



Northeast Brazil Mission headquarters, 2016

Photo courtesy of Northeast Brazil Mission Archives, accessed on January 16, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2R0m7YS>.

## Northeast Brazil Mission

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The Northeast Brazil Mission is an administrative unit of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and part of the Northeast Brazil Union. Its mission field covers the Brazilian states of Paraíba and Rio Grande do Norte. Its headquarters is located at Virginópolis, 92, 59150-080, in Nova Parnamirim neighborhood, in the city of

Parnamirim, state of Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil.

Its territory covers 109,276,841 square kilometers, where approximately 7,475,506 people live<sup>1</sup>. Of this total, 37,619 are Adventists, members of 197 churches,<sup>2</sup> an average of one Adventist out of every 198 people. The Northeast Brazil Mission manages three schools: Natal Adventist School, with 274 students; Campina Grande Adventist School, with 229 students; and João Pessoa Adventist School, with 160 students. Together the schools sum up a total of 663 students.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, there are 334 Pathfinders Clubs<sup>4</sup> with 7,948 members, and 180 Adventurer Clubs with 3,384 participants.<sup>5</sup> The field also has the support of Hope Channel Brazil in the city of João Pessoa, in the state of Paraíba, through channel 49 UHF and digital channel 49.1, with a potential reach of 1,253,930 people.<sup>6</sup> The signal from Hope Channel Brazil is also broadcast in Natal, Rio Grande do Norte, via channel 27 UHF and digital 28.1, with a potential range of 1,473,871 people.<sup>7</sup> The Northeast Brazil Mission has 1,404 Small Groups in operation.<sup>8</sup>

To pastor and involve members in the mission of bringing others to Christ, the mission has the support of 102 employees. Of these, 38 are ordained ministers and 17 are licensed ministers.<sup>9</sup>

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

The Northeast region of Brazil has distinct cultural, historical, and geographical characteristics compared to the rest of the country. The uprisings,<sup>10</sup> wars,<sup>11</sup> poor distribution of resources by the government,<sup>12</sup> and long periods of drought<sup>13</sup> experienced there did not make the long-suffering northeastern people lose their faith. However, this religious zeal was often used by some leaders to prey on, persecute, and threaten the Adventist missionaries who lived in the region.<sup>14</sup> For this reason, it was often necessary to create or adapt evangelistic strategies for the local reality.<sup>15</sup>

During the First Republic (1889-1930)<sup>16</sup> period of Brazilian history, the federal government favored the states of São Paulo and Minas Gerais, alternating their candidates for president, while the other 26 states were deprived of resources and investment.<sup>17</sup> The result of this isolation, especially in the northeastern region, was low rates of urbanization, schooling,<sup>18</sup> and life expectancy (38.2 years).<sup>19</sup> Parallel powers fought each other for dominion in the region, particularly coronelismo<sup>20</sup> (the use of economic, social and political power by large landowners), police corruption, and Cangaço.<sup>21</sup>

It was in this scenario of instability, violence, and persecution that Adventist work began in the northeast, but this did not intimidate the ministers and canvassers who sowed the gospel there.<sup>22</sup> Before the formation of the Northeast Mission in 1932, the Adventist message had already been heard in the states of Alagoas, Pernambuco, Bahia, Paraíba, Rio Grande do Norte, and Sergipe.

Adventism in the state of Alagoas began in 1907 when Costa, a nurse in the Brazilian navy, received Bible studies. Fearful, he lacked the strength to make an immediate decision in favor of the Adventist message. However, when he was transferred to Maceió, the capital of Alagoas, he and his wife accepted what they'd learned and taught it to others. In his spare time, Costa treated patients in his community, becoming known and making friends. He soon began to hold meetings with up to 100 listeners. When Pastor F. W. Spies<sup>23</sup> arrived, he found twelve people keeping the Sabbath in the city, and another four while traveling on the railroad<sup>24</sup>

On December 3, 1909, Pastor Spies celebrated his first baptism in the state of Alagoas, as four people gave their lives to Christ. That December 8, these people formed the first group of Sabbath keepers in the state, although there was still no minister to dedicate themselves to this field. The impossibility of sending a minister was the subject of the Brazilian Administrative Commission, held between January 1 and 7, 1908.<sup>25</sup> The absence was mitigated by sending Pastor John Lipke<sup>26</sup> to perform the baptisms in the states of Alagoas and Pernambuco.

