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West Sao Paulo Conference

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The West Sao Paulo Conference (APO) is an administrative unit of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church located in Central Brazil Union Conference (UCB). Its headquarters is located at the street Radialistas Riopretenses, no. 650, zip code 15090-070, district of Nova Redentora, in the city of São José do Rio Preto, state of Sao Paulo, Brazil!

The APO territory covers a wide countryside area of the state of Sao Paulo, including West Sao Paulo meso-region and micro-regions. This territory is placed northwest to the capital city of the state, at a 442 km distance. It corresponds to an area of 431,963 km², of which 119,480 km² are in the urban perimeter²

In the blessed and promising field of APO administration, there is a population of approximately 7,411,730 inhabitants, distributed in 344 municipalities, in which 645 cities are in São Paulo.³ With a total of 34,311 members, there is approximately one Adventist per 216 inhabitants in the region. The conference also assists a total of 47 pastoral districts that comprise 180 churches and 140 groups of believers.⁴ To administrate all of these congregations, the conference utilizes 911 servers, 806 of which are employees, 105 workers, and 58 ordained pastors.⁵

In the APO territory there are 13 elementary and high schools in operation: Escola Adventista de Araraquara [Araraquara Adventist Academy], located in the city of Araraquara, with 403 students; Colégio Adventista de Assis

[Assis Adventist Academy], in the city of Assis, with 256 students; Colégio Adventista de Bauru [Bauru Adventist Academy] in Bauru, with 139 students; Escola Adventista de Catanduva [Catanduva Adventist Academy] in Catanduva, with 250 students; Escola Adventista de Fernandópolis [Fernandópolis Adventist Academy] in Fernandópolis, with 161 students; Escola Adventista de Lins [Lins Adventist Academy], in Lins, with 388 students; Escola Adventista de Marília [Marília Adventist Academy], in the city of Marília, with 128 students; Colégio Adventista de Ribeirão Preto, in Ribeirão Preto, with 666 students; Presidente Prudente Adventist Academy, in the city of Presidente Prudente, with 458 students; Sao Carlos Adventist Academy, in the city of São Carlos, with 805 students; Sao Jose do Rio Preto Academy, in São José do Rio Preto, with 869 students; Colégio Adventista de Tupã [Tupã Adventist Academy], in Tupã, with 272 students; and Votuporanga Adventist Academy, in Votuporanga with 226 students. These add up to a total of 5,021 students in Adventist institutions.⁶

The Adventist Media Center/Brazil has greatly contributed to the preaching of the gospel in the whole of Brazil through its radio and TV channels. In the APO territory, the New Time radio station, frequency AM 1290 MHZ, is one of the means of evangelization. The *Centro Adventista de Apoio à Família* (CAAF) [Family Care Adventist Center]⁷ also provides services to the community of Barretos. This institution benefits over 200 families per month, by offering at least 40 courses and projects of assistance in the social, emotional, spiritual, and physical domains.⁸

Origin of Adventist Work in the Conference Territory

Regarding the roots of Adventism in the region currently assisted by the West Sao Paulo Conference, we consider the historical data of the arrival of the Adventist message in Nova Europa, Bauru, and Avaré, the first cities to receive Adventism in this territory.

In 1911, after Pastor Siegfried Hoffmann arrived in Nova Europa, he realized that there were already two Adventist families in the city. In that same year during a missionary trip to that city another pastor, Jacob Kroeker, found at least three families who also professed the Adventist faith, demonstrating the successful beginning of Adventist preaching of the gospel in that region. Before departing to other destinations, Pastor Kroeker conducted communion and organized a Sabbath School with 18 members (nine adults and nine children), which greatly benefitted the beginnings of Adventism in that city.⁹

