



Southwest Bahia Mission headquarters, 2019.

Photo courtesy of Nesias Joaquim dos Santos.

# Southwest Bahia Mission

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The Southwest Bahia Mission (SWBA) is an administrative unit of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA) located in the East Brazil Union Mission. Its headquarters is in Juracy Magalhães Street, no. 3110, zip code 45023-490, district of Morada dos Pássaros II, in the city of Vitória da Conquista, in Bahia State, Brazil<sup>1</sup>

The city of Vitória da Conquista, where the administrative headquarters is located, is also called the southwestern capital of Bahia since it is one of the largest cities in Bahia State. With the largest geographical area among the five SDA administrative units in the State of Bahia, SWBA operates in 166 municipalities<sup>2</sup> The population of this region is 3,943,982 inhabitants<sup>3</sup> in a territory of 99,861,370 sq. mi. (258,639,761 km<sup>2</sup>).<sup>4</sup> The mission oversees 42 pastoral districts with 34,044 members meeting in 174 organized churches and 259 companies. Thus, the average is one Adventist per 116 inhabitants.<sup>5</sup>

SWBA manages five schools. These are: Escola Adventista de Itapetinga (Itapetinga Adventist School) in the city of Itapetinga with 119 students; Colégio Adventista de Itapetinga (Itapetinga Adventist Academy), also in Itapetinga, with 374 students; Escola Adventista de Jequié (Jequié Adventist School) with 336 students; Colégio Adventista de Barreiras (Barreiras Adventist Academy) in Barreiras with 301 students; and Conquistense Adventist Academy with 903 students. The total student population is 2,033.<sup>6</sup>

Over the 11 years of its existence, God has blessed this mission in the fulfillment of its purpose, that is, the preaching of the gospel to all the inhabitants in the mission's territory. Therefore, SWBA counts on 191 employees, servers, and workers, 69 of whom work in the churches and the other 60 are workers.<sup>7</sup> Among the employees, there are nine full-time<sup>8</sup> canvassers, 41 ordained pastors, 8 licensed ministers, and 4 evangelists. In addition, under the mission supervision are 181 Pathfinders Clubs<sup>9</sup> with 5,076 teenagers and young adults, as well as 82 Adventurer Clubs<sup>10</sup> with 1,823 children enrolled.<sup>11</sup>

## Origin of Seventh-day Adventist Work in the Territory of the Mission

There are indications that sometime before 1908 in Jequié city in southwest Bahia, there was a man who kept the Sabbath, due to the influence of a canvasser sent by Frederick W. Spies. However, it seems safer to say that the municipality of Santana was the starting point of the Adventist message in the territory of SWBA. This is because of historical records indicating that the first Sabbath-keepers brought to the Adventist Church were through missionary work in this Santana.<sup>12</sup>

Around 1908, some people converted to Adventism after finding Bibles thrown away by a priest in the Corrente River in Santa Maria da Vitória Municipality. In the same period, about 50 km away, Pedro José de Macedo, known as Pedro fiscal, was visited by a Bible salesman. Although Peter did not buy any, the seller left a package and asked him to keep it for a while. The seller gave specific instructions saying that if he did not return within 180 days, it could be opened and its content used. And, because of this episode, Peter became an Adventist. It is worth noting that the first baptisms in that region were performed by Manoel Kümpel in 1912.<sup>13</sup>

In 1920, an Adventist canvasser visited the Rio Grande Ranch in the municipality of São Desiderio, in the west of the state. During this episode, Mrs. Ambrosina Neves received the book "The Story of Jesus" sold by a canvasser and accepted the Adventist message.<sup>14</sup> She was baptized when pastors Leo Halliwell and Storch traveled to the west of the state to baptize interested candidates. Thus, another group of Sabbath-keepers was formed in the territory where SWBA is today.<sup>15</sup>

