

A History of the Mission Work supported by the Canadian Reformed Churches in Western Canada: 1951-2000

by Rick Baartman

1951: Classis West

In April of 1951, at the second synod of the newly-formed “Canadian Reformed Church” federation, one of the churches raised the question of how we can fulfill our calling in mission. The decision made was that for the near term, support would be given to the Dutch sister churches for their mission work. The intention, however, was clear: eventually, the Canadian Reformed Churches should strike out on their own.

Only 4 years later, after a meeting of “Classis West” held on Nov. 24 1955 in Edmonton, the churches of Western Canada held an extra meeting to discuss the possibility of starting their own mission work. All churches voiced their willingness to cooperate in this work. It was decided informally to ask the churches of New Westminster (now Surrey “Maranatha”) and Aldergrove (now Cloverdale) to investigate the possibility of starting either an internal Canadian mission field among the “Indians or Eskimos”, or a foreign field. Some of the possibilities suggested were: New Guinea, South Africa, Western Borneo, Central Africa, South America, Surinam.

In February 1956, the consistory of New Westminster on advice of its Mission Committee, decides that South Africa is the best choice. The reasons for going to a foreign country were that mission in Canada has already been done by Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches, and governmental permission was foreseen as problematic. The reason for preferring South Africa over the other possibilities was that with Afrikaans being close to Dutch, there would be less of a language barrier, and work could therefore start most expeditiously. Some enquiries had been made to Monte Alegre in the state of Paraná, Brazil, but there was no response.

This decision of New Westminster was communicated to the churches of Classis West. The estimated ongoing cost to support one missionary was \$6000 per year, but this did not include startup costs.

In the meantime, in April of 1957, Classis East decides on New Guinea as the foreign mission field, and asks the Toronto church to be sending church. In October of that year, the churches of Classis East ask the West churches to also support this work. All agree tentatively to do so.

However, in the same week, the New Westminster mission committee advises consistory that the eventual goal should be to become a sending church independent of the work of the Toronto church. Further, they also decide that funding for mission work is to come from the church budget, not from the weekly collections in the church service.

In February of 1963, the 3 mission committees of the Fraser Valley (Abbotsford, Cloverdale, New Westminster), in a combined meeting decide to ask the New Westminster consistory to send a missionary on behalf of the churches of Classis West. New Westminster agrees and sends letters to all churches of Classis West stating this intention. The churches agree with the proposal. Letters are also

sent to the churches of Classis East stating their willingness to continue support for the work of Toronto. But Toronto responds by generously releasing the West churches from the obligation to support their mission work.

1965: New Westminster as Sending Church

By October of 1965, all the Canadian Reformed Churches had agreed on the scheme whereby Classis East churches support Toronto's work as sending church, and Classis West churches support New Westminster. In order to keep the membership informed, New Westminster would send a bulletin named "Mission News" to all the supporting churches, every 3 months. The first issue was published in April, 1966.

The consistory asked the mission committee to re-open the question of where to start foreign mission work. The preference expressed by consistory was that a field be found where the gospel had never before been preached. The choices were narrowed down to South Africa and Brazil. A Dutch colony in Monte Alegre (Paraná) had had a minister (Rev. Los) from 1956 to 1965 and responded very enthusiastically to requests for more information. Largely because of this response, it was eventually decided that Brazil would be the mission field.

The brothers in Monte Alegre advised that if New Westminster wanted to minister to Brazilian natives, the best place would be in the province of Mato Grosso, in SW Brazil. They further suggested that they could send two of their members on a two-week fact-finding trip to this province, for a total cost of \$500. This suggestion was relayed to New Westminster consistory and they agreed. And so, on May 18, 1967, Br. K. Sikkema, and another brother embark. The second brother was the principal of the Reformed school in Monte Alegre; his name is Apko Nap.

The report prepared by these brothers made clear that mission work among the "untouched" indigenous people would be very difficult. There would be a language barrier; tribes each had their own language, which had no written component. Some tribes were aggressive and dangerous. Over the 400 years since discovery, the indigenous population had shrunk from 4 million to just a few 100,000. As a result, they were being protected; obtaining government permission to work among them would be difficult.

