



Amazon Journal

by Chad M. Miller

“The Second Amazon Trip”

August 3-14, 1998

Prologue: This is an historic trip.

Never before have Christian denominations worked together to reach the more than 33,000 remote river towns and villages in the Rain Forest. Last April, pastors and leaders gathered in the city of Borba on the Maderia River for the first Congress on Church Planting among the River Peoples of the Amazon. This is the second Congress. We will meet in the city of Anori on the Solimoes River. Our goal is to continue the training and equipping begun in the first congress so that in the next 11 years a church might be planted in every town and village in the Amazon River Basin and win this vast region for Christ.

Today, only 2,200 of these towns and villages have a church! With Gods blessing and the courageous faith of the Brazilian pastors and leaders, they will win the Amazon River Basin for Christ by the year 2010.

What a great God-sized goal!

Why Am I Going Again?

I never before really understood how important it was for us as Christians to get involved in helping take the Gospel to places where people have never heard about Jesus until our Mission Leader, Dwight Marable, asked me this question. He said, "Imagine how you would feel if you grew up and lived your whole life in a town that did not have a church or a Gospel witness. Imagine never having heard about Jesus. Imagine dying and standing before Jesus Christ on judgment day and for the first time you discovered that in a country far away from your town there were hundreds of thousands of churches that knew about Jesus and His message of eternal life. These churches had resources and wealth beyond your imagination.

These churches knew about villages just like yours and people like you that didn't know about Jesus. Imagine finding out on Judgment Day that these Christians didn't come and share the message with you that would have given you and your family and friends eternal life. How would you feel?"

I went on the first Amazon River Outreach in April because I felt our church had lost touch with its mission field. I went for me. I wanted to open my heart to what God wanted to show me about reclaiming a mission field. The Amazon River Outreach was something God brought to me to give me a greater passion for reaching people who don't know Jesus. These are people in the river towns along the Amazon and people living within walking distance of our church.

The neighborhood around St. Philip has changed and our closest neighbors are not coming to our church. God wants us to reclaim our mission field, our neighborhood. He wants us to do it now!

I'm taking 9 friends with me on this trip from our Church. Each of them has felt the strong call of God to go. This is no vacation. It will be a life changing experience.

I went on the first trip for me.

This trip, I am going to prepare myself to reclaim the mission field around our church.

Amazon River Outreach Mission Team

1. Chad M. Miller, Senior Pastor
2. Carol Evans, Coordinator of Care and Prayer, Praise Team Leader, Dental Hygienist
3. Lynn Pilcher, Experiencing God Coordinator, "Stand in the Gap" Promise Keeper, Community Outreach Enthusiast
4. Rick McGowan, Elder, Experiencing God Leader, "Stand in the Gap" Promise Keeper
5. Debbie Cook, Youth Board Staff, Choir, Handbell, Sunday School Teacher
6. Melody Pearson, Seminary Master's Candidate in Leadership Development, Ministry Coordinator, Team Trainer

7. Rory Wesley, Youth Leader, Praise Team Member
8. Melissa Wesley, Registered Nurse
9. Gail Oglesby, Small Group Leader, Registered Nurse
10. Godwin Aduba, Student

Day 1 - Monday, August 3

A Day of Planes, Airports and Getting There...

My second trip is very different from the first. This trip, I am traveling with two friends. Lynn and Rick are full of excitement. They read the journal of my first trip. We talk about the awesome things God is going to do on this trip. I think God has already done something awesome. The 3 of us are sitting together, flying to a destination God is calling us to. We have already shared something with each other that is very special and unique - God's call to a journey - a mission. Even though we have an itinerary and a schedule all laid out for the trip, we have no idea what God is up to. How will He use us, direct us, reshape us, renew us and do something so great and wonderful that its true dimensions are beyond our ability to grasp or know? We know this is a "God sized" thing and we feel privileged to be a part of it. That is awesome!

It is rare in life to have such a clear sense of mission like the one God has given us here on this trip. What a wonderful gift to share with each other. All 10 of us have a mission - Rick, Lynn, Melody, Carol, Rory, Melissa, Godwin, Gail, Debbie and me. We all sense the special privilege of being called by God on this trip. I can't begin to imagine what I will write in this journal over the next 14 days. Even though this is my second trip, I feel that it is very different than the first. The last trip I was alone. This trip I am with friends. I wonder if they know how great a privilege it is to be able to share such a trip with friends? I do. God really knew what He was doing when He created friendship. He created people to be friends and be "in mission" with friends. The trip is already awesome.

God has called us on this trip. One of the ways we know is how hard Satan has worked to keep us from going. When our mission director, Dwight, asked me to come back to Brazil 3 months ago, I didn't know how I could possibly afford it. I said yes because I knew God wanted me to come back to the unfinished business He had planned for me to do here in this Amazon River Basin. I prayed about it for

several weeks. People that know me, and even those that don't, could see God calling my heart to come back on this second trip. As I prayed, I felt God leading me to look for a team of 10 people to go on this trip. It sounded so impossible!

I also felt like God would provide the funds. If you knew my checkbook, you would know that another trip to the Amazon this year was financially impossible. But God did it. He really did it! St. Philip decided to support this second trip. God brought 9 others forward to form our team of 10 and provided the funds. We raised the funds by asking for donations from our friends, appealing for support from the membership of St. Philip, a rummage sale, two fund raising dinners, and a silent auction. Yesterday, we met our fund raising goal. Awesome! We raised more than \$22,000. Awesome! Totally Awesome! It was God's perfect timing and generous provision. We even raised more than we needed the last Sunday. I have \$900 in my pocket. I know there is something very special God already has planned for this money. Before this trip is over, I know that we will find out what God wants us to do with this \$900. Awesome! I can hardly wait to discover what God has planned for the money and the people He has called on this mission trip.

Just because God has called us on this trip doesn't mean that it will be easy. It has already been a lot of hard work getting everyone and everything ready. We have had to struggle with the doubts and second thoughts that always seem to hamper a mission trip like this. Satan doesn't want our team to go or accomplish the work we will on our mission to Brazil. He also doesn't want our lives to be changed by what will happen on this trip. Already, Satan has tried to keep us from going on this trip. He has used some of his best persuasive tricks - doubt, second thoughts, lack of funds and fear.

As Rick, Lynn and I were flying to Miami, we talked about a lot. Both of them told me how they had real showdowns with second thoughts about coming on this trip. Lynn told about how concerned his wife and daughters were about his safety. Their concern and loving care for him were tugging at his heart and giving him second thoughts. And on a Saturday last month, he had decided he was going to tell me he changed his mind and he couldn't go.

I remember our conversation that Saturday morning. We talked about his teaching assignment at the conference. Lynn was going to lead a workshop on the "Experiencing God" Bible Study. Leading people to experience God is one of the greatest passions in Lynn's heart. We talked about how we felt God wanted us to bring the Experiencing God material on this trip and share it with the Brazilians. But how?

Melody, another person on our mission team, had contacted the Sunday School Board of the Baptist Church who publishes "Experiencing God" to find out if we could get copies of the study in Portuguese. They said they would get back to her. She waited for 2 weeks and had not gotten a call back. We were running out of time. We leave for Brazil in just 4 weeks. It looked like "Experiencing God" was not going to work out for the mission trip.

I shared this dead end with Lynn. But still, I told Lynn I thought he ought to go ahead and plan on sharing the "Experiencing God" Bible study the best he could, even though we couldn't get it in Portuguese. Lynn said he would do his best.

I had no idea that he was struggling with second thoughts. Lynn just couldn't bring himself to tell me he had changed his mind about going on the trip. Good thing! The next morning in church, he learned why he couldn't back out.

That very afternoon on Saturday, God brought a stranger into the Baptist Book Store. Melody was working one of the registers and a lady came up and asked her if she could have a discount on some materials she wanted to buy. She explained that she was Sharon Fairchild with the International Mission Board in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. She had come back to the states for a couple of days to visit her mother-in-law who was ill. Melody told her she was going on a mission trip to some of the remote river villages of the Amazon. Sharon was surprised.

Sharon asked, "What denomination are you with?"

"Lutheran," Melody answered.

Shocked, Sharon said, "Lutherans? Really? I didn't know Lutherans did things like that!"

She's right. I didn't see any other Lutherans down there doing missionary work on the Amazon River my first trip!

As Melody told her about our mission trip, she shared how disappointed she was not to be able to find "Experiencing God" in Portuguese. Sharon smiled and said, "I can get you "Experiencing God" in Portuguese. Just tell me how many copies you want and I'll have them waiting for you when your team arrives in Manaus."

God just worked it out!

Sharon got to visit her mother-in-law. She also got her discount at the Baptist Book Store. Melody ordered 100 copies of "Experiencing God" in Portuguese so it will be waiting for us when we arrive in Manaus. Lynn got his material in Portuguese and would be able to give every pastor and leader a copy of "Experiencing God" to use in their church and the churches they will be starting.

Awesome!

Satan didn't want Lynn to go. God did. And God spoke louder than Satan, and Lynn listened.

Rick shared how Satan put doubt in his mind, too. That's the way this sly devil works. He just plants enough doubt in our minds so that we will change our minds. He does it to me all the time.

If I were to ask each person on our team if they had serious thoughts about not coming, what would they say? I know the answer. Satan didn't want any of us to go. But God did. And we are all right now on a plane just a few hundred miles from Manaus.

God won.

Awesome!

Nothing is going to stop what God wants us to do on this trip. We have a mission. We all better just get our doubts and fears and worries out of the way.

What a great encouragement. God wins...

This is going to be an awesome trip. I know it, our team knows it. I could tell when I first looked into Dwight's eyes tonight in Miami - he knows it, too!

But what has God got planned for me? What is he about to do in my life in the next 14 days? I guess this question is what the last hour of a long day on planes, sitting in airports, and waiting to get there is all about. The plane is starting to descend into Manaus. I should write what I feel. I feel God is about to dramatically open my solitary and private life up to new friendships. This is kind of scary to me.

As we descend into Manaus, open my heart Lord, the way you want it to be open to you and to others. It's awesome what you do in planes and airports to get us where you want us to be.

I am so humbled as I see the look of determination and hear the words of commitment from the members of our mission team. They know God wants them to go on this trip. They can't explain it. All I've heard them say is that they know God wants them to go.

Others who don't understand the simplicity of knowing God wants you to do something just can't understand. God's call is so simple. He doesn't give you full blown details. I love that simple but powerful place I feel them at. When we detail God's plans with our rationalism and conditions, we lose the voice of God in our lives. Ask Godwin, "why are you going to the Amazon?" Godwin will say with a great big smile, "God wants me to go." Nothing more. God has simply convinced his heart. It's the same with everyone on our mission team.

When your heart is in this simple place, it doesn't matter what happens. You just know that God is working out His plan. It is so easy for me to forget the simplicity of the obedience God wants from me. I sometimes get lost in trying to control the details of God's work and plan in my life.

Forgive me, Lord. Restore in my heart that place where I first knew you and your guiding voice in my life. I heard that voice in my heart: "Chad, go to the seminary." I said yes. Why? You wanted me to go. I felt You say, "Chad, prepare to share your faith and let me work and talk to people through you. Every week I will bring something in your life and let you live it first, then preach it." I asked, "Why God? You don't do that to other pastors as far as I know." I know - that's the way You want to use me.

God wants me to pay attention. God will surprise me. He will do the work. It's simple.

As I have watched God lead the hearts of my mission team to this simplicity with God, I feel it is God's way of calling me back to simplicity with Him. It is a powerful truth that only a heart moved by God to simplicity before Him can be empowered to accomplish His plans. Anything less just messes up God's plan. We have done enough of that. God forgive me...me. Make it simple between me and you.

