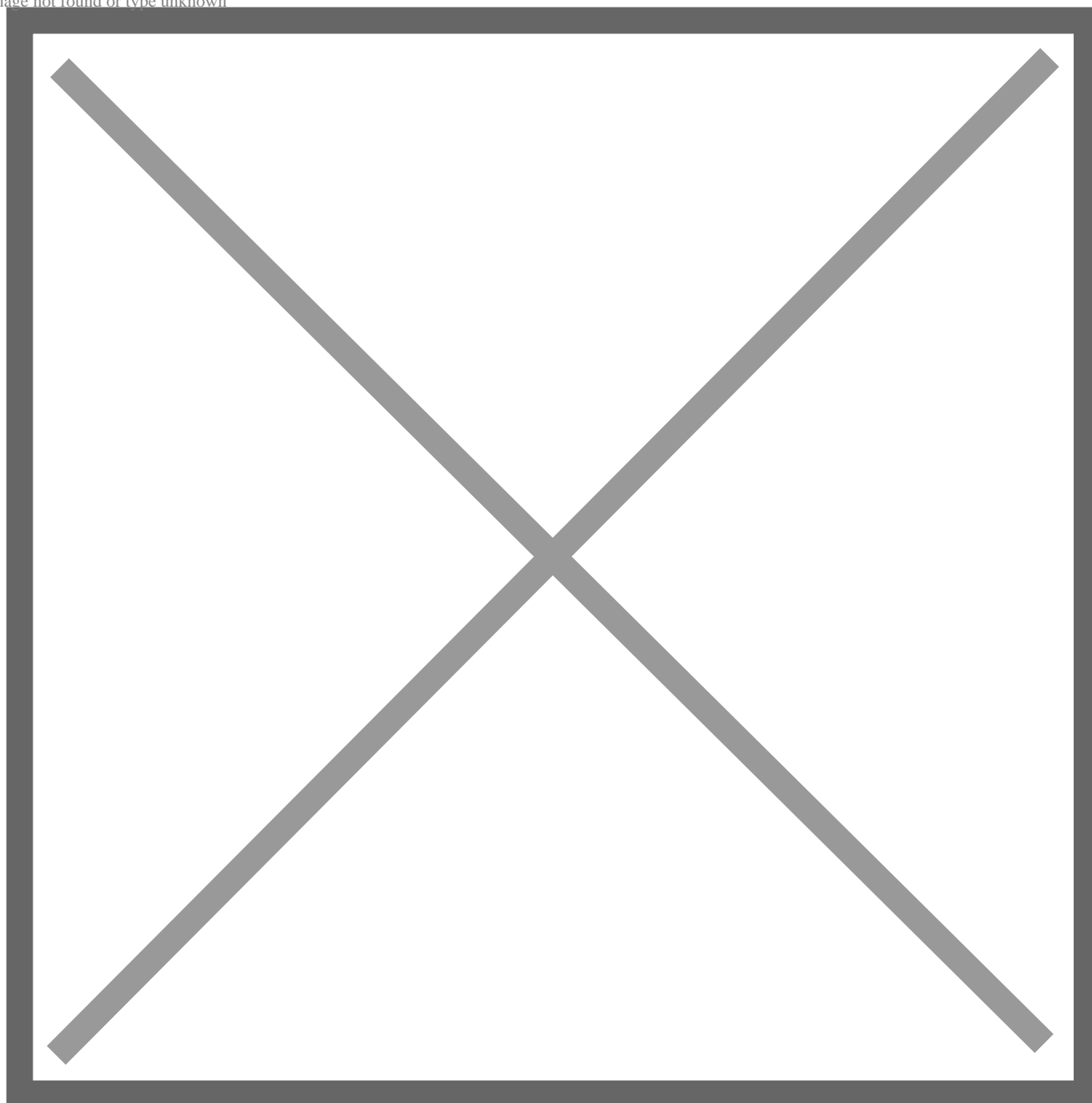


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Central Rio Grande Do Sul Conference

RENATO GROSS

Renato Gross

The Central Rio Grande do Sul Conference (Associação Central Sul-Rio-Grandense or ACSR) is an administrative unit of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA Church), located in the territory of the South Brazil Union Conference (União Sul-Brasileira or USB).

