



West Central Brazil Union Mission headquarters.

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West Central Brazil Union Mission

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The West Central Brazil Union Mission (UCOB) is an administrative unit of the Seventh-day Adventist Church located in the territory of the South American Division. Its head office is at Rodovia DF 001, Km 26, Setor de Mansões Dom Bosco (rea Especial D, Lago Sul, CEP 71680-285, in the city of Brasília, territory of the Federal District, Brazil.¹

Its coverage area involves the entire Midwest region of Brazil, formed by the states of Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso do Sul, Goiás, and the Federal District, in addition to the state of Tocantins, which belongs to the northern region of the country. In total, the five federation units add up to about 16,101,322 inhabitants, divided into 605 municipalities and other 31 administrative regions in the Federal District.²

UCOB manages six regional offices for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in that region. They are: Associação Brasil Central (Central Brazil Conference) (ABC), Associação Planalto Central (Central Planalto Conference) (APlaC), Associação Leste Mato-Grossense (Eastern Mato Grosso Conference) (ALM), Associação Sul Mato-Grossense (South Mato Grosso Conference) (ASM), Missão do Tocantins (Tocantins Mission] (MTo) and the newly created Missão Oeste Mato-grossense [Western Mato Grosso Mission) (MisOM). These conferences and missions, together, lead 1,498 congregations, of which 745 are organized churches and 753 are groups. Data also records 132,709 active members in these congregations. Therefore, the average is one Adventist per 121 inhabitants in the region covered by the Union.³

The Central Brazil Conference, located in the state of Goiás, is an institution that administers 154 churches, 171 groups, and 27,279 members.⁴ In this conference territory, Adventist Education is represented by 9 schools, with 5,419 students, in addition to the Instituto Adventista Brasil Central (Central Brazil Adventist Academy)-assisted directly by UCOB. The Central Brazil Adventist Academy has 693 students, of which 380 are boarding students.⁵

The Central Planalto Conference is headquartered in Brasília, Brazil's capital. This conference is responsible for 167 churches, 118 groups, and 32,173 members in the Federal District and the surrounding cities known as "entorno."⁶ Besides that, it is also responsible for 8 of the 36 Adventist schools across UCOB territory, with a total of 6,300 students.⁷

Eastern Mato Grosso Conference is located in the city of Cuiabá, capital of Mato Grosso. The conference team of employees is responsible for assisting 112 churches and 81 groups spread throughout its region. There are 18,394 baptized members across the territory.⁸ In addition, in the ALM territory there are 6 schools of the Adventist educational network that actively contribute to the preaching of the gospel through teaching.⁹

Still in the state of Mato Grosso, there is the Missão Oeste Mato-Grossense (Western Mato Grosso Mission), based in the city of Várzea Grande. This administrative unit of the church recently assumed the SDA leadership of part of Mato Grosso territory and is responsible for assisting 107 churches and 119 groups with a total of 18,853 Adventist members. In the territory of this mission, there are 3 school units, with 2,618 enrolled students.¹⁰

In the neighboring state, Mato Grosso do Sul, South Mato Grosso Conference has its head office located in the city of Campo Grande. This administrative unit assists 132 churches and 125 groups in a total of about twenty-two thousand one hundred forty-one members.¹¹ In the region Adventist education is represented by 7 schools, with 4,143 students in total. Campo Grande is also home to the Hospital Adventista do Pênfigo (Penfigo Adventist Hospital) and the Health Living Center. Both institutions aim to serve the population concerning health, based on the eight natural remedies, widely taught and disseminated by the Seventh-day Adventist Church.¹²

Located in the north-central part of Brazil, but still within the missionary territory belonging to the West Central Brazil Union Mission, is the administrative headquarters of Tocantins state-Tocantins Mission. It is responsible

for the administration of 73 churches and 139 groups, which have 13,869 members.¹³ Besides, in its territory there are three schools with a total of 2,639 students.¹⁴

In brief, in addition to the six administrative units mentioned, in the UCOB territory, two Adventist health institutions are in operation: the Hospital Adventista do Pênfigo (Penfigo Adventist Hospital) (HAP) and the Health Living Center (CVS), both operating in Mato Grosso do Sul state. Besides that, Adventist education is represented in the territory through 36 schools, including a boarding school (Instituto Adventista Brasil Central [Central Brazil Adventist Academy]-IABC). Overall, 25,704 students are in daily contact with the principles and values taught by Adventist Education Network in its territory.¹⁵