The brothers also advised to "*send along with the missionary at least a doctor and a nurse. This would give the mission work a good reputation with the authorities. Several of the Presbyterian mission posts are equipped with hospitals and schools, while the missionaries often are engaged in agricultural work or running a sawmill or brick factory. This is done partly to teach the people to support themselves, partly to financially help the mission work*".

In spite of the difficulties foreseen, the mission Committee decides to proceed with a proposal to consistory to choose as mission field the indigenous people in the province of Mato Grosso, Brazil. The reason is stated in the minutes of the meeting of September 19, 1967: "*On the other hand it is considered that mission is a matter of faith. There is a command to preach the gospel to the end of the earth...*". The consistory adopts the proposal and directs the committee to begin inquiries to find a minister to call for the work.

Ads are placed in the major Dutch reformed periodicals, but there is very little success in attracting any interest among Dutch ministers to this work. After discussions with the church at Assen and especially with Rev. D.K. Wielenga, missiology professor at Kampen, it is decided that the wisest course of action is to first send a missionary to one of the cities in Mato Grosso and then work from there rather than to send a missionary directly to the jungles of Mato Grosso. The chosen city was Campo Grande. The consistory accepted this revised proposal in January, 1969.

It should be noted that New Westminster's approach was quite different from the approach of Assen. The Dutch had decided it was best to reach out to the leaders, or future leaders, in a nation in order to be effective to more people. They therefore chose a larger urban centre, and a good part of the initial work was done by reaching out to the students in secondary education. New Westminster, however, was seeking more the areas of unreached people, in particular the South American Indians. Monte Alegre convinced New Westminster that this should be no problem. Through contacts with Presbyterians in the state of Mato Grosso, particularly Dourados, they felt the opportunities were there.

1970: Brazil, Rev. VanSpronsen

There were some unsuccessful attempts to obtain a missionary from the Netherlands, but then in early 1970, the consistory calls Rev. C. VanSpronsen who at that time is pastor of the church in Carman, Manitoba. He accepts the call. In his words, *"I shared the Consistory's opinion and goal to seek work in virgin territory since already at that time we saw many opportunities in our own nation as well and therefore felt it would only be justified and a matter of good stewardship to only go abroad if there were indeed such unreached areas"*. He is installed May 31, 1970.

Rev. VanSpronsen then began a course of studies to prepare himself for the work in Brazil. During the 4 months that he is studying, visas are arranged and additional information is gathered. As a result, doubt is cast on the appropriateness of the choice of Campo Grande as starting point, and it is decided to give Rev. VanSpronsen an "open mandate"; he is to gather the information and then decide upon the best place to start. The VanSpronsen family leaves on Sept. 23. The first stop is Campinas in the state of São Paulo, where he and Sr. VanSpronsen are to attend a mission school to learn Portuguese.

During breaks from studies, Rev. VanSpronsen, accompanied by Br. A. Nap, tours possible mission areas. In his words:

Together with br. A. Nap we traveled to Dourados to meet the Presbyterian minister there. However, it appeared that in Mato Grosso do Sul much work was already being done. If we wanted to work in areas of unreached people we should look more in the areas of Mato Grosso do Norte, towards the Amazon region. In that area there were still a number of South American Indian tribes that were not reached. So some time later we again set out, this time with a presbyterian seminarian from Campinas. We drove well into the interior to visit a number of remote places. It's a good thing I had a Jeep considering the condition of the roads there. The unreached people were there alright, for example the Xavantes. The town of Xavantina as well as Aguas Belas would have provided good opportunities but the Brazilian government would not allow anyone to settle in those areas with the purpose of introducing a new religion. We were somewhat discouraged through all this but at the same time saw the Lord's guiding hand in everything.