The Central Rio Grande do Sul Conference's headquarters is on 596 João Wallig Ave. in Zip Code 91340-001 in the

Passo d'Areia neighborhood in the city of Porto Alegre, the capital of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil!

The ACSR mission field covers part of Porto Alegre metropolitan region plus 214 municipalities in central Rio Grande do Sul, an area with an estimated population of 5,103,455 inhabitants.² In this territory, there are 17,371 members divided into 224 congregations, 123 of which are churches and 101 are groups. The regional average is of one Adventist per 294 inhabitants.³

In the ACSR territory, there are 5,118 students served by the Adventist education network through 10 educational institutions. They are: Colégio Adventista de Santa Maria [Santa Maria Adventist Academy], in the city of Santa Maria, with 544 students; Colégio Adventista Marechal Rondon [Marechal Rondon Adventist Academy], in Porto Alegre, with 1,519 students; Colégio Adventista de Cachoeirinha [Cachoeirinha Adventist Academy], in Cachoeirinha, with 1,204 students; Colégio Adventista de São Borja [São Borja Adventist Academy], in São Borja, with 135 students; Escola Adventista de Cachoeira do Sul [Cachoeira do Sul Adventist School], in Cachoeira do Sul, with 158 students; Escola Adventista de Ijuí [Ijuí Adventist School], in Ijuí, with 188 students; Escola Adventista de Alegrete [Alegrete Adventist School], in Alegrete, with 79 students; Escola Adventista de Santo Ângelo [Santo Ângelo Adventist School], in Santo Ângelo, with 157 students; Escola Adventista de Caxias do Sul [Caxias do Sul Adventist School], in Caxias do Sul, with 327 students; and Escola Adventista do Sarandi [Sarandi Adventist School], in Porto Alegre, with 807 students.⁴

In the ACSR territory, there are two Health Life Style Centers in operation, which also serve as Urban Centers of Influence⁵. One is located at 167 Benjamin Constant Ave. in the São Pedro neighborhood in the northern area of Porto Alegre,⁶ and the other is at the Reynold Business Center on 1441 Doutor Montauray St., Room 2, in the city of Caxias do Sul downtown area.⁷ In addition to that, in the medical field, the ACSR has within its territory the Porto Alegre Adventist Clinic. The clinic is located on 581 Matias José Bins St. in the Três Figueiras neighborhood in Porto Alegre, and it provides services in several medical specialties, such as cardiology, dermatology, gastroenterology, gynecology, and obstetrics, among others.⁸

In the communication field, the ACSR has a New Time Radio station, which operates on the 99.9 FM frequency in the city of Porto Alegre with a potential reach of approximately 5,000,000 listeners in 30 municipalities. TV Novo Tempo [Hope Channel Brazil] is also broadcast openly to the city of Porto Alegre, its surroundings, and six other cities: Antônio Prado – Channel 59; Bento Gonçalves – Channel 30; Lagoa Vermelha – Channel 29; Porto Alegre and its surroundings – Channel 44; Rio Pardo – Channel 53; Santa Cruz – Channel 49; and São Marcos – Channel 49. In order to serve the youth in the field, there are 90 Pathfinder Clubs¹⁰ with 2,465 participants altogether, and 71 Adventurers Clubs¹¹ that assist a total of at least 1,463 children.¹² These clubs play a direct role in evangelizing children, teenagers, and young people.¹³

There are 709 people working for the ACSR. The conference has 58 pastors, 38 of whom are church pastors, five are school pastors, one is responsible for those who become interested in the Adventist message after watching the Hope Channel Brazil, one is responsible for those who become interested in the Adventist message after listening to New Time Radio, one is an assistant pastor for the *Igreja Adventista de Porto Alegre* [Central Adventist Church of Porto Alegre], two lead the “Urban Centers of Influence,” seven preside over departmental directors, and three are administrators.¹⁴ The others work in administrative and operational sectors of the institutions of the church.