Simple.

I feel a heavy burden on my heart and spirit. I'm so tired. I feel like there is a heavy weight pressing on me from Satan. I've felt this before. He knows what seeing John, Jason, Quadisee, Asaph, JoseJoao will do to my heart. He doesn't want that.

I'm worrying about the team. Are they o.k.? I know they don't know what they are getting into. Will they be alright?

Satan is so crafty and slick. He wants me to become preoccupied with the well-being of the team so that I don't pay attention to my own. That's not my job, it's God's. I need to make sure I am in the right place and ready for what God wants me to do. He will see that the team is taken care of. He will see that this trip works for each of them the way He wants it to.

Get off me Satan!

We will be in Manaus soon.

Day 2 - Tuesday, August 4

Lose Your Luggage - The Fastest Way to Make Friends.

We are here! I was one of the first to get through customs. They didn't even check my bags. One by one our team came through customs. Everyone got their luggage, except Eric and Carol.

Eric is a seasoned missionary. He has been on a lot of these trips. He knows that if you need it, don't check it. If you have to have it and you check your bag, it will get lost. Eric lost a relief bag.

Poor Carol! She has been standing at the luggage carousel waiting for 45 minutes for her bag. It didn't get off the plane. Her bag is full of her clothes, personal things, gifts for the Brazilians. It's lost. All she has is her carry-on hand bag.

No! Carol is the worst person for this to happen to. I can feel her heart breaking. What a disappointment. I can't believe it. She can't believe it.

We are trying to find a bright side. Maybe they can find it... maybe they can get it back by Friday... Maybe one of the translators coming late to the conference can bring it to Anori. That's 3 maybe's. 3 maybe's seldom work out. Carol has no clothes, no personal care items, nothing but her carry on bag. There is a big difference between what you think you want to have with you for a day on a plane and what you will need for a week and a half on the Amazon River.

We need to give her some care. We've got to step forward and find a way.

No. That's not what God has in mind. God is up to something here. He knows better than I do how Carol is feeling right now. Carol meticulously planned this trip. Everything was listed out. She had packed everything she thought she would need. She had her suitcase packed a whole week before we left. Now it's lost and won't catch up with her before the trip down the Amazon is over. We are about to get on our bus, head for the boats and start down river.

God is in control here. He knows how this will effect Carol. He let it get lost. Wow! He wants to let us know He is in control of this trip from the very beginning. He has already planned this trip. He wants Carol to know that and be ok with it. She has no clothes, no personal care items, no gifts, none of the things she brought to help her with this trip. What does God have in mind? I guess we forget we are supposed to provide for each others needs. Every one of us has a suitcase with all the things we think we will need for the trip. I can't help but believe that if each one of us gave Carol a couple of things out of our bags, she will be equipped just like God wants her to be.

That's the way it was with the first Christians. *"All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need."* - Acts 2:44.

This is how God wants us to start this trip. Wow! He knows if we can't care and provide for Carol's needs, we'll never be the team we will need to be on this trip.

God let Carol keep what she absolutely needed. Just look what she has in her carry-on handbag: Her Bible, workshop notes, medicines, travel papers and that's all. The rest God intends to provide through us. Sounds like God packed that bag for Carol with everything He knew she really needed.

I can already feel God adding a new story to her workshop presentation. He is giving her a testimony He wants her to share. By the way, Carol's workshop at the conference is about staying connected to God and letting Him control your life.

Wow - God's working! I can't wait!

We arrived at the boats at about 4:30 AM. Everyone was asleep. We stowed our stuff aboard and took the opportunity to rest.

We are here! It is so good to see the Brazilians - John Nunes, Quadisee, Jason, and a surprise on this trip - John Nune's wife, Ermina is going with us. Pastor Ioutu and his wife Bronca are also aboard.



These women are strong women of faith. They are real pillars supporting their husband's ministries. Many of them are leaders and preachers in their own right as well as great partners in their husband's ministry. These are great ministry partnerships.

I brought Pastor John Nunes a gift from the States. He was thrilled to get it! It was something he has dreamed about getting for years - a telescope. They are hard to come by in Brazil. He is really happy. I'm so glad the telescope got here without a problem. Thank You, God.

My head feels so foggy from the day of travel. I feel like there is a great pressure on my spirit and on me, physically. I need to just clear my head and pray. I had hoped this would have lightened up once I got here. I'm no stranger to this feeling. It's the same old spiritual warfare. It never goes away. Satan doesn't have to stop us, just distract us and preoccupy us with details that will keep us from being totally about God's business. I can feel God has so much planned for us and the Brazilians on this trip. We need to be spiritually alert.

The boats are underway. What a wonderful feeling. The weather is milder than we expected. Of course, the breeze off the river as we travel has a lot to do with it. God is giving us this day to rest, adapt, and revive. It's great. I already see the fellowship starting between our team and the Brazilians. I wish we were all on the same boat. Our team is split between the two boats. Lynn, Rick and Godwin are on the other boat. I hope they are finding friendship and fellowship with the Brazilians like we are.

The Brazilians are so happy to have us. It means so much to them to feel support, encouragement and connection with other Christians. They don't care about denominations. They feel our faith in Jesus makes us all a part of the Body of Christ. I know that Jesus is pleased at our openness to each other.

It's great.

I shared that Carol lost her bag with all her clothes with the Brazilians on our boat. Rosangelina is already thinking how we can get Carol some clothes. Rosangelina is such a sweet and tireless servant of Christ. She inspires me. We joke about how she is really the one running this boat. The Brazilian pastors give this woman a lot of respect and room. She is a powerful woman. They know it and love her for it.

Carol doesn't seem too stressed out. God will work this out. God has a purpose. It will be great!

This afternoon, up-top on the boat, Pastor Asaph, JoseJoao and Eric were talking about the conference schedule. I started off just listening, but felt the Holy Spirit moving me to get involved. God has already opened doors and provided us with "Experiencing God" books. I know how "Experiencing God" has revived the faith of so many of our people. I believe it has been a significant factor in making the 9 people who have come on this trip open and motivated to come.

I wanted to make sure Lynn got plenty of time at the conference to present "Experiencing God ". I can't wait to put this powerful book in their hands.

When I started talking about small groups, Pastor Asaph and JoseJoao both perked up. I felt the Holy Spirit moving me and giving me words. I had their total attention. I told them "Experiencing God " was reviving churches in the United States. They understand the concept of renewal and revival. They want it. I told them this book would set people on fire to have a deeper relationship with God and give them a passion for making disciples and for church growth. Then God created a powerful moment among us. I said, "it's hard to start a church, but it is easy to start a small group." The Spirit had grabbed the attention of our hearts. Pastor JoseJoao reached over to Pastor Asaph, putting his hand on his shoulder, he said, "Listen to this, this is important." I said it again, "It's hard to start a church, but it is easy to start a small group." Bang! This blasted these two missionaries - big time.

I told them, this "Experiencing God" study would be all you needed to go into a village and start a small group. It would give the group a vision of getting closer to God, understanding what God wants them to do, and doing it. After starting several groups, letting them grow and multiply a few times, you will have a healthy church. Their minds were racing with all sorts of thoughts.

Pastor JoseJoao told me they were experiencing difficulty in starting new churches. Their resources were limited and getting a large enough group of people in a village

to take ownership in starting a church was difficult. But he felt this new strategy, this new paradigm, made sense. It was a new tool God was bringing them.

Yes! Yes! Yes! He is right! It was clicking for both of them.

Then I told them that God did a miracle to get the "Experiencing God" books to them on this trip. I told them the story of a woman who walked up to Melody's register, asked for a discount and turned out to be a missionary director with the Baptist church in Rio De Janeiro. You should have seen their faces as they were captivated by the story! Then when I told them that she said, the Baptist Church doesn't have "Experiencing God " in Portuguese, but she did, WOW! Pastor Asaph's and JoseJoao's eyes lit up! And when I told them we brought 100 books and 20 leaders guides, they looked at me and asked, "Here?" I said yes and put a copy in their hands. If you could have seen them. It was like they had just found treasure. Both of them are reading the same book! They were in their own world, flipping through the book and chattering together in Portuguese.

God was taking them to that special dream place where He gives new ideas, vast vision, and kingdom dreams. The rest of the world just faded away as the Holy Spirit took their hearts and minds away. God was connecting these two great leaders where they shared the same passion. Past conversations and prayers began fitting together in the framework of a new idea. This idea of using small groups as a church planting tool was making sense. Small groups were not totally new, but at this moment, God was helping them catch a vision of the potential of small groups in their missionary efforts. You could hear the harmony of their hearts and the symphony of their thoughts. They were agreeing with one another.

Jesus said, "...that if two of you on earth agree (are in symphony) about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." - Matthew 18:19,20

As the symphony played in our agreeing hearts, there was a shriek of terror from the spiritual darkness in the forest just yards at the bank of the river. Darkness is terrified of the message and power of Christ coming to the Amazon villages where it has had its stronghold for many thousands of years. We are an invasion. This trip is about God's warriors entering a very remote and deep place of spiritual darkness.

It's hard to start a church, but it is easy to start a small group.

One thought from the heart of God,

One idea empowered by the Holy Spirit will take the territory held by Satan.

Today, the word of the Lord grew. This is a great day! Awesome!

I've read the verses in Acts of the followers of Christ speaking and the Holy Spirit opening hearts as the word of the Lord grew. This was that kind of moment for Pastors Asaph and JoseJoao - and I saw it. What a privilege to tell the story of a miracle in our efforts to bring them books and to see the great vision God created in them to reach people who don't know Jesus and build churches through small groups. God had it all planned from the beginning. Awesome!

If people could only experience this kind of moment in their lives, it would change them forever. They would be filled with a passion to reach the lost. They could never go back to just pew- sitting and going through the motions of church week after week.

I didn't want to leave that moment. I felt the great openness, passion, and Great Commission focus you find in the Book of Acts. I long for the churches in the United States to have this kind of heart.

O Lord, hear. O Lord , forgive us

We have lost the awe of You

Have mercy, have mercy

O Lord, cleanse our hearts which are divided

Stir the faith that we once knew

We're thirsty, we're thirsty

O Lord, restore the church that bears Your name

O Spirit, send a revival to this nation

Breathe on us again. Breathe on us again

(Steve Fry (c) Maranatha Music 1997)

People living in the towns and villages along the Amazon River who today are not saved will be touched by the implementation of this "God sized" idea in Pastors Asaph and JoseJoao. They will one day be in Heaven because of a small group or a church that was started through a small group. When I see them in Heaven, they won't be Brazilians, but brothers and sisters in Christ. Then I will truly understand the importance of this moment God has let me witness. Awesome!

I can't believe how beautiful and cool it is as we travel down the river. I know the heat is coming, but until it hits, I'm really enjoying the cool breeze.

We slept in hammocks tonight. It got so cold I needed a blanket. I can't believe I want a blanket in the Amazon in August!

I didn't sleep very well because I was so cold. But it's more than that. There is a lot spiritual warfare being waged around us and against this trip. You never get used to it. This is very intense. The Brazilian Pastors feel it. They know this is an important trip. God will protect us. The battle always belongs to the Lord.

I need to watch everyone, especially our team. Satan will be very active among us bringing doubts, insecurities and discomfort. This is going to be tough. If you watch the Brazilian Pastors, you find that they get quieter and always seem to be together. Normally they are very light hearted, loud and playful. I wouldn't have picked up on it if I hadn't been with them on the first trip. It's quite touching to watch them be there for one another. It's a great comfort to know they are here for us, too.

Only a few of our team have not experienced anything like this before. God has prepared us for the spiritual encounters that are ahead. We'll be ready.