To lead Adventists throughout this region, there are 54 pastors working as administrators and departmental leaders, distributed in the five administrative headquarters in the region, including those located in the UCOB's own office. In addition to these, there are 230 district pastors and 27 who work in schools, totaling 311 ministers.¹⁶ There are also 57 accredited and 26 licensed workers serving in different areas. All employees working for UCOB, both at its headquarters and at conferences, missions, and other related institutions, add up to a total of 4,375 people.¹⁷

Organizational History

The West Central Brazil Union Mission started on October 21, 2004, when the Creation and Organization Assembly of the institution was held. Until that moment, church activities in that region were managed as follows: South Mato Grosso Conference belonged to South Brazil Union Conference, with its headquarters in Curitiba, Paraná state; Central Brazil Conference, along with Central Planalto Conference and Mato Grosso Mission, were directed by Central Brazil Union Conference, headquartered in the state of São Paulo; and Tocantins state, as well as Federal District and part of the state of Goiás, were under the care of Central Planalto Conference.¹⁸

Some factors were key for the creation of a new union. The first point that contributed to this was the high growth of members of the South American Division, which, with God's blessing and direction, reached 78.8 percent in eight years (from 1,271,341 members in 1995 to 2,273,215 in 2003). In addition, the establishment of nine new fields (missions/ conferences) in Brazil, since 1996, and the forecast of one more field formation in 2004, were two more considered factors.¹⁹

Some reflections were essential to clear any doubts regarding the need to create a new union. First, the challenge of expanding the gospel in big cities--especially in São Paulo. Second, the Global Mission purpose to enter areas where there were still no Adventist presence. And, finally, the need to better serve the members, especially in Mato Grosso Mission, in the state of Tocantins and Central Planalto Conference.²⁰

Based on these realities, the General Conference appointed a survey commission, which met on February 26, 2004, intending to study the feasibility of redistributing the territory of Central and South Brazil Union Conferences before anticipating the creation of a new union. After the studies were done showing the feasibility of following through with the plans, the survey commission reached a favorable decision with the recommendation for the formation of a Transition Commission. This team had the task of taking care of the details inherent to the creation of the new institution, which would be called West Central Brazil Union Mission.²¹

Thus, on March 8, 2004, it was voted to accept UCOB as part of the community of Unions of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. As its first president, Pastor Helder Roger Cavalcanti Silva was elected, who remained in this office from 2004 until 2015. As secretary and treasurer, Pastor Jairo César Silva dos Anjos was elected. As of January 2005, UCOB assumed responsibility for the leadership of pastors, workers, and missionaries, as well as the commitment for the servers' employment relationship with the respective labor, tax, social security, and land tenure charges under its management.²²

The initial territory of this new administrative unit embraced the states of Goiás, Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso do Sul, Tocantins, and the Federal District, which were composed of Central Brazil, Central Planalto, South Mato Grosso Conferences, and Mato Grosso Mission. In addition to these administrative units, the union also started to manage Hospital Adventista do Pênfigo (Penfigo Adventist Hospital) and Instituto Adventista Brasil Central (Central Brazil Adventist Academy). At its beginning the West Central Brazil Union Mission had 396 churches, 124 pastoral districts, and 93,712 members in an estimated population context of 14,040,734 inhabitants-about one Adventist per 149 inhabitants.²³ Its headquarters' address is the same since its foundation in 2004 to the present day.

UCOB is made up of different departments to advance the missionary work. There are 16 departments in its functional structure. They are: Education, Religious Freedom, Children and Adolescents' Ministry, Youth Ministry, Pathfinders, Adventurers, Small Groups, Health, Sabbath School, Personal Ministry, Women's Ministry, Área Feminina da Associação Ministerial (Ministerial Spouses Association) (AFAM), Evangelism, Stewardship, and Publication and Prophecy.²⁴ All of these centers have already been led by hard-working leaders who have contributed to spreading the Adventist message by engaging in each of the ministries under their responsibility.

