

Timor-Leste Mission

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Wesley Szamko currently serves as the director for the Office of Adventist Mission for the Southern Asia-Pacific Division. He holds a B.A. in religion from Canadian Union College, a Master of Divinity degree from Andrews University and is completing a doctoral degree in Missiology from Andrews University. He, his wife Ivonne, son, and daughter served as missionaries for two years in Cambodia and then five years in Timor-Leste, where he was the Timor-Leste Mission president prior to their call to SSD.

The Timor-Leste Mission (TLM) is an attached mission of the Southern Asia-Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists (SSD). It was officially organized in 2009 and then renamed and reorganized in 2011.¹ As of June 30, 2020, TLM had one church with a membership of 655 in a population of 1,318,000.²

The TLM headquarters office is located in the capital of the country at Do Fomento, Fomento 1, Comoro, Dili; Timor-Leste.³ Also known as East Timor, Timor-Leste occupies the eastern half of an island approximately 700 kilometers northwest of Darwin, Australia.⁴ The western half of the island is known as Timor or Indonesia's East Nusa Tenggara province. The official languages are Tetun-Dili, or Tetum, (local) and Portuguese (colonial) with English and Bahasa (Indonesian) as working languages.⁵ There are also at least fifteen recognized indigenous languages.⁶

Institutions

As SSD's newest country entity, TLM operates a radio station called Hope Channel Timor-Leste 92.3 FM that broadcasts Hope Channel programming eighteen hours per day in Tetum, Indonesian, Portuguese, and English. Hope Channel Timor-Leste initially started as Radio Novo Tiempo and was re-launched as Hope Channel Timor-Leste in 2013 at the TLM headquarters property.

TLM also operates a combined co-educational Adventist elementary and high school called the Timor-Leste Adventist International School (TAIS). In operation as a day school since 2015, it is the only Seventh-day Adventist school in the country. Located at 4 de Setembro, Comoro, Dom Aleixio, Dili, Timor-Leste, it is a mission school serving predominately non-Adventist students. TAIS is accredited by the Ministry of Education of East

Timor.

Organizational History of Timor-Leste Mission

Before TLM was established, Timor-Leste was part of the Nusa Tenggara Mission territory with headquarters in Kupang, Indonesia, at the western end of Timor Island.

The Adventist work in Timor-Leste was officially organized in 2009 as the East Timor Attached Field (ETAF) under the auspices of the SSD.⁷ It had one church with a membership of 306.⁸ Custodio L. Pereira became ETAF's director, the only leader holding a ministerial credential in ETAF at the time. He was a Brazilian missionary and ordained pastor who had been sent to help develop the work in the region with his family in 2001. Additionally, in 2009, there were two official credentialed missionaries: Wilma Kainde and Hengki Kambey, the latter who also served as the ETAF secretary-treasurer.⁹

In late 2010, Luc Sabot, the ADRA country director, served as the acting ETAF director¹⁰ until January 2011. Wesley Szamko, a Canadian missionary who had been serving in Cambodia, arrived with his family in March 2011 to serve as the field president.¹¹ This attached field was renamed and reorganized in 2011. Initially renamed the Timor-Leste Adventist Mission, SSD officially decided to use the Timor-Leste Mission name before its September 2011 inauguration,¹² although some church publications have since erroneously used the name Timor-Leste Adventist Mission. Budi Dharmadi served as TLM's first secretary-treasurer.¹³ Sabot and Szamko held ministerial credentials while Budi Dharmadi, Anita Sabot (wife of Luc Sabot), and Gilda Ivonne Szamko (wife of Wesley Szamko) held missionary credentials.¹⁴ There was one church with a membership of 459.¹⁵

At the time, there was no registration for religious organizations and very few religious groups outside of the Catholic Church had been unofficially recognized by the government. The Adventist Church in Timor-Leste often faced issues of religious freedom, prejudice, and violence in a climate where the country was still developing its own laws and understanding of itself after a twenty-four-year war.¹⁶

There was increased need for local leadership, member-driven evangelism, the reestablishment of ADRA Timor-Leste, and the establishment of a full elementary school.¹⁷ With an overwhelming amount of work to be done, TLM leaders strategically focused the following five focal areas: elevating the reputation of the Adventist Church, local leader development, infrastructure development, preventative health education, and Adventist education.

