

# BRAZIL

LEADERSHIP FELLOWS 2025  
GLOBAL IMMERSION TRIP

## STUDENT & MENTOR REFLECTIONS



MINISTRY PARTNERS:



# Thank you, Brazil

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Rev. Lee Yates

HELM Vice President of Scholarship & Leadership Programs

As I child, I was fascinated by Brazil. I had started playing “soccer” and the only player anyone knew was Pele’. His yellow jersey and the Brazilian flag were vibrant and captured my imagination. As I got older, I learned more about the struggles that shaped Pele into an amazing athlete, leader, and cultural ambassador. Until I experienced Brazil for myself, I had no idea how much Pele’s strength and passion truly embodied Brazil.

Much like the United States, Brazil is a nation with a complicated history, great diversity, and lots of contradictions. History unfolded differently in each country but the voice of indigenous communities, the role of enslaved peoples, religious nationalism, and challenges to their constitutional ideals are part of both nations’ story. Professor Magali Cunha did our introduction to Brazil, offering us different lenses by which to explore the nation’s history and current events. The most important, she suggested, was through the lens of resistance. The profound truth of this statement was evident throughout our trip.



As we visited “Little Africa” with the Instituto Pretos Novos, we learned about Brazil’s history with slave-trade, involving ten times the number of enslaved people as North America. We sat on an excavation site where the old shipping ports had been discovered underneath the modern streets of the city. As we looked up we could see the Christ the Redeemer statue in the distance. Our tour guide, who was of African descent, explained that Jesus standing outstretched hands was a dramatic from the imagery of God and Jesus associated with the colonizers and slave traders.

The site we sat on joined the murals we saw on building walls, the slogans painted on signs and doorways, and the Instituto Prestos Novos museum and exhibit space, proclaiming a story of Brazil that is too often only told among those on the margins. They stand as signs and symbols of resistance to the divisive power of racism and the ever-present reality of apathy.





As our week went on, we met with indigenous community, we met with health care workers, we met with students in internship programs. We met local politicians. We met fans cheering on their team. We met people trying to make the world a better place in the face of enormous obstacles. Poverty, drugs, violence, racism, and selfishness wrapped up in Christian platitudes all challenge the work they do. Yet, they continue on, in daily acts of service and compassion.

Resistance is part of being Brazilian.



As the week went on, we got to watch our students engage with partners, guests, guides, and our interpreters. Their questions were insightful and on target. Their curiosity often turned into conversations and their compassion created connections – relationships. Questions about African religious symbols turned into a conversation around water and the feminine divide. Questions about health care sparked conversations about access, justice, and healing vocations. Our Leadership Fellows showed cultural humility and academic expertise in their individual fields. More importantly, they built authentic

relationships with everyone they met. They came to care about Brazil's people and hoped for a better world for them. Our Leadership Fellows also talked about the role they might play in creating a better world for everyone. Some shared professional goals and others expressed personal aspirations.

It seems that resistance is part of being a Leadership Fellow.

As the week came to an end, and we started moving towards home, our attention became more and more focused on what we were returning to. Debates over the federal budget reminded us how little care many have for the poor, for children, and for those who are sick. Expanding ICE raids put the spotlight back on immigration and continual overreaches of power reminded us that much of what we heard about in Brazil is happening right here at home. We even heard a lot of folks using Jesus' name to justify acts of marginalization and oppression. We came home to notices about churches holding vigils for immigrants and attending Pride events to stand in solidarity. We came home in time for Pentecost- a reminder of how the Holy Spirit connects us, even while others scoff and seek to divide.

It seems that resistance is part of being a Christian.

Thank you Brazil, for all your lessons.