Rio de Contas was also one of the first municipalities to receive the Adventist message in the territory of the Southwest Bahia Mission. In 1935, the family of Arlindo and Ana Pires (who accepted the gospel in the community of Furnas, municipality of Rio de Contas) decided to move to the village of Iguai. There, the Pires family were pioneers, as they shared their faith with others, forming a core of Seventh-day Adventist believers. Arlindo, Ana Pires, and their siblings formed a big Sabbath School; from then on, the group grew to occupy a

prominent place within SWBA territory.<sup>16</sup>

Another important region in the early history of Adventism in this area was Chapada Diamantina. With the extraction of diamonds, metals, and gemstones in the region, the economy started to grow fast and the influx of people was very large. People from all over the world went to Chapada Diamantina in search of wealth. New sewing machines had become available and the ladies of the city acquired some of them. It came to pass that when those machines broke, no one could fix them. Then, a gentleman, taking advantage of the situation, went to the city, not only to carry out the repairs but also to distribute the SDA literature. He preached the message of Christ's return in that region, and through his work this place became another important spot for the beginning of Adventism in the SWBA territory.<sup>17</sup>

In 1932, there was an evangelistic campaign conducted by pastor José Passos in the city of Jequié, where there was already a congregation of Sabbath-keepers. In 1937, in addition to this congregation, there was also a church school headed by Adelina Passos, pastor José's wife.<sup>18</sup> During that same period, Policarpo Amorim, owner of the Liberdade Farm (located about 3 mi. [10 km] from the municipality of Itapetinga on the banks of the Catolé River), received a request from an unknown person to authorize him to use his fishing nets in the river.<sup>19</sup> The fisherman was João Sacramento, a Seventh-day Adventist. Soon after, João presented the gospel to Policarpo who accepted the message together with his children, Eleusir, Dorival, Kalva, Nilton, and Edelzir. Later, João Sacramento invited pastor Theófilo Berger to visit them and confirm their decision. Policarpo and his family were baptized by pastor Jorge Hoyler.<sup>20</sup>

The Ladário Farm is also important in the history of SWBA. There, between late 1930 and early 1940, another group of Sabbath-keepers emerged. The farm was located in Encruzilhada, now Ribeirão do Largo. This company of believers gave rise to the Ribeirão do Largo SDA Church. These people were probably fruits of the canvassing work because, at that time, canvassers went quickly through the cities of the state spreading the gospel message.<sup>21</sup>

With regards to the city of Itambé, evangelistic work began with Joaquim Alves between 1930 and 1942. Although it is uncertain how he became an Adventist, it was probably through canvassing work in Bahia. It is known that the distance between the group of believers at the Ladário Farm and the city of Itambé is small and that the Amorins helped in the preaching of the gospel when they moved to Itambé. They also went in search of support for the Adventist school.<sup>22</sup>

From the 1940s onward, the number of Adventist members increased in other areas of the state such as in the case of the Recôncavo in the north. Great growth also occurred in the south following the creation of Rio Sao Francisco Mission. By that time, the Ladário Farm and other distant places were left without an Adventist minister or worker.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, due to the creation of the Rio Sao Francisco Mission and other factors, the number of new members in SWBA territory did not increase to the degree it did in other regions of the state. In 1955, many groups

disappeared, such as Mucugê, Andaraí Lenções, and Mundo Novo. However, others emerged such as a group in the old city of Nova Conquista (now Cândido Sales). Thus, during the following decades until 1990, there were many core groups of Adventist members in the region. Nevertheless, most of them did not grow very much.<sup>24</sup>

In 1993, five churches were operating in the city of Vitória da Conquista. During this period, a strong mobilization for evangelistic campaigns took place resulting in the opening of six new churches. One factor that contributed to this development was the system of regional administration practiced by the Bahia Conference during that decade. This system encouraged the growth of the Church, especially in the most distant regions from the headquarters (located in the city of Salvador). Therefore, growth occurred in the southwest and west regions of SWBA territory.<sup>25</sup>

