Introduction

For a long time indigenous peoples were pretty much a marginalized part of Brazil’s official history. Their conquest and genocide lasted for five hundred years while the traditional view of history emphasizes a harmonious meeting between indigenous people and Europeans, which together with the Africans formed Brazil’s national culture. However, a more detailed analysis shows what really happened was a very violent and cruel conquest with enslavement, transmission of diseases, land invasion, and intolerance towards their religious ideas.

The story of Brazil’s actions towards its indigenous people is a story full of tragedies, few hopes, and little expectation, but things have started to change in the last few decades. There was a widely held idea that the natural evolution of the indigenous people would integrate them with the national society in such a way that their indigenous cultures would blend in with the rest of Brazil’s cultures as they were assimilated. Contrary to what many people taught in the 20th century, the indigenous nations did not disappear by the end of the millennium. Instead, their population is increasing every year, and there are a growing number of institutions that are fighting to get back their lands and to force changes that will result in respect for their cultures.

During the 20th century there was progress in the study of anthropology and people became more conscious about the need to promote self-determination among the various people groups and to allow all people groups to have the right to live according to their own cultural beliefs. This right usually needs to be assured by the legislation in every country before it can make much headway. In Brazil both Catholics and Protestants began reconsidering their mission practices and contact strategies with indigenous people.

Within the Seventh-day Adventist Church the early proposals to reach
indigenous people were first conceived for mission to the native communities of the United States and Canada. However, the impact on Adventist missionary mentality was further strengthened by the work in South America, especially the missions conducted by Fernando and Ana Stahl in Peru, and Alfred and Bett Cotty on the borders of Brazil, Guyana, and Venezuela.

There is a strong connection between medical assistance programs and missionary activities in many denominations and that is exactly what took place in Adventist mission as well. Evangelism to indigenous people was always accompanied by nurses, doctors, or dentists who offered help in the villages where they were working. In Adventist mission there was even a stronger emphasis on medical work because of our beliefs which highlight the connection between physical and spiritual health.

This article will briefly highlight several aspects of the medical missionary activities of the Seventh-day Adventist Church among Brazil’s indigenous people by taking a detailed look at the Karajá people.

The Brazilian Indigenous Peoples

There are many definitions for Indian. Usually, the best definitions are those which explain the collective identity of peoples, nations, societies, ethnic groups, or communities. Indians have maintained their traditional ways since the arrival of the first Europeans. New anthropological studies suggest that being an indigenous person is not biological or racial, but involves ethnicity and culture. This means that being indigenous does not necessarily mean you live in the forest and walk around naked, as many stereotypes suggest.

About 170 indigenous languages are still in use in Brazil. Some of them are now at risk of extinction since they are known only by a small group of people. Other languages are recovering their importance, and whereas they had been abandoned, are now once again being studied and learned. There are several large linguistic groups, such as the Gê or Tupi, and additional smaller groups and languages that do not fit in any other grouping.

Research shows that in the 15th century, there were about 8 million people living in the lands that today make up Brazil’s territory. The disastrous effects of colonization caused a large reduction in the indigenous population through genocide, transmission of diseases, and forced miscegenation. Census data from 1991 listed an indigenous population of almost 300,000. It is surprising that in 2000 the data noted an increase in the population to about 700,000 people. This significant increase proves how wrong the idea of the extinction of indigenous people was. Part of the reason for this resurgence is that peoples’ ethnic consciousness has been
reawakened, and many groups have lost their fear and have come to accept their identity.

Since 1967 the federal government agency, the Indigenous National Foundation (Funai), has, together with the Ministry of Justice, been responsible for indigenous matters in Brazil. One of the responsibilities of Funai is to delimit the land that belongs to the indigenous people, which is no easy job, since there are many interests involved. Loggers and gold diggers still insist on going into indigenous lands and often do not recognize the local people’s rights.

The Constitution of 1988 assured the right of each indigenous group to occupy land according to their cultural traditions, thus strengthening the concept of indigenous territorial rights. There is also the recognition of the rights of indigenous populations to preserve their peculiar culture. The idea of integration has been replaced by the recognition of the right of cultural diversity. However, even with these improvements there is still a lot to be done in order to assure that constitutional guarantees are realized all over the country for there is often a gap between the law and practice.