*Location of the Xavantes (square) in the state of Mato Grosso, Brazil.
Also indicated is Curitiba and Chapecó (square dots).*

So it becomes clear to Rev. VanSpronsen that work in Mato Grosso will not be practical. He visits many possible locations around Brazil and finally narrows down to two: Chapecó in the province of Santa Catarina (south of Mato Grosso), and a number of fishing villages in the province of Pernambuco in northeast Brazil. Chapecó is chosen at first, one of the main reasons being that it was within driving distance from Curitiba where the Dutch missionaries were working, making regular contact possible.

Rev. VanSpronsen mentions to consistory that in either case, the mission work would be far different in nature from that done for example in New Guinea. In September of 1971, Rev. VanSpronsen and his family move to the city of Chapecó. At that time, this town was developing very quickly. Rev. VanSpronsen discovers on closer inspection that there are many churches there: Lutheran, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Seventh Day Adventist, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Four-Square Gospel, etc. The Presbyterian church in particular used to have around 300 members, but many had become unfaithful to the point the church was near to becoming unviable. Rev. VanSpronsen could do work calling people to repentance: there was much work to do, but it would not be very different in nature from mission work that could be carried out in any number of Canadian towns, and therefore the extra expense of performing such work in a far distant land seemed not to be warranted.

1972: São José da Coroa Grande



Left: The provinces of the North-East. Right: Villages between Recife and Maceió. São José da Coroa Grande is on the border between Pernambuco and Alagoas.

While in Pernambuco, Rev. VanSpronsen had met up with several Presbyterian brothers and sisters who had strongly recommended the coastal areas South of Recife which they considered near virgin territory, and no Presbyterian work was being done in that area. That had been one of the criteria all along: not to enter areas where Presbyterian Churches were present or conducting mission work since this was felt as duplicating the reformed witness.

The people contacted were Olin Coleman in Garanhuns and Ann Pipkin in Recife, who both thought São José da Coroa Grande (in Pernambuco, 130 km south of Recife) was a good starting point. From there the mission work could radiate outwards along the coast since there was no Presbyterian witness in any of those areas, nor much of anything else, the people being mostly in the grip of spiritism.

After intensive discussions between consistory and Rev. VanSpronsen, it is decided to abandon Chapecó and move to Pernambuco. So in April of 1972, the VanSpronsen family moves to São José da Coroa Grande; into one of the many empty summer townhouses by the beach.

São José is a small town of about 5,000 inhabitants, most of whom are illiterate. There are also many summer homes owned by “upper class” people who come on weekends in the summer, swelling the town to almost twice normal size. Most residents consider themselves Roman Catholic, but few attend regularly. There is also an “Assembly of God” (Pentecostal) church with about 100 members.

There were no contacts in that town nor the area, so how to start? Rev. VanSpronsen relates:

The people were friendly and outgoing. Walking along the beach and through town, talking to the people, being willing to learn from them all about life in the North-East, ocean, fishing, weather, plants etc. they would at some point ask: "And what brings you here? What work do you do?" They could hardly imagine that anyone wanted to live in São José if obviously he could afford to live somewhere else.

Contacts grew and very soon we were able to start a Sunday School in a rented warehouse which in a very short time brought many children, young people and soon parents as well. Illiteracy was a problem but at the same time an opportunity. Through Ann Pipkin I was familiar with the Laubach Literacy Course and started teaching reading and writing in the homes of some of our contacts, holding devotions there at the same time. Soon we could start Sunday evening services and before long we were able to purchase property on the road which was to become the new entrance into town. A house was built and shortly after a simple churchbuilding as well.

The surprising element always was that there were no difficulties attracting people. The major concern was how to follow it up properly.

What were our early goals? Preaching the Gospel and establishing Brazilian Churches, run by Brazilians, becoming independent, self-supporting etc. From the start we realized that they did not have to be clones of the Canadian Reformed Churches but at the same time we should not ignore our Reformed heritage and require them to "re-invent the wheel". Carry over what was beneficial and avoid what could become cumbersome but in the end the decision would be theirs, also with respect to the doctrinal standards.

Within 4 months there is already a core group of 12 adults and 20 children who worship faithfully, so plans are made to start evening catechetical classes.