Day 3 - Wednesday, August 5

Learning to Swim on the Way to Anori

Last night we stopped at a small town where Pastor JoseJoao's mission team has built a church. The town is called Fe em Deus which means "Faith in God". It was dark. We saw very few lights. The town must be very small. We walked down a very narrow path. No streets, only a dim light in the darkness ahead guided us.

About 6 months ago, Missions International and people with Pastor JoseJoao built this church as a mission church. The small building, perhaps 25x35 feet, was made of simple wood construction. The front was unfinished. Boards were just leaning on the support structure. One electrical wire ran along the rafters down the center of the church. Two 60 watt bulbs barely cast enough light to penetrate the darkness. Other than about 8 small benches there was nothing else in the building.

I don't yet know everyone on our two boats, but I didn't see many faces I didn't recognize as our crew. We brought an amplifier, 2 mikes, an electronic drum set and a guitar from Pastor JoseJoao's boat. After some introductory words from one of the Brazilian pastors, Mike and Rick gave their testimonies. Both of them spoke of God making a radical change in their lives to bring them on this mission trip to serve. Pastor David Brown, a Presbyterian pastor from New York gave the message. He has been to Brazil more that 18 times on mission work. I have a strange feeling about him. Perhaps I just need to get to know him. I feel he has come on this trip with a mission of his own. His message was about Peter stepping out of the boat in faith. I can feel that stepping out in faith is on his heart. You can tell as he preaches. This is a great place to step out in faith on the water.

The mission church in Fe em Deus has only 4 Christians. Wow! They built this church hoping that once the building was built the people would come. My heart just screamed when I found out. We have learned the hard way that the idea, "Build it and they will come," just doesn't work. Churches don't have the resources to build a building and hope that the building will attract people.

Pastor Asaph and JoseJoao have such a great vision and desire to bring the gospel to the river villages. I have great admiration for all the work they are doing. But they haven't found the right tool to plant churches in the interior of the Amazonas. The boats are great for first contacts, periodic ministry visits and humanitarian aid, but they aren't very effective in planting churches. They don't really know how they are going to reach all the river villages. They are open and searching for a better method and a more effective ministry tool. They have so few resources to try and win this great region for Christ.

It's sad to see a half built church like this one in Fe em Deus with no pastor and only 4 Christians. The church has been standing here for almost a year with un-nailed boards leaning against their supports. You would have thought someone would have simply nailed them in place. I guess they were waiting for the boat to come back and finish it for them. You can't start a church without people taking ownership in it.

What did we build in Fe em Deus? Is it a church or just a building? I wonder. Time will tell.

What causes a group of people to become a church. It's not building a building. It takes the building of a community. The Holy Spirit causes it to happen as people feel drawn together to do something important for the Lord. Then the people realize they have a connection with each other and a purpose. This is community. When a group of people find this sense of community, they become a church.

I have a growing conviction that a community that exists only to meet its own needs of friendship, care and togetherness will thrive and be healthy for only a short time - because it has its own "self" as its greatest concern. People will make a lot of sacrifices and work hard to build a wonderful church for themselves and their families. It's sad to say, but this is the highest priority in most churches in America today. But not all churches are like this. Some churches form a sense of community that thrives beyond its founding generation. They understand and know that in addition to caring for each other, their future depends on the people who have not yet arrived. Their focus is on the future. They know that they exist primarily for those who will come and be there after them. When this future focus is clear, a church will be a thriving community that will pass on its best to the generations that follow.

In Fe em Deus, I don't feel this sense of community. The town has 40 families and only 1 of them is Christian. All 4 Christians belong to the same family! It is no wonder, that after a year, the boards are still not nailed up on the wall. Without a community of faith in Fe em Deus, it won't matter if they nail them up. You can't build a church for someone else. They must build it themselves. Just because you build it, they will not necessarily come. If you doubt it, you can visit Fe em Deus anytime and meet the 4 people they built a church for. I wonder if it will ever be finished?

This morning Larry did our devotion. He came to me and told me the Lord had given him a message we had to hear. I could sense a pressing urgency in him. Something very deep was driving him. It seemed like he was at a moment of truth with something to prove, not so much to us, but to himself.

I've been there before. We all have. Like a young boy taking swimming lessons, all his instruction was in the shallow water. He has learned to put his face under water, the basic swimming strokes, and even soloed across the width of the pool. But the water was always shallow with the security of the pool's bottom always beneath his

feet. Now it was time for him to jump off into the deep water and swim. It was a moment of truth. It was time to Jump in. He would either sink or swim.

Larry has come on this trip by himself. He comes from a Church of God and is an adult Sunday school teacher. I feel this is Larry's moment of truth. He can't go much farther down the river until he knows something about himself.

I know this feeling. I already know what his devotion will be about. It will be about his personal struggle inside. Boy, do I know this feeling! It is the secret of every good preacher. People will hear his message and feel he is speaking right to their hearts and their situations. People will say, "It's like he knew exactly what has been going on in my life this week." They all think he's preaching to them. The preacher humbly accepts their kind comments about having spoken to their hearts and life situations. Little do they know how little he knew. All he really knew was his own heart and his own needs. When he was preaching, he was preaching to himself. Everyone else just got to overhear the sermon. That makes him a good preacher.

As Larry begins his devotion, all of his nervous energy is focused. As if he is taking a deep breath and getting ready to jump in the deep water. He starts - Splash! "God is the great I am... He made the universe... nothing is impossible for God... I want to challenge you on this trip to let God do the impossible to expand you and stretch you more than you ever felt possible..." We all listened. Yes, the Spirit was speaking to our hearts. We all needed to hear Larry's words. As we listened, we thought to ourselves, "It's almost as if he knows exactly what we are feeling and what's going on inside of us."

My heart danced as I listened to Larry's devotion. I heard the splashing of swimming arms and kicking feet. The young boy was swimming in the deep water. The preacher was preaching to himself.

And now we could all go on, down the river.

We can swim.

This morning we stopped in the small fishing village of Anima. We pulled in while it was still dark. It's a wonder to watch morning arrive. It's an act of God's creation every day. Wow. The town comes to life. We stopped to pick up several passengers. Back to the river. On to Anori.

After our devotion, the women shooed us down to the lower decks. They want to get to know each other - girl talk. For girls, that seems to be so important. Before they can share the days journey ahead, they need to know each other. Knowing each other is a necessity. For them, it's an important part of what this trip is all about.

Us guys, we just followed orders. We trudged down stairs like we were told. We talked about things like how much farther it was to Anori and when would we get there. The women now knew most of the important things about each other. Us guys, we still haven't learned each other's names. Perhaps this is just the nature of the difference between men and women. I bet, even after this trip is over, us guys won't have even learned each other's names.

We arrive in Anori just after noon. Everyone is excited.

The population is about 10,000. Anori is not a pretty sight. The docks are littered with trash. Scavenger birds pick through the trash on the shore. The ugly birds are perched on the roofs of the city waiting for new garbage to pick through. Scrawny and underfed dogs fight with them for scraps.

This is a poor place, not just in terms of the economy and lifestyles, but spiritually too. You can feel the darkness. Anori is a wise choice for this conference. Anori needs The Light. This conference will be a real battle between the light and darkness. I know about these battles. I have been here before, but not the people who have come with me.

I worry about them. This is a dimension of ministry only two of my team have ever experienced like this before. The others will have to learn about this spiritual warfare. The enemy's strategy is to show us the trash, show us the scavengers, shock us with the stench of his dark ministry, his evangelism of need, want, despair and emptiness. He wants to shake us and rob us of our confidence. Next, he will bring restlessness to our sleep. He wants us to start the conference tired, uncertain, confused. I'm sure he will be successful. He usually is in the beginning of the battle. Our team will now learn how darkness fights. The battlefield is set. Those who battle for the light must enter the darkness. This is how it is.

"The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it." John 1:5

This darkness doesn't want to understand. That is why it is a battlefield.

I feel so sweaty and gritty. I'd love a shower! Jason and some of the other Brazilians are boating out to a marsh in the river. They asked me if I wanted to go wash - swimming in the river. I guess this is my chance to swim in the Amazon. I grabbed my towel, soap and we had a great swim. I have no idea what's in this river, but it is their home. The Brazilian pastors were just watching. Jason asked me if I was really going to jump in for a swim. He didn't think I would. These moments are where friendships grow. We splashed and laughed. It was great!

How can you ever earn their respect, be their brother in Christ, if you don't swim in their river? The swim was great. Our friendship grew. It was an important moment.

Rick is really having his boundaries expanded. He has never experienced spiritual warfare like this. It is different from the ways he has thought about Satan and his presence in our world. His law enforcement training is making him feel we need to get together and be prepared. He's not quite sure what we need to be prepared for.

Rick was constantly questioning why God wanted him to come on this trip. It's really pretty clear. He is our watchman.

He told me today he was concerned we were not all getting together and having time to talk and support each other. He's right. Since we have been split up on two boats, we haven't connected like we need to. The watchman has sounded the alarm. Tonight we will all get together. We need to talk about our feelings and join hands in prayer. This is how soldiers of the light prepare to enter the battlefield of darkness.

Tomorrow the conference begins. I've invited the Brazilians to join us. I want Bronca, Pastor Iouto's wife, to tell about the things that have happened in Borba since the first conference. I think it will be just what our team needs to hear as we prepare ourselves spiritually for the conference to begin.

It's good to have a watchman watching.

Pastor Iouto and Bronca told us about the spiritual progress God has brought about since the 1st conference in their town of Borba. The most dramatic change was some significant steps by the pastors to begin working together. It makes sense. How can the witness for Christ grow in a town if the pastors do not have a bond and commitment to work together?

I shared how we would be entering a great spiritual battle when the conference begins. I told them we could expect obstacles in sharing our messages, workshops, and developing the friendships with the Brazilian people. Several in our group were just waiting to talk about the spiritual darkness they were sensing in this place.

Pastor John Nunes shared some great insight. He said Satan and the demons like the Rain Forest. This is their home. They have been here for many thousands of years - even before men started marking time in this place. He said, "It was so long ago that we don't even know the peoples who lived here then. This was the demon's home. They like this place because there was so much superstition and idol worship. This is their religion. They call it Makumba. There is a heavy cloud of this darkness over Brazil. The demons won't give it up easily. They always fight to keep their territory. The demons are very influential."

John described the demon possession they find here. He talked about how you have to call on the demon in a person and command it to come out in the name of Jesus.

If you could have seen the look of shock on our team's faces. John's words were pushing them way beyond their boundaries. They were nearly unbelievable to them. Perhaps if they were back home and they heard what John said, they may very well have dismissed them. But here, in this place, the darkness is undeniable. John's gentle caring spirit and simple honesty gave his words powerful authority. He knows the enemy. This is his home.

Rick was shocked as he listened. He kept asking, "Does that really happen?" Pastor John just kept looking at him with his kind smile, "Yes, my brother, it is true. Demon possession and exorcism is just part of our ministry responsibility." John explained that after you cast out a demon, then you must lead that person to faith in Jesus, otherwise the demon will come back.

Wow! What a great thing for our team to hear! What good does it do to rid someone of an evil or relieve their suffering, only to let it come back later when you are not there? Pastor John's heart sees the real goal. The true victory is not casting out a demon, but filling a person's life with Christ. In America, Christians don't think about demon possession. Most of them wouldn't recognize it if they saw it. So many people's lives in our country are so empty without Christ. We don't have to cast out a demon, just help them fill their life with Christ. Get a life! - John 10:10.