Since the beginning of its activities, the team of servers of the West Central Brazil Union Mission has been engaged in carrying out missionary programs led by the South American Division. Three good examples of this are Caleb Mission,²⁵ Breaking the Silence,²⁶ and Hope Impact.²⁷ In the first five years of UCOB organizational existence, at least 3,077 actions of the Breaking the Silence campaign were carried out throughout its territory.²⁸ In the second five-year period, around thirteen thousand young people donated their vacation time to participate in the Caleb Mission project.²⁹ And, in the same five-year period, 8,300,232 books were distributed through the Hope Impact project.³⁰

The challenge of starting an institution in the countryside of the country was great, especially in a region with low population density and an area equivalent to 1/4 of the national territory. For the union to be successful, it took planning and strategy. The main goal was to consolidate the local leadership, with several investments made in training leaders. The objective was to promote a broader view of the church, as the region had limited access to major projects and leaders (who were located in the centers of São Paulo, as well as in the southern region of the country). As a result, a generation of young leaders trained at UCOB today serves the church in various parts of the SAD. As an example, a new field was formed, the Tocantins Mission, to serve a very challenging region, where the church needed to develop.³¹

However, it was necessary not only to train leaders but also to invest in structures. In this regard, another major investment was made in the physical facilities of churches and local institutions, such as the acquisition of new land, expansion, and invigoration of strategic places. A model church project was also established, which helped several churches to carry out relevant works and restorations at a low cost. This model was shared by many other church institutions throughout Brazil.³²

In its recent but intense journey, West Central Brazil Union Mission had to make some adjustments to further strengthen some already consolidated institutions. Then the functioning of Adventist Education in the territory was restructured and, in the process, the need arose to close some school units that were not in functioning condition. On the other hand, other units, which were well-positioned, were strengthened. The decisions made contributed to double the number of students in the Adventist Network in a few years, in addition to cooperating for the development of schools of reference in the territory of UCOB (like Central Brazil Adventist Academy, one of the well established secondary boarding schools in the territory of the SAD).³³

However, it was not only in education that several changes were noticed. The publication work was restructured and centralized in the Serviço Educacional Lar e Saúde (SELS) (Adventist Book Center). This change provided a significant gain in management efficiency. Thus, it was possible to grant more support to canvassers and students who, together, make SELS an efficient UCOB department.³⁴

By reflecting on the experiences along the journey of West Central Brazil Union Mission, it was possible to draw important lessons for the growth and development of the church. Among such learnings are: the importance of investing in local leaders, focusing on sustainable development, and seeking to conquer new horizons.³⁵

As for the challenges UCOB currently faces, it should be highlighted by the vast extent of its territory, which embraces the diverse peculiarities that characterize the different places in Brazil. As already recognized, growing comprehensively in such a diverse context is the greatest challenge, as there are a hundred cities that have not yet been reached by the gospel. To accomplish this goal, the church has sought to become relevant to new generations to engage them in mission.³⁶

Considering that the rapid secularization of today challenges the missionary spirit of the church, the opening of new fields enables better care and training of members in the union territory, favoring the work that remains to

be done. The UCOB institutions, such as Hospital Adventista do Pênfigo (Penfigo Adventist Hospital), seek to find a viable way to continue growing to fulfill the mission amid increasingly challenging demands.³⁷

To obtain victory in the face of the great challenges presented, UCOB leadership understands that it is necessary to continue to form leaders, as it is of paramount importance to strengthen the basic structures of the church, such as the Sabbath School and Personal Ministry. It is also necessary to always keep open the possibility of dialogue with new generations and to be attentive to seize the opportunities to place the mission in their hearts in different ways.³⁸

For this purpose UCOB has sought to establish more missionary structures through mission agencies installed in each school in its territory. In addition, the UCOB Mission Institute was created, which aims to train missionaries both for local and for distant lands service, besides seeking partnerships that enable missionary opportunities for church members-all to foster mission on all its fronts. For this generation of missionaries to be raised, it is understood that it is necessary to continue strengthening the Bible vision of discipleship.³⁹

At the organizational level, many efforts are being made to reorganize, in the short and medium terms, two of UCOB's largest fields by creating new administrative units. Besides, a fund has been created for the opening of new Adventist schools, and continued investment has been made in missionary projects that keep members and leaders connected with church missionary initiatives in the South American Division.⁴⁰

Since the UCOB formation, its leadership teams have been working to spread and to deepen the biblical relational discipleship. Relational discipleship is defined as one in which the individual is a true friend of Christ and a true friend of the community in which they live. Discipleship is not an end in itself. It needs to be lived in community. In this perspective, it is only when the individual learns to love his neighbor-to the point of letting go of his own interests to attend to a friend-that he can understand the true meaning of the gospel. Anchored in this Bible vision of relational discipleship, UCOB's mission is to "make disciples through communion, relationship, and mission," having these last three words as the guiding premises of discipleship in the union.⁴¹