The Origin of SDA Work in the Conference Territory

Along with the states of Rio de Janeiro, Espírito Santo, São Paulo, Paraná, and Santa Catarina, Rio Grande do Sul was one of the first states to receive the Seventh-day Adventist Church message in Brazil – an event that occurred in the late 19th century. This “soil” was extremely fertile for the Adventist message because the Adventist preaching advanced almost at the same time in the various regions of the state, both in the countryside and in the capital!¹⁵

In 1892, Adventism came to the state of Rio Grande do Sul with the arrival of the Kämpels. Five years later (1897), Pastor Huldreich Graf and a canvasser named Albert B. Stauffer organized the first two churches of that state—one in the municipality of Ijuí and the other in Santa Cruz do Sul. In the following year, the third church of the state was organized in the city of Não-me-Toque. Currently, this church is in the territory of the municipality of Lagoa dos Três Cantos.¹⁶

In 1897, Pastor Graf baptized Mr. Guilherme Preuss and his family in Taquari, which is approximately 80 km from Porto Alegre. The Preuss family was reached by the Adventist message through the work of Albert B. Stauffer, a canvasser who had come from Uruguay and had been working in South America since 1891. Guilherme Preuss owned a hotel in Taquari and purchased, in 1894, the book *Patriarchen und Propheten* (*Patriarchs and Prophets* in German) by Ellen G. White.¹⁷

After his baptism, he made the hotel building available so a medical clinic and a school for the preparation of missionaries could be installed in it. In 1903, the course for the preparation of missionaries was transferred from Gaspar Alto in the state of Santa Catarina to Taquari. It is known that “classes began on August 19, 1903, under the direction of Emílio Schenk, assisted by Guilherme Stein Jr.”¹⁸ Emílio Francisco Otto Schenk was a German Lutheran who was married to Pastor Graf’s daughter, Lucy Meta Graf (fondly known as “Lulu”). Schenk was never baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church.¹⁹

In addition to the Preuss family’s hotel, a land of 100 hectares²⁰ was provided so the school could be self-sufficient and the students would have a place to work. Thereafter, the leaders sought the legalization of the Taquari school. In

addition to that, the “Statutes of the School Society of the Seventh-day Adventists of the State of Rio Grande do Sul” were drafted and registered in a registry in July 1904. It was clear (in Article II) the purposes of that Society: “to foster the education of the youth in accordance with the principles of the Christian religion (that is, the Bible) by giving elementary instruction, notions of agriculture and accessory industries, as well as enabling young people of both genders for the work as teachers and for the evangelical ministry.” For the first time in Brazil, an Adventist institution was granted legal existence.²¹

Schenk was replaced as principle by John Lipke, referred to by Ruth Streithorst as “the one who knew everything and did everything.”²² Immediately, Lipke began preparations to install a publishing house at the College. With this aim in mind, “he decided to go to the United States in order to raise funds for the establishment of the long-awaited typography. He raised US\$ 1,500.00 and when he visited the *Emmanuel Missionary College* [nowadays Andrews University] in Berrien Springs, Michigan, he noticed that there, in the Review and Herald Publishing Association workshops in Battle Creek, there was a press in disuse, saved from a fire that had occurred in 1902. He then suggested the press be donated to a missionary school in Brazil.” So it was sent to the countryside of Rio Grande do Sul.²³

The small town of Taquari in the countryside of Rio Grande do Sul²⁴ was the territory where the first Adventist publications in Brazil were printed and the ministry of publications in the country began. Thus, it became possible to print adventist literature in Portuguese instead of importing books and magazines in German and/or English. In order to operate the press, George Sabeff, a medical student who had already worked in the profession at the International Tract Society, came from the United States. Sabeff decided to move to Brazil after hearing Lipke’s personal appeal about the needs of the Brazilian mission field. Relying on his experience, he cleaned the charred machine, assembled it, and started to make typographic compositions.²⁵ Almost at the same time, Augusto Pages arrived from Germany to manage the enterprise.²⁶

The initial goal was that there would also be a clinic in the town of Taquari. A. L. Gregory played an important role in achieving this objective. He was a recently graduated North American physician who had arrived in Brazil with his wife, Lula, in 1904.²⁷ Gregory was the forerunner of the Adventist medical missionary work in Brazil.²⁸ Two years later (1906), with the organization of the South American Union, the Rio Grande do Sul Conference was established in Taquari under the leadership of Huldreich Graf. This was the first administrative headquarters of the Adventist Church in Rio Grande do Sul.²⁹ A growing Adventist population of international roots gradually settled in Taquari.