I wonder if there was a real awareness of Satan in American society, would people be more concerned with filling their lives with Christ? I suppose it's fortunate the demons like Brazil and everyone knows they live here. I suppose if the Brazilian demons wanted to, they could come and live in America. It's open territory for them. That's for sure.

Bronca shared about a real victory in her town of Borba after the first conference. The pastors of Borba have been very disconnected and suspicious of each other. They feel threatened by each other's ministry and are afraid the other might steal their members away from them. I didn't have the heart to tell them pastors in America are just as paranoid and suspicious of each other.

Pastor Iouto told about another pastor in Borba he invited to the conference. He said he didn't have time to come. The first day of the conference, one of his friends that was attending the conference told him about the topics, so the next day he came. The third day this pastor had a whole group of his people there. Since that conference, there has been a fellowship and a sense of unity of this pastor with Iouto and other pastors in Borba. I'm surprised. I wasn't aware our conference was sparking the beginnings of pastoral unity that would play a significant role in the growth of God's Kingdom in Borba. It was! I guess I didn't see it because I've been so used to a paradigm of ministry where we pastors just kept to ourselves - our own kind. Bronca was so thrilled to have gained greater unity and fellowship with this pastor.

Since I have been reaching out and trying to get to know some of the pastors in the area of St. Philip, I realize how critical it is for pastors to have some unity or fellowship on some level if we are going to have an impact on our community. If pastors and church leaders don't come together and work together, how can we ever project the Body of Christ to our unchurched community? Yes, we have doctrinal disagreements that are critical, but we have the same Savior, same mission, the same responsibility to be the presence of Jesus in our community.

I understand why Bronca was so happy about these developments in Borba. I think it has opened my eyes more. I can't help admire this simpler view of Christianity I've found in my two mission trips to Brazil. Since I've been in Brazil, no one except fellow Americans has even asked me what denomination I'm from. That's because it's just not that important here. What's important is that we came.

We had a powerful time of prayer. Americans and Brazilians prayed together. Everyone began to pray at the same time. The energy and sincerity of the pleas of our hearts grew louder. My spirit felt the shrieks and screams of the darkness around us giving way to our presence, our prayers, our mission. It was as if the darkness was being invaded by the Light. The prayers grew louder. There were shouts for the power of God to descend on this place, give us divine protection for our conference, and courage in our hearts. The Brazilians pray so boldly, they want God to hear their hearts and they want the darkness to hear and know, as well.

Tonight, the darkness of Anori heard the battle cry of God's people. It was their turn to be afraid.

How did our group who had never experienced anything like this before react to this powerful time of prayer and proclamation? They all felt just fine. I didn't hear them trying to figure out if something was right or wrong. They accepted it. They were glad to have been given the privilege by God to be a part of it.

Why wasn't their first reaction to be judgmental rather than being open and accepting of something so new and different? The answer is simple. They felt the darkness. Now they better see The Light. I'm very proud of each of them.

Tonight we sleep. We are guarded.

Day 4 - Thursday, August 6

The Conference Begins

Last night we walked to the church where we are going to have our conference. This is the oldest part of town. The streets are dark. It feels dark.

As we walk through the square we see the Catholic church. It is in the heart of the city. It's an impressive structure. The doors are open and a service is going on inside. I had to step over for a closer look. I saw about 12 people in this very large church. I heard chanting. Everyone was on their knees, hands folded responding with their liturgy.

No one was outside the church.

Every time we have a meeting or service, kids and adults come by to look. They are curious and I guess we are new in town. There is no curiosity here. Out in the streets, kids are everywhere. Music blares, everyone is visiting, playing and enjoying themselves. The church seems all by itself - separated and ignored. I have a hard time with what I see.

The Padre's house is next to the church. It is a very large house. It was so large, I thought it was a school attached to the church. One of the Brazilian pastors said, "No schoola," as he shakes his finger. "No, No, Padre." The Padre lives in the big house. Somehow, I don't think that the big church in the center of the town is a big church in the hearts of the people.

The conference started today. Pastors and leaders are still arriving. This is a remote and hard place to have a conference. The church has a few fans. In this heat they don't seem to help much. We are all just dripping in sweat. But with great determination and commitment, we began with Dwight casting the vision of the conference. We are here to strengthen, encourage and coordinate these pastors and leaders to go out and start new churches. This is a great vision which Dwight casts so well. The Brazilian pastors have great respect for Dwight. He has come many times and shown he has a great commitment to this vision.

Because of the heat and poor accommodations, this conference is a real struggle. There seems to be a lot of confusion. Sometimes I think Satan just creates enough confusion in what we are doing to rob us of the joy and the sense of what God is doing. From a spiritual perspective, our beginning was a big spiritual victory.

It's taking a little time for everyone to settle in. It's happening.

This was a good beginning and a good morning.

Our team is going in a lot of directions. We are doing much more this trip than on our first. Our medical people are traveling by boats to some of the very small remote villages along the river and in the jungle. We have a team preparing for youth and children's ministry at a club called "Adreniline". Some of our team is walking the streets to pray for the people, the city and the conference. We are doing a lot at this conference. I feel God is up to more than we can see at this moment.

It is really hot, really hot. It's so hot people don't ask for the temperature. After lunch is siesta time. We have nothing until 4:30.

The Brazilians are very attentive to our workshops and presentations. They want something to take back to their churches. If we say it will work, they will take it home and try it. They are wanting help in ministry so desperately. I feel our workshops are addressing real needs: renewing your spiritual life, small groups, and leadership training. They are really taking it all in. This is a great thing for so many who have never gotten any training. Most of them are from such remote places. They are so isolated. Eric, the organizer from Missions International, says we should never underestimate what these Brazilians will take and use. They are very industrious and innovative in putting new ideas to work in their churches. A conference like this expands their vision more than we can know.

After lunch, Pastor Asaph had the boat put out away from the dock to the open channel of the river - the Solimoes River. Out here the water is cleaner. It was amazing - almost everyone put on their trunks and jumped in. The whole boat was like a bunch of kids playing together, laughing, horsing around. The water felt so good. As I treaded water, I grabbed on the side of the boat and just watched the moment. Everyone was sharing such a great time of fellowship and fun.

The Brazilians love time for fun and playing together. People were diving off the boat. One of the big, hefty Brazilians cannon-balled off the boat and made a great splash. Everyone joked that they could feel the water level of the great Amazon rise and fall when he jumped in. I don't think I'll try the cannon-ball. The joking would be merciless.

Even some of the older women came in the water. It was all about fun. You felt the friendship and community they had with each other. They include everyone - even those that might not find acceptance in other groups. They know one another and accept each other so openly.

When the Americans jumped into the water, we took a big step toward entering our Brazilians' family and community. This is turning out to be a great trip.

We are getting closer to the Brazilians. Everyone on the team is working hard at building relationships. I think the Brazilians are more open to the folks from St. Philip than the rest of the mission team. I guess it is because they came with me. Coming back means a lot to them. Pastor John told me most of the people who come on a mission trip go back home and they never see or hear from them again. It meant a lot to them that I came back and brought friends.

Tonight was an extraordinary night. The St. Philip team, some of the other Americans and the Brazilians gathered for singing and prayer. The Brazilians sing with such rhythm and gusto. It makes even our peppy songs sound sort of wimpy. Clapping and laughter and song led to a time of prayer. Bronca took charge. She is a natural leader.

As we prayed, she wanted us to feel free to walk over to someone else and pray for them if we wanted. On top of the boat with the stars as our canopy, we all started praying. The prayer of both languages and the heart cries became a great symphony to God. As we prayed some of the prayers became confession of deepest needs and inner struggles. You don't have to know the language to feel what is going on. I am so used to confession as a memorized or written statement we read in a service, or something we might whisper under our breath in a prayer. But here in this moment, Brazilian hearts opened, crying out for the Lord's throne. Hearts were asking for forgiveness, help, courage, strength, to be worthy of God's choosing, asking for God's will and kingdom to come through them... I have never heard such an outpouring!

Several of the Brazilian pastors and leaders were on their knees crying to the Lord to be worthy to be the leaders and warriors God has called them to be. What I heard gave new meaning to "Calling on the Lord". These were serious hearts, committed totally to the Lord. This was the most honest and sincere expression of community calling on the Lord that I have ever experienced. The Americans were drawn into this symphony. We began moving among each other as the Spirit led us. Hands were laid on each other, we were gathering around the pastors with prayers of encouragement and strength. I had never before seen pastors on their knees crying for the Lord's presence and to use them to bring others to Christ. The passion they had buried deep inside flowed out in presentation to God as we opened our hearts beneath the stars.

The prayers went on for more than an hour. No one thought about the time. Time seemed to stand still. We were in the presence of God. The darkness around us and Anori was silent. There was nothing it could say. I was awed while God's people were together in heart, in spirit, and in prayer.

I believe there are moments when something so significant and powerful happens, it is remembered and learned from for a lifetime. This was one of those moments - perhaps not for the Brazilians, for they were allowing us to join their prayer life. But for us Americans, what we experienced was unforgettable. It will be cherished for a lifetime. Woe to the next pastor that tries to intellectually talk to any of this group

about prayer, or the next person who casually tells one of them they will be praying for them. Tonight, the bar has been raised on prayer. Their spirits have experienced a prayer of great honesty, openness and passion. It will be hard to find a sanctuary as special and beautiful as the top of this boat under the canopy of stars.

Now prayer has new meaning. It will never be memorized words and routine motions ever again. Prayer is alive!

You just had to be there. As I talked afterwards with some of the American team and our St. Philip group, we realized this experience was something that they could never really explain to their friends and family back home. Rick asked me, "How could you explain what just happened here tonight?" I said "You can't. You just had to be there. You just had to be there." He nodded his head in agreement. We both knew - you would have had to be here.

Day 5 - Friday, August 7

Pizza for Breakfast and Thoughts Too Big to Think

This conference may look small, but it is a gigantic spiritual battle. As you walk through the city, the churches are old and largely unused. They are not the center of spiritual activity any more. They feel like places that lost their vitality and spiritual significance long ago.

It's easy to tell a church that has a living and thriving ministry. An alive church transforms the neighborhood around it. People have pride in their church and it creates a sense of self-worth in them. These churches in Anori may have been bastions of transforming ministry in the past, but not now. Now they are relics. As I have walked past several of them on the way to where we are having the conference, they are trashy, in disrepair, the doors are closed and locked, and most significant, there is no one around. Ministry is dead in these churches and in this part of Anori.

One of the reasons Asaph and JoseJoao chose Anori is to bring the excitement and celebration of vision-filled Christians into these dark places in Anori. JoseJoao is bringing a new pastor from Anima to Anori. He is a strong, loving and committed pastor with a great missionary heart. They are preparing the way for his ministry. Both these leaders understand a new pastor would be overwhelmed coming to a place like this if that place wasn't prepared. This conference is an invasion of this

spiritually dark territory. It is a strong message to the community that the kingdom of God is serious about making Anori a center of ministry and missionary work along this region of the Solimoes River. The plans are to build a seminary training center and a new church and to make this a mission center.

There is no doubt that Satan and the demons are responding to our conference and plans in a very strong way. Everything we seem to do is so difficult. There are so many little mis-communications, tensions between us in our scheduling and organizing. Everything we seem to do is hard. But everyone seems to be working with a clear awareness of the spiritual dimension and warfare of this conference.

Rick and Lynn are walking through the city with Pastor David Brown - praying. It is so critical we have those prayers daily in the city streets, around the places we are meeting, during our workshops and presentations. Here you wouldn't even consider doing a workshop without prayer going on around the building and inside the church during the presentations.