# Reflecting on Rio

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## Sam Snider Leadership Fellow

Looking back on the time leading up to our trip to Brazil, I really did not know what to expect. I knew our trip had an anti-colonialism focus, but I struggled to envision what that would look like when the problems surrounding colonialism seem so daunting. I was very impressed with the work that Michael, Fiyori, and the rest of Global Ministries did to connect us with such fantastic individuals throughout our trip. To say I felt empowered by the connections we made on this trip

would be an understatement. Our group arrived in Rio and our first stop was to Fundacao Mudes, where Pastor Luis immediately welcomed us and eased our nerves with his light hearted personality. The foundation poured information into us the first day, bringing in journalist, Magalee, to give us a fascinating rundown of the political history of Brazil. The foundation also gave us a chance to meet their interns. This was our best opportunity to connect with individuals who were around the same age of all of us, I did get beat in arm wrestling but became friends with an admirable group of young adults. The foundation set a high bar for everyone else on the trip, but I was continually impressed with everyone we met.

Val, our guide on our tour of Little Africa, absolutely made the experience what it was for us. If our group were to have taken the tour without the information Val provided us, it would not have been nearly as impactful. There were a lot of difficult emotions walking through the streets where the slave trade took place, but they were feelings needed to be felt and facts that needed to be acknowledged for restorative work to be done. The resistance that Val and coworkers provide through uncovering stories of the past is beautiful, and their museum is a place I need to return to in the future so I can see their progress.

The same passion displayed by Val was displayed by Manu, who gave us a presentation on traditional African religions. Manu's intellect is what stood out to me first, but after we were lucky enough to spend the whole day with her, we found that what makes Manu so special is her kindness. She and Claudia came into the museum even though they were on strike, just to share with us. The museum was so special to me, and then the samba school was an experience that was special as well. I loved seeing the samba school as a beacon of hope in a Favela, and world, that is in desperate need of it.

The ladies from the health organization we met with also gave me great hope. They all referred to themselves as “Barbara’s disciples” exhibiting so much respect for their leader Barbara Mosley De Souza. This stood out to me because I saw these women as heroes, yet they were so humble and saw themselves as just small parts of something bigger than themselves. The resilience they show to come in to work every day in the face of lack of funding and danger in the surrounding area was very inspiring.

Throughout the week we were also supported by Pastor Rodrigo and his church. Pastor Rodrigo had a smile that was infectious and led a worship service that blew me away. Pastor Rodrigo’s church held the space for a program for children to learn music as an escape from danger in the streets. The program was led by a man named David from Europe and he was a fantastic human being who made a choice to use his gifts to help others find meaning in their lives. Members of Pastor Rodrigo’s congregation also stuck around with us when we visited the indigenous community on Sunday. This tribe resides right by the Maracana stadium in the middle of Rio, and hearing their story opened my eyes to even more ways native people have been and continue to be marginalized. The entire community showed us such compassion, the leader shared with us his knowledge of plants, and a student they have been hosting shared conversation with us in English, which he said he had learned from watching Disney channel.

The connections we made throughout this trip were only possible because of our great interpreters, Rainn and Natalia. They showed an interest in the what we were learning and were very intentional about properly presenting not only what was said, but how it was said, and provided context when needed. They showed such an interest that I did not realize they were from an external company, I thought they worked directly for Global Ministries. They made connection possible between me and my Portuguese speaking friends, and for that I am forever grateful.

Words cannot do this trip justice, but I hoped to hit on just a little bit of what made this trip so special to me. I see ways in which uncovering stories from the past and the present can help in fighting the consequences of colonialism. I see also that this work has to be done from a place of compassion and humility. The leaders we met on this trip showed how having the proper approach to the small things in life carries over to the big things and makes them easier to deal with. I am forever grateful for HELM for giving me this experience and for having it be with my cohort. My cohort has served to be the Disciples community that I have yearned for my whole life. Being surrounded by such caring and intelligent people relieved so much of the anxiety I had felt going into it. I am still processing so much of this trip and have so much to say, but this is just a glimpse into how it exceeded any expectation I could have had for it.

