

Rio Sao Francisco Mission (1945–1955)

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Rio São Francisco Mission was a local field of the Seventh-day Adventist Church from 1945 to 1955. Its last address was at Rio Grande street, 514, 39270-000, in the city of Pirapora, in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil.

It was composed of two pastoral districts, one located in the territory of the state of Bahia and the other in the state of Minas Gerais. However, it oversaw all the work along the São Francisco River that passed through the states of Minas Gerais, Bahia, and Sergipe. In all, the mission had 4 organized churches and some companies, and had a total of 437 members registered.¹

There is no information about the population of the region in those days. Nor is it known how many groups existed in the mission at the time of its inception. The first indication of size reveals the existence of 16 groups of Sabbath keepers and it was documented only in 1946, about one year after the mission's creation?²

The terrain of the region made it difficult to establish and maintain this mission. To do so in a time of want and lack of resources in a region where communication was all but nonexistent was an even greater challenge. Even today, the territory where the mission was established is among the most challenging territories for the church in Brazil.

Origin of Seventh-day Adventist Work in the Mission Territory

The history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in this territory apparently began with the arrival of the Adventist message in three different places, all in western Bahia State. In the first two places it arrived simultaneously, while in a third it occurred about 12 years later, about 125 miles (200 km.) away. And everything happened in a very unusual way.

The cities of Santana and Santa Maria da Vitória received a team of Presbyterian missionaries that came from an agency in the county of Goiânia, in the state of Goiás, around 1904 or 1905. These missionaries arrived in the region of western Bahia and there established bases for their activities. Under the leadership of the American Presbyterian missionary whose last name was Schamberline, Bible distribution began through sales and giving them away.

Due to the introduction of the Bible to the Bahian people resistance unfolded in many dramatic episodes. In one episode, Bibles sold by Presbyterian canvassers³ were collected by Father Frey Agostinho Garrido (parish priest

from 1904–1908) in the parish of Santa Maria da Vitória⁴ and thrown into the River Corrente.

The day after the incident, the same Bibles were found by a canoeist who saw them being thrown into the river the previous afternoon. Finding them intact in a bend of the river, he was amazed and gathered them up and handed them to Joaquim Matos, a man in the village of Porto Novo do Corrente. This man, later known as brother Joaquim, discovered some truths as he studied the pages of the black-cover Book. Around 1908⁵ he established the first group of Sabbath keepers in the town of Porto Novo do Corrente, Santana County.

At the same time in the city of Santana, around 30 miles (50 km.) away, a Presbyterian canvasser tried to sell a Bible to Pedro José de Macedo, sacristan in the city parish. Pedro offered several excuses and didn't buy the volume. The canvasser withdrew but shortly after went back to him with the following proposal: "Mr. Peter, keep this package for me. I will return in six months. If I don't return after this period, this package will be yours."⁶

Pedro agreed, kept the package in a special location on the underside of the roof. After six months, bedridden and recovering from an accident at work, he looked at the roof, calculated the time, and opened the package. There was the Bible. He started studying it and soon found verses about the Sabbath. From then on, he began to keep the Sabbath and shared it with friends and family. Thus, a group of Sabbath keepers emerged in the city of Santana, the county seat.⁷

About twelve years after these episodes, a lady residing in Sítio do Rio Grande, São Desidério county, dreamed about a well-dressed man visiting her small town and going from house to house. The following day when she began her daily activities, she was visited by the man who she realized was the one in the dream. She bought a book from him entitled "The Life of Jesus." Upon reading the book, she was converted, giving rise to the third nucleus of Sabbath keepers as early as 1920.⁸

These are the places where the first Seventh-day Adventist believers were registered in the counties of Santana and São Desiderio, considered the most notable regarding the arrival of Adventism in western Bahia. At the time, this region was part of the territory of the East Brazil Union (EBUC).⁹

Conference Organizational History

Aware of the missionary challenges in its territory, EBUC noted there was an urgent need for organizing the work along the São Francisco River. There were increasing requests for Bible studies, as well as the necessary visitation of Sabbath keepers in such a vast territory. In the interior of northeastern Brazil and in the hinterlands of Minas Gerais, areas without roads, with scarce means of communication, the difficulties were great and increased the challenge of spreading the gospel.