Everyone has a great attitude. Everyone is staying very flexible and stepping forward as needs arise. It was God's work that these 9 people came with me from St. Philip. Each one knows God brought them on this trip for a purpose and they are fulfilling that purpose every day. It is amazing how God assembled this group with the right gifts and talents. It shouldn't surprise me. I know that's the way God works. The same thing is true in the church. If we only realized the resources, gifts and talents that were present in our church to accomplish all of God's great will.

I struggle with why the church isn't a positive, active, purpose driven place like we are on this mission trip. There is too much selfishness in the church. All too often we are more wrapped up in doing what we want than actually accomplishing the mission God has given us. Even though we give allegiance to the great commission and expanding God's kingdom, most of what we do is "pew sitting" and "nest building".

When our church accepts the great commission, sees the area around us as a mission field chosen by God for us, and we are totally dedicated to doing whatever it takes to grow God's kingdom, we will leave our nests, come down out of the trees and make a difference for Christ. Until then, we will stay where we are. It's safer that way.

Something exciting and surprising happened this morning. Last night during our dinner conversation, Pastor Asaph asked me what kind of food we ate in the United States. I named several dishes; Mexican, Italian, hamburgers and pizza. "Pizza," he said. He knows pizza. It's not common in Brazil, but they know of it.

This morning for breakfast, guess what? The cooks brought out Pizza! Wow! What a surprise.

What a great loving heart for us to make such a meal for us. We all laughed and celebrated at the community and fellowship we had found with each other. It was total love and a desire to serve us that motivated them to make us pizza. Everyone instantly knew how special a moment this was. No one said, "pizza for breakfast?" It was an act of love that you just have to accept - even for breakfast. As we were eating pizza and drinking our coffee, I thought to myself, when was the last time I saw such community and fun loving caring in a church? It is rare.

I think we should try serving pizza for our next breakfast meeting. Something wonderful could happen.

Today, the conference began to pick up steam and gain focus. Today is a day that our street prayers and children's ministry are all advancing in Anori. The topics of the workshops were focusing on winning others to Christ and becoming strategic in our disciple making and ministries.

The more we talk about improving and increasing our focus on disciple making, the more the importance of small groups keeps coming up. The Brazilian pastors are intensely interested in small groups, but they don't know that much about them. I can't wait until we put "Experiencing God" in their hands and let them experience the revival this powerful small group study will bring to their churches. In this culture of family closeness and a village way of life, they are primed and ready for small group ministry!

I had a great surprise this afternoon. Dwight told me he was working on a pilot project. He wasn't planning to try it in Brazil, but because of the way God's spirit kept bringing our focus and discussions at this conference to small groups, he felt like the Holy Spirit was pointing out Brazil to be a place to try this pilot. He wants me to help him.

Dwight described the program to me. Churches have been using small groups to nurture and involve people in ministry for more than 20 years. The biggest and most dynamic churches in the world have thriving small group programs to nurture,

care for and train people. But Dwight has been working on a small group program to be evangelistic. This has never been tried before.

Here is his vision: The pastor becomes the model and example. He writes down the names of 12 people he knows that are unchurched. He then focuses on 3 of them he feels the Lord directing him to. Then he starts a small group with as many of his unchurched friends as he can. The total purpose of this small group is to reach the unchurched. He mentors another leader in his group to train to lead a group., The total purpose is evangelism. This has never been tried before. Small groups have been around a long time to nurture and care for members in a church, but they have never been used for evangelism and church planting.

I shared my idea that perhaps we could use these small evangelistic groups to plant new churches in the communities that don't have a church. I gave him my idea: "It's hard and expensive to build a church, but it's easy and cheap to start a small group." Bells and whistles were going off in both of our heads.

Dwight has done extensive groundwork in this evangelistic small group project. He has a staff person that has written the first draft of training materials and studies. He wants to test it in several countries in a variety of different cultures . Dwight wasn't planning to pilot the program in Brazil, but now he feels the Lord is sending us all the signals to try it here too.

Look at how the Lord is talking to us! Our St. Philip team comes to bring a workshop on small groups and the "Experiencing God" study. Lynn Pilcher, who started Experiencing God at St. Philip and has directed the material, is on this trip. Gail Oglesby, who has been a Bible Study Fellowship leader for years, is on this trip. Melody Pearson, who has developed and directed several small group programs, is on this trip. We have been miraculously provided with "Experiencing God" books in Portugese on this trip. God put an idea in my head, "It's hard to start a church but easy to start a small group". It rings bells between Pastor Asaph and JoseJoao just a few days before. Dwight is just about ready to pilot this Evangelistic small group program.

Do you think God is trying to tell us something on this trip?

Yes, God wants us to try this new strategy.

It is huge.

The Brazilians have such a strong community culture. Small groups would sweep this nation like a wildfire. Brazil would experience a great Pentecost. Small groups are a new idea for them. The people working to take the Gospel to communities that don't have a gospel witness don't have the right tool to plant new churches.

I believe small groups is the tool these people have been waiting for. Just imagine, we send someone into a community that doesn't have a church to start a small group. They first form a group of unchurched people, divide the group as it grows until you have a nucleus of committed Christians. They can build their own church. They will have ownership in it. It will be theirs. It will be a church built out of the community developed in their small groups. It's a better way to start a church than for a boat to come down the river and do it for them. Evangelistic small groups can start a gigantic revival and explosion of church growth here in Brazil.

I feel it is the right tool these passionate people need to attain their goal of planting a church in every community in the Amazonas by the year 2010. Wow! This is it. God has placed the tool to win a nation for Christ right in our laps. This strategy could be used in other countries as well. But here in Brazil - it is the tool these people have been praying for. Wow! This is huge!

This feels like a great moment for Brazil and evangelizing the rivers and the remote villages of the Amazon Rain Forest. It's as if God just spoke to us, "Have you ever thought about trying to use small groups to start churches?" Wow. This is gigantic! No wonder the spiritual warfare has been so intense! I don't think at this moment I can even write a sentence without an exclamation mark!

My mind is just racing. I can't turn it off or think about anything else. As I think about my life and how God led me into ministry - it's amazing! When I was in graduate school studying for medical school, Darla and I joined a Lutheran Church that had a new and unique ministry called "Careciples". The pastor of the church was Rev. Steve Wagner at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Carrollton, Texas. "Careciples" was a small group ministry. I was quickly asked to lead the High School Bible class and the Youth Careciple group. That small group changed our lives.

Darla and I found more than a new church. We found a home, friends, a new sense of meaning and purpose in our lives.

We experienced what Acts 2:42-47 was about.

It changed my life. I felt God calling me to change all my plans and go to the seminary. While I was at the seminary, I started a small group program in the field work church I was assigned to. We established 10 small groups that brought strong spiritual renewal similar to what we have seen happen at St. Philip through "Experiencing God" . One of the groups was especially strong and had spiritual vitality. This one group produced the key leadership that has led that congregation for the last 20 years. It is really amazing.

I've started small groups in all of the churches I've pastored. It has been one of the focal points of the way I've done ministry. St. Philip saw a renewal of small groups in the Experiencing God study. I didn't have anything to do with this renewal. God raised it up through a hand full of lay leaders. In the last 6 months we went from 4 adult Sunday school classes to 18 Experiencing God small groups. And everyone who has come on this trip has been through an Experiencing God small group.

If I were to draw a time line of my life and the important and significant ministry God has done through me, small group ministry would be on every point of that line from the moment I felt called to be a pastor until now. And today, I'm in Brazil being asked by Dwight to pilot an evangelistic small group program to plant churches and initiate church growth. Wow. I can't believe I'm here! I can't believe this is happening! How is it possible that things can be so complicated and so simple at the same time? Wow!

I have so many thoughts swirling around inside me. Dwight and I sat down with Pastors Asaph and JoseJoao and we talked about the pilot. They are intrigued and very supportive, but this is out of their league. They don't know about small groups. That's why we need a pilot.

Later Dwight, Melody, and I sat down with Pastor Iouto and Bronca and shared our idea with them. If you could have seen the serious look on their faces. They knew this was big and we could all feel God preparing to reshape the spiritual landscape of their country. Wow. Pastor Iouto and Bronca have such committed hearts to the Lord. They are immensely talented and form a dynamic team. Their hearts couldn't help but say yes. Yes!

We all knew God was preparing to do something great. It was humbling. It wasn't about any one of us. God was beginning to repaint the picture of our lives in some way. We felt the scripture *"See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?" - Isaiah 43: 19*

Awesome, totally awesome!

Later that night Melody was talking about the small group pilot with Bronca. She was ecstatic. She said that they have been praying for years for a tool to reach their country for Christ. This was a great day in all our lives. I'm not sure what it all means yet, but today, so far, it's been totally awesome. I feel an agreement among our spirits. We all seem to understand and are thinking with the same focus. I feel the great potential of using these small groups to build a Christian community in an unchurched town. The Brazilian pastors have a great vision to reach the Amazonas but they don't have the right tool. You can't win the Amazonas building boats or churches. It's hard to build a church, but it's easy to start a small group. It's the right tool.

During our gathering time at the end of the evening, the Brazilians joined us again for prayer time. We prayed for the City of Anori, the pastors and their families serving this town and the economy. During the afternoon, a modern luxury boat had docked next to us. Elections are only a few months away and this fancy boat was the governor's boat. Two state representatives were visiting Anori today politicking for support. Politicians come to remote villages like Anori only at election time.

The governor's boat is a very ritzy luxury boat. It is equipped with every modern convenience. It is really equipped. What a contrast - the boats the Brazilians travel in compared to the governor's high tech craft.

As we started praying, raising our voices and hearts to God, the witness of Jesus Christ was penetrating the darkness, even into the corruption of the politics that had come to Anori today. The Light penetrated the darkness through prayer. It wasn't but a few minutes until the people on the Governor's boat realized we were praying. They started their engines and pulled out to find a quieter spot. I'm not quite sure, but it looked to me like they left Anori entirely.

The symphony of prayers was so wonderful - the blending of our languages, the openness of emotions, and seeking the Lord's presence and direction. It was unforgettable. After we finished, I asked the Brazilians if their governor and representatives were good or bad? They said their elected officials were very bad, dishonest, and corrupt. Somehow I thought it was fitting and appropriate that the governor's boat left. After all, isn't that what we were praying for - that the Light of Christ would invade and be victorious over the darkness? The departure of that boat somehow felt like The Light had won a victory - at least for now.

The evening feels nice and cool. It's an illusion. It's really not cool. But after 110 degree temperatures during the day under the direct equator sun, the evening feels good.

I can't sleep. Too much is running through my mind. Yet it's hard to think. My thoughts seem so big - too big to think. Perhaps I'm a bit afraid to think them. I know they are much bigger than I can think.

The confusion that the spiritual darkness brings is so intense. It is hard to explain but unmistakable when you have experienced it. God help me think and see clearly. Help me ignore the distraction in my mind so I can see only You. I'm not afraid because I know there is really nothing to be afraid of. God, help me see simply and clearly. Help me see with my spirit and my heart.

Day 6 - Saturday, August 8

The Conference Ends We Are Amigos

Today is the last day of the conference. I could just feel that today we would have to face a lot. I got up about 5 AM. The Amazon sunrise is so beautiful and peaceful. I got out of my hammock and went to the back of the boat on the top level. The morning solitude helps me focus on the spiritual challenges of the day. I felt the Lord's presence. I needed to just sit with Him that hour. It seemed as if this morning, the rest of the world honored this time for me to be with the Lord. Thank you Lord for your friendship, for being with me and our team today.

Hell will fight us hard today. The issue isn't whether the conference would be a success or if our proclamation would win over the darkness in Anori. The Lord will have His victory. Today was about stepping forward in faith, standing firm and doing what God called us down here to do in this conference. God is opening a ministry door in Anori.