In that city, there was a clinic, a mission school, and a fully functioning publishing house in addition to the Conference administrative headquarters. However, difficulties with access and the distance between the city and the other Brazilian regions contributed to the fact that the work didn’t advanced as expected. The clinic didn’t prosper due to the difficulties for the North American physician to obtain a license for the practice of medicine in Brazil. In addition, in 1907, the publishing house needed to transfer to the state of São Paulo, the school was closed in 1910, and the property sold in 1911. The money obtained through the sale, combined with funds coming from different sources, allowed the acquisition of a property in the then-municipality of Santo Amaro (which today is part of the capital of the state, São Paulo). This was the third attempt to establish a school to prepare missionaries in Brazil after Gaspar Alto and Taquari.³⁰

Also in Porto Alegre, the capital of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, although Adventism had been present in the city since 1897 (the year when six people were baptized by Pastor Huldreich Graf), it was only in 1911 that the Adventist Church was organized in that city. The pastor responsible for its organization was Emmanuel Christian Ehlers. During that occasion, 12 people were baptized.³¹ It was in that location, with the mentioned pioneers and many others who worked there at some point, that the Adventist organization in Brazil built educational, medical, and publishing institutions, all of which would contribute to the expressive growth in the number of Adventists in this region of the world. As a result of these efforts, the ACSR currently manages a network of schools and academies that serves school-age children and the youth and has in its territory a traditional medical clinic in Porto Alegre in addition to an impressive Adventist population.³²

In 1922, Canadian educator Abraham Classen Harder, then president of the ASR, inspired the church to invest in a teaching center to provide training for its youth and to prepare them to serve in the Adventist work. Those who dreamed of following a pastoral career had only one option: the Colégio Missionário de São Paulo [Brazilian Seminary] (currently the Brazil Adventist University, campus São Paulo - Universidade Adventista de São Paulo or UNASP-SP) that had been established after the closure of the Taquary Training School. Mary Harder and Ernesto Bergold were some of the people who contributed financially to the fulfillment of this dream. In 1928, classes and training of missionaries began. However, it was only in 1937 that a property to hold the school in was purchased by the Conference. In 1938, under the direction of Dr. Otávio Espírito Santo, the school was made official as the Ginásio Adventista de Taquara [Taquara Adventist Gymnasium], nowadays Instituto Adventista Cruzeiro do Sul [Cruzeiro do Sul Adventist Academy] (Instituto Adventista Cruzeiro do Sul or IACS).³³

The medical field also made progress in the 1940s. It was during this period (1944) that pastor Jerônimo Garcia and physician Siegfried Hoffmann founded the Clínica Bom Samaritano [Belém Clinic] in Porto Alegre. The clinic was established at the same address as the Rio Grande do Sul Conference, and Hoffmann, who was also a pastor, had the “opportunity to treat thousands of patients.”³⁴ Many years later, in 1989, the Belém Clinic gave rise to the Porto Alegre Adventist Clinic (Clínica Adventista de Porto Alegre or CAPA).³⁵

In the first semester of 1950, the then-leader of the South American Division Evangelism Department, Pastor Walter Schubert, was in Rio Grande do Sul to preach in a series of public meetings in a tent, called *tabernáculo* [tabernacle]. His messages usually involved topics related to well-being, health care, family affairs, and subsequently, biblical-

theological subjects. This first evangelistic experience in Brazil was successful, and 70 people were baptized in the first two baptismal ceremonies. This fact is important because this model has strongly influenced evangelistic efforts carried out in the Brazilian territory since then.³⁶

