

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***



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# Sowing in Concrete: Congregational Effort to Join God’s Mission in Brazilian Cities

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**Abstract:** In October of 2019, the International Center of Missionary Training (*CITM*) and the *Paulista*-district of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil (*IELB*) hosted a symposium on urban missions in the city of São Paulo, Brazil. During the event, a journal of Lutheran missiology named *Missio Apostolica Brasil (MAB)* was launched in continuity with the work in Brazil of the Lutheran Society for Missiology, as a kind of partnership. This short article consists of the introductory speech delivered at the symposium, whose title was *Sowing in Concrete*, and the topic was “congregational effort in God’s mission.” The public attending the event was made up of pastors and church leaders (with little or no theological training), who required a very simple, though clear, approach to introduce the event. The article therefore explains the context out of which the topic arose and briefly explores Jesus’ use of the image of sowing the seed to talk about the disciples’ role of preaching the Gospel in the cities. In addition, the article ties the event to the effort of pastors and theologians of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil, a church body that still faces many challenges in big cities (given its rural origins), and briefly talks about the importance of the new journal in the Brazilian context. The article aims to bring awareness about what is going on in Brazil in terms of mission thinking and practice to the readers of *Lutheran Mission Matters*.

## Introduction

São Paulo is known as a *selva de pedras*—“concrete jungle”—because of its many ongoing constructions: roads, bridges, and skyscrapers everywhere. And yet, as one drives through the city, one can see living gardens in the middle of the concrete. One example of this is located on the 23 of May Avenue. As one drives south on this road, one just needs to look at the left side to see beautiful flowers and other green plants



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hanging on the wall as if they had all been sown right in the concrete. It is a kind of work that probably required a lot of knowledge from someone who has studied architecture, urbanism, and landscaping. It is likely that this professional had to draw up a project and study hard to figure out the best way to do it, so that the plants are not overexposed nor hidden from the sun's light. The result of this hard work is that today, as people drive on that road, they can see beautiful plants in the middle of that dense concrete.

In southern Brazil where I grew up, I got used to seeing many plants sprouting from the earth. At my parents' house, there used to be a huge garden in the backyard. Often, I would see my parents preparing the soil and sowing seeds, and the plants easily grew. Sometimes it seemed that no further effort was needed. Flowers appeared out of nowhere; someone could even put organic material in the earth, and suddenly, from that a tomato plant would grow. It seemed to appear and grow naturally, without any effort of my parents. But the same does not happen in São Paulo, where I live today. Here, it seems, a lot of extra effort and a different kind of knowledge and skills are required. I am still trying to figure how to grow plants in my yard, and I think I will have to study different techniques to help grow plants in the middle of so much concrete. In other words, it will take a lot of effort.

This reality can be helpful to understand the challenges of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil as the church participates in God's mission in the city where different strategies and skills may be required. This article does not offer suggestions in terms of strategies and skills. Rather, it introduces a theological reflection on God's mission in the city and lays the foundation for further discussions on how to sow in concrete on Brazilian soil.

### **The Sowing Work: Our Effort in a Mission That Is God's**

To introduce this theological reflection, I would like first to discuss that which is the most basic, the root—so to speak—of the metaphor *sowing in concrete*. When the *Paulista*-district pastors were planning the symposium on urban missions held in São Paulo in 2019, we started our conversation by discussing our many perceptions regarding the challenges of the Lutheran Church in this city. One of these perceptions was voiced through a question made by our colleague and friend Rev. Iderval Strelhow. His question touched the root of the matter: “Do our congregations really want to do mission work?” Our conclusion was this: “Unfortunately, our members do not seem to want to be involved in the effort required to do this work. Our members love it and rejoice when new converts are received in our congregations, especially when an adult gets baptized. Our people seem not to understand, however, that for this to happen, everyone must make an effort, since pastors cannot do all the work by themselves.”