With the Voice of Prophecy radio program beginning in 1943,¹⁰ the demands grew even greater. Letters and more letters arrived at the radio program headquarters from the remotest places and with requests for visits from a church representative to share the message of hope. These requests only started to be answered about

two years after preaching on the radio began in the region.¹¹

Over the years, EBUC requested the South American Division (SAD) to authorize a study commission to reconfigure EBUC fields, intending to divide the territory of Bahia Mission¹² and to create a new field covering the São Francisco River.¹³

After the study, it was concluded that a new local field territory should be composed from part of the state of Minas Gerais (from the Rio-Minas Gerais Mission territory) and part from the Bahia Mission territory in the São Francisco River region.¹⁴ The new field territory had as its starting point the island of Cajueiro about 125 miles (200 km.) from Juazeiro. Then, following a straight line, the territory would include the localities of Quixadá, Itapicuru, Tiririca, Brotas, Macaúba, Riacho Sant'Ana, and Monte Alto, reaching the city of Carinhanas and covering the entire western part of the state of Bahia.¹⁵

On this side of Bahia territory (the part that bordered the Bahia Mission), there were already many congregations at the time. One can list, for example, the counties of Alagoinhas (today Canápolis), Arrojado, Barreiras, Boa Fé, Inhauma, Porto Novo do Corrente, Riacho das Neves, Santana, Rio Grande Site, Santa Maria da Vitória and Tabuleiro.¹⁶ On the side of Minas Gerais, the territory extended by the course of São Francisco River entering by the northern part and reaching the center of the state.

The project had support from the leaders of SAD, EBUC, and the Bahia Mission, and thus the territory described came to compose the São Francisco River Mission. Although it began on January 1, 1945, it functioned precariously for about five years due to a lack of workers, until it was reinforced by Werner Bleck in 1949.¹⁷

Initially, the São Francisco River Mission was based at Avenida Octavio Carneiro 582, in the city of Pirapora, where it functioned until 1951 when it moved to Rio Grande Street 514, in the same city, in Minas Gerais State. The mission remained at this last address until it was closed.¹⁸

At its creation, there were 230 members in its territory,¹⁹ 106 of them inherited from Bahia Mission and another 124 inherited from the Rio-Minas Gerais Mission.²⁰ In addition to bordering the two Missions from which it received its members and territory, Rio São Francisco Mission also bordered Rio-Espírito Santo Mission.²¹

To direct the work in the Rio São Francisco Mission, Pastor Paul S. Seidl was called. In the 1950 Yearbook, the record for the newly created field appears for the first time with the following team: Paulo S. Seidl, Werner Bleck, Enoch of Rocha Medrado, and Plácido da Rocha Pita.

Regarding the president, Pastor Paulo Seidl,²² he was not chosen by chance. When he arrived in Bahia in 1934, he worked in the city of Salvador, then in Aracaju, having also served the government of the state of Bahia helping fight an epidemic in the west. As a health professional, he was like an "angel" that saved many people. In addition to this experience, Seidl had also been a pilot on the launch Luminar II for a long time, so he knew well that section of São Francisco Mission. Due to his credentials he was elected president and remained in office for 10 years.²³

In the educational area, the teachers that worked in the mission were Maria de Lourdes Lima and later I. F. R. Medrado, who taught at Inhaúmas, and Idália P. dos Santos, who taught at Arrojado.²⁴ In 1950, a new teacher, Helena M. Montebello, arrived who was responsible for the school at Porto Novo do Corrente. Later, Clarice Macedo took over as teacher at this school.²⁵