However, the organization of the first Adventist church in the city of Nova Europa took place in 1914 when the worker John Boehm bought a house and turned its front room into a meeting place.¹⁰ Initially, only a few residents attended the meetings that took place in that room. Nevertheless, in time, increasingly more people started to attend and participate in the worship services. The frequency of the meetings increased such that on August 15 of that same year Pastor Boehm baptized seven people.¹¹ Generations later, descendants of those pioneers who led the Adventist church in the west part of the State of Sao Paulo still remain. On May 17, 1997, the Adventist community of Nova Europa celebrated 86 years of Adventism in the city with a thanksgiving worship service, attended by sister Hermínia, the oldest Adventist in the place.¹²

The second city demonstrating an Adventist presence in the west of Sao Paulo was Bauru. According to reports from canvassing and Sabbath School missionary activities, by June 1919 the Sabbath School unit comprised eight members, three of whom were canvassers.¹³ Later, in 1926, an evangelist canvasser¹⁴ named André Gerdau arrived in that region. As he worked, André offered his books to a gentleman named Lázaro Teixeira Silva – which led to the conversion of one of the first Adventist pioneers in the region. The canvassers explained several topics to him such as the Sabbath, the gift of prophecy, and health laws. Consequently, by the following week, Lázaro and all his family began observing the fourth commandment.¹⁵

A year later, when visiting that region, Pastor José Amador dos Reis baptized four people - including some family members of brother Lázaro Teixeira. Nevertheless, brother Lázaro was not baptized until some years later, on March 29, 1930, after receiving Bible studies from Pastor Luiz Braun. After his baptism, brother Lázaro became a canvasser and attended the Santa Izaura SDA Church as there was no Adventist church in Bauru at that time. This pioneer, along with others, later participated in the building of what would become the largest Seventh-day Adventist Church in the state of Sao Paulo countryside during the 1960s. This church was inaugurated on Friday, June 14, 1963. The first pastor of this church was Carlos Tavares.¹⁶

Around 1929, a resident of the municipality of Itaí (about 8 km from the city of Avaré) was reached by the Adventist message. Together with other missionaries, this man began to evangelize other residents of that country region of the state. As a result, in the following year, at least four families were baptized. Soon the first Adventist group of believers in the city of Itaí was organized who would later, in 1934, open the first SDA church in that city. The four families congregating at that time were the Fiúsas (who donated the land for the construction of the church), the Leites, the Cezários, and the Menescos.¹⁷

Due to the increasing number of members, it became necessary some decades later to move the meeting place to one with a larger capacity. In 1965, they rented a meeting room in the center of the city of Avaré, at Rua Pernambuco, no. 18. This place, however, was used only for a short time. That same year the church headquarters moved again, to the street Rio de Janeiro, without number. The brethren gathered there until 1978 when a campaign was launched to build a Seventh-day Adventist church in Avaré. The new church opened on March 10, 1979, at rua Sergipe, no. 980. By 1984, nearly 125 people were regular members of that church.¹⁸

The conference assisting the churches in the central and west regions of Sao Paulo state was known as West Sao Paulo Conference, with headquarters in Campinas. Its creation was voted during an Extraordinary General Assembly

that occurred from September 18 to 19, 1997. Its first leaders were Pastors Ítalo Manzolli, president and Sérgio Octaviano, secretary/treasurer.¹⁹ The former West Sao Paulo Conference began to operate on January 1, 1978 and continued operating with this name until early 1989, when the new reorganization was voted by the administrative board of Central Brazil Union Conference.