Local Leader Development

After 2000, church membership grew largely through the work of young Adventist converts who were sent as volunteers throughout the country. However, as most married or were sent abroad for Adventist education, there were few active volunteer missionaries remaining by the mission's inauguration in 2011. Without enough volunteer missionaries, intense persecution and societal pressures caused the numerous satellite groups

started throughout the country to dwindle. Few students returned to Timor-Leste, and those who did often chose to work in higher-paying NGOs.

After visiting members and observing the work throughout the country, TLM leaders determined to begin rebuilding from the foundation. They identified potential local Bible workers and leaders, holding monthly meetings in which all the workers in a specific region would gather. TLM representatives would collect tithes and offerings, hear reports, provide church leadership training, and teach workers what needed to be done for the next month's focus for the implemented cycle of evangelism. Seminars were held to develop church leaders, clerks, and treasurers. The two existing licensed pastors began to be prepared for ordination while the officers searched for additional help from abroad. Students with potential were recruited to be sent to Adventist colleges and universities outside the country for degrees in ministry and education.

During this time, the Bible, Ellen White's writings, the Sabbath School lesson, Bible studies, and other materials were available only in Portuguese, Bahasa Indonesia, and English. As most members could not understand Portuguese nor English, and the youth could not understand Bahasa Indonesia, TLM began to translate materials into Tetun and to create its own materials. This was challenging as Tetun had not yet been standardized as a language.

As the number of local Adventist leaders and materials grew, baptisms resumed and increased. In terms of progress, leaders witnessed a spiritual revival and increased missionary zeal among new members coming into the church as well as returning members. Inaciu da Kosta, the first Timorese Adventist pastor, was ordained to the gospel ministry on June 15, 2013,¹⁸

Infrastructure Development

Lack of adequate infrastructure was also an issue for the TLM. Churches, functional housing, a school, a rebuilt radio station and tower, and other infrastructure were needed throughout the country. The lack of resources, skilled workers, property laws, and clear development regulations made this even more difficult.

SSD allocated money for TLM officer housing in 2011, since the existing TLM housing was limited to one residence and most officers had to rent homes off-campus. Even with plans and a location approved in 2012, the construction that was expected to take one year took three years due to denied building permits, labor uprisings, land disputes, and challenges obtaining supplies. As housing was completed, it enabled progress elsewhere. The money previously used for housing rental fees was released for other projects, the president's house on the TLM property became the TLM office, and the former annex buildings were turned into Adventist Volunteer Service (AVS) teacher housing and classrooms for the new Timor-Leste Adventist International School (TAIS).

Other infrastructure development included renovation of existing church buildings and missionary housing, the rebuilding of the radio station and tower, a new church building in Baucau, and the establishment of a building fund for church buildings in four provinces. Much was accomplished through the generosity of donations from abroad and from local church members.

Preventative Health Education

The TLM supported a small primary care clinic that operated for a short period of time. While there was strong interest in the community, the lack of infrastructure ultimately resulted in its closure. With space being prioritized for TAIS classrooms in 2015, the TLM chose to focus mostly on health education and preventative care. In conjunction, the TLM trained local Bible workers and members in medical missionary work.

Development of Adventist Education

From the beginning, a sustainable Adventist school system was an integral part of the TLM and the SSD strategic plans for the Adventist church in Timor-Leste. An Adventist education option was needed because Adventist students faced great challenges with Sabbath observance and mandatory Saturday classes. In a country whose population is ninety-eight percent Catholic, Saturday classes are mandatory for all levels of education.¹⁹ Adventist students faced persecution²⁰ and even expulsion²¹ for attending church instead of school on Saturday.²² Adventist parents, church members, and the TLM leaders saw the increasing need for a full-fledged Adventist elementary and high school.²³ It would also provide a quality educational alternative to the often overcrowded public schools for the Timorese people.²⁴ One Adventist family prayed for more than ten years for a full-fledged Adventist school.²⁵

First Steps

With no qualified teachers available among Adventist church members in Timor-Leste, the TLM's first effort to start an English-language school was an English pre-school/ESL program in September 2013. Led by an Adventist Volunteer Society (AVS) teacher from the Philippines, Weelunah Barro Habaradas, the intention was to prepare future students for full-time elementary studies in English. Miss Habaradas served for two years beginning in April 2013.