In 1951, the licensed minister S. Silva arrived in the region and strengthened the team that worked hard serving the newly created mission²⁶. In 1952, the team underwent changes with the departure of Werner Bleck and the arrival of Pastor Leontino Ramalho who served as secretary and treasurer from 1952 to 1955 when the Mission was closed.²⁷

According to pastor Paulo Seidl, the first and only president of the Mission, it was the plan that the mission work in partnership with the launch Luminar I and the other missionary launches,²⁸ fulfilling the mission of seeking to “heal the sick, teach our fellow man about healthy living, but mainly carry the light of the gospel and heal the wounds of sin of thousands.”²⁹ This way, the launches would be an important augmentation to the work in the São Francisco River Mission.

On March 25, 1948, three years after the mission was established, the inaugural voyage of the medical launch “Luminar I” took place when it departed from the port of Pirapora. Its task was to serve all the communities along the banks of the São Francisco River in the mission’s territory. This launch traveled at a speed of about 15 mph (25 kph). In five years, its services reached about 16,000 people. During this period, 745 patients were treated, 2,000 treatments performed, 680 teeth extracted, 6 minor surgeries performed, and an arm fracture and two abscesses treated. As part of the missionary activities, 19 meetings were held, 13 films screened, 690 pieces of literature distributed, and 154 visits made.³⁰

In its 11 years of operation, Rio São Francisco Mission nearly doubled its membership from 230 to 437,³¹ remarkable growth for the time and the region.

In 1955, SAD and EBUC re-studied the condition of each field in the states of Espírito Santo, Minas Gerais, and Rio de Janeiro. After careful evaluation, the decision was to close Rio São Francisco Mission activities, which was done at the end of that year. The reasons for such a decision were recorded in the minutes as follows:

Considering that Rio S. Francisco Mission has no possibility of developing its own livelihood in the face of geographical features, and considering that the territory of this mission extends to the north including large areas of Bahia and even Pernambuco making evangelization of the territory practically impossible....³²

It was voted to dissolve Rio São Francisco Mission. In the same vote the creation of Mineira Mission was decided, based in Belo Horizonte, capital of Minas Gerais. This field received the territories in Minas that were previously overseen by the Rio São Francisco Mission. The Bahia part of the Rio São Francisco Mission territory was incorporated back into what was then the Bahia-Sergipe Mission.³³ Beginning with the 1956 Adventist Yearbook,

there is no further mention of Rio São Francisco Mission.³⁴

Chronology of Administrative Officers³⁵

President: Paulo S. Seidl (1945-1955).

Secretaries: Werner Bleck (1949-1952); Leontino Ramalho (1952-1955).

Treasurers: Werner Bleck (1949-1952); Leontino Ramalho (1952-1955).

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NOTES

1. "Rio São Francisco Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1955), 140.
2. Leon Replogle, "A Nova Missão do Rio S. Francisco" [The New S. Francisco River Mission], *Adventist Review*, December 1946, 9.
3. The canvasser is someone who sells literature to the public, door to door.
4. "Rio São Francisco Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1951), 163-164; Nésias Joaquim e Natan Fernandes, *Contando Nossa História 110 anos da Igreja Adventista do Sétimo Dia no Estado da Bahia* [Telling our story 110 years of Seventh-day Adventist Church in the state of Bahia] (Salvador, BA: Publisher EGBA, 2016), 52.
5. Plácido da Rocha Pita, *Por Quê Mudei de Exército* [Why I changed arms] (Santo André, SP: Brazil Publishing House, 1986), 83-84.
6. Nésias Joaquim and Natan Fernandes, *Contando Nossa História 110 anos da Igreja Adventista do Sétimo Dia no Estado da Bahia* [Telling our story 110 years of Seventh-day Adventist Church in the state of Bahia] (Salvador, BA: Publisher EGBA, 2016), 52.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. A Union is a group of conferences, missions or ecclesiastical acting fields inside a larger territory. At that time, East Brazil Union coordinated the missionary work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Federal District and in the states of Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, Espírito Santo, Bahia, Sergipe, Alagoas, Pernambuco, Paraíba, and Rio Grande do Norte. "East Brazil Union Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1947), 145.
10. Date of the beginning of the retransmission of Voice of Prophecy through radio in Brazil.
11. Throughout Brazil, people listened to the program, enjoyed it and wrote requesting Bible courses, and missionary visits to help them. It was common for Voice of Prophecy to give the local pastor the various addresses of listeners making such requests so that they could visit them.
12. At this time, the UEB headquarters was located at Lopes Trovão 84, Icaraí, in the city of Niterói, RJ.
13. Minute of Bahia Mission, no. 287, October 23, 1941.
14. São Francisco River, in its navigable stretch, runs from the city of Pirapora, Minas Gerais, to Paulo Afonso Dam, where navigation is interrupted because of the waterfalls that are currently used to produce electricity.
15. The project proposed to divide the state of Bahia and, consequently, Bahia Mission almost in half. For the project, any area in which the Church had the greatest development in those days, except the cities of Salvador and Itabuna, would be in the west of the state, beyond São Francisco River.