On August 11, 1972, br. & sr. John and Ardis Kuik joined the VanSpronsens, sponsored by Mission Aid. From the start the principle had been that workers were to be sent "two by two", but the Kuiks were to serve primarily as Mission Aid workers. The people of São José are very poor; not being able to afford for example the equivalent of one dollar for life-saving medicine. This means that the mission work inevitably becomes partly a social work. Br. Kuik is an experienced farmer and general handyman and sr. Kuik is a qualified practical nurse. The Kuiks also helped out with the Sunday School, Bible classes, services and filling in during the VanSpronsens' furloughs.



The manse in January 1974



Templo da Igreja Reformada

By December of 1972, the missionary family is living in their own (the sending church's) house.

In May 1974, the church building of the Igreja Reformada do Brasil is inaugurated in São José. By mid-1975, church attendance is around 40 adults each Sunday, and 50-55 children plus 11 adults attend Sunday School. Bible study is attended regularly by a core of close to 30 adults and a number of older children.

During the church service of Sunday afternoon, January 26, 1975, five women publicly profess their faith and they and 6 children are accepted as members. Two of the children had never been baptized and this is performed in the same service. On the first Sunday in February, the Lord's Supper is celebrated with 9 communicant members partaking. By the end of that year, 4 men and one more woman had become members, for a total of 11 communicant and 10 non-communicant members.

Expansion Plans of the '70s

How was the work to continue? Rev. VanSponsen:

From the start we did have the vision of expanding from out of São José. Barreiros was on our mind, we made regular trips to Abreu, Varzeas de Una, and Maragogi. We had hoped that the immediate surrounding villages of Abreu, Varzeas de Una, Peroba and so on would be good opportunities for evangelism by the local people from São José. Recife was not so much on our minds because of the presence of many Presbyterian Churches and preaching points, strongly supported by the Presbyterian seminary in Recife. Bear in mind that at that time, the IPB was still quite conservative and reformed. Then there were also the IPB Independente as well as the Fundamentalista.

At the same time we realized you could not think of the interior without Recife. People who, also through the gospel, moved upward would find much better opportunities and employment in Recife and the time would come that they would need to get organized there as well.

1978: Revs. Boersema & Meijer

In 1973, for various reasons, some of them family-related, the VanSpronsens gave notice of wishing to repatriate. The consistory set up a calling committee with the goal of sending not one, but two missionaries to the NE Brazilian mission field. After many enquiries and some unsuccessful calls, in 1977 Rev. Ralph Boersema of Calgary, Alberta accepts the call, and in 1978, Rev. P.K. Meijer of Noordbergum, th Netherlands accepts his call.

In July 1978, Rev. and Sr. VanSpronsen, and their 5 children return to Canada. The Kuiks remained and could perform necessary mission-related tasks during the 6-month gap between the departure of the VanSpronsens and the arrival of the Meijers.

The Boersemas in Brazil

In the spring of 1977, when they received the call for work on the mission field in Brazil, the Boersemas had three children. In September Rev. Boersemahe went to the Netherlands for 3 months to do studies in missions. This was followed by one month of additional studies in Philadelphia in January of 1978.

The process of application for visas for Brazil took a long time. While the Boersemas waited in Surrey, Rev. Boersema preached and fulfilled other pastoral duties after Rev. Van Beveren had moved to Burlington and Maranatha was vacant.

After many months of waiting for visas without success, it was decided that, following the lead of the Rev. Meijer family, the Boersemas would go to Brazil as tourists and apply from there for permanent status. In April 1979, the family went to São José da Coroa Grande. Three times the visa application made in Brazil was denied. Finally, a new application (this time for a temporary missionary visa) was made under new Brazilian legislation which required that the missionary family receive their visas outside Brazil and, in 1982, it was granted. The Boersemas picked up their visa in Toronto while on furlough. When they returned to Brazil, their belongings were shipped down and they were able to set up more permanent housekeeping after almost five years of uncertainty.