The ministry had died here a long time ago. I wish I knew the history of the churches in this place. I feel they were once strong. But something happened here. It feels like the Church of Ephesus in Revelation 2:1-7. There was a time when the Gospel thrived here. The old churches throughout the town testify to that. But now they are empty shells.

As I watched the services and the few numbers of people who attend them, it feels like the same second generation church in Ephesus. Those that are left are going through the motions. Their parents were the pioneers and builders of the churches. I can just feel how they were once full and very active. But the children of the pioneers and builders who were raised in the church so often never experience the passion of discovering the Lord and personal conversion. This second generation always had the church. They take it for granted and often turn it into a self-serving place. Churches die when they become self-serving. The greatest tragedy that can happen in a church is when the first generation pioneers and builders fail to pass on their passion and commitment to the Lord to the next generation. Buildings and traditions are meaningless if you don't have people with passion for Jesus to fill them and carry them on.

If we could only learn this lesson in our churches in the United States. As they get to be 30 or 40 years old and the founders and builders want to pass the leadership down to the next generation, they discover the next generation just isn't interested. Jesus words to Ephesus: *"I hold this against you: you have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place... He who has ears, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches..."*
Revelation 2:4-7

So many of these churches in Anori will never be full again. But God is about to do something new. Our conference is what this is about. It's part of God's plan. I know it.

Now, I'm ready to face the day.

Boy, was I right about today. The confusion and chaos was incredible. Behind the scenes of the conference there were mix ups and mis-communications. Several of the major presenters, including me, were confused about who was doing what. One of the presentations went way long and threw our entire morning schedule off. Stress among the presenters was rising. At one frantic moment, I stopped and looked at the pastors and leaders attending the conference. I realized that they didn't have a clue that any of this confusion was going on. Wow! I'm tied up in knots and the Lord is just making this a wonderful day for everyone else.

After a few moments, I regained my focus and had a great presentation - "Making Fully Devoted Disciples in Your Church." God was really feeding the Brazilians and giving them a greater vision for their ministry.

Then, Great News! The lost luggage arrived at the airport and the Experiencing God Books that mistakenly were left back in Manaus arrived just in time for this afternoon's presentation of Experiencing God! God had it all worked out. He brought us here and all the materials we needed to give the Brazilians at this conference. They arrived in His time - not ours. This was God's reminder on a day like today, He would provide.

The success of this day wasn't the schedules we did or didn't keep. It was based on the heart work the Holy Spirit was doing, the vision God was using us to cast, and the encouragement the Brazilians were receiving. God is opening a great door. I feel it.

*"What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut."
Revelation 3: 7,8*

Today was a scheduling and organizational nightmare. Everything seemed to go wrong. But spiritually, everything was going right. Awesome!

Lynn walked the Brazilians through the "Experiencing God" books we brought. This study is going to create great revival and renewal in the Brazilian's churches. It is hard to appreciate just how great a gift this was to them. They all got a book. It is a treasure to them. They were already starting to devour it. God was giving them a new tool to take back to their churches and create passion and renewal to follow through with the ideas and vision shared in the presentations and workshops in this conference.

Awesome.

This day was a great affirmation of the timing of the small group pilot project that hadn't stopped banging around in my brain the last couple of days.

Awesome.

2nd Conference Amazon River Outreach

Major Presentations and Workshops

The Challenge - Reading Our Nation, Pastor Dwight Marable

Church Planting - Pastor Dwight Marable

Intercession - Pastor David Brown

Spiritual Warfare - Pastor David Brown

Church Planting - Pastor David Brown

How to Build a Great Church - Pastor Chad Miller and Melody Pearson

Making Disciples - Pastor Chad Miller and Melody Pearson

Testimony: I Am A Miracle - Godwin Aduba

Workshop 1: Welcoming the Lost - Rick McGowan

Workshop 2: Living the Spiritual Disciplines - Carol Evans

Workshop 3: What Would Jesus Do? - Rory Wesley

Workshop 4: Building a Strong Youth Ministry - Debbie Cook

Workshop 5: Renewing Your Spiritual Passion - Pastor Chad Miller

Workshop 6: Starting Small Group Bible Studies - Gail Olgesby

Workshop 7: Growing Great Spiritual Leaders - Melody Pearson

Workshop 8: Experiencing God - Lynn Pilcher

This was a great conference. 60 pastors and leaders have been encouraged, inspired and given a tool that will help them accomplish the ministry God has called them to. Awesome. Not only has our team made a great impact at the conference, but the youth ministry that has been going on these last two days has touched hundreds of kids. We took over the club called "Adrenaline" and during the afternoons and evenings, the place was packed with kids. They were witnessed to, involved in kid's praise, and taught Bible lessons. It was great.

Our medical teams went out to nearby villages and were the only medical people they had seen in years. People were coming out of the Rain Forest to see them. It was amazing. Many of our team went through the streets praying and witnessing. Even though we were limited by the number of translators, this group brought a powerful presence of Christ to the entire city of Anori. The darkness was challenged and retreated from our ministry during this conference. God is opening a door for ministry to begin again in Anori.

This trip is about more than a conference for pastors - God is opening a door he wants opened. This is the beginning of a spiritual revival in this city and God planting a witness to effect this entire area of the Solimoes River. Awesome! We have brought a new pastor to Anori to begin a new ministry. Awesome, just awesome!

In the afternoon, we put out into the river so everyone could swim again. We need the relief from the intensity of the heat day and night. I got our St. Philip team together. We did some re-arranging to get several of our St. Philip group on Pastor Asaph's boat. This rearranging was difficult. Many in our group were under the impression that we would all be together the entire trip. On Pastor Asaph's boat, I have made sure we have had devotional time and opportunities to talk about what is happening. The other boat hasn't had that. The thought of the two boats splitting up after the conference ends tonight and us not being together for two days is unsettling to some in our group.

It was a difficult discussion. We agreed on some rearranging. I'm not sure any of us feel totally comfortable with the re-arrangements, but we agreed and made them. I feel we need to address this issue before we ever go on future trips.

The accommodations here at Anori are very poor. Most of the pastors who have come to this conference came on our boats. We have had to feed most of them from our onboard kitchens. It is costing more than we expected and this trip was underfunded from the beginning. We gave the Brazilians \$500 from the \$900 I brought to help cover their expenses. God provided. What will He want us to do with the remaining \$400?

Dwight came and talked about the Evangelistic Small Group Pilot to our St. Philip group. I asked him to share the project's concept because I wanted their input and prayers. Dwight wants me to come back with him at the end of September and help him train 4 or 5 selected pastors to implement evangelistic small groups. This would take a couple of days of intense training and then we would monitor the progress of

the pastors putting the model into practice. This would give us data to share at the next pastor's conference in February. That conference would hopefully kick off small groups in the interior river villages in a big way - especially if we had some positive results. But with the great openness and faith of these Brazilian pastors, they would start these groups in their churches even without data and results. It just makes sense to them and it is so much like the first church in Acts 2:42-47.

What does God want me to do? I want our team members' prayers. It is a lot to think and pray about. I'm just feeling such a strong pull in my heart. Dwight, Pastor Iouto, Bronca, Pastor Jon Nunes, Melody and I know this is the right tool. Pastor Asaph knows it too. Even though he's not been able to make small groups work in his church, he feels the idea and the rightness of this moment. Yesterday, when we were talking about this pilot, he said, "Right now the idea of the moment is small groups in the Amazonas." He's right. But to develop this tool, we will have to do the pilot. I'm glad to have our St. Philip team here to share this with. We'll pray about it. It's not going to go away. I know it.

The confusion of this day is awesome. Nothing is working out like we planned. But it's going just according to God's plan.

While we were swimming, a long green snake swam up onto the boat. You should have heard the screams and yelling. Several of the crew wanted to try to kill it. But Pastor Asaph wanted to let it go. He said it wasn't poisonous. After they threw the snake off the boat, about 3 minutes later, the snake came back and aggressively went after Dwight in the water. Everyone said how unusual and uncharacteristic it was for a snake to go after and attack someone. Dwight and several others scrambled out of the way of the snake. Dwight just got out of the water with about a foot to spare before the snake would have gotten him. Boy this scared everyone! One of the women on the boat got a broom and slapped at the snake just before it would have bitten Dwight. Dwight almost got bit on the derriere! It wasn't funny at the time - not one bit. I'm not sure how dangerous the snake really was. I just know everyone - including the Brazilians were scared to death and climbed over each other to get out of its way. It was a 3 ft. long green snake. I'm not even going to go into the spiritual significance of a snake attack before the closing service of this conference. I think everyone can figure this one out for themselves.

What a day!

I was scheduled to have the final presentation of the conference. Since Rick didn't get to give his workshop on "Caring and Welcoming the Lost", I thought I would let him present a summary, ask Godwin to share his testimony, and then have time for questions and answers. It seemed like a good way to wrap it up. Boy was I wrong - Big time!

As we walked into the church, people started coming in from the community. They were dressed up. A teacher from the town said, "I think we will fill the church tonight." I felt this huge "Uh-oh!" in the pit of my stomach. This wasn't the time for presentations or questions and answers. This evening God wanted a message proclaimed about God's power and how God had chosen these pastors and leaders to be his tools to bring the Gospel to the Amazonas. It's a scary feeling when you see God changing your plans and rewriting the program. It's something God seems to do all the time in the mission field.

I just knew God wanted the church to hear Godwin's testimony. He told them how one night as he was walking home after playing basketball, a car ran over him from behind. He was pinned under the car. He couldn't cry out with the weight of the car on him. By the time they got the car off him and rushed him to the hospital, the doctors felt there was no hope for him. The doctors said he wasn't worth wasting time, medicine and energy on. They were going to just make him comfortable.

But while Godwin was pinned under the car - he heard God tell him, "*John 11:4*". The verse says, "Jesus said, *"This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."*

Even though everyone else gave up on him, God hadn't given up on him. Godwin was confident he would be healed. After 7 days in the hospital, Godwin got out of bed, stood in the hallway for more than an hour to meet his doctor and show him what God had done. The doctor couldn't believe it.

After telling the Brazilians all this, Godwin smiled at them with his big contagious grin and said, "I am a miracle". The joy and excitement just poured out of the hearts of the Brazilians. He told them God could do anything through them. Wow, what an awesome testimony. You just had to be there to experience the Spirit's joy and presence.

I knew God had a message for these special people on this final night of praise. I asked them if they ever felt like God had given up on them - especially after failures and hardships have stopped them from doing what God wanted them to do in their churches? They were right there!

I walked them through the failures of Peter - sinking after walking on water and denying Jesus. When I unfolded how Jesus never gave up on him and that it was never too late, the Holy Spirit began renewing their strength and healing their hurts. They were miracles of God's forgiveness and Grace. They would be empowered by God to take the challenges of their ministries and the attacks of Satan. They were God's walking miracles, called by God to do miraculous work building their churches and planting new ones.

What a great service and Spirit presence. After the message, Pastor JoseJoao got up and pulled out the deed to a new piece of property they had just bought in Anori for a new church. I didn't even know they were working on this purchase. The celebration erupted into praise. This conference was about more than pastor and leader training. A new ministry was being planted, a new pastor, a new first generation Christian church and missionary training school was going to be built to be a center of ministry in this remote place. This conference was about taking spiritual ground and making it a mission headquarters for Anori and this whole river region. That's why all the spiritual warfare was being waged. This was a great moment, a great victory, a great renewal of God's miraculous ministry. The door was opened... and *"what He opens no one can shut!" (Rev. 3:7)*

Then we pulled the two big maps of the Amazonas off the wall. For the last 3 days we had pointed to them, strategized and dreamed of the places God wanted us to plant churches and establish ministries. We placed the maps on the floor in the center of the church and all us pastors got on our knees and put our hands on the map and began praying for the Gospel to come and win all the unchurched places. Our hands moved from river to tributary to rain forests, from city to city. I felt the hands of more than a hundred people on me and the other pastors. Everyone was praying for God to use us to win the Amazon for Christ.