TLM leaders not only needed to recruit qualified staff from abroad, but also needed ways to effectively recruit students. During the May 2015 SSD mid-year meetings in the Philippines, Szamko heard of a Filipino couple, Janette and Manuel Loñoza, who pioneered a successful community literacy program for under-served children in the area. After observing one of their programs, he felt their program could be the bridge to change existing attitudes and help a school start well.

The Loñozas accepted an Adventist Volunteer Services call and by late June, they and their young son were in Dili. They began making friends in the village where they found a home. The next month, they and the TLM's One Year in Mission (OYIM) youth offered regular game times for the children. Lastly, Janette Loñoza, assisted by Maria dos Santos Morais and others from the OYIM team, began a free ESL program for the children. Modeled on the literacy program the Loñozas created in the Philippines, it was very popular.

Beginning of TAIS

In September 2015, the Timor-Leste Adventist International School (TAIS) was launched. The acronym, TAIS, is also the Tetun name for the traditional cloth worn in Timor-Leste as a symbol of belonging and given in respect and friendship.²⁶ Founding staff included Mae Rhea Whitty from Canada as the principal/mixed-grade teacher, Stephanie Haddad from the United States as a one-year AVS first-grade teacher, Janette Loñoza from the Philippines as a two-year AVS kindergarten/ESL teacher, and Angelina Rangel from the Dili Seventh-day Adventist Church as the kindergarten/ESL teaching assistant, who had also served as an assistant since the days of Escola Adventista, the preschool that existed for a time before the English-language school.

As the rest of the TAIS staff arrived, they began preparations to launch the school, including completion of the school's organization, advertising, assembly of new furniture, renovations, and curriculum preparation. The staff also visited potential students, while church members promoted TAIS to those they knew. It was decided to advertise the school with a booth in Timor Plaza, the country's first shopping mall. The response was overwhelmingly positive, and within a few hours the remaining student spots filled. The new elementary school started with enthusiasm, which has not diminished.

A New Facility

Several sites were considered for a school over the years, but no adequate site was found within the available budget. TLM leaders decided to start the school on the existing TLM headquarters property while continuing to search for a suitable site.²⁷ Thus, the original location was on grounds of the TLM office headquarters at Do Fomento, Formento 1, Comoro, Dili, Timor-Leste.

TAIS' summer program combined with its international curriculum, individual student focus, and small class sizes²⁸ proved so attractive that enrollment quickly grew beyond TAIS' goal of twelve students on opening day. Instead, TAIS opened on September 28, 2015, with a total of thirty-five students in its English preparatory, kindergarten, first grade, and multigrade classes.²⁹

TAIS used the Fomento Seventh-day Adventist church children's Sabbath School room for the kindergarten classroom on weekdays. It was a narrow room that could fit fifteen small wooden tables. Grade 1 and the multigrade students shared the former women's ministries room in a separate building on the TLM grounds.

The building was an old room made of equal parts concrete and native tree fronds. The floor was cement. There was no playground, library, or even benches in waiting areas. For assemblies and other programs, they used the Fomento Seventh-day Adventist church located on the TLM property.

Regardless, the first year was so successful that enrollment for the second year almost doubled, from thirty-five to sixty students. That next year, a United Nations (UN) tent, left over from the years that UN peacekeeping troops were stationed in Dili, was repurposed for additional classrooms.

In 2016, Szamko was appointed the SSD Global Mission director and long-time missionary Raymond C. House was named the TLM president. House and his family had previously served as missionaries in the Marshall Islands. They arrived in Dili in September 2016. House and da Kosta continued the strong support of TAIS by the TLM and the local church.