Following this new administrative reorganization, the institution based in Campinas received a new name: Central Sao Paulo Conference (APaC), and the new field, with headquarters in São José do Rio Preto inherited the name West Sao Paulo Conference (APO). From then on, the missionary success in pioneer spots in the cities of Nova Europa, Bauru, and Avaré, would reach the broad area of west Sao Paulo.²⁰

Organizational History of the Conference

The creation of current day West Sao Paulo Conference (APO) was voted on December 20, 1998, at 3 p.m., at the Adventist Institute of Sao Paulo, where the meeting of the administrative board of Central Brazil Union Conference of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church took place. Pastor Darci M. de Borba chaired the meeting, and Pastor Pável O. Moura was the secretary. On that day the reorganization of the field correspondent to Sao Paulo state west-central region through the opening of APO was decided and its first Denominational Assembly was scheduled for April 29, 1989, when the board of directors and the installation of the new conference were voted.²¹

The APO personnel initiated their work in a house located at rua Prof. Jamil Khauan, no. 19, Vila Imperial district, in the city of Sao Jose do Rio Preto. The new field was comprised of 56 churches and 80 groups of believers, totaling around 11,166 members. To assist all of these churches, there were 30 pastors distributed in 22 pastoral districts. Its area covered the whole western region of the state of Sao Paulo. At the time of its foundation, 24 servers formed the first group working at the conference headquarters, with an administrative board composed of Pastors Edelizir Amorim, as president; Natanael Batista as secretary; and Ademir de Oliveira as treasurer.²²

The institution operated at this address for approximately 10 years. At the end of the decade of 1990, the APO office was transferred to the facilities of Sao Jose do Rio Preto Academy, located at rua Abdo Muanis, no. 1000, district of Nova Redentora, also in the city of São José do Rio Preto. However, because of its limited space for a church administrative headquarters, the challenge to find a space with better accommodations was kept in view.²³

With this challenge in mind, about 20 years after the creation of the conference, the administrative board initiated a campaign among the members, pastors, educators, head office employees, and canvassers of APO. The aim was to raise funds for the construction of a building to serve as the definitive head office of the institution. With God's blessing, a very well located building plot of over 7,000 m² was purchased and the foundation stone of the new headquarters was launched on August 8, 2008. This administrative unit headquarters has been considered a model for integrated operation and has received visits from representatives of all unions of the South American Division.²⁴

Since the beginning of its operation, the personnel of West Sao Paulo Conference have been involved in evangelistic projects in collaboration with Central Brazil Union Conference (UCB). In 1990, Pastor Neumoel Stina, APO department director, together with Pastor Antenor Cruz from UCB, ministered courses for the Sabbath School teachers and volunteer workers. These courses aimed at raising the awareness of the duties and privileges of each church leader to improve their role.²⁵ The strong emphasis on this type of kind of training would become a strong characteristic of the church in the APO field.

During the first two months of that same year several Christian summer schools for children²⁶ were carried out in different cities of APO territory, among them Franca, Porto Epitácio, Presidente Prudente, and others. Through this project, over 1000 children were benefitted, and entire families were reached through visits by church members who studied the Bible with them.²⁷

In 1991, there was only about one Adventist per 609 inhabitants in the territory of West Sao Paulo Conference. Due to this and in order to reach more people with the message of Christ's gospel, the administrative board of the conference, in connection with the UCB team, committed to prioritizing evangelism in their plans. Thus, that year they promoted courses that equipped over 500 preachers for the Holy Week Evangelism, as well as the purchase of devices to be used during the evangelistic campaigns, held in over 600 preaching spots during the Holy Week. Such an initiative was very successful. As a result, the following year the Adventist/inhabitant ratio improved considerably, with around one Adventist per 517 inhabitants.²⁸

In 1995, there were 4,547 municipalities in the South American Division (SAD) in which there was still no Adventist presence. These were called zero municipalities. Nevertheless, in the four previous years, there was a significant increase regarding Global Mission for this territory - 1,063 new cities were reached. The field of West Sao Paulo Conference experienced the second-largest territorial advance in all SAD - with 61 new municipalities reached.²⁹ In 1996 the number of municipalities in the APO territory that still did not have an Adventist presence was 100. In 2008, just over a decade later, this number had decreased to less than half due to the advance of the preaching of the gospel. Later, in 2018, 93 percent of the municipalities had an Adventist presence.³⁰ Such a number was only achieved thanks to God and the efforts of leaders and members in APO territory.