You had to be there. You just had to be there to experience the spirit, passion, obedient hearts for whatever it would take, wherever the spirit would want them to go. God is doing something great here. This Amazon will be won for Christ. God has opened the door. No one can shut it.

We must have prayed for 20 to 30 minutes. You just lose track of time during such a moment. And then the Brazilians wanted to share a song for us. Pastor Jon Nunes asked his wife, Efminia, to come up to the front with me and Godwin. Their hearts had really intertwined with us that night in that service. I'm not sure I really understand it.

Then they sang "Amigos" (friends). When they sing this song, it's a gift of love and commitment to brothers and sisters in Christ. It's so powerful. You don't need to know the words - just watch their eyes, their gestures, they reach out their hearts and hug you while they sing. It is the most amazing, loving community experience I have ever seen. Here are the words:

Amigos

When I met you, it was sublime, like sweet love

You are as precious as a flower

All your cares I will leave in the hands of the creator

You are to me as a green field of flowers

When I am with you, I feel fine

My soul is happy when I see you.

It doesn't matter if somebody despises you

Because Jesus and I love you

Friend, listen well

It doesn't matter what you face in this world

If I don't meet you again,

But when I arrive in heaven

I'll meet you again

Amigos

As they sang they hugged us. All of them, everyone of them hugged everyone of us. What a moment. No one had a dry eye. Tears of joy flowed. We had this great privilege of being together to do God's work in this special place and time. Awesome, just totally awesome. You can't imagine the moment. You just had to be there. You just had to be there.

As I was walking back to the boat, I couldn't help but imagine taking the map of the demographic study of the neighborhood around St. Philip, the same map I have spent hours working with our leaders and elders and council. It struck me how we have talked about it so much. We've talked about what we need to do to win our neighborhood. But do we have the heart and commitment to do it? Are we serious? I tried to picture laying that map on the floor - me and the church leaders on our knees praying over it together with the hands of the congregation on us, encouraging and supporting us.

When we can do that, maybe we will be ready to sing *Amigos*.

Day 7 - Sunday, August 9

Relief Work and Evangelism in Our First Village

We Are All Glad We Came.

This morning we are getting ready to leave Anori. Our mission trip will now transition to medical, relief and evangelism work along the river villages as we work our way back toward Manaus. It feels like everyone is ready for a change of pace and scenery.

This is Father's day in Brazil. A group of the women on the boat put together a skit encouraging fathers to be godly leaders and blessings in our families. It was a wonderful face to face encouragement from these women to us describing the kind of men they want and are praying for us to be. It seems so rare that we tell each other of our prayers and dreams in such an encouraging way. After hearing them, I wanted to be a better husband and father. We just underestimate the power of encouragement. It was a time of joy, a good Father's Day.

Pastor JoseJoao asked me if I wanted to walk through the city with him, Dwight and Pastor Asaph. You never really know what these guys are up to. You just have to be ready. We walked through the city and turned the opposite direction we had gone in for days to our conference site. We went to the side of town I had not ventured into during the days of the conference. It was a newer part of town. It didn't seem as spiritually dark and burdened.

As we walked, Pastor JoseJoao said he wanted us to see the new property they just bought for the church and training center. It was a great site. It felt like a good place. He showed us where they were going to build a house to train and equip people for the ministry. Their vision is to make this site a training and teaching headquarters for all their work in this area on the Solomones River. This would be a long stretch to plant this satellite training center so far from Manaus. They will use it to reach even farther into the interior. This is a great strategic move. After building the teaching center, they will build a church. This is really great!

Pastor JoseJoao asked me to pray as we stood in a circle holding hands. Lord make this a protected and safe place where you will transform and train men and women to build your kingdom and win the Amazon. As I prayed, I realized this was one of God's strategic objectives for this entire conference. He called our St. Philip team to help come and break through the spiritual barriers to bring a pastor and the victory of Jesus and the Gospel to this site. All the spiritual battling was about what would happen here on this site in the months and years ahead.

We claimed this site for Jesus and His kingdom building. This conference was about us bringing The Light. *"The light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it." John 1:5*

It has become so apparent in the conference how God calls us to be light bearers. It's not just about a small little city in the interior of the Amazon, but about every mission field, around any site God has built a church. Our churches must be teaching and training centers - mission headquarters. Where did we ever go wrong in thinking church was just a place for us to come? When a church is not a mission sending place it begins a long dying process.

The Brazilians have picked a new site to build with a new mission vision. Across town are empty churches that stand empty and unused. Why don't they just take over one of them. Because in each one of those other churches, a remnant from the past holds on. Even if it is just a few, they can't let go of what they used to be to become what God wants to make them. They hold on to their past like a possession. It's theirs. And that's the problem. When your church forgets it's there for the people who have not yet come - that it belongs to those God wants you to give it to, God might just let you keep it. What a powerful lesson for those who will learn. When a church won't reach out, God will give the authority and blessing to grow His Kingdom to those who will. I've seen this happen many times. It's so sad when a church loses its light.



Our two boats split up. Our boat is headed back to Manaus on the south side of the Solimoes. We pass the Purus River and come to the village of Nossa Senhora Do Perpetuo Socorro. What a big name for such a small place. This is a fishing village.

The people here are desperately poor and uncared for. We set up our clinic about 3 in the afternoon. We filled the Pavilion in the center of the town with people waiting for medical care. The kids gathered together and Bronca did some songs and games. Boy these kids are so eager and open. I told them the story of Jonah with a young volunteer who I helped act out the story. The kids loved it. I feel like they really related to the part of the story where there are people Jonah didn't want to go to. They feel that way. No one ever comes out here to them. They are so isolated. It means so much to them that we came.

I started passing out candy, toothbrushes, a few toys. The kids all sat and without any reaching or grabbing, just waited. Some of them I had to coax to take things. They are just not used to being given anything. It just breaks your heart.

There is a church in this community. It's a Catholic church. It's locked up. I'm told that the priest stops at this village about once every 6 months. A nun makes a stop once every couple of months. They don't have regular services. I asked the people if they go to church. They just looked at me as if they didn't know what I was talking about. My translator told me they never have services. It's sad.

It's amazing how many people we saw in our clinic. We passed out relief supplies, doctored and gave dental care to everyone that came. Carol pulled more than 13 teeth that afternoon. Her hand cramped up and Rick pulled one. She had quite a dental crew. Rory was the head holder, Gail and Debbie assisted and comforted the patients. They really had a system going. They were great!

I couldn't believe the pain tolerance of these people. They are standing in line to have their teeth pulled. When one gets out of the chair another steps up. We had patients 5 years old to the elderly. They sat down and not one of them flinched or made one sound of pain. Amazing. We pulled molars, sometimes two at a time and they just sat there without a whimper or tear. They were so glad we came. These people in this town are so desperately poor and isolated. It's heart breaking.

That evening we had a service. Many of the people came out for our service. It was great to see the people who just 3 hours ago had two molars pulled come back to our service. You could tell a worship service was so foreign to them. They didn't sing. They just watched. It was something that was new to them. One of the Brazilian pastors preached a powerful message. Several people after the service came forward for prayer and ministry.

Satan doesn't want a village in spiritual darkness to encounter the preaching, worship, care and fellowship of Christ. That night just before the service started, a young boy about 6 years old came up with an awful cut on his finger. Several of our nurses took him back to the boat for stitches. Then one of the villagers came and took some of our medical team to the house of a man whose knee was sliced open with a huge knife cut across his knee. It was an awful cut. All this happened just before we started our service. Satan would rather see people cut up and uncared for before he would have them hear the Gospel. But the service went on and Christ was proclaimed to the injured, the doctored and all who came. That night 4 people came forward at the altar call and dedicated their lives to Christ.

At the end of the service, the leader of the village came up and spoke to us. We gave dental care to two of his kids earlier that day. He said, "this morning when I woke up I was feeling very sad, but today, because you came, my heart is filled with happiness and I feel better."

This was a great day.

Day 8 - Monday, August 10

Nothing to Lose

We spent the night there at Nossa. I couldn't sleep. I heard voices all night. Others on the boat were very restless too. I got up about 5 AM and found that Pastor John Nunes was up as well. We sat up on top of the boat. Sunrises are beautiful on the Amazon. You watch the day come to life. It is awesome.

I talked to John about our talks of an Evangelistic small group pilot program. I haven't been able to get my mind off of it. John wants to be a part of it. I asked him what he thought. He feels like it's a great idea. I told him about my reservations. I would have to come back at the end of September for another week. I

had really stretched to make it this second trip. I felt like many in my church wouldn't understand if I came again.

John just sat and listened. Then he said, "My brother, we have nothing to lose."

Nothing to lose. I really felt convicted.

I feel in my heart God has opened a door to pilot a ministry tool that could facilitate the gospel being taken to villages that have never heard about Jesus. What do I have to lose compared to those who don't know Jesus? What did I have to lose if people didn't understand why I felt this was important and God was calling me to do it? What would I lose if I lost favor with people who were critical of me or people who would become that way? I could lose favor with everyone, but if my work brought the name of Jesus to others or even if my work showed this wasn't the way and gave us insight to another better idea - I could never lose because I was serving Jesus. I can hear his words still asking my heart, "My Brother, we have nothing to lose." John was right. The only way I would lose anything would be if I didn't listen to my heart.

We went up river from Nossa to a village called Jerusalem. It was only an hour or so up river from Nossa, but what a dramatically different place. The village seemed smaller than Nossa. The people were so open and friendly. They immediately opened the doors of the church - an Assembly of God church, rearranged the pews and furniture and transformed their church into a clinic. What a great transformation. A church is a great place for healing.

There is no electricity or modern forms of communication out here. But somehow, people from all up and down the river started coming in their canoes. We saw some people come at first and then they left. It wasn't long until they were back. They had gone home, cleaned up and put on their best clothes. It was so precious to see the women bringing their babies in frilly dresses. You knew they were wearing their best. It was so important for us to be there. They appreciated our presence so much.

A string of boats came down the river. How did they know that we were here? News travels fast. Wow!

You could tell these people had a stronger sense of community. They were cared for so much better than Nossa. I don't know why, but their spirits and health were not as desperate. It was a striking difference. And they were just an hour from Nossa on the river. Incredible!

The American team was getting pretty low on clean clothes. We were all sweating like pigs all the time. We just drenched everything we wore. So we asked one of the Brazilian women to help us do our laundry. She insisted on doing it for us. We wanted to pay her but she wouldn't hear of it. We tried to give her \$10 and she adamantly refused to take it. When she ran out of soap, one of the villagers told us a house across the river might have some. We went over and when they found out we were the missionary team from the boat, they gave us two boxes of Tide detergent. We tried to give them the \$10. They wouldn't take it.

We couldn't give that \$10 to anyone that morning!

I realized that the love of Christ and the community of His care just won't take your \$10. How awesome! How awesome!

Later that afternoon we traveled up river a couple of hours to Vila Sion. This village was larger than the last and the people were excited to see us. They immediately opened up the church and let us plug our boat into their generator for power.

This village is more developed than the first two.

Again, it didn't take long for people to hear we were there. Two men jumped into a small canoe and worked for more than an hour pulling a floating barge of river weed out of the docking area and out into the flow of the river where it drifted down stream. Next to the Assembly of God church was the pastor's home. He was gone. His wife had gotten sick and he had taken her to Manaus for treatment. But some elders of the church were there and helped us get set up for our clinic.