The Meijers in Brazil

In 1978, Rev. P.K. Meijer accepts the call to do mission work in Brazil, and already in December, he and his wife arrive there under a tourist visa. When the Boersemas arrive a half year later, the Meijers move to Maragogi to start work there. In 1982, Rev. Meijer introduces the concept of “congregados”: adults who are receiving catechetical instruction. In September of 1984, this bears fruit as 5 adults of Maragogi profess their faith.

In 1989, Rev. Kroeze and family arrive in São José. He has been called by another Canadian Reformed sending church (Hamilton), and this is understood to be a temporary arrangement so that he learns the language and culture while helping Rev. Meijer. At the same time, he is scouting for a location for Hamilton to do their mission work. After 2 years, he leaves for the chosen location: Maceió. This is beneficial for Surrey, as it is within driving distance of São José.

In 1989 also, the Meijers give notice of wishing to repatriate to the Netherlands. In Jan. 1993 the Meijers move to Recife so that Rev. Meijer can work full time on Portuguese Reformed Literature. This work carries on until June 1996, even though the Meijers repatriate to the Netherlands in April 1995. There were 4 target groups for the Reformed literature: Brazilian ministers of the Word; church leaders in general; our mission congregations, and Protestant believers in general with special reference to Presbyterians.

Expansion into “Engenhos”

In 1980 it was decided to also work in small communities of transient workers in the sugar cane fields. The decision had as goal both the expansion of the Gospel to new locations and teaching the congregation in São José to take on more responsibilities, as per the so-called [Nevius method](#). A lady who lived in Itabaiana, daughter of a church member of São José invited Rev. Boersema to start some work there. This invitation was the start of his mission work in rural areas. As well, some work was started in Agua Fria, and Rev. Meijer started some work in Areias, near Maragogi, but this work only went on for a couple of years.

By 1983, members of the church in São José would regularly go with the mission workers to Itabaiana on Sunday afternoons and Thursday evenings for preaching services. This evangelistic work continued for 10 years with always two to six people showing interest. Eventually one man made public profession of faith, but he decided to join the “Assembly of God” a few months later.

In 1993, the work in Itabaiana came to an end. Why did it end? Rev. Meijer:

It was hard to get church life off the ground. The rural population had its own characteristics: low education, lack of discipline, high illiteracy rate, high rate of dependence on others, not being used to take initiatives (mentality of the times of the slavery). More importantly, however, than these facts, was the fact of little or no interest in the Gospel nor real dedication to the Lord; in short, no real signs of new life.

Rev. Boersema:

It might have been better had the church members of São José done more of the evangelizing and teaching, both in Itabaiana and in São José.

Nevertheless, other work was still proceeding. In June 1983, work starts in Barra Grande (north of Maragogi), and by 1985, 3 adults had professed faith there.

Evangelization work of the 80s

Open air evangelistic meetings and week-long campaigns drew much attention and both created good will in the town and led to conversions of people that joined the church. Vacation Bible schools were also blessed and brought new visitors, some of whom eventually became members. These activities were added to those already in place while Rev. Van Spronsen was in São José, effective ministries such as Sunday morning and evening services, Wednesday evening Bible studies, Sunday school, study societies for boys and girls, women and young people, as well as special music evenings and outings for the societies. A particularly important new development was that of dividing the Sunday School into several classes and involving many members as teachers and helpers. This did much to promote spiritual growth. A choir, church dinners, and work days for building maintenance all built up fellowship in the congregation. A men’s study society was started as well as Bible courses offered by extension through a Presbyterian Bible Institute. These courses were followed by several young adults. Eventually, there was also a program of training several brothers to become office bearers. In all of these areas there were frequent setbacks, but the overall picture was one of growth, both in numbers and maturity among the members. There was not yet, however, a strong male leadership, even though, after ten years, there were many more men in the membership than at first.

Education

The Brazilian Christian parents in São José saw the need for better education for their children and a Reformed parental school was started in 1984. It was called the Escola Biblica Crista (Christian Bible School). It first met in the church building with four grades and three teachers. The students were from church families of São José and nearby Maragogi. Because there was an emphasis from the beginning on this school being a parental school, several projects were implemented to raise money for the school. Among the projects were the selling of eggs and the sewing and selling of towels and tablecloths. Slow progress was being made towards self-support for the school as the parents participated actively. However, when inflation became ever worse, Mission Aid decided to help out more financially. Unfortunately, the parents did not continue their efforts and the school became more of a Canadian sponsored project.