**New Challenges for Indigenous Peoples**

Many issues need to be evaluated when dealing with indigenous societies in Brazil, a few of which will be highlighted in the following sections.

**Indigenous Health System**

Every indigenous culture has its own traditional medicines that have been in existence since before their first contact with Europeans. This system was based on the people’s knowledge about plants, roots, rites, and procedures that responded to their existing diseases.

However, the close proximity of the indigenous groups with the growing national society brought a wide range of diseases to the indigenous villages which were not known by them or their shamans. They never had a chance to build up any immunity to fight against the new diseases.

The government has tried to provide basic medical care, but there are difficulties for even basic health services to reach many of the villages. There is the problem of language and the lack of knowledge by many of the health professionals about the indigenous cultures. In some regions the federal government has contracted the services of indigenous organizations, churches, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in order to implement the needed health services. For example, over the last few years ADRA (Adventist Development and Relief Agency) has been asked to provide some of these basic services.
Indigenous Education System

When most of the young indigenous people attend a government school they usually come to school speaking only their indigenous language. This fact alone requires a differentiated educational system. The teachers need special training in order to learn how to show honor and respect to the indigenous culture and language. In order to meet this need the government has recently made plans to encourage the training of teachers from each indigenous people group in order to have more sensitive teachers in the system.

Indigenous Food

As the indigenous peoples have come into contact with outsiders their eating habits have also radically changed. When the indigenous lands were seized or encroached upon, the process of getting food became more difficult, especially for hunters and gatherers. Thus, if the church or ADRA is working in the communities the simple fact of being there for assistance can help solve, temporarily, the need for new food sources. But there is also the need to deal with the damaged social and environmental conditions and to introduce, when necessary, new food production techniques and new food types in a careful and well-balanced manner.

Indigenous Land

Land has always been important for indigenous people because it is from the land that they receive their food, medicines, wood for their homes, and tools. In addition, many cultural traditions, stories, and their history are connected to their traditional areas. There are several ongoing efforts by various indigenous organizations to clearly define indigenous land, but it is a difficult assignment because justice for indigenous people moves slowly to solve this kind of problem.

The Karajá Society and the Araguaia River

The Karajá have been living by the Araguaia River for at least four centuries, especially around the area of the Ilha do Bananal. Their language is part of the linguistic family that is also known as the Karajá, and includes the languages spoken by the Xambioá or Northern Karajá and by the Javaé. Despite some particularities, all these indigenous groups share many similar cultural features.

In addition to the river’s economic and mythological importance, the Araguaia is also a link that connects the Karajá with the national society. The river runs through almost all of Central Brazil, and because of this the region was in constant contact with sertanistas (adventurers from the
backwoods), merchants, missionaries, and immigrants, so it was not long before the Karajá people started to feel the effects of the encroaching colonialist.

The area was drastically changed when gold seekers flooded into the territory, but when the gold ran out cattle ranchers took their place. So once again the Karajá were forced to retreat from their lands, and that also affected their cultural way of life.

According to stories from the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, the Karajá men used to walk around naked with ornamental ropes on their arms and legs. During special festivities and ceremonies they completely covered their bodies with intricate painted patterns that were symbolic expressions of their age and of different occasions in their lives (Bueno 1987:35).

The Karajá live in large communities, although sometimes they are required to split up into smaller groups due to scarcity of food. Another reason for splits in the community is conflicts between groups. Their houses are usually built in parallel rows facing the river. The traditional house is rectangular, with only one room and only one opening. During the rainy season, the waters from the river can rise forty feet above the normal flow, flooding the whole region. When this happens, the Karajá go up to the hills or to higher areas where they fish in the lake in the area and dedicate themselves to agriculture.

The Karajá, like many other indigenous groups, are extremely susceptible to diseases spread through contact with the regional population, especially infectious pulmonary diseases.

**The First Adventist Mission Project among the Karajá**

During the 1920s the leaders of the Adventist Church became interested in reaching out to the indigenous population in the Mid-West region of Brazil. This idea was not an exclusive idea for the church leaders and missionaries, but mirrored what politicians, adventurers, and scientists were talking about. At the end of 1926, the South Brazilian Union decided to send an American pastor, Alvin Nathan Allen, to organize a mission for the indigenous people of Goiás. He had worked before with indigenous peoples in various regions in Peru and Bolivia, and was forty-seven years old at the time.