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One could argue over these statements and disagree with them. But it is important to notice that this reflection was born, in part, out of certain uneasiness or even anxiety that we, urban pastors, experience in the city. We know our Lord is in control of His church and that the mission is God's, which brings us great comfort. And yet, it seems that the emphasis and the teaching of this God-centered biblical understanding of mission, for some reason or another, has led many to neglect how the mission work takes place in the world; neglecting work to be done today in order for more people to believe what God has already done for all in Christ. For this reason, the pastors of the *Paulista*-district came up with the following guiding question to organize the symposium: How can we emphasize the biblical teaching that the mission is God's and dependent on Him without overlooking the fact that Jesus gave a role to the church to play and, thus, that we participate in this mission as God's people?

As a first step toward answering this question, we chose the biblical image of sowing or farming to guide us. In Matthew 9, in the context of Jesus calling the twelve apostles, after showing compassion for the crowds, He says to the disciples: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (vv. 37–38). Then Matthew lists the names of the twelve, of which eleven were sent into the world to preach the Gospel (Mt 28:19–20).

Exegetical discussions about this latter text properly indicate that Jesus gave this role primarily to the apostles. An overemphasis on this point and a reading that isolates Matthew 9 and 28 from the rest of the New Testament, however, might lead to the conclusion that only the apostles have the privilege and service of sharing the Gospel. This view then results in seeing mission work as a kind of activity which only those few who have received special training can carry out. In Luke's Gospel, however, Jesus applies the farming image to the mission of seventy of His followers, whom He sends "into every town and place where he himself was about to go" (Lk 10:1–2).

In other words, the role of sowing or farming is not limited to the apostles. Neither is this role to be carried out only by pastors, but it involves many other followers of Jesus in different ways, carrying out different functions and respecting the local context. This is one reason why we have proposed the metaphor *Sowing in Concrete* to speak of the congregational effort to join God's mission.

Another reason for the use of this image in the symposium on urban missions regards the theocentric perspective of mission implicit in the use of the sowing metaphor, a perspective that also affirms the importance of our effort as we engage in mission. The people who heard Jesus talking about the action of preaching the Gospel in the cities in terms of the activity of sowing or farming knew the history of their own people, a history that had its peak or summit with the fulfillment of God's promise of a land that bore fruit because the Lord would send the rain.

This can be seen in Deuteronomy 11, when a contrast is made between Egypt and the Promised Land:

For the land that you are entering to take possession of it is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sowed your seed and irrigated it, like a garden of vegetables. But the land that you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven, a land that the LORD your God cares for. The eyes of the LORD your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. (vv. 10–12)

That means to say that, in Egypt as slaves, the people needed to work hard to make the plants bear fruit to some extent. In the Promised Land, however, the people only needed to sow the seed, and then they could trust that God would send the rain and take care of the farmland as He had promised. In other words, the Israelites could depend on and rely on God and His providence. This is the implicit narrative or the “story behind the image,” to recall Justin Rossow’s words,<sup>1</sup> that we would like to keep in mind as we talk about *sowing in concrete*. We need to till the soil and sow the seed, which requires us to work hard. At the same time, we recognize and thank God for the fact that the plant grows and bears fruit only when He sends the rain and makes it grow and bear fruit.

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An affirmation of both the active work of the church involved in the planting and growth of the church and the reliance on God’s power can be seen in the New Testament, as the apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth to solve a conflict within the church. Some favored him and his work, while others would prefer Apollos, and this situation was dividing that congregation. Then the apostle writes, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (1 Cor 3:6–7). Note that Paul, who at another point said he has “become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some” (1 Cor 9:22), here says that God is the one “who gives the growth.” In other words, the very one who put a lot of effort into the mission work that is part of the church’s role did not deny that growth depends on God; the recognition that Paul worked hard did not lead him to think that the mission work depended on him. Rather, he affirmed God’s power when he talks about growth.

Paul’s use of the farming image to talk about preaching the Gospel emphasizes that the church needs to be actively engaged to make an effort to sow and, at the same

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time, this understanding still affirms the workers' reliance and dependence on God. Therefore, we can understand this biblical metaphor and Jesus' words as if He were saying, "Go! Sow in the soil, share the word, and leave all the rest to Me!" This is the distinctive role our congregations have in the cities of southeastern Brazil, and they can try to play this role trusting that the mission work depends on the Lord.

