poole, “Because it was all a highlight. “ Nevertheless, the information presented here offers just a few glimpses, by necessity, of our adventure. Additional reporting is by seminarian Luiz Coelho and by Bishop Poole.

At the invitation of the Primate of the Episcopal Anglican Church of Brazil, Archbishop Mauricio Andrade, 17 members of the Compass Rose Society from Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Ireland, The United Kingdom and the United States spent four days in the Diocese of Rio De Janeiro headed by the Rt. Rev’d Filadelfo Oliveira and four days in the Diocese of the Amazon headed by The Rt. Rev’d Saulo Barros from April 3 to April 11, 2011.

Monday April 4

On the first morning of our visit to IEAB, (the acronym in Portuguese for the full name of the Province) Luiz Coelho, a young Brazilian seminarian who served as our translator, shared some a background about the Province while we waited for our bus.

He told us that the church in Brazil was established in the south and moved to the north. Seventeen percent of Brazilians claim to be Pentecostal, 60% are Roman Catholic. About 200,000 are Anglican. Each week more Pentecostals attend church than do Roman Catholics, and there are at least 10 different “brands” of Pentecostalism. The IEAB has nine dioceses, each headed by a bishop, and a missionary district.

The Anglican School of Araras

On the bus at last, we journeyed one and a half hours to Araras, a district of the Municipality of Petrópolis, where Anglican Social Action (a non-profit organization attached to the Diocese of Rio de Janeiro) keeps a school and a series of social projects.

Through heavy cloud cover, the bus climbed a steep but mostly invisible peak in the local mountains. The dual lane one way roads up and down the mountain showed evidence of recent accidents from vehicles travelling too fast. Our bus fell into the latter category but we did not crash!



At the school, the head administrator of ASA, Carlos José Machado, accompanied by the Rev'd Abimael Rodrigues, the school chaplain, and the school staff and children greeted us warmly.

Started in one room 49 years ago, the school now has over 1000 students. It was built brick by brick to provide education for rural children and to dispel the myth that rural children cannot achieve as well as those in the city.

This school is unusual as it is a faith-based partnership with the local municipality. When the school threatened to close in the 1980s, the municipality arranged to keep it open guaranteeing its financial stability. Students from low-income families now receive free high-quality education in the elementary and middle school grades. It also offers a low-tuition high school program, partially subsidized by donors. (In Brazil, the public elementary schools are the responsibility of the municipalities and high school and university are the responsibility of the state. Elementary school is free; high school charges tuition.)



We visited several classrooms, a library, the computer room, and had lunch. After the visit, Bishop Poole presented Mr. Machado with a plaque depicting the Compass Rose -- the symbol of the worldwide Anglican Communion.

Devastation and Relief in the Cuiabá Valley

On Monday afternoon we visited Cuiabá Valley, an area devastated by February's well-publicized heavy rainstorms and mudslides which killed nearly one thousand people and displaced twenty thousand more.



The unusually strong rain, which meteorologists say occur only once in every 350 years, caused entire slopes to collapse. Natural lakes flooded, turning narrow streams into dangerous torrents which destroyed buildings in a matter of minutes. About 80 people died.

Carine Cunha, a biology teacher at the Anglican School of Araras, showed us where she used to live. Her family managed to survive by fleeing to a neighbor's house which had a second story. Their own house was quickly covered by water and is now condemned. All of their possessions were lost and they are starting their life over elsewhere.



The IEBA has been working with ecumenical relief organizations and local government to rebuild housing for the homeless. Canada, the UK and the US sent money immediately and a gift from Japan arrived just before the earthquake.

As we traveled through the area reflecting on the pain and devastation in so many people's lives, we were struck by the immense work required to rebuild and by the courage and determination of the people who waved at us as the bus passed, smiling as if to say "we will be OK."

Tuesday April 5

Christ the King in Cidade de Deus

The next morning, we visited the parish church of Christ the King in Cidade de Deus (the City of God), Rio de Janeiro. "You have read the book and seen the movie," said Father Nicolas Wheeler, the rector, a young Portuguese speaking priest from England, as he introduced his church. "Now, you'll experience it first-hand."