In these action-generating words, the first premise is governed by the Bible view of discipleship and is completely linked to each person's relationship with God. By becoming a true friend of Jesus, it is also easier to become an imitator of Him. This is the first step toward being a true Christian, and this can only be achieved through prayer and the reading of the word of God, aided by the study of the Sabbath School lesson and the guidance of the Spirit of Prophecy.⁴²

The second premise concerns the relationship between each other. The purpose is that all members live in small communities of love, opening their homes to receive their neighbors and friends, making them a reference to the love of God. The achievement of this goal in local churches can be measured through the growth in the number of Pequenos Grupos (PGs) (Small Groups)⁴³ structured in a network, with leaders, supervisors, and coordinators of each PG duly established.⁴⁴

The third premise points to what Christ's disciples do with the gospel they receive. Each member must be personally involved in saving someone. The focus at this point is not to bring people only to the church in its temple form but into the lives of its members and, through that, to bring them to Christ. The level of involvement in this cause can be seen through the ratio between the number of baptisms and the number of members involved.⁴⁵

A challenging issue in the experience of such premises is related to the people who have been reached and the ones that still need to be reached. According to data collected through the secretariat system (ACMS-Adventist Church Management System-2015 and 2016) of the UCOB, most of the people who come into the church are in the age group 8-30 and most of the ones who leave are also in the same age group. Therefore, the goal is to have a church that makes disciples of these new generations and keep them in.⁴⁶

To this end three steps are considered fundamental in UCOB efforts. The first one is to have parents discipling their children. Discipleship begins at home and, to that end, before working with children, the church needs to empower parents to start this process early with their little ones. The second step is to instill the mission in the hearts of young people. Currently, several volunteer programs for young people are developed and supported by the church, such as: Um Ano em Missão (One Year in Mission),⁴⁷ Geração 148 (Generation 148),⁴⁸ among others. These programs lead participants to donate their time to other people, whether in the community in which they live or in a distant city or even in a country with a completely different culture.

The third step is to be a relevant church for new generations. For the young person to become the church wherever he is, he must first identify himself with it. Therefore, the idea is that all UCOB churches can receive young people and "talk" with them from the beginning to the end of a service, speaking their language, whether through the liturgy, the hymns chosen for praise, the preaching, or the way they are cared for. When they feel identified and represented by this church, it will be their flag. It will not only be a place where they congregate, but it will be part of their lifestyle.

Seeking to carry out the second step, which is to instill the mission in young people's hearts, in 2019 UCOB held an event called "Together," which was a mission and a volunteer experience. The program involved lectures, seminars, workshops, fairs, maker space, urban missions, interactive installations, among other activities. Together objective was to promote a spirit of mission and volunteering in all participants. The target audience was teenagers aged 13 to 15 and youth aged 16 to 35 from the UCOB region.⁴⁹

A brief comparison between the statistical data from the period from 2004 to the present may well exemplify how the church mission in the midwestern Brazilian region has been fulfilled, after the foundation of UCOB. As previously mentioned, at the beginning of its activities, the team of employees of this union assisted about ninety-three thousand seven hundred twelve members, distributed in about three hundred ninety-six congregations. At that time, there were about 1 Adventist per 149 inhabitants in the region.⁵⁰ About five years later, on October 31, 2009, that number had already been reduced to about 1 Adventist per 141 inhabitants,⁵¹

and there were already 495 churches and 599 organized groups.⁵²

Between 2010 and 2014, 39,392 new members were baptized throughout UCOB churches. Thus, at the end of that period, there were already 109,803 members, distributed in 1,328 congregations.⁵³ Later, in June 2018, the number of members had already exceeded the mark of 126,120 people, and the number of congregations was already 712 (a number that refers only to organized churches, except groups). The Adventist/inhabitant ratio in the region was about 1 Adventist per 127 inhabitants. Efforts will continue to be made to keep moving forward.⁵⁴

Chronology of Administrative Managers⁵⁵

Presidents: Helder Roger C. S. (2004-2015); Alijofran L. Brandão (2015-current).

Secretaries: Jairo Cesar dos Anjos (2004); Cícero F. Gama (2006-2011); Alijofran L. Brandão (2012-2015); Elberth Kuhn (2015); Jim Galvão Soares (2016-, 2017); Matheus L. Tavares (2018-current).

Treasurers: Jairo Cesar dos Anjos (2004-2017); Gilnei V. de Abreu (2018-current).

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NOTES

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7. Information gathered from the School Secretariat System, 2019.
8. Adventist Church Management System (ACMS) – West Central Brazil Union Mission, 2019.
9. Information gathered from the School Secretariat System, 2019.
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