With the mission moving forward at a rapid pace, the Adventist Church created the course “Como Deixar de Fumar em Cinco Dias” [“How to Quit Smoking in Five Days”] in the 1960s, an important tool of social and evangelistic outreach.³⁷ In 1971, the ASR’s new headquarters was inaugurated in the Cristal neighborhood in Porto Alegre, where it remains to this day.³⁸ In the 1980s, the Porto Alegre Central Church started to provide the “How to Quit Smoking” course in its evangelistic campaigns.³⁹ Using the same tactic as Walter Schubert — start the evangelistic series talking about topics such as well-being, family, and health — the Adventist Church grew in the region. In 1984, the number of Adventists in the state of Rio Grande do Sul exceeded the benchmark of 26,800 people.⁴⁰ Thus, due to the continuous advance in the preaching of the Gospel in the region, in 1995, there were already about 35,806 members linked to the ASR, and at least 52 pastoral districts.⁴¹

With the missionary expansion in Rio Grande do Sul, the South Brazil Union Conference (União Sul-Brasileira or USB) decided to reorganize the Rio Grande do Sul Conference, establishing the Western Rio Grande do Sul Mission (Missão do Oeste Sul Rio Grande or MOSR, presently the North Rio Grande do Sul Conference - Adventistas do Noroeste do Rio Grande do Sul or ANSR), headquartered in Ijuí and started to operate in January, 1996. Such reorganization allowed the ASR to remain with about 28,700 members spread over 37 pastoral districts, and the MOSR to begin its work assisting about 7,500 members divided into 15 districts.⁴²

Conference Organizational History

Years later, the growth of SDA Church in Rio Grande do Sul enabled another reorganization. In 2005, the Rio Grande do Sul Conference had reached a total of 44,542 members spread over 386 congregations and 59 pastoral districts. Considering the extension of the territory and the challenges for the work of evangelization to advance, the ASR (through vote no. 2005-193) and the USB (through vote 2005-039), with referendum of the Extraordinary General Meeting of the Rio Grande do Sul Conference held on January 29th, 2006, asked the SAD for the creation of a survey board for the purpose of reorganizing what was then the ASR, and to establish a new Conference. The plenary session of the South American Division that approved the establishment of the Central Rio Grande do Sul Conference took place within May 1st-4th, 2006, and was presided over by Pastor Ruy Nagel.⁴³

The new administrative unit was officially established on November 4, 2006⁴⁴ with the splitting of the pioneer Rio Grande do Sul Conference, which started operating in January 2007. The new conference began to assist some municipalities which, until then, had been a part of the Western Rio Grande do Sul Mission. There were no churches in them, and greater evangelistic action was needed.⁴⁵ The initial configuration of the ACSR had 20,521 members spread over 28 districts that covered 194 municipalities, and it had a total population of 5,284,729 inhabitants. The first president elected to lead it was Moisés de Mattos. Pastor Laerte Lanza was chosen as executive secretary, and as treasurer, Pastor Davi Contri.⁴⁶ Its mission, as an institution of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been, from the start, “to make disciples through Relationship with God, Relationship with others, and Mission.”⁴⁷

The ACSR headquarters was inaugurated in March 2007 at its current address on 596 João Wallig St. in the Passo d’Areia neighborhood in Porto Alegre. Since its establishment, already with status of Conference, the ACSR has been located in the capital of Rio Grande do Sul because it is a financial and geographical center with a good communication and transportation system. Also, this happened because it is a large city that all the cities in the countryside of the state prefer to gather and because it is the center of several satellite municipalities which form the Grand Porto Alegre as well.⁴⁸

Within 2007 and 2010, the ACSR sought to grow on all fronts. There was a strong emphasis on baptisms and growth of the educational field. Adventist education also showed expansion. The number of students during these four years increased from 3,713 to 4,023. As part of the investments in infrastructure, a new auditorium that could hold 1,000 people was inaugurated at the Colégio Adventista Marechal Rondon [Marechal Rondon Adventist Academy]⁴⁹