We arrived just in time to see one of the community projects at work. Alfazenda and the Eco-Network were hosting a conference on eco-sustainability and recycling, especially important in this area that suffers with dirty streets and open air dumpsters. The parish has pioneered in implementing environmentally friendly practices.



After lunch Fr. Nicholas detailed the history of Christ the King parish in Cidade de Deus, and how it now tries to open its doors to anyone looking for solace and rest in God. In the spirit of a catholic ministry of presence, the parish also partners with several local institutions: Abrindo Portas (Opening Doors) an NGO which teaches residents new work

skill, Agência do Bem (Goodwill Agency) which teaches music and human rights education to over 200 children in Cidade de Deus and The Anglican Program of Healthcare, coordinated by the Diocese of Rio de Janeiro, and sponsored by Episcopal Relief and Development, which provides free counseling and group therapy to residents.



The Church buildings at Christ the King have seen better days. Like many church buildings, they have served many functions over the years, including housing a school, and like many church buildings, have grown in an undisciplined patch-work fashion. They are now more than tired, and more than unsafe. In fact, these facilities now work against the ministry of the church.

None the less, the church's nave -- covered with a roof that cannot keep parishioners dry during rain storms and with a ceiling riddled with bullet holes and bearing the scars of drug lords hiding from the police in it -- serves as a perfect backdrop for this community venture.

Five panels of the life of Christ -- birth, baptism, crucifixion, the empty tomb and Christ the King --are painted over the altar on the back wall on what first appear to be mosaic tile but when seen more closely are painted on material more like old style bubbled-glass shower doors. This seemed a fitting and indeed special place for people to say they have a responsibility for God's creation.

The Vestry of Christ the King has launched an appeal for funds for a new building which will host both church activities and local community partners.

After Fr. Nicholas' presentation, Bishop Poole gave the senior warden, Mrs. Dora Macedo, the Compass Rose tile. He explained that the tiles were made in Jerusalem, near the station of the cross on the Via Crucis where Saint Veronica wiped the face of Jesus, and he challenged the parish to continue to wipe the face of Jesus in their community.

Touring the City of God

In the 1960's in an attempt to solve the housing crisis facing Rio de Janeiro, the government took people from the shacks and slums and offered them brand new housing in the City of God so called because most of the streets were given Biblical names with the hope that a Biblical paradise might emerge.

A flood, however, forced many from their homes and instead of a new planned community of 3000 families, three times as many moved in. Paradise quickly became a slum and its leaders were the drug lords.

We saw a picture, one of many which touched us, of a motorcycle with two people on it, the man in the back holding and pointing a semi-automatic weapon. The City of God became a symbol for the drug battle for central Rio.

Eventually, the government became embarrassed by the disorder, and two years ago the police raided the community and rounded up or drove off the drug lords.

Today while not totally "clean", people feel safer and a certain pride has emerged. We headed out for a look around.

It is still not a pretty place. Rubbish lines the streets, the river which runs through it smells of sewage. There is poor lighting, poor roads and poor education but a new hope is palpable: people are looking after their homes and shops and cleaning up.

Until last year there was only one health clinic for the 70,000 residents. People would queue up at 4am and if they were lucky were seen that day. The first bank opened just a few months ago. It is getting better.

Christ the King is a church punching above its weight. Its Sunday attendance is small but shows some signs of life. This is a parish building bridges into the community: beautifying its own property and modeling that for its neighbors, opening its doors to community opportunities, holding Pizza parties, hosting a BBQ during Carnival, all in an effort to live into the gospel. People are ashamed of a City of God address. Christ the King is trying to change that.

We walked through the streets to the local Roman Catholic church named "Eternal Father and San Jose," a larger and better kept church than Christ the King, where we met the priest who was just two months into his ministry. We prayed together and enjoyed ecumenical hospitality. Where else could Roman Catholic Portuguese and Anglican English find common music in the Latin words of Ubi Caritas and all be blessed by an Anglican Primate?