In January 2017, Peter Koolik, an advisor to the General Conference for Adventist global building projects, began guiding the TAIS building project with notable results.³⁰ In 2018, TAIS finally found a beautiful property for the school campus. After many challenges, God miraculously paved the way for obtaining the ownership of the current property. Before the Christmas school break in December, TAIS had its open house at the new property. Leaders and staff spent the Christmas break setting up classrooms in existing buildings and moving the school to the new property. Classes were resumed in the new facility in January 2019.

By the 2019-2020 school year, TAIS had grown to 150 students and outgrown the existing buildings on the new property. Thus, the General Conference, SSD, and TAIS partnered in the construction of much-needed new classrooms, an auditorium, and an administration building. Koolik led two mission trips (one in June 22-July 2, 2018, and one in March 2019) to Timor-Leste to build the ten classrooms.³¹ The building project expanded the TAIS property from the one house and two surplus United Nations tents originally used as classrooms to a multi-building expansion on TAIS' additional property next to the school.

Due to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, TAIS ended the school year early and thus leaders anticipated that the 2020-21 enrollment would be negatively impacted. They credit God's faithfulness in providing an even greater increase in students when classes began in August 2020 as enrollment increased by almost 100 students.

TAIS was able to accommodate this increase because the Koolik mission trip team had completed the major work just days before the COVID lockdown began in March 2020, and a local crew was able to complete the finishing touches before the re-opening day in August. On September 27, 2020, TAIS celebrated its fifth anniversary with the theme "Blessed Beyond Measure."

TAIS received Ministry of Education accreditation in February 2021 after a challenging two-year process and is now recognized by the government as a legally operating school per its guidelines for international schools.

Other Milestones

In terms of local leader development, in February 2019, Sebastiao Pinto became the second Timorese Adventist pastor to be ordained.³²

While the TLM focused on the new construction at TAIS in 2019, plans for 2020 were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The border with Indonesia was closed on March 19, 2020, as a preventative measure even though the first COVID-19 case was not confirmed until the next day. Stringent responses quickly followed. Schools suspended classes, gatherings were restricted to five people, a state of emergency was declared, and other protocols were enacted on March 20, 2020.³³ A few foreign TAIS teachers were able to leave on rare repatriation flights over the next two months; however, the majority of the TAIS and TLM staff remained due to travel challenges or because they lived locally.

The COVID-19 protocols enabled the country to maintain a low number of COVID cases for the rest of 2020,³⁴ while TLM leaders focused on nurturing members, first via the available technology and later with other methods per government guidelines. This resulted in membership increases and baptisms more than doubling from the start of 2019 to the end of 2020.³⁵

Adhering to the TLM's long-term plans, the Adventist development in Los Palos continued at a slow but steady rate. The goal was to open an Adventist school in Los Palos in August 2020 under the direction of experienced missionary Weelunah Barro Habaradas, who had returned to Timor-Leste to work at TAIS in April 2019.³⁶ However, she was diagnosed with cancer in July 2020 and the next month had to be medevacked home to the Philippines, where she passed away in April 2021.³⁷ At the time of writing, there remains a great need for Adventist teachers and missionaries with Habaradas' dedication and commitment to help open Adventist schools in various parts of Timor-Leste.

Adventist members and facilities were impacted by extensive flooding beginning April 2, 2021.³⁸ More than 11,000 people were displaced to shelters and others to private homes.³⁹ ADRA Timor-Leste led in the Church's response with assistance from the TLM and Fomento Seventh-day Adventist Church volunteers.⁴⁰

As of 2021, progress was being made among rural communities in mountainous areas through branch Sabbath Schools and community health programs.

Vision, Mission, and Strategic Plan

The Timor-Leste Mission seeks to expand its presence in the country through education and media with a focus on local leadership development and clear and simple reproducible strategies for discipleship movement. Education, Discover Bible Reading Care Groups, and health education continue to be part of the TLM's strategic plan for the future.⁴¹

List of Presidents

Custodio L. Pereira (2009-2010),⁴² Luc Sabot, *Acting* (2010),⁴³ Wesley Szamko (2011–2016),⁴⁴ Raymond C. House (2016-Present).

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