Allen’s first trip was an exploratory trip to learn more about the place and see where the first mission could be established. He went from São Paulo to Leopoldina (current Aruanã, in Goiás), and then north on the Araguaia River. He traveled by river from Goiás to Belém, and returned to São Paulo by ship. This trip began in April 1927, and ended in October of the same year, according to his diary (Alvin Nathan Allen Diary).
In all the places Allen traveled, he made his best connections and contacts with the Karajá people, so became interested in starting his mission with this group of people. In January 1928 the administration of the South Brazilian Union decided that Allen could go back to the Araguaia and begin the so called, “Mission of the Araguaian Indians.” The project had the intended purpose (1) to instruct the Indians on how to survive and develop so as not to be dependent on the workers from the conference; and (2) to buy a piece of land in an appropriate place in order to reach the largest number of Indians, but also where the worker’s health would be protected. They looked for land that had fertile soil and that was close to a source of wood, which would be needed for construction (Pinheiro 1994:51, 52).

In May 1928 Allen left São Paulo accompanied by his wife Luella and his son Alvin, and also Antonio Pereira and another couple, Emílio and Ofélia Gutzeit. The place they chose for the headquarters of the mission was Piedade. They spent many days in the construction of the small school and housing. Some of the local Indians helped in the construction.

In 1932, after four years of work in Piedade with few results, Antonio Pereira and two others went on to Fontoura, in the Ilha do Bananal to establish a second mission among the Karajá. This village was one of the biggest on the Araguaia River, and Allen’s plan was to form many small missions along the river. Thus, the first school among the Karajá was established at Fontoura.

After six years of work in the Araguaia mission, Pastor Allen needed to be transferred to the south of the state of Goiás. He was fifty-three years old at that time and his wife was physically weak, not being able to endure the pressures of living in an area of difficult access. Up to that point, no baptisms were reported. The huge cultural differences between the missionaries and the Karajá hindered the progress in the evangelistic activities and even in the assistance programs. In 1938 the Allen family returned to the United States. These early beginnings among the Karajá begun in the 1920s were almost forgotten in the years that followed.

Difficulties in Maintaining the Mission

In 1934 the mission headquarters was moved from Piedade to the village of Fontoura, but means were scarce so it was difficult to continue the work. The ethnologist Herbert Baldus, an important scholar of the indigenous societies of Brazil, tells what he saw in the village of Fontoura when he passed through it in 1947:

In Piedade, where we went the next day, there are no more Karajá. In 1935, I found some of them working on the Adven-
tist mission. On July 12, I passed by the Adventist mission in Fontoura. When I visited it in 1935, it had just been established. Now it is almost abandoned. Only Mr. Antonio Gomes [one of those that helped with the development of this small missionary post] and his family are left, to take care of everything.

Even in that time many Karajá of the conquered village had died of malaria, especially the kids. In April of 1935, there were 123 Indians in this village. According to Mr. Antonio Gomes, this number went down to 80 in 1939 and to about 45 in 1947. From the nine students that the missionary school had, which were between 10 and 12 years old in 1939, only one is still alive.

In July 1947, the Karajás had established themselves on a sand island in front of the mission, which was at the right margin of the river. At the time of high waters, they go and live on the opposite margin. (Baldus 1948:151)

Antonio Gomes got sick and died in 1950. The mission was then basically forsaken. As we can see from Baldus’ report in 1947, the situation in Fontoura was precarious. The mission was not able to find a solution to the high mortality rate caused mainly by malaria and tuberculosis. In addition to the high death rate there was also an exodus of Indians from Fontoura to the nearby villages. Although the mission was abandoned, the Araguaia was still a region that needed to be reached by the church.

**New Incentives for the Karajá Mission**

In 1953 a mission boat was bought by a missionary nurse as a way to once more start some missionary activity among the Karajá. Three years later it was decided to send another missionary couple, Isaac and Joaquina Fonseca, to Fontoura. They were able to move to the indigenous territory because of the authorization of an indigenous leader that sympathized with the Adventists.