16. Nésias Joaquim, personal knowledge, for he worked for six years (1993 to 1998) as a pastor in this area and he organized the centenary congregations as churches.
17. Minute of Bahia Mission, no. 131, March 25, 1948, vote no. 017/1948.
18. "Rio São Francisco Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1955), 140.
19. Minute of Bahia Mission, no. 857, from 1946.
20. Rio-Minas Mission had as its territory the state of Minas Gerais, except the southwest corner of the state; the southern part of the state of Rio de Janeiro and the Federal District. "Rio-Minas Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1948), 147.
21. The territory of Rio-Espírito Santo Mission comprised the entire state of Espírito Santo, the northern part of the state of Rio de Janeiro, the northeast part of the state of Minas Gerais, and the southern part of the state of Bahia. "Goyaz Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1939), 188.
22. "On October 19, when he was 85 years old, in Afonso Cláudio, ES. Born in Germany, Pastor Paulus Seidl graduated in Theology and nursing, in Argentina. Married to sister Alicia Victoria Wess [...], started his ministry in the former Bahia-Sergipe Mission, where he was district and department Leader. Later, he went to the region of São Francisco River. Carrying out a pioneering work, he created São Francisco River Mission, accepting after 14 years a call to preside over Central Brazil Mission." "Dormiram no Senhor" [They rested in the Lord], *Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review], December 1996, 31.
23. "Rio Francisco Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1955), 140.
24. "Rio Sao Francisco Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1950), 161.
25. "Rio São Francisco Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1951), 172.
26. "Rio São Francisco Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1952), 164.
27. Ibid.
28. "Mission launches are used to provide services to those who live in the riverside and in hard to reach places. They are equipped for medical and dental care, and also have the presence of an Adventist pastor to provide spiritual assistance to families. Access on October 18, 2018, <https://goo.gl/94Ypqk>.
29. Paulo Seidl, "Viajando pelo Rio São Francisco" [Travelling through São Francisco River], *Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review], January 1947, 11-12.

30. Paulo Seidl, "Notícias da Missão Rio S. Francisco" [News from São Francisco River Mission], *Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review], March 1953, 13; Minutes of East Brazil Union from 1943-1957; Paulo Roberto Vieira, "As Lanchas no Brasil" [Launches in Brazil] (Monograph, UNASP-EC, 1986), 13.
 31. Ibid.
 32. Minutes – East Brazil Union Committee 1953-56, July 10, 1955, vote no. 55/223, 1610.
 33. "Mineiros vibram com a nova Associação" [Population of Minas Gerais cheers with the new Conference], *Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review], March 1991, 22.
 34. Família Seidl, "Despedida" [Farewell Seidl family], *Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review], April 1946, 24; "South American Division," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1956), 139.
 35. For a more detailed verification of all the officers, consult the Minutes of East Brazil Union from 1943-1957.
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