Again people came from miles. There were a lot of kids. Our nursing team treated more than a hundred people. These people too came dressed in their best. They were very glad to see us and were a delight to care for. It just means so much that we came. We all wished we could do more. We did our best to show the love of Jesus. They knew Jesus was our motivation. There were so many kids in Vila Sion. Kids were everywhere.

That night we expected a real crowd at our service. With all the kids and adults we treated at our clinic, I expected a good turnout from the people of this village.

As we walked up to the church, the door was closed. I assumed it was to keep the bugs out. Not hardly. This was Monday night, the night they have their "closed door" service. This is a service only for their members. It is closed to outsiders.

Inside there were 4 elders up front and no more than 20 people from the village. All of them were older.

Pastor Asaph said tonight was a miracle because they let us attend their "closed door service". I suppose they made an exception for us. Later I learned that this church, like many along the rivers in the interior are the "Old Traditional Assemblies of God." They are very legalistic. They do not permit women to cut their hair. Kids aren't allowed to play soccer. Both are considered un-Christian. I understand that they have many other rigid and legalistic rules that they impose on their people. No wonder so few people attend their services.

What the pastors on our boat told me was that the younger people have pretty much left the church because its traditions and rules are so out of touch with their lives. Soccer is the national sport of Brazil. There is great national pride in Brazil for their world class soccer team. For the church to tell them soccer is un-Christian would be like telling people that God doesn't approve of Baseball. No wonder so few people attend their services.

These traditional Assembly churches are dying. It's so sad. The other pastors on the boat just shake their head when I would ask about these churches. They know that these traditional churches just don't get it and they can see them dying. They know that they will have to re-evangelize towns and villages where the only church has been one of the traditional ones. It's sad.

I was really amazed to see how even in the Amazon a church could disconnect with people by becoming out of touch and irrelevant. Can you imagine telling young people in a country where their national pride is their world class soccer team that playing soccer is a sin? I can't imagine how you get to the logic of that conclusion! In the afternoon the church was packed full of kids. Tonight there were only a hand full of the old faithful.

We brought a few soccer balls to give out. When we found out one family had 10 kids, we tried to give one of the older sons a soccer ball. He hesitated. I didn't understand his hesitation at the time. But another young guy standing nearby said he'd take it. I guess he wasn't as "religious"?

The young man who didn't get the soccer ball just watched in pain as his neighbor walked away tossing the ball in the air. I guess he must have been thinking that being a "religious" person isn't much fun nor does it make much sense?

He just stood there for a few moments, watching the soccer ball that could have been his walk out in the hands of someone else. I wonder if he will remember that the next time his mom or day says, "Let's go to church"? I wonder if when he hears the pastor talk about the evils of worldly sports or modern music or TV or dancing, if he won't think about the emptiness he felt when he lost that soccer ball? I wonder if that young man might not have decided right then that was the last time he was going to think about what he heard in church and try to put it into practice in his life? I wonder.

I wonder what the young people in our services are thinking? I want my kids to love our church and be proud of it because it is a place where they learn to be real people who follow Jesus in today's world, not where they are forced to act and worship in the style of their grandparents. There was nothing wrong with it in their grandparents' day. It's just that back then it was 1950's. Today is almost the year 2000.

My parents didn't even know what soccer was in the 50's. Today it's the only sport my son plays. I wouldn't dream of taking his soccer ball away.

Day 9 - Tuesday, August 11

A Surprise Birthday Party

This morning about 4 am I woke up to dogs barking. Then there was a blood-curdling squeal of one of the dogs. An alligator got him.

The river can be a dangerous place.

We traveled down river to Fem em Deus and met the other boat. Today we are going to have a Bar-B-Q. We are inviting people from the village. The other boat crew has finished the wall of the church and put a coat of paint on it. Tonight they will have a dedication service for the new church. It's hard for me to get that excited for the church they built. I wonder if people will take ownership in it or just wait for the river boat to come back and do the next task?

I know this sounds cynical. The pastors here know they need to get village buy-in and ownership. I think they have made some good connections with some other

families in town. I'll pray for the church of Fem em Deus. I hope it will become a church of the people of Fem em Deus. I hope they will live up to their name.

The generator on our boat is out and we traveled all afternoon up river to Manacapuru. It is a large busy city. It's nice to stop here tonight. We got to walk through the city. This city's major industry is making bricks. They have done well economically.

It was so good to have an American soft drink. People in the villages where we have been don't get a diet, caffeine free coke very often.

Dinner was taking a while, so 2 of the pastors on the boat and Melody insisted we take another walk. They were just so bubbly and energetic. They became very interested in sightseeing all of a sudden. We walked down street after street admiring the architecture. I've never seen them so interested in the houses and culture of the community. They make bricks in Manacapuru, but they were up to something that smelled pretty "fishy" to me.

When we got back to the boat the pastors inconspicuously escorted me to the top deck where they had put together a surprise birthday party for me. It was really great. They had been planning and working on it all day. They had balloons and cake and guess what - pizza! Birthday pizza!

They had the candles that you can't blow out, and they just laughed watching me try to blow them out over and over again. They had party hats and gifts. Pastor John Nunes got me a hammock. He knows how much I have enjoyed sleeping in one. They gave me a Bible in Portuguese. Inside they wrote: "To Pastor Chad on his 43rd birthday. We dedicate this Bible to you in the name of the Brazilian team. Our prayer is that you will always remember this trip and the special times that we shared. Your Brazilian Friends in Christ, August 11, 1998."

We laughed, played games and ate. It was a wonderful birthday party.

I'll never forget it.

They love me very much.

After the party, Larry was upset and felt something was wrong. He had one of those strange feelings we have all had at times, but he really felt we needed to have everyone pray. Both our teams, Americans and Brazilians, gathered for about an hour of sharing and prayer.

Pastor Asaph talked about how Satan times his attacks against us after times of spiritual victory. He has found that when away on mission trips like this, his family is often targeted.

We all shared our feelings. Some mentioned some unsettling feeling they had felt that day. Then we prayed. I looked at my watch. It was 10 pm Brazil time. I wondered what was going on back home? I wonder if God responded in some way to our prayers? I'm sure if I'm supposed to know, I'll find out.

The great thing about our prayer time tonight was that Larry felt comfortable to ask us to pray on a feeling and everyone took his feeling seriously and prayed. This openness with each other is so refreshing. We have found a wonderful sense of community with each other.

Tonight was a very special time of shared prayer.

Day 10 - Wednesday, August 12

The Next Generation of Leaders are Listening

This morning we traveled back to Manaus. It was great to get to our hotel and get a shower. Tonight Dwight, Melody and I are to speak about small groups to the pastors and seminary students of Pastor Asaph's church.

Pastor Jon Nunes set up this 2 evening seminar. As we drove up to the church we were really in the inner city of Manaus. By American standards, this is ghetto. Buildings, atmosphere, and neighborhood don't seem to mean much. These people are living and doing ministry right where the poor and disadvantaged live. I am inspired by their hearts to help and minister to people. They have their churches right where I would imagine Jesus would go if he were here today. I have to be honest with myself. We don't look at ministry this way. I have an immense amount of respect for these pastors and leaders.

I thought we were going to be speaking to area pastors and a few seminary students in Manaus. When we got there, the church was packed. 200 or more people were packed into the building and 30 more were standing outside, listening through the doors and windows and taking notes.

It was incredible! When we asked for a show of hands, about a fourth of them were area pastors and the rest were the seminary students of Pastor Asaph's entire denomination. Wow. Before us sat the next generation of leadership of this entire denomination. What an opportunity.

These people don't know anything about small groups. It is a new concept they had heard about and are eager to learn. These were men and women of all ages. They had hungry hearts to learn how they could make better disciples and build God's Kingdom through small groups.

These people are preparing to go out into a human wasteland with nothing and give everything to start a church and grow God's Kingdom. They are open to anything that will help them do ministry. Their interest and attention was incredible. I have never been so inspired and humbled in anyone's presence as I am before this crowd.

Dwight began painting a picture of how the world's largest and most dynamically growing churches all have strong small group programs as a foundational ministry of their church. He talked about how pastors of growing churches spend their time praying and working in personal evangelism. Everything Dwight was describing was what these people wanted to be.

After hearing the perspective of Dwight as a world mission and evangelism promoter, I talked to them as an ordinary pastor from an ordinary church. I shared my understanding that God has called us first and foremost to make disciples. The disciples we make will be the measure Jesus will use to judge our ministry. If we build great buildings and prove ourselves to be successful pastors but have not made disciples in our ministry, we have failed the Great Commission. I shared how Jesus chose 12 and gave them "on the job training." He made disciples. And then I explained how small groups is the most effective way to build a church that looks like the first church of Acts 2: 42-47.

You could feel it all sinking in and creating passion in their hearts. Acts 2:42-47 is their vision of church. It was a great evening. I promised to continue tomorrow night with the practical, how to's to start a small group program.

I wondered how many would return? Tomorrow night we'll see.

It felt like God was doing something awesome - totally awesome!

Day 11 - Thursday, August 13

Heaven is for Amigos

We arrived early at the conference. People trickled in slowly. Then more and more came in. What an affirmation! The church was again packed. You could feel the seriousness and openness of their hearts. They wanted to know how to start small groups.

I introduced Melody as one of my disciples. I described how she came to my church, underwent a lay ministry training program and then became a full time worker in the church. I told them she would be finishing her seminary training this year and become a Church Leadership Developer and Program Director.

They listened intently as she laid out a small group ministry program. She did great casting the vision of "How To", what mistakes not to make and how to make small groups work. I was very proud of her. Then I introduced them to Experiencing God and gave them the 40 remaining books I had brought. I also presented a gift of \$400 for a new site for a church in a remote village in the interior. This site would be where they are going to build a missionary training center.

They were overwhelmed by our gift and the encouragement they felt from a church in America that would care about their ministry. They were overwhelmed. They appreciated the money. But what touched their hearts was the fact we came, gave them ideas for ministry and resources to use. You just had to be there!

Then a man on our boat that I had not hardly heard speak on our entire mission trip to Anori was asked to step forward and give a report. I had no idea, but this guy was the missions director of their church body!

As John interpreted for me, the man talked about our trip and how the Americans came and suffered through miserable heat and horrible conditions to bring their pastors and leaders training. He told how the mosquitoes were horrible and swarmed us and that there was even a snake! After hearing what he said, I actually wondered if there might have been another mission group that came and had it much worse than us. But no! He was talking about us!

We really made an impression on him!

I realized how deeply our coming to encourage and serve them had profoundly touched his heart.

He turned to me and with a gesture of his hand, said "When you leave us, you will be leaving a part of yourself with us. We may never see each other again. If we don't, we will in heaven. And we will rejoice with each other because of what we did together on our mission trip. Your teachings and your gifts to our ministry was not done for a denomination but for the Kingdom of Jesus Christ."

I can't find the words to describe what I felt at that moment. I have never felt so humble, privileged, thanked and overwhelmed in my whole life. All we did was come to serve Jesus the best we could without any prejudices or boundaries. We just wanted to try our best to do what Jesus would do. And God used us to encourage and inspire the next generation of leaders in this passionate denomination committed to bring the Gospel to every town in the Amazonas by the year 2010. Awesome!

And then they sang "Amigos" to us.

My heart was overwhelmed!

Everyone there hugged me, Melody and Carol.

We cried together - the bond in Christ we felt was overwhelming.

You had to be there, you just had to be there.

I would have never imagined all God did this night of this mission trip. It was more than I could have dreamed. Ask anyone who went along. It was a great God thing!

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