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# **Through My Five Senses in Rio de Janeiro**

By: Jahnelle Mata  
Leadership Fellow





# Sight

Rio de Janeiro is a city cradled by mountains and oceans. Christ the Redeemer stood above with arms outstretched over the city, visible from miles away. Sugarloaf Mountain stood at the edge of the bay and, on top, overlooked the entire city.

Little Africa was filled with streets rooted in deep history. Colorful murals told stories of survival and of Afro-Brazilian pride. I was moved to hear just how recent some of its history was uncovered, including a main port that brought enslaved Africans to Brazil, only discovered due to the Olympic construction.

At the Manguiera samba school, the walls danced. Bright banners and painted drums filled the space, and every corner was enriched by music.

The Canal do Anil Health Promoters clinic was different. As a pre-med student, I saw hands at work. I saw the perseverance and the grit of this community to keep providing accessible healthcare for those who need it most. It was personal, woven into the life of the community.



# Sound

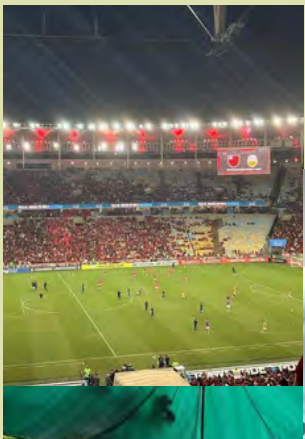
Rio is sound in itself. At the Manguiera samba school, thunderous drums, the beat of the tambourines, and rhythms that felt so alive that you could feel the story being conveyed.

The youth internship program with Fundação Mudes students carried voices of ambition and hope as they spoke about their dreams. Conversations over their experiences and their involvement in the program moved me deeply. This program primarily supports young people in situations where opportunities in the job market are limited. Conversations blended with coffee and laughter, breaking through the shyness and friendships began to form.

The children at Botafogo Presbyterian Church played music for us. Tunes filled with hard work over recorders filled the air. The sound was bright and full of life.

Our visit to the indigenous community Aldeia Tekoa Ka'aguy Hovy Porã moved us as they sang us a farewell song. The melody wrapped around us like a blessing, bidding farewell and a reminder that we would always be connected. This community had long been grappling for their rights in the ownership of their land, and yet their voices carried strength, resilience, and hope

The sound of crowds cheering at the Flamengo futbol game added another layer to Rio's soundscape. The chanting and excitement of thousands of fans filled every corner and showed their deep passion.



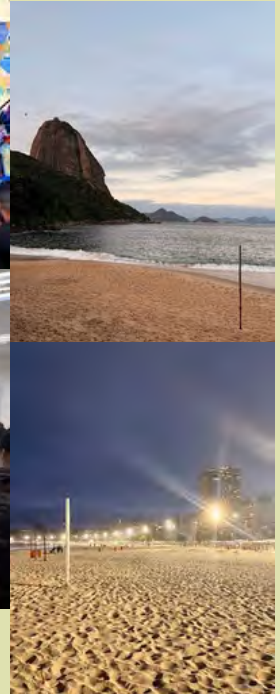
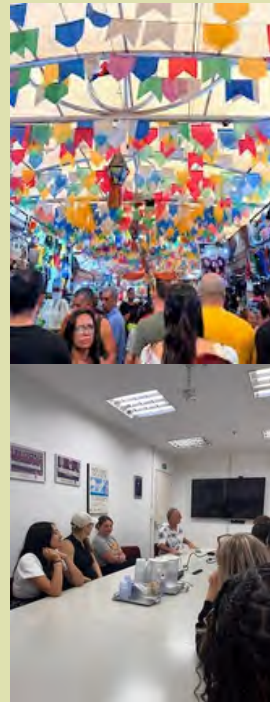
# Smell

our mornings began with our hotel breakfast, always stocked with an unlimited supply of pão de queijo. The aroma of freshly baked cheese bread quickly became a daily favorite and a small, comforting novelty that I will deeply miss.

