

## BRAZIL VISIT REPORT

### Amazonian realities



This photo is of a delicious, fruit and nut based drink in the *Waku Sese* coffee shop, known as the Starbucks of the Amazon. I am sure you can see the similarities! *Waku Sese* is among the thriving businesses and impressive shopping malls that you can visit in the Amazonian city of Manaus. It is the historic capital city of the Amazon region in Brazil with a population of over two million people. It is a well-developed city, with the infrastructure that you would expect from a city in one of the most developed economies in Latin America.

Yet not far from the city, and along the Amazonian Black River, are indigenous communities that have little if no contact with city life, no infrastructure and little or no support from the state.

**When:** February 2020

**Where:** Brazil, Amazon Mission Region, Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro District

**Who:** The Methodist Church in Brazil

**Purpose:**

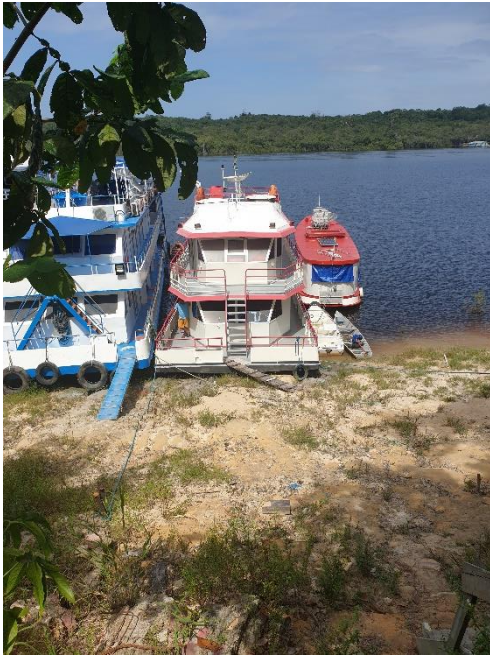
Support vice president designate Carolyn Lawrence in exploring the themes of church growth and evangelism



The Black River and the city



The Black River and riverside indigenous communities



The Hospital Mission Boat



Left: Carolyn Lawrence, vice president designate  
Right: Superintendent Revd Max Maia

The Amazon Missionary Region is one of the Methodist Church’s in Brazil’s newest district regions, and is a symbol of the expansion of the Methodist church across Brazil. The region is growing both in Manaus and in the Amazon interior, among riverside indigenous communities where new Christian disciples are being made and are growing in their faith. The approach the region uses is different according to the context. Carolyn Lawrence will be sharing much more with the Connexion throughout her vice presidential year, so I will try not to say too much!

We had the great privilege of visiting the region’s Hospital mission boat, which takes a team of medical personal, evangelists and children’s workers to isolated indigenous communities along the Black River 6 times a year. Revd Max Maia, the Superintendent in Manaus, and Bishop Fabio Cosme, the regional Bishop, shared testimonies with us of how this ministry was touching people’s lives with the gospel and medical care. Over 10,000 people in these communities have heard the gospel and some have accepted Jesus as their Lord and saviour. Some Methodist communities have been established. The basic health concerns of these

communities were being met by the doctors, dentists and medicine offered free of charge. The stories they shared were a wonderful testimony of how the Methodist Church in Brazil is able to bridge the gap between social action and evangelism.



In Manaus city, the goal of preaching the good news to all people and church expansion remains the same, but the strategy is different. Pastor Max Maia and his wife Pastor Jessica Maia, planted a church in a shopping mall a year ago. They started with six people, and are now a church of 30, mainly new believers! As you can see from the photos, it is quite different from a traditional Methodist church, but it is relevant and attracts people who would usually go to shop at the mall. This is a church, which is “all things for all people”.

Left photo: Carolyn Lawrence with our interpreter Bruno and the church’s banner in the shopping mall.  
Right photo: Bishop Fabio Cosme preaching to the congregation

## SAU PAULO

In the middle of our programme in Brazil, we visited the Methodist Church in Brazil's Sao Paulo headquarters. We spent some time hearing about the mission priorities of the church, which are six fold:

- 1- Stimulate evangelical zeal in the lives of every Methodist and in each local church;
- 2- Revitalize the missionary charisma of clergy and lay people in various aspects of mission;
- 3- Promote discipleship in the light of salvation, sanctification and service;
- 4- Strengthen the identity, connectedness and unity of the church;
- 5- Implement actions that involve the church in the care and preservation of the environment;
- 6- Promote greater commitment and the church's response to the outcry of the urban challenge



Carolyn Lawrence with National Sunday School Coordinators

One of the ways in which the church works out its mission is through its Sunday School materials and resources. Created age appropriately, these resources are used to enable Biblical discussion and teaching on a Sunday morning, where congregations split into different age categories and grow in their faith and in fellowship. Corporate Sunday worship would normally take place later on in the morning or in the evening. It is part of the church's growth strategy, where growth in this case means growing in discipleship and in passion for God.

Bishop João Carlos Lopes, one of the church's regional Bishops, gave us a thought provoking explanation of what church growth and evangelism means for the Methodist Church Brazil. For our Brazilian Methodist friends, evangelism can happen anywhere, and does not necessarily lead to church growth or new church communities. Church growth is both qualitative and quantitative, where established churches grow in numbers and members grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. Church expansion on the other hand, is the way in which the church is planting churches in areas where there is no Methodist presence, such as in parts of the Amazon region. This is a helpful explanation and an insight into the strategy of our partner church, who now has over 270,000 members in Brazil, but only 13% of Methodist present in Brazilian cities, as the pie chart on the right demonstrates.