Our walk continued past houses that were, with deepest respect, shacks. Not all the communities' housing is shocking, but these were. The sidewalks were dreadful. People stopped and waved at us, some children engaged us in "hellos"; still others wanted their pictures taken. (Wherever we have gone in the Anglican world children are all the same, they love to ham it up in front of a camera.)

We headed next to the police station and heard from the Chief, who oversees 300 officers working in the community after attending a two week course in community policing where they learn conflict and domestic violence management and mediation.

Their building formerly housed police before drug lords took it over. Now they have reclaimed it as a temporary office, while a permanent structure is built.

The Chief said they hope to get increased cooperation from the community and help citizens understand their basic rights. He shared the residents' concern that if the government changes, the police mandate might disappear. For now, he seems proud of what they have accomplished.

Our final stop in The City of God was a daycare center for seniors, named for St. Anne, Jesus' grandmother.

Brazilians are reluctant to place their elderly in nursing homes or retirement centers. Here at St. Anne's, despite the lack of easy access, they offer recreational, health, exercise and other eldercare programs. They average 25 people a day in the building we saw and another 60 in another. The government contributes no financial support. Nursing homes in Brazil, especially public ones, are of poor quality. They employ people who are not trained and who command tiny salaries, and elder abuse is evident.

This place felt good. There was warmth in the staff and in the attitude that exuded the love God has for these dear precious people.

As we made our way back to Christ the King through the humbling streets of the City of God, people waved as we passed by. They don't see many white folks on their streets, we were told, and they must have wondered why we were there.

Wednesday April 6

Christo

We were on top of the world this morning, visiting Rio de Janeiro's most famous landmark. The trip to the Sanctuary of Christ the Redeemer – one of the seven modern wonders of the world – took us 710 meters above sea level to the top of Corcovado Mountain where we experienced marvelous panoramic views of the city below.



Our journey included a train ride from Cosme Velho station and lifts and escalators on the final stretch.

At the top, we first took in the magnificent views while silently contemplating the 30-meter high statue of Jesus Christ with outstretched arms embracing the city and then entered the chapel under the statue for midday prayer led by Fr. Nicholas. We heard Psalm 27's insistence that "unless the Lord watches over the city, in vain the guard keeps vigil," while the gospel told the story of the Transfiguration and the disciples' ascent of a high mountain where they saw the body of Jesus transfigured before their eyes. We prayed aloud for some of the places and people we had come to know in Rio before joining together in the Lord's Prayer.



Presentations at Rio Cathedral of the Redeemer: Life in Communion

That evening, Bishop Philip Poole and Canon Kenneth Kearon talked to a large audience in Rio's Cathedral of the Redeemer's parish hall. Bishop Poole described the work of the Compass Rose Society, while Canon Kearon discussed the Anglican Communion. Their presentations were streamed live throughout IEAB over the Internet.

The cathedral congregation prepared a delicious meal including some typical Brazilian dishes and gave us gifts from their 2009 centennial celebration. An ecumenical group from St. Paul's Church that produces quilts and prayer shawls for the Mathilde de Oliveira Nursing Home gave us mugs and place mats with the diocesan crest and a banner for the Anglican Communion Office in London.

Thursday, April 7

We arrive in the Diocese of the Amazon

After a three hour flight from Rio, we landed in Belém do Pará, see of the Diocese of the Amazon. We were welcomed at the International Airport Val de Cans by several local hosts led by USPG Missioner Ruth Barros, the wife of the diocesan Bishop, and were driven to St. Mary's Cathedral where the bishop, the Rt. Rev. Saulo Barros, clergy, employees and parishioners were waiting for us with--what else?-- a great Pará-style lunch.

As a token of friendship, we each received a video about the Gurupá community we were to visit in the morning: a village in the margins of the Amazon where Anglicans are developing a project sponsored by the USPG with the Maroon population (Maroons were runaway slaves who banded together and subsisted independently). Before

lunch, we prayed in memory of the school shooting victims who died in Rio de Janeiro that morning.