In the city of Recife, the capital of Pernambuco, the first record of Adventists in the region dates back to 1911. Canvassers at the time heard stories about a former Baptist minister who was excluded from his church for keeping the Sabbath and teaching others to do the same. Since then, he had lived in poverty, but nevertheless remained steadfast.<sup>27</sup> Also in that year, missionary Camillo José Pereira and three canvassers, Pedro Baptista, Zacharias Martins Rodrigues, and Francisco Queiroz, worked in the countryside cities of Cachoeira, Sant'Anna dos Brejos, Itabuna, and Santo Antônio de Jesus. There were more than 20 people awaiting baptism, but due to lack of time, Pastor John Lipke was unable to visit all sites to baptize them.<sup>28</sup>

An Adventist unable to find a job allowing him to keep the Sabbath in Recife decided to move to the state of Paraíba to work as a railroad chief. It is believed that this man was the only one who kept the Sabbath in the state, and, by his testimony, his employer started to do the same. In a short time, more than 15 people were keeping the Sabbath, and at least three of them were baptized. Pastor John Lipke was the first Protestant preacher to work in the state.<sup>29</sup>

In September 1920 the canvassers José M. Rabello,<sup>30</sup> Luiz Rodrigues, Antonio Rodrigues, and Ignacio Damasceno started to work in Natal, the capital of Rio Grande do Norte. As they arrived in the city, they met R. Wilfart, J. Kroeker, and many canvassers. At the time, the canvassers worked to meet the needs of the mission field, including some also taking on the duties of minister.<sup>31</sup>

At that time, there were only four or five Adventists in Natal and some more interested in knowing the message they had preached. When R. Wilfart returned to the state of Rio de Janeiro he left an organized church with fifty members, in addition to an increasing amount of interested people preparing for the baptism. Raulina Noronha was one of those baptized a few years later, in 1924. The ceremony took place in the municipality of Mossoró, conducted by one of the pioneers of the Adventist Church in the region, Luiz Calebe.<sup>32</sup> In all parts of this vast field, through cities and towns between the states of Alagoas and Rio Grande do Norte, hundreds of doors were opened to the Adventist message.<sup>33</sup>

In the city of Aracajú, the capital of the state of Sergipe, Pastor Gustavo Storch held a series of public lectures in 1926, in a large hall of the state's public library with a capacity for 1,500 people, provided by a city councilor. Each evening he answered audience questions from a box. The most popular newspaper in the city published a summary of the previous day's sermon in an exclusive 25-centimeter column each day. According to Storch, one of the greatest needs of the work at that time was that of more evangelists.<sup>34</sup>

Among the canvassers who worked in the northeastern dry lands of Brazil, some became famous for their courage, such as Generoso de Oliveira, in the state of Bahia;<sup>35</sup> Jackson Alves de Carvalho, in the state of Sergipe;<sup>36</sup> and Luís Calebe Rodrigues, a pioneer in the states of Pernambuco, Paraíba, and Rio Grande do Norte.<sup>37</sup> All of them met at some point with the most feared and notorious leader of Cangaço, Virgulino Ferreira da Silva, known as "Lampião." At each of these meetings, Lampião received at least one copy of the book *The Story of Jesus*. When he was killed in 1938, the book *The Story of Jesus* was among his possessions.<sup>38</sup>

In 1930, Pastor Gustavo Storch worked on his motorcycle in the region of Rio Grande do Norte and visited the city of Natal. There, he met José Soares Filho, the director of the Adventist Church, who was evangelizing several people and preparing them for baptism. That year, he held an evangelistic series at the church with 20 members and a great number of visitors interested in the message. Thanks to the good work done by José Soares, he was transferred to another city, and Raulina took over the direction of the church, continuing the missionary work with the monthly sale of the magazine *O Atalaia* [The Watchtower] and with Bible studies. The administrative unit at that time was the Pernambucana Mission, chaired by Gustavo Storch.<sup>39</sup>

After some time, Oscar Castellani was sent to support the Adventist work in the Natal region. The residents of the Northeast suffered from intense drought, and the difficulties were immense. Water, vegetation, and trees were scarce and many rivers were dry, but in spite of all this, people still believed in God and accepted the truth of the gospel.<sup>40</sup> In June 1931, Ellis Maas and his wife arrived in Natal to work with Castellani, and together they held several public conferences. As a result of this effort, many people began studying the Bible and keeping the Sabbath, and Pastor H. B. Westcott baptized three who were awaiting the arrival of a minister.<sup>41</sup>