## CHURCH GROWTH IN RIO DE JANEIRO



After a meeting with Bishop Paulo Rangel in the Rio de Janeiro District office, we were whisked away to start an intense but inspiring programme of visiting churches and taking part in outreach ministries. We learnt a number of things during our visit:

### **1. Cell groups cause church growth**

The Rio District has a strong cell group growth structure. Bishop Paulo Rangel strengthened this ministry when he was elected as Bishop, and put in place monthly cell groups for the circuit ministers, and periodic times throughout the year when all the ministers of the Rio District go on retreat together to be refreshed and strengthened in the ministry.

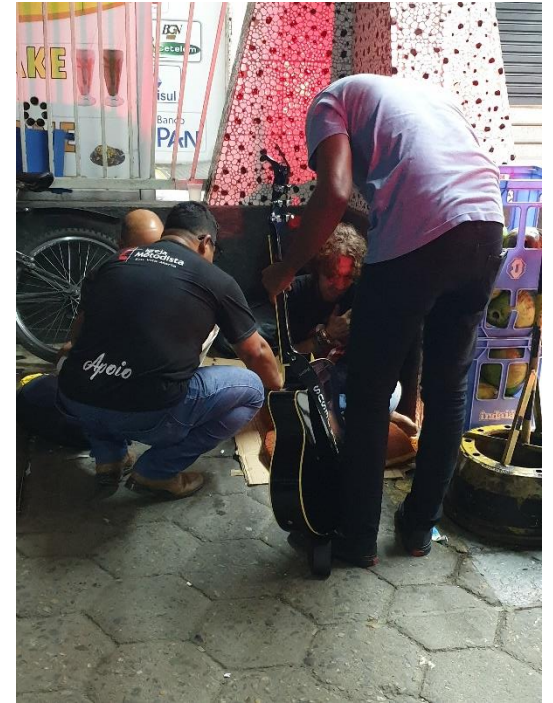
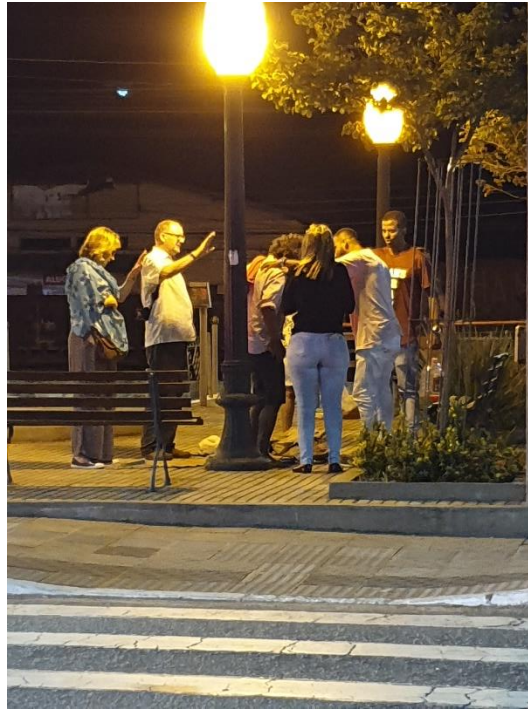
He feels that it is imperative to pastor the pastors to enable them to minister the 'flock' more effectively.

The cell groups in Santa Cruz Methodist Church, getting together to worship God. The people standing up in orange are a cell group!



### **2. Evangelism is unpredictable, exciting and loving!**

We were privileged to spend time with the Barra Mansa Methodist Circuit, a circuit that is 135 kilometres from Rio de Janeiro city. The churches here are very active in street evangelism, and we were blessed to go out on the streets with members of a church after an evening service. The church prepared a large pot of hot, filling soup, and proceeded to go out into their community. Members were split into several groups, and were sent on their way to start speaking to people and offering to pray for them. The first place we went to was to a Catholic cemetery, where these evangelists spoke to family members of the recently deceased. They offered words of hope and the opportunity to receive prayer. Two people even committed their lives to Christ! We then went on to speak to road workers, construction workers, the homeless, and even the local police! Many said that they had once committed their lives to Christ, but had fallen away from their relationship with God and from church. As we witnessed tears, loving, sincere embraces and words of hope of the love of Christ being offered and received, I was again left with a sense that the gospel really is the hope of God for all people, and that all people, regardless of their situation, deserve to hear these words of hope and life.



### 3. People within the church are very hungry for a touch of God



As I accompanied Carolyn to her preaching engagements at two churches in Rio de Janeiro city, it was clear that church members were hungry for God's presence and input into their lives. At the altar call for prayer and healing, at least half of the members of both churches stood up to receive prayer. We witnessed this hunger in a church based in a middle-income community, and in a church located in the first favela ever built in Rio, *Providencia* Favela.

This hunger for God may also be why so many Methodist Christians in Brazil feel called to ministry, and why the church in Brazil not only has a growing and expanding church, but also growth in the number of lay and ministerial leaders. We witnessed this growth during an ordination service where at least 30 presbyters were ordained. It was an exuberant occasion. Some of these ministers will eventually feel called to work overseas as mission partners, as a number of Brazilian Methodists already do. It was so encouraging to see the passion for God and for building God's Kingdom in these ministers and in congregations, especially as the Methodist Church in Britain's Newcastle District prepares to receive a Brazilian mission partner in September this year.



Ordinands, left and right photos



In conclusion, this was a fruitful vice presidential visit, where Carolyn was able to see a growing and 'expanding' church in action in a variety of contexts: urban and rural, middle income and impoverished. We are able to learn more about some of the strategies used to strengthen church growth through cell groups. We were able to experience how evangelism in some local churches is done. We were able to observe how church expansion is being done contextually. Crucially, we were blessed and privileged to meet so many Brazilian Methodists who love the Lord Jesus deeply and are passionate about sharing Jesus with others.