## Formative Events that Led to the Organization of the Mission

Southwest Bahia Mission was created from the reorganization of three conferences: Bahia Conference, Central South Bahia Conference, and the Central Bahia Conference. In the beginning, SWBA oversaw 25 pastoral districts, 13 of them inherited from the South Bahia Conference and 12 from the Central Bahia Conference. The laying of the foundation stone of the SWBA headquarters took place on July 22, 2008. On August 11, at a meeting held in the city of Gaibu, Pernambuco State, the leaders of the Northeast Brazil Union Mission elected Pastor Abdoral Cintra as president and Pastor Urbano Pereira as treasurer.<sup>26</sup>

The causes that led to the formation of SWBA were both the positive impacts of the creation of the South Bahia Conference (now Central South Bahia Conference) and the good outcomes of the growth and development obtained by the organization of the Central Bahia Mission (now Central Bahia Conference). These factors influenced and boosted the foundation of the new field which began operations in 2009.<sup>27</sup>

The study for the creation of SWBA began in planning meetings of Northeast Brazil Union Mission (NEBUM), headquartered at Jaboatão dos Guararapes, in the State of Pernambuco. The request for its creation was then forwarded to the South American Division (SAD), which analyzed the project and returned it with positive endorsement.<sup>28</sup> On June 11, 2008, NEBUM accepted the survey committee's report and reorganized the Church's administrative units in Bahia, creating the Southwest Bahia Mission. This new field received the difficult task of evangelizing a region with a large number of cities that had no Adventist presence.<sup>29</sup>

Between February 2 and 4, 2009, the Southwest Bahia Mission held an inaugural pastoral council that determined the beginning of its activities. At this event, 25 pastors of districts presented their proposals for each department.<sup>30</sup> The provisional headquarters of the mission was located at that time in Guadalajara Square at Conquistense Adventist Academy. Since its foundation, SWBA's mission has been to serve the people by helping them in three main areas: education, health, and family through Bible study.<sup>31</sup>

On January 1st, 2010, the headquarters of the mission moved to Avenida Juracy Magalhaes, no. 3110, Morada dos Pássaros II District, in the city of Vitória da Conquista where it remains to the present. Since its foundation, SWBA has remained unchanged in its extensive geographic territory. There has been no reduction of its administrative area. In the first decade of its existence, the number of members increased from 20,877<sup>32</sup> to 34,044 (an increase of 10,843 members). The number of pastoral districts has grown from 35 to 42. In 2013, SWBA came under the administration of the new East Brazil Union Mission (EABR), founded during the reorganization of the NEBUM.<sup>33</sup>

The creation of SWBA has substantially improved the relationship between the SDA Church and the community of the west and southeast of Bahia, and with the public authorities at municipal, state, and federal levels. The good work done by the church members in educational and social areas has been instrumental in bringing these entities closer, especially in the cities of Barreira, Luís Eduardo Magalhães, Itapetinga, Jequié, and Vitória da Conquista. The mayor of the city of Vitória da Conquista stated, "Adventists have provided a great service to the public authorities by gathering these teenagers and young people, and by keeping them involved in these activities."<sup>34</sup>

Among the relevant programs that SWBA has developed is the Caleb Mission project,<sup>35</sup> created in its territory, in the city of Guanambi, by sister Nora Ney. Also noteworthy are the programs for blood donations and the distribution of missionary books. These initiatives have really helped meet the challenges of evangelizing the vast SWBA field; the field encompasses west and southwest Bahia State, regions having the largest number of municipalities to be reached and the largest distances to be covered, corresponding to about 40 percent of the entire State of Bahia.<sup>36</sup>