Rev. Boersema retires

In 1992, Rev. Boersema became legally blind. He continued to do the mission work with the help of a driver, but after three years concluded that he was only accomplishing about 50% of what he had been doing previously and discussed this with the Mission Board. In 1997 he retired, making the way for the sending church to call another missionary to take his place. The Boersemas remained in Brazil for another three years as Rev. Boersema continued the same work.

In 1995 the congregation of Camaragibe began construction on their own church building. In December of 1998 the first elders were ordained. In the following year a new church work was begun in the Recife suburb of Ibura. The group there met in the home of one of the attending families. They soon “outgrew” the space and, with financial help from Brazilian friends, were able to construct a small building for worship on a neighbouring lot.

In May of 2000 Rev. Ken Wieske arrived with his family to continue the mission work in the Greater Recife area. In June of that year, the Boersemas returned to North America.

Later that year, the International Reformed Theological College was founded and the first online courses were offered in 2001. Rev. Boersema has continued as the president of the College until this writing (2008). He and Mrs. Boersema are now both engaged in this educational ministry, with the help of many others. In 2004 Rev. Boersema had another setback in his vision and is no longer able to read. The Boersemas give much thanks to their heavenly Father for his great wisdom and grace towards them and particularly rejoice in the benefits of modern computer technology, which allows Rev. Boersema to be involved in the administration of the IRTC, to teach courses through the Internet and to complete some theological writing projects.

1981-1995: The Road to Institution

Beginning in 1981, there were meetings of all the men in São José for office-bearer training. By 1985 there were 2 men in full training in São José. This internal training is very important as a tool for institution. There were “dips on the road”. In Feb. 1988, a “provisional Council” was started in São José, but 18 months later, it had to be dissolved. A new one was set up in 1990 covering all three areas: São José, Maragogi, Barra Grande.

However, overall the emphasis put on the office-bearer training was necessary and beneficial to the development of the mission congregations. In 1991, the opinion of the missionaries was that Provisional Council of Maragogi-São José was able to do most of the pastoral and diaconal work. The

Mini-Conference of the sending churches of Assen, Hamilton and Surrey, held in 1991 in Recife, emphasized in its Consensus Statement the training of future office-bearers, as a part of the missionaries' mandate.

The office-bearers' training included: study of the Reformed confessions, study of the Forms of Ordination of Office-bearers, instructions for pastoral visits, discussions on discipline cases, and the practical work itself in the congregations.

What about the future role of the missionary? As the mission field matured, new questions were asked. What is the role of missionary in councils of the new churches? Do the new churches use the Canadian Reformed Church order? What about the confessions? Do they choose say between the "Three forms of unity" and the Westminster Standards?

In April of 1995, a Reformed church, the "Igreja Reformada do Brasil" is instituted, covering the São José and Maragogi and Barra Grande congregations. There was still paucity of officebearers, so it was felt that there were not enough to cover two separately instituted churches. At that time, São José had 40 communicant members, 61 non-communicant. Maragogi and Barra Grande combined had 33 communicant members, 30 non-communicant. Over the years till 1995, there had been 72 congregados, and of these, 37 made profession of faith.

1989: Recife

In 1986 and 1987, several changes in the work were under discussion. One was that Rev. Boersema had, for some time, been seeing the need for more mission studies. His request to be allowed to set aside some time for this was granted and he enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of South Africa. He further received a one-year unpaid leave-of-absence for study which was spent in Philadelphia during the academic year 1988-89.