From 2003-2006, at least 5,948 people were baptized in the APO field. The number of small groups³¹ rose from 300 to about 900. Moreover, 287 quit-smoking courses were run - to which 22,960 people attended, and six new pastoral districts and five sub-districts were organized. The tithes increased by 68.42 percent when compared to the previous four years, and besides promoting music courses for lay members, the churches received 185,000 copies of Bible

studies, 980,000 missionary flyers, and 30,000 study guides for small groups. This shows the great advancement of the work in this region of western Sao Paulo.³²

Similar progress was noticed in 2007, in the city of Ribeirão Preto, where the evangelistic campaign lasted for an entire year. The campaign was conducted by members of local churches, pastors, Adventist school teachers, 22 theology students from UNASP, and the APO board. The result of this great involvement was the baptism of approximately 500 people alone in Ribeirão Preto. The total number of baptisms in the whole region of West Sao Paulo Conference in 2007 was 2,170 people.³³

In the following year, several evangelistic programs were conducted throughout the territory. The evangelistic campaigns had the support of evangelists Luís Gonçalves (from UCB) and Ranieri Sales (from SAD), as well as the Holy Week Evangelism³⁴ and the Week of Harvest.³⁵ Thus, the results were encouraging. In the city of Bauru alone, 380 people were baptized. Nearly two thousand baptisms also took place in the western region of the state of Sao Paulo - the second largest number of baptisms in the period of one year in West Sao Paulo Conference at that time.³⁶

In 2011, the *Centro Adventista de Apoio à Família* (CAAF) [Adventist Family Care Center] was founded in the city of Barretos. This unit is sustained by the Adventist Development and Relief Agency International (ADRA) and promotes community development and assistance. CAAF aims to provide social-assistance services and to support and strengthen the family and community bonds of those families who migrate to the city in search of cancer treatment at PIO XII Hospital.³⁷

Two years later, during the second semester of 2013, a project called Projeto Garotas Brilhantes [Shining Girls Project] was organized in the city of Sao Jose do Rio Preto. The project aimed to facilitate developing abilities and potentialities in each participating teenager. This is done through lectures and group games on self-esteem, self-knowledge, self-valorization, entrepreneurship, job market, autonomy, children and teenager rights, and others. In addition, there are cultural and artistic workshops and some trips.³⁸

In 2015, aiming to train volunteers in the region covered by the APO to organize evangelistic series in their own churches, an initiative called *Escola de Evangelismo Aautos da Cruz* [Cross Heralds Evangelism School] was created. At the onset, this project counted on 80 participants, and, three years later, had already reached 160 student participants. The classes are ministered by West Sao Paulo Conference pastors and by guest pastors invited from Central Brazil Union Conference and the South American Division.³⁹

On October 21, 2018, the first unit of the Adventist Education network in the city of Marília was opened. The school began operation in 2019 with about 500 students, from pre-school to the 5th grade. This school began at full force, with many different pedagogical projects, such as financial education, healthy cooking, new talents, cultural trips, innovation courses, technology & entrepreneurship, among others.

The Adventist members linked to APO have involved themselves with major missionary projects developed throughout the South American Division, such as the Hope Impact⁴⁰ project. In 2019, the Adventist churches of the city of Sao Jose do Rio Preto received a Motion of Applause by the Municipal Chamber of the city as a tribute to the distribution of free literature in the city streets. The book distributed that year was "Hope for Families" by Willie and Elaine Oliver. At least 400,000 copies were distributed in the western region of the state of Sao Paulo (more than the number of residences in the region) during the event on May 25, 2019.⁴¹

Since the year of its foundation, the APO administrative team has been assisting Adventists in its vast territory. However, although there are no changes in relation to this geographical framework, the growth that occurred in the numbers of churches and members linked to this association is notable. As previously mentioned, at the time of its founding in 1989, APO assisted about 11,166 members in 56 churches. A decade later, there were 17,982 members and exactly twice as many churches. Later, in 2009, there were 153 churches and 24,755 members. More recently, in 2017, the numbers rose to 180 churches and 32,868 members in the conference territory.⁴²