A major event for the mission took place between October 11 and 14, 2012, in the city of Itapetinga, when its first camporee was held.<sup>37</sup> More than one thousand pathfinders attended this event. Some of the activities impacted the region and its residents, such as a parade, delivery of food hampers, donation of toys to a local project, investiture, and baptisms. During the event, municipal authorities supported the camporee whose theme was "Unified in the Hope," encouraging the actions of the Pathfinders.<sup>38</sup>

Even with these projects and the remarkable advance of the mission, its location still represents a challenge, as it resides in the so-called "Drought Polygon,"<sup>39</sup> a place with prolonged drought and scarcity of food and water. However, EABR's support to SWBA has been substantial in fulfilling its task of preaching the Adventist message in the context of such difficulties. Over the years, many pastoral districts have been opened, many cities have been reached by Adventism, and several churches built. Despite the obstacles in the territory, the administrators and leaders will move forward with the same commitment and motivation, seeking to faithfully accomplish the evangelistic mission in this field.<sup>40</sup>

Currently, SWBA leaders are working on these plans for the next five years: opening at least two new pastoral districts each year; expanding the training of department leaders in the churches; increasing evangelistic efforts

for the fulfillment of the mission through the establishment of churches in all municipalities and villages where there is still no SDA Church.<sup>41</sup>

Leaders and members also work toward the creation of another SDA administrative unit in the western region of the state where Barreiras is the principal city, so the administrative structure of the vast territory now under SWBA can provide better assistance to churches and members of that distant region. The Adventist members of southwestern Bahia understand that challenges and struggles will continue to exist, but believe the lessons from the past will refine and mature the work to be done, the completion of the preaching of the everlasting gospel in their area.<sup>42</sup>

## List of Leaders<sup>43</sup>

Presidents: Mr Manoel Abdoral de F. Cintra (2009-2012); Jairo Emerick Torres (2013-2018); Eliezer Júnior (2018-currently).

Secretaries: Jesse Martins Oliveira (2009-2012); Paulo Fonseca (2013-2015); Osias Rodrigues Ferreira (2016-currently).

Treasurers: Urbano Goncalves Pereira (2009-2015); Laercio Silva Costa (2016 - currently).<sup>44</sup>

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## NOTES

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5. ACMS - Adventist Church Management System, South Southwest Bahia Mission (SWBA), accessed on April 13, 2018; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, Southwest Bahia Mission, accessed on June 25, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2LojTLZ>.
6. Secretary of the Education Department of the East Brazil Union Mission, interviewed by the author, April 12, 2018.
7. ACMS - Adventist Church Management System of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Southwest Bahia Mission, accessed on April 12, 2018.

8. Evangelists canvassers are the missionaries who “develop their ministry acquiring and selling to the public the publications edited and approved by the Church, with the aim to convey to fellow men the eternal Gospel that brings salvation, and spiritual and physical well-being.” Accessed on August 30, 2018, <http://bit.ly/2J6tY1I>.
9. The Pathfinders Club is a “group of boys and girls between the ages of 10 and 15, of different social classes, colors, and religions. They usually meet, at least, once a week, to develop their talents, perceptions and a taste for nature.” These boys and girls “thrive with outdoor activities. They like camping, hiking, climbing, explorations in the woods and caves. They can cook outdoors, make fire without matches.” They also demonstrate “skills with discipline through drill commands and have creativity awakened by manual arts. They also fight against the use of smoke, alcohol, and drugs.” Accessed on October 9, 2019, <http://bit.ly/2FDRqTh>.
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17. Gemima, interviewed by the author, Community Mato Grosso Farm, Furnas, Rio de Contas, Bahia, June 19, 1987.
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23. Ibid.; Minutes of the Bahia Mission, no. 287, October 23, 1941.
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26. Rommel Resende, "Bahia terá novo campo em 2009" [Bahia will have a new field in 2009], *Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review], November 2008, 35.
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44. For more information about SWBA, access the website: <http://mbs.adventistas.org>/or the social media: Facebook: @AdventistasBahiaSudoeste and Instagram: @adventistasbahiasudoeste.

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