Another matter under discussion at that time was a proposal to initiate church planting work in the Greater Recife area. In the past, several members and contacts had moved to this capital city and had fallen away. It was also thought to be good to have a church in the city that serves as the hub for communications to all of the state. It was determined that, after Rev. Boersema's year of study, his family would locate in the Recife area. During their absence, a work was started in the home of Adeildo and Lucia Farias, members of the church, who after a number of years in São José, had moved back to Camaragibe (just outside Recife). The Farias family had Sunday School classes in their home. They were helped in their work by Ronaldo Gasparini, a student at the Presbyterian Seminary in Recife, where Rev. Boersema and Rev. Meijer had each previously taught some courses. When the Boersemas returned to Brazil in 1989, they moved to Recife to continue the work there.

In 1991 the young people of all the churches had their first retreat in a rustic campground near Recife. Later, the congregations of São José, Maragogi and Camaragibe also got together for a day of study and fellowship. Such activities continued on a yearly basis with the different churches taking turns hosting and organizing the events.

The work in Camaragibe grew so that the group began to meet in a local school. The congregation began women's and young peoples' Bible Study groups, had vacation Bible school, open-air evangelistic meetings, and other activities like those held in São José.

1993: Rev. Venema

As the time came for the Meijers to repatriate, Maranatha Council began a search for a replacement; first in Canada, then in the Netherlands. Rev. Venema, then a minister of two large congregations in the Netherlands, accepted the call. He was unmarried at that time, but was engaged. He married in the summer of 1993, and in the Fall, was installed as missionary for Maranatha Canadian Reformed Church (Surrey).

Rev. Venema relates:

When my wife Gerry and I arrived on the mission field in December 1993, we first spent half a year in Recife for language training and mission studies in Recife. Then we moved to São José, the congregation where it all began in the beginning of the early seventies. We went to live in São José because this had been recommended by my colleagues. Rev. Boersema had left São José some time before (in 1988), and had opened up a new field in the greater Recife area. Apparently, the people from São José did not appreciate the departure of the Boersema family. Many stopped attending the worship services. The “church of the Canadian” (as the church in São José was known) was without a Canadian missionary and had become a flock without a shepherd. Rev. Meijer, who lived in Maragogi, gave some assistance to the church of São José; however, there were serious concerns. In the beginning of 1993, Rev. Meijer moved to Recife. Some brothers in Maragogi felt that the existence of the church of São José was at stake. For this reason, I guess, the colleagues urged me, almost unanimously, to start my career as a missionary in the Church of São José.

Rev. Venema arrived during a transition period between when the churches were dependent fully upon the leadership of the missionaries and when they were beginning to feel a responsibility to govern and themselves and provide their own pastors. Earlier in 1993, a young person named Flavio had expressed an interest in the ministry and his training began under the supervision of Rev. Boersema and Rev. Meijer. Then in 1995, as noted above, the church was instituted.

So in 1998, the Venemas move to [Japaratinga](#), a village as far south of Maragogi as Maragogi is from São José. Evangelization there yielded little, however, an even smaller village, Barreiras de Boqueirão (not to be confused with the [Barreiros](#) north of São José), was very receptive, and continues as a congregation.

In 2004, Rev. Venema summarized the situation as follows:

Presently there are three councils on our mission field: one in São José, one in Maragogi and one in Recife. Barra Grande has a provisional council. The church of Barreiras has some young male members, but as yet no leaders. That we now have local male leaders is perhaps the most important development that has taken place in the mission field over the past ten years. A related development of interest is that more and more faithful brothers are starting to lead worship services. In the greater Recife area we now have eight worship services each Sunday and in the São José - Maragogi area we have nine worship services each Sunday.

2000: Federation

In 1998 a meeting of representatives of these churches was held in Unaí, in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais. (Unaí is [170 km east of Brasilia](#); it contains a colony of Dutch immigrants.) Among the many matters discussed at this meeting was that of theological training and Rev. Boersema was appointed to a committee that was to develop a proposal about this. With input from the churches, the committee proposed the founding of an online theological college with the participation of sound Reformed instructors from other Reformed and Presbyterian churches. Our students would then no longer attend Presbyterian and Baptist seminaries, but would join together in local study centers with our own missionaries and pastors as mentors, while courses would be provided by the online college, in which our missionaries would have a significant role, as well. In this way, the Brazilian Reformed Churches would supervise the training of their students without having to provide all the teaching.