At that time, the Adventist Church of Natal already had 28 members, in addition to "a class of Bible studies of twelve members, under the direction of brother Oscar Oastellani [...]" and other groups across the state. Later, five more were baptized by Gustavo S. Storch, as a result of the lectures given by the valiant workers who worked in the field.<sup>42</sup> In 1932, the number of those enrolled in the Sabbath school at the Natal church was 57, and the offerings tripled. Due to the growth of the church and the increasing number of young people, the Missionary Volunteer Society was founded.<sup>43</sup> In the same year, Gustavo S. Storch assumed the presidency of the new Northeast Mission.<sup>44</sup>

## Mission Organizational History

The Northeast Brazil Mission formed from the merger of old missions. Its beginning dates back to 1929 when the world was shaken by an unprecedented economic crisis, the Great Depression.<sup>45</sup> Since most missionary resources then originated in the United States, all Seventh-day Adventist administrative units in the world were affected by the economic crisis on the finances of the North America Division. However, due to sound planning the impact of this crisis was only felt in 1931 due to sound planning.<sup>46</sup>

The South America Division had to make cuts in its operating expenses, and saw that among all its unions, the East Brazil Union faced the most difficulties in growth. It was voted to study ways to provide that field with a larger portion of resources, with the budgets of the other three unions decreasing in favor of the East Brazil Union.<sup>47</sup>

In 1932 the South American Division linked the Bahia Mission to the Pernambuco Mission. The new field, Northeast Brazil Mission, covered six Brazilian states, Bahia, Sergipe, Alagoas, Pernambuco, Paraíba, and Rio Grande do Norte.<sup>48</sup> The Northeast Brazil Mission was reorganized in 1937, 1965, 1980, and 1999, with significant changes in its territory and status.

This new mission field became the largest territory for the Adventist Church in Brazil, in its time, as it covered 821,837,676 square kilometers.<sup>49</sup> In addition, the cities of Salvador, in Bahia, and Recife, in Pernambuco, were, respectively, the third and fourth most populous cities in Brazil. Despite this, there were only six Adventist churches with 792 members in the entire territory.<sup>50</sup> The mission headquarters of the camp was the same as that of the former Pernambucana Mission, located at Marquez de Olinda, 215, 1st floor, in the city of Recife, state of Pernambuco.<sup>51</sup>

Since its founding, the Northeast Mission has been tasked with “Communicating to all people in the states of Rio Grande do Norte and Paraíba the eternal gospel of God’s love in the context of the angelic messages of Revelation 14:6-12, as revealed in the life, death, resurrection, and priestly ministry of Jesus Christ, inviting them to accept Jesus as their personal Savior and to join His church; and assisting and edifying them spiritually in preparation for His soon return.”<sup>52</sup>

With this vision in mind, the Adventist Church grew in the Northeast Brazil Mission. In 1937 a reorganization was necessary to form the North Brazil Union. The Northeast Brazil Mission was divided into the Northeast Brazil Mission and Bahia Mission. The administrative unit that maintained the name of Northeast Mission managed the states of Alagoas, Pernambuco, Paraíba, and Rio Grande do Norte.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the population served by this administrative unit decreased by half, and the number of churches also dropped to three; however, the number of believers grew to 608.<sup>54</sup>

In 1942, three churches were organized in the Northeast Brazil Mission, in the cities of Maceió, Campina Grande, and Natal. Added to the three existing churches in the city of Recife, the number of organized congregations in the mission doubled. At that time, the mission had eleven primary schools, with almost 300 students.<sup>55</sup> “In the previous year there were 819 members baptized in all churches, 1,395 students in 38 organized Sabbath

schools, and 11 primary schools with 219 children enrolled.<sup>56</sup>

In 1943 Belém Adventist School was established in the city of Belém de Maria, in Pernambuco. A year later, Northeast Brazil Rural Institute was founded, which in 1950 became Northeast Brazil Academy. In 1958, the Theology department at the academy opened.<sup>57</sup> Subsequently, the theology course at Northeast Brazil Academy was transferred to Northeast Brazil Academy, which later became Bahia Adventist Academy, and is now administered by the East Brazil Union.