Another mission boat was acquired with more space and more possibilities for attending to the needs of the population. Alvino and Maria Xavier, both nurses, were called to be in charge of the activities for this boat (Pinheiro 1994:64), and it became well known among Seventh-day Adventists for its social activities. Many of the Karajá villages were visited and the doctors and dentists were especially welcomed. This work was also news worthy in the secular press and was mentioned in the *Folha de São Paulo*, one of the most important newspapers in Brazil.

Alvino and Maria worked on the boat between 1962 and 1970. Even with all this community assistance and social activity, no baptisms occurred among the Karajá during this period.
The First Baptisms among the Karajá

Calebe and Abigail Pinho arrived in Fontoura in 1970, but had to leave six of their seven children at a boarding school. Only their youngest son was able to be with them so it was not an easy decision to accept the offer to continue the work on the Araguaia. The separation from their many children made it very difficult to continue in the mission (interview with Abigail Pinho, July 2002). The family stayed in Fontoura until 1977, and during that time the Karajá often received visits from various Adventist volunteers that would do various types of service for the community.

Pastor Calebe began daily morning worship services, and after four years some of the Indians started to have an interest in the church, leading to the first baptism. Among the first converts was Paulo Kuaji who translated the sermons into the Karajá language. During his time in the mission, Pastor Calebe baptized more than seventy Indians, and among those first baptisms, the conversion of Antônio Tewahura stands out. According to Abigail Pinho, this man became a great preacher among his people. He would study a Bible lesson with the missionary couple and immediately share it with other Indians. In addition he would travel to different villages to share the Adventist faith. Sometimes he would travel by bicycle or even by foot.

From the time of those first conversions there developed a growing opposition. Indians that were baptized stopped eating turtle meat, a traditional food in the Araguaia, and they also stopped participating in some of the traditional festivities that were part of the Karajá cosmology. The converts gave up other cultural elements because they were now considered unnecessary. This situation of cultural change was studied by anthropologists that visited Fontoura, and because of it the missionaries were looked on as if they were trying to change the essential elements of the indigenous life. Among other accusations, the newspapers said that the mission “discourages the practice of the indigenous ritual Ruanã, which, according to anthropologists, is the basis of the political and social structure of those people” (Jornal do Brasil 1976). In addition the mission was accused of treating “the Karajás with racial prejudice” (1976). It was the absence of the Adventist Indians from the traditional festivities that were interpreted as racial discrimination encouraged by the missionaries.

In the following words the anthropologist Marielys Siqueira Bueno describes the Aruanã ritual which the Adventists no longer attended:

The Aruanã festivity, where they reenact the myth of the creation story of the Karajá, also considered an artistic manifestation, is the most well-known and recounted festivity by all authors and also the most significant for the Indians. It is truly
an amazing spectacle—men dressed in interesting hay costumes, beating their feet monotonously to the sound of voices and rattles. Under the masks that completely cover them, hides the Aruanã spirit, and the songs bring back the memory of the myths of the tribe and reinforce their religious experiences. (Bueno 1975:37)

Pastor Calebe, however, argued that he never prohibited the Indians from eating turtle meat. He only taught what the Bible said about the distinction between clean and unclean food. Among the unclean animals were the capybara, collard peccary, and the leathery fishes. Those who converted voluntarily avoided those kinds of meat, as well as alcoholic beverages and the Aruanã dances, which were dedicated to the Karajá gods (Pinheiro 1994:95, 06).

Although the Karajá leaders recognized and valued the Adventist assistance during the recent years and from years before, different opinions on the presence of the mission in Fontoura led some leaders and the Funai to banish the Pinho couple from the village in 1977. Until today no specific reason has been given for this action. According to Antonio Tewahura, the Fontoura village was split by the issue. Funai agents promised better assistance than what was being offered by the mission, which motivated the Karajá leadership to agree to the removal of the missionaries. In addition, Tewahura emphasized the fact that a Funai agent collected signatures of all the people of the village who were interested in having better opportunities to sell their crafts. Of course, everyone signed it. Then, according to Tewahura, those signatures were used on the petition requesting the expulsion of the mission (interview with Antonio Tewahura, July 2003). Another sad fact is that the Funai did not provide all that they had promised to the village of Fontoura.