Another issue discussed at the 1998 meeting was the need for a common “Book of Praise”. The participants discussed a number of proposals. The Church of São José proposed that a committee would evaluate the available Psalms and Hymns. The Church of Recife proposed to sing the hymns using the melody of the Presbyterian Book of Praise. The Church of Colombo asked if Rev. Janssen could continue his work of preparing a selection of Psalms and Hymns. All of the proposals were approved at this meeting, which was more of a conference than a synod.

Two years later on July 5, 2000, delegates of the Reformed Brazilian Churches met in São José and established the Federation of Brazilian Reformed Churches (in Portuguese, the Igrejas Reformadas do Brasil). At this first synod of the Brazilian Reformed Church federation, the delegates decided to establish a committee of five brothers and sisters that received the mandate to prepare and publish a complete Book of Praise. The Book of Praise was to have the following content: Psalms, a selection of hymns (not more than two hundred), the three ecumenical Creeds, the three forms of unity, all the appropriate forms, and the Church Order. In 2002, at the second synod, held in Curitiba, it was decided that a committee, consisting of seven church members, should prepare a complete Book of Praise with all one hundred and fifty Psalms and two hundred hymns. It was also decided that the committee should prepare an interim Book of Praise with sixty Psalms and two hundred hymns.

The establishment of a Brazilian Reformed Church federation is fundamental for their decision making. For many years the missionary churches were dependent on their respective mother churches. All kinds of practical decisions needed appropriate approvals from the Dutch and Canadian councils. The missionaries sent hundreds of reports and letters to the home front seeking approval for various actions. The establishment of a Brazilian church federation changed the entire picture. It effectively transferred decision making authority from the foreign mother churches to the national churches. This development has certainly strengthened the Reformed and Brazilian identity of the Brazilian missionary churches.

The Brazilian Reformed church federation adopted the three ecumenical forms and the three forms of unity (Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, Canons of Dordt) as their doctrinal basis. They decided not to adopt the Confession of faith and the Catechisms of Westminster. The one, and only reason, for not adopting these confessions was that the majority of the delegates did not know these confessions. The Brazilian Reformed Church federation also adopted a church order, based on the well-known Church Order of Dordt. The committee that developed the proposal for a Church Order used, as a starting point, the adapted translation of Rev. Meijer. Synod adopted the proposal with some minor modifications.

The position and authority of both sending churches and of missionaries has changed with the establishment of a church federation in Brazil. When the Brazilian churches established their own federation, they assumed responsibility for their own churches and for all evangelizing and mission

activities in their national territory. This means things have become much easier for the sending churches. The missionary churches are no longer little children who constantly need the supervision of churches abroad. The missionary churches have become independent of their foreign mother churches. Now they are responsible for themselves; for both their decisions and for the consequences of their decisions.

In terms of the involvement of foreign missionaries in Brazil, the following decision was made by the national synod (at São José-2000 and at Curitiba-2002): *“The churches in Brazil will propose to establish agreements of cooperation between the Brazilian Reformed Church federation and the foreign churches that are responsible for mission work in Brazil. They also propose that existing forms of cooperation, and existing agreements, will be maintained”*.

As of 2004, the Brazilian Reformed Church federation consists of five instituted churches: Colombo (formerly Curitiba), Unaí, São José, Maragogi and Recife. There are also some not-yet-instituted congregations: Barra Grande, Maceió (the mission work of Hamilton), and Barreiras. However, the total number of confessing members is not more about three hundred. If one includes baptized members, catechumens and regular visitors, the number is about five hundred or six hundred people. There are three foreign mission workers and two Brazilian ministers in the church federation. Every two years there is a national synod. The churches in the south have two seminarians (Marcos Borba and Xico) and the churches in the northeast have five (Alexandrino, Elissandro, Thyago, Tony and Adriano). The Brazilian federation has established sister-church relations with the Reformed Churches (liberated) in the Netherlands and the Canadian Reformed Churches.