The following four-year period was notable due to at least three aspects. The first was the growth of the church through new converts, increasing from 9,645 in 2007 and 2010 to 10,644 within 2011 and 2014.⁵⁰ Regarding the education, the premises of the school in Cachoeirinha were expanded to include an auditorium able to hold 300 people. In addition to that, the number of students in the Adventist network of the ACSR increased 16%.⁵¹ The period was also marked by the computerization of 90 percent of the secretariat departments of the churches in the Conference.⁵²

Since 2015, the Adventist Church in the field of the ACSR has shown harmonious growth. It has inaugurated 17 new churches,⁵³ four of which in Porto Alegre (considered the most challenging state capital in Brazil) and two Health Life Style Centers. In addition, the Conference demonstrated a sharp increase in member loyalty through tithes and offerings as well as in personal devotion. In 2017, it achieved the largest amount of Sabbath School Bible Study Guide subscriptions in its history. In that same year, the ACSR was the association with the best performance in ingathering campaign in the USB. There was also a great emphasis on member engagement on a relationship with God, with others, and on Mission. Also, within 2016 and 2017, the education department had an increase of 17.75 percent in the number of enrolled students.⁵⁴

Still in the educational aspect, during this period, five new lots were purchased for new schools,⁵⁵ construction work for a new school in Canoas began, and a “Novo Tempo Store” [“Hope Channel Brazil Store”] was inaugurated at

Marechal Rondon Adventist Academy.⁵⁶ There was also an increase in the number of teachers, students, and baptisms in schools, a jump from 128 in 2015 to 182 in 2017.⁵⁷ In addition, during 2016 and 2017, at least two new churches were planted in the Porto Alegre region, the House Church and the Jardim Lindóia Church.⁵⁸ A Health Life Style Center was also inaugurated in the southern area of Porto Alegre, and another was established in the city of Caxias do Sul. These centers have service rooms, a kitchen for cooking classes, a place for children, and an auditorium where the Novo Tempo Spaces are.⁵⁹

In 2017, a reorganization took place in the three administrative units of the Adventist Church in the state do Rio Grande do Sul. This action was necessary due to the challenges the state was facing, mainly due to the geography of the then-Western Rio Grande do Sul Mission. Thus, on November 16, 2017, it was voted to accept the USB request for the reorganization of Rio Grande do Sul Conference, Central Rio Grande do Sul Conference, and Western Rio Grande do Sul Mission.⁶⁰ With the change of territory, the MOSR changed its status to North Rio Grande do Sul Mission (presently the North Rio Grande do Sul Conference).⁶¹

This territory reorganization took place on January 1st, 2018. The ACSR became responsible for assisting 38 districts, namely: Alegrete, Arroio do Meio, Bairro Cruzeiro, Bairro Fátima, Bairro Pioneiro, Bento Gonçalves, Cachoeira do Sul, Cachoeirinha, Canoas, Caxias do Sul, Costa e Silva, Cruz Alta, Esplanada, Farroupilha, Floresta, Igará, Iguatemi, Ijuí, Ijuí Norte, Lajeado, Mathias Velho, Montenegro, Niterói, Panambi, Parque dos Maias, Parque Pinheiro Machado, Portão, Prado, Restinga Seca, Santa Cruz do Sul, Santa Maria, Santa Rosa, Santiago, Santo Angelo, São Borja, Sarandi, Uruguaiana, and Vila Jardim.⁶²

Currently, the Conference has a total of 17,371 members divided into 224 congregations. At least 4,343 of these members are directly involved in the mission, with 1,215 giving Bible studies to 322 friends interested in learning more about the Adventist message.⁶³ The ratio is of 294 inhabitants per Adventist in the territory, so the ACSR team has been working intensively on planting new churches in order to reach more and more people. In 2018, a total of 1,084 new members were admitted to the SDA Church, 829 of whom joined through baptism.⁶⁴

