

Onward Christian Soldiers

By Derek Sambrook, FIBSA, TEP
Managing Director, Trust Services, S.A.,
Panama



As the economic gloom in the United States of America continues, some Protestant churches are offering investment advice to their flocks; this mixing of finance with faith has even moved from church benches to boardrooms. Corporate chaplains are on the increase and some estimates have put their number at 4,000, working for both small as well as large businesses. Some of the larger companies, in fact, have in-house chaplains complementing their in-house lawyers and there are also some rent-a-chaplain companies which are doing very well. Whilst I accept that religion can serve as a moral compass, I am not so sure if it can set the right course for temporal endeavours.

The Mexican dictator, Porfirio Díaz, who ruled absolute for 35 years in the 19th century, deplored the fact that his country was so far from God and so close to the United States. Today, in part thanks to the US, God is much nearer to Mexicans, as well as many other Latin Americans, for there is no doubt that this blending of the bible with business has travelled south into territory which, traditionally, has been the preserve of the Roman Catholic Church.

Protestants are known as Evangelicals in the US, and their brand of religion is gaining ground across Latin America – especially one particular strain, modern Pentecostalism, with its distinct approach. Religious zeal has become a major US export and today although there are just under six million Pentecostal Christians in the US, there are 24 million followers in Brazil alone. Brazil, the continent's largest country, is, in fact, a good illustration of how this particular Christian concept, rather than Catholicism, can prevail.

The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God is the third-biggest

Pentecostal group in Brazil and it has branches in 172 countries; but only in Brazil (so far) does it have its own political party, the Partido Republicano Brasileiro, not to mention owning the country's second-largest television network which has a 24-hour news channel. These soldiers of God are encouraged by their church to donate 10% of their income to it and are told to see these donations as investments that can bring dividends, not necessarily in heaven but on earth, through the church's blessings in the form of either miraculous healings or success in their personal lives.

Religious orthodoxy has been injected with fervour where the traditional use of hands and knees as part of worship has been sidetracked. A few years ago one leading spokesman from Rio de Janeiro's Institute of Religious Studies put it simply: "... these people were hungry for more than just food. The Evangelicals met the peoples' emotional and spiritual needs better." Ironically, Edir Macedo, who controls the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, is a former Catholic who began preaching in 1977 to a dozen or so people in a rented room above a funeral parlour.

If Catholicism, like US influence, is on the decline in Latin America, inflation, like evangelism, is on the rise. It has frequently plagued the region since the 1960s and is back again with a vengeance – particularly in those countries, such as Venezuela and Argentina, where it has been helped along by rapid economic growth. Even countries which have been cushioned from higher fuel costs by subsidies are seeing food prices rising uncomfortably and as they do, many Latin Americans who were hungry for more than food might find their priorities shifting.

The author, David Stoll, once wrote that in Latin America "...born-again

religion has the upper hand", but in Brazil they also enjoy a born-again economy. You might say that Brazil is the rubber ball that always bounces back off the wall, as the past bears out. In May of this year Brazil's monthly inflation rate reached its highest in three years (5.6%), but back in 1993 it stood at 2,500%. Although in my June column 'Brazil: Boundless and Bold' (Issue 187) I referred to the beginning of an era of steady economic growth in Brazil, it should be appreciated that already between 1965 and 1980 annual growth averaged 9%, a feat that India has only achieved in the last few years.

Whether or not under the influence of Christianity, Brazil continues to strive for more equality amongst its population of nearly 200 million. The country's billionaires, whose faces appear regularly on magazine covers, are not always criticised for their wealth; more often than not their success is praised in a country where the message is getting across that being born rich is not the only road to success. This is not the case in most other countries in South America, but will that Brazilian benevolence continue as the world economy weakens further and Brazilians begin to really suffer?

Brazil's economy, as I alluded to also in my June column, is tied to the faltering global market and despite this, government optimists believe that their economy will maintain its current pace for perhaps the next 20 years or so. Non-believers, on the other hand, think that Brazil's good times have already peaked.

Perhaps Lord Tennyson, the Victorian English poet, who said that "...more things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of..." was right. Certainly, that was so for one preacher in a room above a funeral parlour in 1977.

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