Though for many years workers, evangelists and pastors labored in the Northeast Brazil Mission, large cities remained without an organized Adventist church. Beginning in 1938, the church members of João Pessoa longed to build a church. In 1949, the East Brazil Union, together with the Northeast Brazil Mission, donated the necessary resources to buy land. They purchased land in the city center and begin construction of the João Pessoa church. On July 31, 1949, a series of conferences began under the direction of Pastor José Baracat, president of the Northeast Brazil Mission, with the help of Neander Harder. Thousands of invitations were distributed throughout the city, and each day more than 500 people followed the program. As a result of this work, a new Bible class was organized with 59 students.<sup>58</sup>

In 1953, the Northeast Brazil Mission had already established 14 primary schools. "Enrollment by the end of the first semester reached a total of 475 students."<sup>59</sup> Each school ran a baptismal class and some students had already been baptized. That year, 135 people across the mission were baptized, and membership reached 2,841. There were 98 Sabbath schools, with 3,069 participants, and 13 primary schools with 541 students enrolled. 1953 was marked by the holding of 12 series of conferences by 25 volunteer preachers from the field. The church in the Northeast was engaged in the mission of preaching the gospel to everyone.<sup>60</sup>

In 1965 the South America Division granted the Northeast Brazil Mission the status of Northeast Conference, under the presidency of Pastor John Baerg. For a period of 15 years the field gained autonomy and maintained its conference status.<sup>61</sup> At that time, in its territory there were 8,738,000 inhabitants and 4,686 baptized members in its 17 churches.<sup>62</sup> The Northeast Conference went through a great crisis that intensified in 1970. "It should be noted that this was the most difficult year for the Northeastern economy, including in the history of the Northeast Brazil Mission."<sup>63</sup> The drought hit the whole region, but the preaching of the Adventist message did not stop and the work of reaching souls continued.

In 1980 the administrative unit reorganized again. It was renamed the Northeast Brazil Mission and carried out this leading work in 5 states: Alagoas, Paraíba, Pernambuco, Rio Grande do Norte, and Sergipe.<sup>64</sup> Together, these states were home to 14,840,600 inhabitants, among them 14,522 Adventists distributed in 53 churches.<sup>65</sup> In the 1990s, life expectancy in the Northeast reached 64.3 years, only 4.4 years less than in other Brazilian regions.<sup>66</sup> In 1999 the last reorganization of the Northeast Brazil Mission took place. Its field was limited to two Brazilian states, Paraíba and Rio Grande do Norte.<sup>67</sup> Together, these states comprise 109,276,841 square kilometers.<sup>68</sup> Its headquarters was transferred to the city of Parnamirim, in Rio Grande do Norte, where it

remains today. As a result of the last change of status, the mission has 15,128 Adventists in its 48 churches, out of a population of 6,855,290 people.<sup>69</sup> Reorganization ensured that workers were not overloaded and the territory was better served. New leaders were chosen and new missionary investments were made.

From 1999 to the present day, the number of Adventist members has increased from 17,161 to 39,721. Each year the Northeast Brazil Mission has an average of 4,193 baptisms. In 2018, 5,338 people were baptized. In March 2019, 9,217 new students enrolled in Sabbath School. The numbers reveal the success of the work carried out through missionary projects such as Small Groups. All the mission fields of the Northeast Brazil Union have decided, since 2002, to strengthen Small Groups, resulting in church growth. Since the beginning, there were 1,404 Small Groups, and the creation of 8,000 new ones was planned.<sup>70</sup>

In 2006, Bible classes were organized into missionary pairs as described in the Gospel of Luke 10:1, "two by two." Public meetings were held between April 8 and 15 of the same year, resulting in 12% growth compared to the first quarter of 2005. Consequently, a church was inaugurated in the village of Eldorado dos Carajás, in the municipality of Macaíba, in Rio Grande do Norte.<sup>71</sup>

Another important project in the Northeast Brazil Mission is Hope Impact,<sup>72</sup> through which approximately 300,000 missionary books are distributed each year. From 2007 to 2019, 2,935,895 copies were distributed in the Northeast Brazil Mission territory.<sup>73</sup> Another part of evangelism through publications is canvassing (literature evangelism). Canvassers usually sell books and magazine subscriptions, accompanied by the book *The Great Controversy*.<sup>74</sup>

The Caleb Mission project is a program that brings together young people willing to give up their January or July vacation to meet the challenge of public evangelism in cities with little or no Adventist presence. Each young person receives a missionary kit with a Bible, sermons, and Bible studies. Today the project is part of the Seventh-day Adventist evangelistic calendar in the Northeast Brazil Mission. In the city of Campina Grande, in the state of Paraíba, volunteers even overcame local religious conflicts to share the Adventist message.<sup>75</sup>