Following lunch, we visited the NGO “Weaving the Amazon” in the Pratinha neighborhood. There, we saw their work with recycled material and heard about their also activities – mostly soccer coaching – with teenagers and young adults.



At the end of the day, we invited both the bishop and his family for dinner at a local restaurant near our hotel where we enjoyed typical Pará food and shared a bit about our lives and experiences.

Friday, April 8

Dignity and Life in Gurupá

Today we fly to Gurupá, and then travel by boat to the Quilombo Maria Ribeira. (Some of us will remain in Belém to visit Ascension Church in Santa Izabel do Pará, a city 40 minutes away from the state capital.)

Twelve of us, along with Bishop Saulo and Ruth, left Belém at 8:30am for Gurupá in the low Amazon River area packed tightly into two small single engine planes.



The Anglican Church has been developing a ministry here for the past five years. It was started by the Rev. Fernando Ponçadilha with leadership from the Quilombo Maria Ribeiro, a community of former Maroons especially Mr. Duca Castro and his wife, Vitória, in partnership with the Ecumenical Service Coordination.

The Rev'd Amaro Daniel de Barros (who lives in Macapá) and the lay leader Vanilse Castro visit the Anglican community in Gurupá.



After the flight, three small ferries took us up the Amazon to Maria Ribeiro. There, we visited the elementary and middle school, the computer center and the community radio station, the first of its kind in Brazil.



After that, at the community center, Ruth explained to the local women how to start a community bakery, which will be supported by the Anglican Service of Diakonia and Development. Bishop Poole gave a Compass Rose tile to the community. The women of the community sang their anthem, which was composed by Mrs. Vitória Castro, and accompanied the group on the trucks that took them back to the ferries.



Back at Gurupá, we had lunch and went see the land where the first Anglican church in the low Amazon river will be built.

Ascension in Santa Izabel

Five of us stayed in Belém to visit the Popular University (UNIPOP) and the Mission of the Ascension of the Lord, in Santa Izabel do Pará, a 40-minute drive from Belém. First we met a family who own a small cottage where they hold spirituality and community meetings and some baptisms, giving us our own flavor of Amazon vegetation.



Next we visited the Mission of the Ascension, where a group of local women welcomed us. They explained how the mission started and the kinds of activities that it offers to their community.



In the afternoon, we visited the Popular University (UNIPOP), an important formation and leadership center for many religious denominations, social minorities and popular movements primarily working with youth. It is beginning a tutoring program to promote social and educational rehabilitation of teenagers caught in petty crime.

Saturday, April 9

Church visits in Belém

Today we saw the church of the Diocese of the Amazon “up close and personal.” There was nothing pretentious here just the day to day ministry of this diocese, surviving on a shoestring, practicing a theology of abundance in the midst of scarcity joyfully proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ and giving voice to the voiceless.

This diocese has one full time priest, one part time priest, two non-stipendiary priests, two full time deacons and a group of committed lay leaders who teach, preach and give vitality to the church. It has nine communities (four parishes, two missions and three preaching points.)

The Diocese of the Amazon was formed in 2006 and Bishop Saulo was elected as its first bishop. It covers 38% of Brazil -- a county about the same size as Canada.

Our first visit was to one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the city and its Parish Church of St. John the Baptist. The area has a reputation for gangs, murders, drugs and violence. The presence of a group of white and Chinese folks attracted a crowd. It is not often that outside people visit here. It certainly is not a place tourists visit.

Police with weapons accompanied us, a matter of some concern, but during the day, these officers began to integrate with local residents and show concern about their needs.

Mr. Valdemir Correa, representing the state Security Department, said that the government intended to implement a Pro-Peace unit in the neighborhood, which will also provide social projects such as sports and computer labs. He said that the police recognize that most people are good and he wants to ensure that people understand their human rights. He wants to keep these children away from a life on drugs. This is a pilot project which he wants to see replicated in other communities.

Children from the community, led by Lay Reader Marília Cruz, sang a song called “it depends on us” which helps motivates them to help build a better world and handed out chocolates locally made as a parting gift to us.