### **Trying to Join God's Mission in the Midst of the Concrete**

To hold a symposium to discuss ways by which congregations can participate in God's mission in the city and be more actively engaged is not a new thing in the *IELB*. Already in the 1970s, the church studied ways to achieve a stronger presence in the major cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro during a time of massive urbanization in Brazil.<sup>2</sup> In such circumstances, missiological study and planning were required.<sup>3</sup> Later, in the 1990s, one can see that the faculty of the Seminary in São Paulo (*ICSP*) was making an effort to form an urban missiology through the Missionary Research and Training Center and the International Center of Missionary Training (*CITM*), an effort promoted by the Rev. Dr. Leonardo Neitzel. Under his leadership, that seminary promoted a few urban mission symposia up to the early 2000s, until the closing of that seminary due to financial issues in 2003. The major problem addressed in these symposia was the fact that the church had moved to the cities, but without making much progress in terms of becoming an urban church. In other words, even in major Brazilian cities, congregations functioned as if they were still in the rural area.<sup>4</sup>

The *CITM* continued fostering theological thinking about God's mission in general under the leadership of the Rev. Dr. Anselmo E. Graff, professor of the seminary in São Leopoldo in southern Brazil. Particularly regarding urban missions, some advance has been achieved from 2014 on. In this year, a missionary training center was founded in the city of Rio de Janeiro, the *Centro de Treinamento Missionário–Nestor Welzel (CTM-NW)* as the result of the efforts of local church leaders and Rev. Laerte Tardelli Voss, a former missionary to Hispanics in the USA.

This training center has since then promoted urban mission training to Brazilian pastors and church leaders. In addition, in partnership with *CITM*, it has organized regional urban mission forums and symposia oriented mainly toward the challenges still faced in the southeastern region of Brazil, where the largest Brazilian cities are located. These examples show that this reflection and the urban mission symposium held in São Paulo in 2019 reflects not only the concerns and goals of the *Paulista*-district pastors and leaders. The examples show also that the symposium continues a trajectory begun by other faithful Lutheran servants whom we join in our effort as pastors of southeastern Brazil.

"But"—one could ask—"Since the biblical image is clear about the important role the church has been given and since mission in the city has been affirmed in the *IELB* for almost fifty years, why are we still discussing some basic aspects of God's mission

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in 2019?” There is, of course, the reality of sin that hinders the preaching of the Gospel, not to mention the work of the devil, both of which hinder the action of the church. These aspects cannot be denied.

But for the present purpose, it is important to pay attention to the particular issues we are facing. On the one hand, the answer to this question has already been given: our members seem not to realize or seem not to want to do the work necessary for mission to happen. On the other hand, there has been what Graff pointed out as a “vertical reductionism” (after David Peter’s article on the two dimensions and evangelism)<sup>5</sup> in our theology. In this kind of reductionism, Graff explains, everything is attributed to God in the mission work in such a way that neglects the fact that God uses the church. In other words, it overlooks that Jesus has given a role to the church.

As a response to this problem, Graff reminds us that Luther’s theology has not only a vertical axis, but also a horizontal one, within which the church is active in love.<sup>6</sup> Of course, there are other aspects that need consideration to understand our own challenges.<sup>7</sup> For now, however, it is important to highlight that the most fundamental dimension of our theology, that God has already done all that is necessary for our salvation (which Article IV of the Augsburg Confession properly explains and highlights), has implications for our lives as Christians in the world, that is, within the horizontal dimension.

It is within this dimension, the horizontal relationships, where the congregational efforts, strategies, and planning tasks for urban missions are situated. Let us therefore look with these lenses at the “intentional effort” of congregations. It is part of the Christian life. It is necessary not for our salvation, but for the salvation of our neighbor, in the sense that God decided to use us and give us the privilege of being His instruments. He did this so that the Gospel, the message that Jesus died on the cross to save the world, may reach other people. Seeing our participation in God’s mission in this way, we will hear and interact with ideas about how to be a congregation involved in social action in the city, about being a congregation in mission in the city to preach its distinctive message, and about the mission intentionality taught in the Bible. In addition, we will hear the experience of members of a congregation planting a church in a *favela*<sup>8</sup> and of a pastor who is restructuring

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his congregation for a new generation, preserving the foundations of Lutheran theology.