The smell of coffee from our meetings at Fundação Mudes and Canal do Anil Health Promoters would greet us, filling the air with warmth and signaling the start of another day of learning and ministry.

Walking through the markets, we'd smell the alluring aroma of churrasco, grilled fish, and fried pastries. Each smell filled our curiosity with flavors waiting to be discovered.

Besides food, the sea salt-filled air from Copacabana was with us with every step, carrying the crashing of the waves and the laughter of locals. It was a reminder of the city's fresh and vibrant energy.



# Taste

Every meal told a story.

Lunch would always bring something new. The taste of churrasco, grilled chicken, and sausages was smoky, savory, and satisfying, filling the air with warmth and flavor. Beans, rice, farofa, potatoes, and eggs would make up the traditional cuisine. Each bite carried the care of those who prepared it.

The community of Fundação Mudes and Canal do Anil Health Promoters provided us with traditional Brazilian snacks, with timeless favorites and regional specialties. Each bite reminded us of their hospitality and offered a taste of connection that went beyond food and into the heart of the community.

The indigenous community of Aldeia Tekoa Ka'aguy Hovy Porã had us taste their planted herbs that they use in daily life and traditional remedies. Each flavor, earthy and aromatic, allowed us to connect to the land and nature.





# Touch

Rio was a connection to the city, the environment, and the people we met. I felt the warm sun on my skin, the cool sand during devotionals, and the ocean breeze on walks along Copacabana.

Visiting Little Africa, I ran my fingers over the worn cobblestones, feeling the weight of history beneath my hands and the resilience of generations that had walked these streets before me. At the Mangueira samba school, I touched drums and instruments, sensing the energy and rhythm that flowed from every beat.

At Canal do Anil Health Promoters, I felt the warmth of each nurse's embrace as they wiped away my tears for me and cheered me on my journey to becoming a doctor.

I felt the embrace and presence of my cohorts, mentors, and translators. They offered reassurance, friendship, and shared joy. This trip truly touched me in ways that went beyond the physical and left memories that I will carry with me forever.



# Reflection

This trip was a journey into the heart of community, culture, and service. I saw the resilience of communities in Little Africa, favelas, and the indigenous community of Aldeia Tekoa Ka'aguy Hovy Porã, each facing unique challenges yet carrying a profound strength and spirit.

In Little Africa, I was reminded of the importance of preserving history and culture after centuries of oppression and saw firsthand the efforts to document and honor the stories of those who were enslaved, including the restoration of historical sites and the creation of murals that celebrate Afro-Brazilian heritage. I witnessed young people striving for opportunity despite limited access to education, formal employment, and safe living conditions, and I saw how programs like Fundação Mudes open those doors and hope for a better future. At Aldeia Tekoa Ka'aguy Hovy Porã, I felt the deep connection of the indigenous community to their ancestral land and traditions, and I observed their ongoing struggle to secure legal rights and maintain cultural practices in the face of modernization and external pressures.

Across all these communities, the resilience, creativity, and sense of unity were inspiring. The trip reminded me that strength is found not only in individual perseverance but in the collective commitment of people working together to protect heritage, build opportunity, and preserve identity.

If I were to name a sixth sense from this trip, it would be Spirit. Everything I saw, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched was infused with God's presence. Ministry doesn't always look like preaching. Sometimes it's a group of young children who are playing music on a piece they'd been practicing. Sometimes it's the conversations and laughter between students, the teaching of history and systemic issues, or the songs of the Aldeia Tekoa Ka'aguy Hovy Porã community that carry blessings, gratitude, and hope. Spirit was in every interaction, with God's work in each smile, act of service, and every story we encountered.



# Water

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## Callie Yates

### Leadership Fellow

The HELM Leadership Fellow Global Immersion trip to Brazil was deeply impactful, inspiring, and necessary to my development as a global citizen. I am grateful for the many opportunities we had for learning and experiencing Brazilian history and culture. The greatest takeaway of the experience was my interaction with water and the way it pulled me throughout the trip.