Every year, the members and the leadership of the Central Rio Grande do Sul Conference participate in important missionary programs for the evangelization of their territory. Among these programs, it is worth pointing out the project "Hope Impact"⁶⁵ and its numbers in the last three years. In 2016, Adventists in the region distributed approximately 215,000 books called "Esperança Viva" ["Living Hope"]; In 2017, "Em Busca de Esperança" ["Seeking Hope"] a total of 380,000 books; and in 2018, "O poder da esperança" ["The Power of Hope"] about 250,000 books. All of them were given away through free distribution.⁶⁶

The Holy Week programs⁶⁷ were another highlight of the last four-year period. During these years, members were greatly engaged in carrying out this project, and many people were reached by the message preached in the churches. It stands out that "An annual average of 10,000 members were engaged, 793 preaching spots, and 4,941 people interested in the message." Also, during this period, 76,000 Bible studies were given, 3.5 million missionary flyers were distributed, along with 50,000 evangelistic DVDs and 10,000 Bibles. All of these initiatives were put into practice so more people would be reached by the message of hope.⁶⁸

In 2018, the ACSR was challenged by the South American Division to further increase its missionary efforts to reach large cities. With the work of members and pastors, a new church was inaugurated in the Moinhos de Vento neighborhood in Porto Alegre--a neighborhood that, until then, had no Adventist presence. In 2019, "Porto Alegre Impact" took place in Porto Alegre with the participation of a team from the SAD. In that occasion, the Adventist Church celebrated a total of 382 baptisms. During that same period, Pastor Ted Wilson, president of the SDA Church's General Conference, came to the ACSR territory and visited churches, schools, and the Conference office.⁶⁹

Although this mission field has experienced a massive gain in the amount of members, the most consistent growth sought by the ACSR has come to pass through the emphasis on direct engagement in the mission by members as well as a focus on stewardship, training, and the effort to make members aware that it is their responsibility to care for new converts. Aware of the need for discipleship, members began to become more directly engaged. In addition, education was where the major share of the resources were distributed to, resulting in the inauguration of a new school in the municipality of Canoas in the state's countryside.⁷⁰

However, the geographic territory covered by the ACSR still poses two major challenges: The first has to do with the distance between the locations being served, and the second involves the Porto Alegre Metropolitan Region. It has been observed in recent years (during the project of evangelism of big cities) how much the Adventist presence in the capital needs to grow. With some initiatives such as "Hope Impact" and "Porto Alegre Impact"⁷¹ and projects for planting church-centers in neighborhoods where the church hadn't been present, this has already begun to change. However, there are still many people that members need to reach and neighborhoods they must enter in order to fulfil this mission.⁷²

The essential plan the field has to achieve this goal is to continually strengthen the practice of networked discipleship, including gaining new disciples and keeping those who are already members. In each district, there is a regional lay leader for each department who will serve as a bridge between the ACSR and the individual member. In addition, the ACSR leadership team intends to deepen the commitment of all members regarding faithfulness in giving tithes and offerings.⁷³

Through these and other possible initiatives, such as the *Projeto Maná* [Manna Project], the ACSR leadership wants to have more members engaged in a daily relationship with God through studying the Bible and the Sabbath School Bible Study Guide.⁷⁴ In addition, it is intended to have more members practicing solidarity with others through actions

that will be undertaken in partnership with ASA and ADRA branches in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Finally, it is the Conference plan to engage as many members as possible with the mission of saving others from sin and guiding them into service - using all available resources and means such as public evangelism series', small group meetings, Branch Sabbath Schools, the planting of new churches, etc. Every possible missionary effort will continue to be made so that many will be in heaven for eternity.⁷⁵

Chronology of Administrative Executives⁶

Presidents: Moisés de Mattos (2007-2015); Marcos Luiz Lima de Oliveira Júnior (2016-present).

Secretaries: Laerte Lanza (2007-2013); Harry James Streithorst (2014-2015); Elton de Lima Alves Júnior (2016-present).

Treasurers: Davi Contri (2007); Herbert Élbio Annes Gruber (2008-2011); Márcio da Luz Silva (2012-2017); Laudecir Miotto Mazzo (2018-present).⁷⁷

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