Calebe and Abigail Pinho left Fontoura during the first semester of 1977 and moved to a district in Goiás that was still at the margins of the Araguaia River, but with no contact with the indigenous people. Newspapers claimed that the couple had saved up a lot of money during their time in the mission. However, they left Fontoura with only their personal belongings and the added responsibility to raise a Karajá child. Abigail tells how an indigenous family begged them to take and raise the child. Notwithstanding the fact that they already had many children, Calebe and Abigail adopted the girl as their daughter. Thus, besides their seven children, now they had one more daughter that lived with them. Their interest in the Karajá did not end there, for Mrs. Pinho worked on preparing the Adventist Karajá Hymnal (interview with Abigail Pinho, July 2002).
The Remnants of the Mission After 1977

Beginning in the 1960s the Adventist mission sent some Karajá young people from Fontoura to IASP (Instituto Adventista de São Paulo), an Adventist boarding school. Some of them did not adapt well and ended up going back to their families. The challenge of cultural adaptation and being away from family are common problems for many Karajá students that need to study outside their environment. Recently a boarding school that welcomes some young Karajá is IABC (Central Brazil Adventist Institute) located in Goiás.

When the mission personnel were expelled from Fontoura the church was left in the hands of a converted Karajá, Antonio Tewahura who had received training as a Bible worker and who is respected in his community and the neighboring villages as a wise counselor. Another local leader who had been born in Fontoura was João Weheriá who was baptized in 1975 and later went to study in IASP. He found living in a boarding school difficult and many times thought about going back home. One of the obstacles he faced was the food, which was very different from the Araguaia diet.

After finishing high school João went to the Instituto Adventista de Ensino (IAE) where he was the first Indian to enroll for a degree in theology. In spite of many obstacles and difficulties he graduated in 1984 at the age of 35.

It took a while before João Weheriá received a call to pastor. Meanwhile, Adventist leaders in Goiás worked to reestablish contact with the Funai and presented a plan whereby João would stay in a boat along the Araguaia River, assisting the villages. The Funai agreed with the plan and João went to work with his people three years after finishing his studies in theology.

In his first year of ministry, 25 Indians were baptized. In July 1993, João Weheriá became an ordained Adventist pastor, reinforcing his decision to be a missionary.

According to a report in 2003 from Pastor Weheriá, Antonio Tewahura, and Iwraro Karajá, the church in the Santa Isabel village had grown to about 150 members, some of them from JK and Wataú, two small neighboring villages. In Fontoura there were about twenty-six members attending even though there were 160 members on the books. According to Tewahura, this loss of members was due to the decision of some to abandon the Adventist faith. Others had died or moved away.

There was also a small Adventist group in São Domingos where Paulo Kuaji was one of the members. He, along with Leandro and Waxiaki Karajá, helped in the translation of hymns that were being prepared for the Adventist Karajá Hymnal (a project led by Abigail Pinho). From these recent
reports it seems that there is an emerging leadership among the Indians. The worship services are conducted in the Karajá language, and when an outsider attends, there are translators to help.

The work of the church among the Karajá has also increased the church’s understanding of how to work with indigenous peoples. The methods and approaches used should help the church in future work among Indian populations. Especially helpful in this regard was the work of Pastor Matson Santana who worked as a missionary on the Araguaia from November 2004 to December 2009. Since Pastor Matson was interested in missiology his work and insights from working with many Karajá villages should also prove helpful for future indigenous work.

Research has shown that the conversion process among the Karajá is long and drawn out, but when a Karajá converts it usually lasts, even if it seems unstable at times. The data from 2006 lists a Karajá population of more than 2,500 scattered in many villages. It is also interesting to note that in April 2010 the total number of Adventists among the Karajá was 513 (about 20 percent), although this number needs to be updated to check and identify those that are regularly attending church.

**ADRA's Recent Actions**

Beginning in the early 1990s, ADRA started some social projects in the Karajá villages. The agency built four Centers for Development in the Ilha do Bananal. These centers were funded by contributions from ADRA Italy and also from the Northern Ireland government. The projects were designed to offer a basic health orientation and health care, basic sanitation, guidelines for businesses and small industry, classes on the dangers of alcohol, classes teaching sewing and agriculture, and the projects also provided dinghies for transportation purposes. ADRA also furnished equipment and seeds to encourage agriculture in all the villages. They also encouraged the breeding of bees and chicken. In partnership with Funasa, 170 bathrooms with running water were built. Some of the villages that participated in these projects included Wataú, JK, Santa Isabel, Fontoura, São Domingos, and Macaúba.