The difficulties faced by the leaders of the Northeast Brazil Mission, from 1932 to the present day, provided lessons for the work to be carried out in faith. Leaders and church members perceive that perseverance in sharing the gospel can overcome all financial, cultural, and geographical limitations, because "when there is a will to do, God opens the path."<sup>76</sup>

Despite the large number of Adventists in the region, its mission work is far from over. The great challenge is to enter the 157 cities that do not have an Adventist presence. Moreover, the Northeast Brazil Mission plans to expand Adventist education in both states, starting in the city of Natal, and to implement Hope Channel Brazil on open signal to the cities of Campina Grande and Patos, in Paraíba, and Mossoró in Rio Grande do Norte. The Northeast Brazil Mission foresees the division of the field for the emergence of the future Paraibana Mission that will comprise the entire state of Paraíba, as well as the emergence of the Rio Grande do Norte Mission that

will focus its efforts in the state of Rio Grande do Norte.<sup>77</sup>

## Chronology of Administrative Officers<sup>78</sup>

Presidents: Gustavo Storch (1932-1935); Jeronymo Garcia (1936-1939); Oscar Castellani (1940-1945); Orlando G. Pinho (1946-1948); Jose Baracat (1950-1954); B. C. Andrade (1957); John Baerg (1959-1962); J. C Bessa (1963-1966); Altino Martin (1967-1970); Arandy Nabuco (1971-1973); Edwin Eisele (1974-1975); W. M. Oliveira (1976-1979); José Freire do Nascimento (1980-1981); Osmar Domingos dos Reis (1982-1986); Helder Roger Cavalcanti Silva (1987-1988); Antônio Ribeiro de Oliveira (1989-1990); Gerson de Souza Fragoso (1991-1992); Gustavo Pires da Silva (1993-1997); Jurandi Januário dos Reis (1999-2001); Silas Gomes de Oliveira Neto (2002-2003); Manoel Abdoral de Freitas Cintra (2004-2007); José Soares da Silva Junior (2008-2014); Geison Arley Pinto Florencio (2015- at present).

Secretaries: Guilherme Itin (1932-1933); O. M. Groeschel (1934-1936); E. M. Harmanson (1937-1938); F. Vegele (1939); M. Fuhrmann (1940-1946); Palmer W. Harder (1947-1949); O. M. Groeschel (1950-1955); A. R. Dourado (1956-1959); Palmer Harder (1960); L. H. Perestrelo (1961-1967); W. S. Macedo (1968-1969); Pedro Gonzales (1971-1973); Osmar Reis (1975); Joel Pola (1976-1977); E. N. Correa (1978-1981); Joel Gonsiorowski da Silva (1982-1983); Gustavo Roberto Schumann (1984-1985); Helder Roger C. Silva (1986); Clovis F. Bunzen (1987-1988); Moisés G. de Oliveira (1989-1992); Waldomiro Domingos dos Passos (1993-1995); Arnaldo Ferreira Silva (1996-1997); Miqueas Gomes Meira (1999-2001); Gilberto Nunes Ludugerio (2002-2007); Elias de Carvalho Pedrosa (2008-2012); Paulo Fernando Gomes Correia (2013-2015); Cleber Veras Aragão (2016- at present).

Treasurers: Guilherme Itin (1932-1933); O. M. Groeschel (1934-1936); E. M. Harmanson (1937-1938); F. Vegele (1939); M. Fuhrmann (1940-1946); Palmer W. Harder (1947-1949); O. M. Groeschel (1950-1955); A. R. Dourado (1956-1959); Palmer Harder (1960); L. H. Perestrelo (1961-1967); W. S. Macedo (1968-1969); Pedro Gonzales (1971-1973); Osmar Reis (1975); Joel Pola (1976-1977); E. N. Correa (1978-1981); Joel Gonsiorowski da Silva (1982-1983); Gustavo Roberto Schumann (1984-1985); Ivo de A. Vasconcelos (1986-1992); Waldomiro Domingos dos Passos (1993-1995); Arnaldo Ferreira Silva (1996-1997); Miqueas Gomes Meira (1999-2001); Jorge Luis de Oliveira Sousa (2002-2007); Jander Campos de Oliveira (2008-2010); Elton Santos de Oliveira (2011); Gabriel dos S. Brito Cerqueira (2012- at present).<sup>79</sup>

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## NOTES

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