Our second visit was to St. Luke's parish in Marambaia where the parish priest, the Rev'd Marcos Barros, showed us the recent renovations of the church building: a new parish hall, a bell, new flooring and lighting. The parish also produces recycled paper.

Gathered around in a group after lunch, parishioners talked to us about the visit and also about the work of the Church in the Amazon. Canon Kearon said he was happy to notice how the Church is involved in people's lives and how it manages to do much with so little. St. Luke's is, aside from the Cathedral of St. Mary, the only self-supporting parish in the diocese. They have 40 communicants.



At the next stop, Holy Trinity Parish Church, their recently arrived priest, the Rev'd Sérgio Silva, explained how he had just held a prayer vigil the week before, asking the Holy Spirit to be present in his work. He also presented Mr. Paulo Carvalho, one of the local young adults, who is in charge of music ministries and youth work. They hold bible studies here and are aided by bi-vocational clergy (professional teachers.) This is a big building with a small congregation of 15 or so. It is a church with a sense of purpose and a sense of self confidence. Their people are talented and committed.

This parish has also started a mission in Icoaraci, Annunciation Church, where a group of children and teenagers led by three young adults welcomed us.



All in all this was an exhausting day as we went from place to place in hot, energy sucking humidity. But it was exhilarating to see our Church pouring itself out for others, getting alongside the community, working with them in education, music, drama, arts, attending to spiritual life of their congregation, studying the Bible and engaging in life giving ministry. This is a vital Church -- a Church about whom we are proud and humbled to call family.

Ecumenism and Prayer in the Amazon

Back at St. Mary's after this full day Metro Belém do Pará, we joined representatives of the Amazonian Council of Christian Churches and attended an Ecumenical Prayer Service. After prayer by Bishop Saulo, the Rev'd Marcos Barros invited worshippers to name their church affiliation. There were Roman Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and also representatives of the Focolare movement, the Ecumenical Center for Biblical Studies, the Amazonian Association of Religion and an Inter-Religious Committee.

During the presentation, Canon Kearon mentioned that part of his work as Secretary General of the Anglican Communion involves ecumenism and Inter-faith dialogue. He emphasized the current importance of such work among Christians. Lutheran Pastor Cibele Kuss explained a bit about the development of ecumenical relationships in the Amazon, which started through the defense of political prisoners. There is a strong emphasis on ecumenism in this region.

After the service, we enjoyed dinner prepared by Cathedral congregation parishioners. One of the most important expressions of friendship is sitting at the same table and sharing a meal.

Sunday April 10

Farewell from Belém

Our visit ended the next day with Eucharist and lunch at St. Mary's Cathedral. About 80 people attended the service and said goodbye to their new friends.

Wherever we have gone to worship in the Anglican Communion we have discovered that the rhythm of the liturgy is very familiar even when the language is different. This was a special service because it was the first time this community had gathered following the dreadful shooting of school children at the Tasso da Silveira School, in Rio de Janeiro.

Bishop Barros, an accomplished artist, created a piece of art naming the children who died in this tragic event. Two parish children were brought it forward as an offering, a moving and appropriate tribute. We prayed for the dead students and their families before we received the Eucharist.



Bishop Poole preached about the need all of us have to share our lives and the Bishop Saulo baptized little André Silva, son of the Rev'd Deacon Sérgio Silva. Bishop Saulo gave to the Society a chalice and paten in Native Brazilian Marajoara style and we all received individual gifts. We, in turn, left gifts for the diocese and for the people who worked so hard to make our visit a success.



At the end, we stood around the altar and the parish prayed and sang for us. A community lunch followed, reminding us all of the original context of the Eucharist.



Summing up our visit our seminarian friend Luiz said, “We believe that the Society’s visit was very important to us and helped us realize we belong to an international family, with members of many faces and many tongues. We also believe that our new friends’ love and care will make us more visible on the map of the Anglican Communion. Under the canopy of jungle trees and amid the concrete of big cities there’s a people that belongs to such a big family.”

We are deeply grateful for the invitation to visit Brazil and to experience the ministry of this vital part of our worldwide Anglican Communion.