West Sao Paulo Conference's vision is "to be a united, serving, and missionary Church, so that the community may see the love and character of Christ through our harmonious actions." Its mission is "to announce the Good News of the Gospel to the world, leading people to accept Jesus as their personal savior and to unite them with His Church in the preparation for His soon coming." The growing numbers of members and churches, as well as their commitment to God's cause, show that this motto has been lived and that the mission has been fulfilled with success in the wide territory of this conference.⁴³

The leaders of West Sao Paulo Conference are motivated to start a new phase of growth and service in the context of this conference's 30 years of existence. Experiences from three decades will serve as a guide for this institution to walk the right path, with the greatest efficiency possible to achieve the best results and fulfill the mission assigned to it in its field of work. Hence, the conference will continue with humility to honor God and recognize the work of all pioneers and leaders of the past who contributed to the existence and outreach progress of this institution today.

To accomplish the evangelistic challenge is still the largest mission of this conference. There are only 40 cities in this wide territory where there is still no Adventist presence, though 154 cities have no established church. Nevertheless, with over 100 actions in progress, the future of West Sao Paulo Conference is very promising.

Among the greatest challenges faced to achieve this goal are the extensive geography and small cities, due to the unlikely possibility of growth because of the number of inhabitants. However, despite the difficulties, the leaders of West Sao Paulo Conference continue to make bold plans for the future. These include reaching 40,000 members, reaching the mark of 55 pastoral districts, and growing to the point that it is necessary to reorganize church

leadership by creating a new administrative headquarters. The studies for the creation of a new field already indicate that this possibility is real and that it can happen soon.

List of Officers⁴⁴

Presidents: Edelzir D. Amorim (1989-1992); Neumoel Stina (1993-1996); Ademir de Oliveira (1997-1998); Ronaldo de Oliveira (1999-2001); Luiz Carlos Araújo (2002-2005); Heber Mascarenhas (2006); Acilio Alves Filho (2006-today).

Secretaries: Natanael Batista (1989-1992); Alcides C. Rodrigues (1993-1995); Carlos E. Polheim (1996); Luiz Carlos Araújo (1997-2001); Laercio Mazaro (2002-2005); Carlos Roberto Alvarenga (2006-2017); Samuel Ferreira Bento (2017-current).

Treasurers: Ademir de Oliveira (1989-1996); Jairo de Oliveira (1997-1999); Edemar Zehetmeyr (2000-2002); Kemuel Ebinger (2003-2011); Claudio Valdir Knoener (2012-2017); Matheus Munhoz (2017-current)⁴⁵

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20. Ibid., 71; Moisés Lopes Sanches, “Associação Paulista I.A.S.D Região Administrativa Oeste” [Sao Paulo Conference SDA West Administrative Region] (Monography, Brazil College), 4.?
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28. “Missão Global” [Global Mission], *Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review], February 1991, 35; “Evangelismo é prioridade” [Evangelism is priority], *Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review], May 1991, 27; “West Sao Paulo Conference,” *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, MD.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1993), 256.?
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31. “Small Group is a group of people who gather on weekly basis, under the coordination of a leader aiming spiritual, relational and evangelistic growth and its multiplication”. Accessed on July 31, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2NtcXj7>.?
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34. Harvest evangelism in Holy Week is a special time to introduce Jesus and the life we find in Him through the Word of God. The purpose of evangelism is to remember the sacrifice, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ on behalf of mankind. Accessed on November 27, 2019, <https://bit.ly/37HwF4H>.?
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45. For more information about APO, access the website: <http://apo.org.br/>, or social media – Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter: @paulistaoeste, and Youtube: Associação Paulista Oeste.?

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