With the funds from Northern Ireland an Indigenous Cultural Center was built in São Félix that today also houses a small cooperative to promote the selling of indigenous crafts.

It’s also important to mention the work ADRA has done in the development of community leadership. A good example is the support ADRA gave to Waxiaki Karajá from Santa Isabel. She studied elementary education at UNASP (Centro Universitário Adventista de São Paulo) and was also financially assisted by the American non-profit organization International Children’s Care (ICC).
Finally, mention should be made of the Indian exchange program that was funded by ADRA in partnership with the Canadian International Development Agency and Funai. The purpose of the program was to learn more about the indigenous developmental models in Canada. Four Karajá Indians participated: Iwraro Karajá, João Weheriá, Antônio Tewahura, and Marcos Karajá, traveling to Canada in April 2003 and visiting projects in Toronto, Oshawa, Ottawa, Vancouver, Victoria, among other cities (Barbosa and Borges 2003:14).

Final Thoughts

In this brief history of the Karajá mission there are many lessons that can be learned about the missionary and the help and assistance offered by the church. One of the characteristics of the mission on the Araguaia was its inconsistency due to (1) the interference of the Funai, (2) lack of trained indigenous leadership, and (3) the lack of funds.

A second area was that within the Karajá community there was a lot of resistance to any change of their traditional worldview. The first baptism happened only after fifty years of mission work. This struggle to communicate the gospel in understandable ways for the Karajá was impacted by the lack of good information about the indigenous culture and the politics involved in working for indigenous people. Anyone who goes into an indigenous area needs to have at least some basic knowledge about the culture of the people they will be working with. In recent years many anthropological studies have been made which allow for a deeper understanding of the cosmology of the people, the way they eat, their relationships with nature, the way they process their contacts with society, etc. Even more important is the need for missionaries to be respectful of the people’s worldview during the process of evangelism. Anthropological studies can be a tremendous help in building understanding and relationships between the indigenous peoples and Seventh-day Adventist missionaries.

It is important for the missionary enterprise to know where to start when entering a community. Best practices suggest that before anything is attempted study should be given to the social and cultural characteristics of the group that the church seeks to share the gospel with. Studies by historians and social scientists cannot be ignored. In the case of the Karajá, there are many dissertations and thesis that thoroughly describe and analyze these people and their cosmology. Instead of being looked on with reproach and suspicion, these studies contain much important information that can help the missionary.

I believe that the many years of Adventist work and struggle on the Araguaia will continue to have an impact on Brazilian Adventist work
among indigenous peoples. The ups and downs of the Karajá mission will influence other projects and missionaries. The current presence of Adventist Karajá leaders will also increase the attention given to the debate over cross-cultural evangelism that involves contact between Indians and missionaries. Pastor Matson Santana’s reflection about missionary practices among Indians in Brazil was unheard of before his pioneering work, and it will continue to be important for future practices. Based on the missionaries’ past experiences his analysis sought to show what went right and what went wrong among the Karajá.

There are other considerations that will be important for work among indigenous peoples. In 1996 a group of Brazilian anthropologists had a meeting to discuss the work of religious organizations among indigenous people during which it was concluded that the actions of the federal government through the Funai had often been faulty. Therefore, they suggested that the assistance and support of religious organizations is valuable in work among indigenous groups, but the right to receive assistance should not be conditioned by whether or not the local people accept the religious beliefs of the assisting group. Missionary activity needs to respect the liberty and authority of the indigenous people so the goal of Christian social activity is not to force the gospel on the people but to present in respectful and winsome ways the salvation found in Christ.

Those missionaries who want to work in indigenous societies anywhere in the world should realize that cross-cultural contact is never a one-way street. Indigenous people will interpret the Christian message that they receive through their own cultural lenses and based on their own values and history. Sometimes the Christian message will be completely rejected while social assistance is welcomed. At other times indigenous peoples will adopt many of the practices and doctrines of the Christian faith and will look to the culture and practices of the larger society to contribute to their own social and ethnic reconstruction. Between these two extremes are many variables, so missionaries need to be aware of these possibilities. The goal is always to bring people to an understanding of the biblical message and past mission history has demonstrated that the Lord can work in miraculous ways to accomplish this. What may seem at first a simple rejection of the gospel or syncretism of the message with local beliefs or practices, can often in the future give way to rich new expressions of the biblical message in the indigenous community.