The first experience I had with water was during our group's tour of Little Africa with Instituto Prestos Novos. During the tour, I noticed symbols embedded into the walls, drawn on posters, painted into murals, and built into fences. I asked our tour guide, Louis, about the significance of these symbols, and we learned that each one represented a different deity. These deities originated from African spiritual practices and religions, which then syncretized with Brazilian spiritualism and culture, preserving them in Little Africa and Brazilian history.

Next, we arrived at a museum that housed the remains and artifacts of those held in slavery that were found underneath the building. The walls captured a timeline of the slavetrade that led to a second room. This second room was an art exhibit meant to capture the movement of the boats in the slave trade and how water marked a pivotal piece in Afro-Brazilian history. In the corner of one of the murals, I noticed a small symbol reminiscent of those we were shown in Little Africa. Somehow, I was sure I knew who it was. Not just that it was a deity connected to this movement of water, but a goddess of water. Yet again, I asked our guide Louis, and sure enough, I was right.

Back at Chapman University, I had been studying ancient Mesopotamia, where I presented research on the goddess Tiamat. The goddess of water. I felt called to Tiamat as she was a powerful woman who was not embodied anthropomorphically. Rather, she was the culmination of all water; she was life water that created all things. It was as if Tiamat was dragging me to the symbol to say, Look, a goddess like me! We then went to a restaurant that, to my surprise, was famous for its view of the ocean. Even after the tour, I couldn't escape the calls to the water.

Later in our trip, we went to the Palácio de Catete, the Museum of the Republic, where we met a woman named Emanuelle. Emanuelle spoke to us about preserving religious artifacts from the Afro-Brazilian religions Umbanda and Candomblé. During the session, we were introduced to the different deities known as Orishas. Iemanjá is the Queen of the Sea, particularly saltwater, and is the Mother of the Orishas. Again, the parallels between religions overcame me. It felt as though I was being led on a personal, divinely inspired academic vacation. When the session ended, we were given time to view the art gallery and gift shop. I walked in and the first thing I spotted was an employee hanging up a shirt of what appeared to be Iemanjá. I knew immediately that that shirt was intended to come home with me.

Throughout our remaining days, my eyes kept catching the water. Funnily enough, our hotel was located next to Copacabana Beach. Each night, I had time to reflect on the power of water, movement, womanhood, and life. I have never had a more profound academic and religious experience, and I wonder if I ever will.



# Brazil Reflection

By Sharon Lee

Leadership Fellow

Summer 2025



## Hi, this is Sharon!

Hello! I am a senior at Vanderbilt University, and I traveled to Rio De Janeiro, Brazil with the HELM Fellowship in June 2025. I am so excited to tell you about it!



## Favorites

### My Favorite Memory

so hard to choose!!!

#### Visiting the home of one of the native tribes in Brazil

It was an honor to be welcomed into their home! They gave us a tour of their land, showing us their school, the plants they grew, and the history they carried with them. It was an inspiration to see their ambitions amidst the persecution they received by the government.

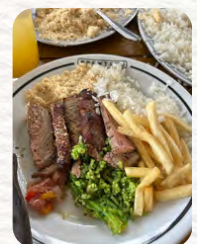


### My Favorite Food There

rooftop buffet

#### Botofogo Steak!

We ate at a beautiful restaurant on the rooftop of a mall, and although it was not an actual buffet, we ordered so much food like it was one! Most memorable was the salted gilled steak. The reason why this was my favorite was because I had a really good conversation with Lee there!