Anthropologists, including Robin Michael Wright, former professor at the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Brazil) and currently a professor at the University of Florida, suggest that in most cases the way Christian mission to indigenous Indians and how the missionary message is interpreted are closely related to the religious concerns of the Indians.
Although every human being has a need of salvation in Christ, Christian witnesses should not ignore the problems that the people are facing. A deep understanding of local worries and concerns must be sought out so those points can be used to establish bridges of communication with the Christian message. This type of respectful dialogue, where the missionary is a learner of the indigenous culture, can help break down walls that can hinder the preaching of the message. When Pastor Matson spent time learning about Karajá religiosity in order to discover bridges of communication he could use to share the biblical message, he was involved in a dialogue that emphasizes the differences without giving up the universal message of the gospel.

For centuries indigenous peoples were the target of massacres, forced exile, dispersion, impositions, and prohibitions. Society asked them to adapt, negotiate, and make concessions. Much of their traditional culture was lost during the process of contact with the national society. Many characteristics of the outside society are common in some indigenous villages. This reality suggests that the idea of a cultural rescue may be necessary in the social assistance and missionary approaches used. Important cultural aspects like the appreciation of the local language, the use of medicinal plants, championing the sense of community and sharing, the production of crafts, and many others things need to be valued, even those things that are becoming rare due to outside influence.

In addition to the biblical message that is lived and preached by the missionary in a contextualized manner, there also needs to be intentional training of local leadership so they can continue the work. Thus, Adventist institutions must provide safe havens for young, promising Indians who have accepted the Adventist message. The social assistance approach which has always been important in contact with Brazil’s Indians, adds an additional point of contact with indigenous people because their own history has shown that they needed a health care system. In this way, the combination of preaching the gospel with care and orientation in the health area are important elements to the diffusion of the message.

Missionaries also have a responsibility to warn the people in the area (including people in the church) of the necessity to respect the Indians in order to contribute to a more congenial environment. More required classes in anthropology should be included in the curriculum in the Adventist universities in majors like Theology, Education, and Nursing. The benefits of the anthropological studies will help not only those who will have contact with the Indians but will help create bridges of understanding for anyone who may have contact with people from a different culture.

An analysis of the Adventist activity among indigenous people shows a history of victories and failures. Our past needs to be considered when
it comes to the present and the future for there are many implications for other parts of Brazilian territory. Many stories about missionaries still need to be studied and analyzed in the light of the current concepts of mission and cultural change. These initiatives of historic rescue can stimulate the discussion about current mission strategies used by the church. The world increasingly talks about the importance of appreciating cultural diversity and allowing each group to have autonomy when it comes to different cultural practices. Indigenous people should have that autonomy, but when they learn about the gospel they will also be able to be part of a global community that transcends cultural differences and is united by the grace of Jesus.

In order to be efficient in missionary approaches the cross-cultural worker needs to take into consideration that there is not a superior or inferior culture. To take the gospel to indigenous societies does not mean that the task is to civilize them or make them more like us and our set of values. Instead it is necessary to understand the peculiarities and positive aspects of the society we want to reach.

Finally, the missionary that comes into contact with an indigenous community needs to understand that there is no culture that is completely ideal. Only God is capable of making a culture that is perfect. Each society has elements that contradict the Creator’s original plan, and this includes the missionary’s own culture. For this reason meekness is essential, for meekness should also lead to a deep reflection of one’s own values and limitations.

Notes

This article is adapted from my 2007 Doctoral Thesis from the Universidade de São Paulo, entitled “Indigenous People and the Second Advent Message: Adventist Missionaries and Indigenous People in the First Half of the 20th Century.” The Portuguese version of the dissertation can be found at http://www.teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/8/8138/tde-10072007-104907/

The Associação Brasileira de Antropologia (Brazilian Anthropology Association) requires that all indigenous names be written in capital letters and without inflection (example: the Timbira people—the Timbira); and that the sound of a strong /c/ be written with a /k/.

The diary has entries from April 1927 to May 1930 and formed the basis for my doctoral dissertation. The first published source that mentioned Allen’s diary was Greenleaf 1987:67-77.
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