# Snapshots

- we ate so much good food (that HELM so graciously paid for)
- we met and grew close with amazing people
- we visited many historically and culturally rich places
- we also had devotionals on the beach



## Concluding Comments

To be honest, I was very anxious before leaving for Brazil. I was scared to go to an unknown country with people that I was not very close with before. But being in Brazil for a week with great food and fun people really does something to you. All the pictures I took cannot fully encapsulate the knowledge I have acquired and the bonds I have formed. I have created memories that will last a lifetime. I am very grateful to HELM for coordinating this trip, and for inviting me to experience the world!





# Reflection

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Khaya Barnes  
Leadership Fellow

Para entender o Brasil melhor você tem que comer pelo país. Esse país bem misturado, cheio de culturas diferentes e uma história colonial me roubou o coração por causa dessa mistura. Quando chega à comida, a riqueza dela está tão colorida como a cultura, os edifícios, a roupa, e a bandeira. Não há nada semelhante. Pastéis europeus, frutas do mar, churrasco, presunto portuguesa, e sobremesas doces. Cada estado tem seus pratos próprios, e no Rio (uma das cidades mais antigas do Brasil) a comida é um símbolo. Minas Gerais, com suas padarias, é incomparável com Bahía e seu açaí, nem o sertão e os gaúchos que transformou o churrasco na fenomena brasileira. Esse arco-íris da comida contém o sabor dos países africanos como o peri-peri de Moçambique, ou os caril de Angola. A cultura brasileira não existiria sem eles. Sem África, o Brasil que conhecemos seria outro país. Nem sem Europa. Desfrutei muito o Brasil, sua música, os bailes, a natureza, e as religiões indígenas. Quando celebram e oram pelas suas divindades, oferecem a eles comida. Nos dá energia mesmo que os deuses, e mesmo que o próprio Brasil. A gastronomia brasileira é literalmente a comida dos deuses.

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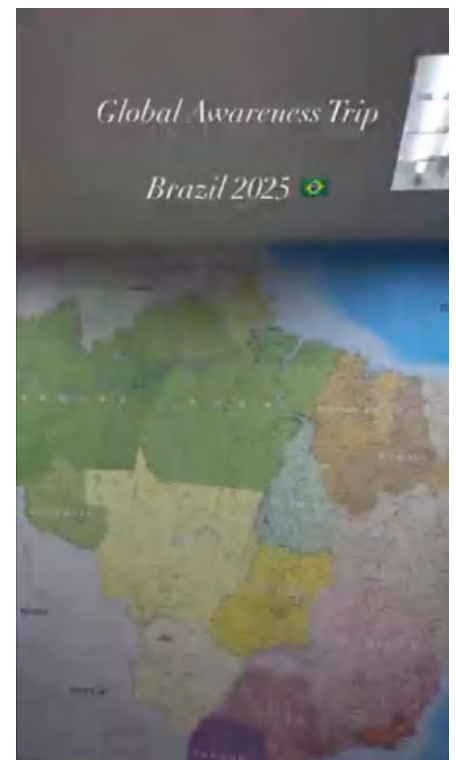
## Video Reflection

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Bri Vasquez  
Leadership Fellow

Bri sent In a video reflection which can be accessed here:

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/137KLgve3QJse6ifdO\\_Xz7ITQShRJEFdM/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/137KLgve3QJse6ifdO_Xz7ITQShRJEFdM/view?usp=sharing)





# Leaning In: Reflection Moments Framed by Brazilian Flora and Fauna

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Liv Hardin-Nieri  
Leadership Fellow

I strained to listen to the English flowing through the translation device tucked in my ear. The words didn't match the Portuguese coming out of the mouth of the man in front of us. Our group was clustered together, smelling, tasting, and delighting in the plants offered to us. The lime, citronella, and mint leaves passed around were nothing less than sacred, holding space for the healing and resistance that had come into contact with violence and grief.



Sunlight beamed through the open center of a health clinic. Plants grew with abandon, the air felt clean, and healing felt abundant. A plant spiraled toward the sky, the dark green stark against the almost neon pink on the tips of the leaves. Bathing in the sunbeams, bearing witness to the line of folks waiting to receive vaccines.



Hummingbirds were stitched alongside the tree of life, gifted from the hands of someone who had traveled miles to bring the connection point of these birds and this tree. Hummingbirds, so mighty, resilient pollinators, skilled air dancers, spiritually gift the grounded rootedness of the tree of life.



The frigate, its forked tail trailing behind it, circled easily above the ocean, matching the wind's fluidity. High above the world, at eye level with Sugarloaf Mountain, our group must have looked tiny tucked into a rooftop restaurant. These birds, equipped with a sense of place even so high above us, were not disconnected from the world below.



The natural world appeared to seek us out in Brazil, showing up in quiet but powerful ways. Reminders of the spiritual and the complexity of what we encountered. It was a choice made at every turn to share food, laughter, tears, stillness, chaos, and stories. The choice to lean in went beyond the explicable, escaping what any language could capture. Leaning in, close enough to ingest a tongue-numbing herb, did not come without the equal relationship with the wider context, much like the scope of a swooping magnificent frigatebird.

# Walking with the Next Generation: Reflections from a HELM Cohort Mentor

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Rev. Christian Watkins  
Cohort Mentor

As the cohort mentor for the HELM Leadership Fellows, I had the honor of accompanying a truly extraordinary group of students on their recent immersion experience to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Over the past three years, I've walked alongside them in retreat spaces, small group conversations, and leadership formation sessions—but this journey brought something even deeper to the surface.

It's one thing to talk about leadership in the abstract. It's another to watch it unfold in real time—on the streets of Rio, in conversations with local organizers, in moments of quiet reflection after witnessing injustice or resilience up close. These students—every single one—showed up with their whole hearts and minds. They asked thoughtful questions, honored the dignity of the people we met, and reflected with courage and vulnerability. As a mentor, I found myself in awe, again and again.

HELM's Leadership Fellows Program fosters exactly this kind of leader: grounded in faith, committed to justice, and constantly growing in self-awareness and cultural humility. The program doesn't just offer support—it offers formation. Over four years, Fellows move through a deeply intentional process of learning, conversation, and spiritual discernment. Each year builds on the last, shaping young adults who are capable not only of leading, but of leading well—with integrity, curiosity, and compassion.

Our time in Rio brought all of this into sharp focus. These students didn't come to be tourists. They came to learn—about themselves, about systems of injustice, about the beauty and pain held in communities that are often overlooked. They didn't flinch from hard questions. They leaned in. They processed complex issues with maturity, respected each other's stories, and constantly asked, What does it mean to be faithful in this moment?

This kind of depth and engagement doesn't happen without strong leadership. Rev. Dr. Tamara Nichols Rodenberg, HELM's President, has brought steady, inspiring vision to the ministry. Her commitment to nurturing spiritually grounded leaders is evident in every detail of this program. Under her guidance, HELM is not only thriving—it's leading with clarity and purpose into a new generation.

And alongside her is Rev. Lee Yates, who serves as Director of Scholarship and Leadership Programs. Lee's relational and creative presence has created a culture of care and accountability that our students respond to deeply. He brings theological imagination, trauma-informed wisdom, and just the right amount of nerdy joy to every encounter. He knows when to challenge and when to encourage, and the result is a community where students are safe enough to grow and brave enough to lead.

Together, Tamara and Lee have shaped a program that is both rigorous and grace-filled. As a mentor, I have seen firsthand how it changes lives—and not just the lives of the Fellows, but all of us who get to witness their transformation.

If you've been wondering where hope lives in the church, or where the next generation of justice-seeking, faith-filled leaders is coming from, look no further than HELM. These students are not just thinking about leadership. They're practicing it—quietly, boldly, and with a wisdom far beyond their years.

And I count myself lucky to walk beside them.

Ad astra,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christian Watkins". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Christian" and last name "Watkins" clearly legible.