I also would like to say a few words about another way of making an effort toward the proclamation of the Gospel in Brazil, namely, the publication of the new journal named *Missio Apostolica Brasil*. This journal can be seen as one more tool to help the church to better sow in concrete.

### ***Missio Apostolica Brasil* as a Tool to Sow the Seed of the Gospel**

This journal of Lutheran missiology results from both an initiative of the Lutheran Society for Missiology (LSFM) and from a perceived need, namely, the necessity of enriching the missiological reflection from a Lutheran standpoint in Brazil. For the past few years, Rev. Jeffrey Thormodson, Rev. Dr. Daniel Mattson, and I have been discussing the possibility of having a Portuguese version of *Lutheran Mission Matters* (previously called *Missio Apostolica*) in Brazil. During this conversation, we all agreed that this would expand the missiological reflection already fostered by LSFM through its journal worldwide, on the one hand, and fill a void in terms of missiology in Brazil, on the other. I would like to briefly talk about this second accomplishment through *Missio Apostolica Brasil*.

For the reader who might not be aware of this, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil (*IELB*) had its beginning through LCMS missionary effort in 1900.<sup>9</sup> In the early 1990s, the Brazilian church body achieved full financial (and theological) independence, while maintaining the strong bond of brotherly love with the “mother church” and the common commitment to confess the faith according to Scripture and the Lutheran understanding of it expressed in the Book of Concord.<sup>10</sup> As mentioned above, the church arose in the rural environment of southern Brazil. The *IELB* faces many challenges in Brazil, and one of these challenges regards its mission work, mainly in big cities. Today, given that many of its congregations are situated in the city, part of its challenge is to learn how to function as Lutheran congregations in the midst of the “concrete,” in a way that not only safeguards their commitment to the Lutheranism, but that also fosters the spreading of the seed of the Gospel through the Lutheran voice of this church body. Some congregations may have done this job better than others, but most recognize that more needs to be done, and this requires more missiological reflection. This is where the *Missio Apostolica Brasil* journal, with the help of LSFM, enters the picture.

*Missio Apostolica Brasil* (*MAB*) will serve as a space for Brazilian pastors and theologians to participate in the international forum promoted by LSFM through *Lutheran Mission Matters*. The purpose for this journal is to reaffirm, discuss, and exchange the theological foundations, ideas, and practices of Lutheran missions around the world. In other words, the readers of *MAB* will be able now to engage in this international conversation, reading in Portuguese the articles written by

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missiologists and Lutheran theologians from the Northern Hemisphere, and to contribute to the discussion from a Southern Hemisphere perspective. This will be possible because of the commitment to translate texts from English into Portuguese and from Portuguese into English.

This new journal in Brazil focused on missiological issues fills a perceived gap in Brazilian Lutheranism. Within the *IELB*, there have been books published from the symposia promoted by International Center of Missionary Training (*CITM*) mentioned above. And still, there is a shared recognition that much more needs to be done in terms of Lutheran missiology. On the one hand, this need can be perceived in the simple fact that there is no Lutheran theological journal focused on missiology specifically in Brazil. On the other hand, the way the context changes and new challenges arise leads to the conclusion that there is always work to be done when it comes to missiology. As Graff has pointed out, the current context “demands that one reaffirms the missionary character of the church, along with the recognition that this is an unfinished task.”<sup>11</sup> The *MAB* now helps answer this perceived need.

I would like to also thank *Hora Luterana*—the Lutheran Hour Ministry agency on Brazilian soil. It is through a website provided by this missionary society that the *MAB* will be published online (the only format available as of now). *Hora Luterana* has been helping the *IELB* in its mission since before the church had become an independent church body. While it was still a district of the LCMS, *Hora Luterana* was already helping with Lutheran missions on Brazilian soil. Now, this missionary society is helping with the missiological reflection of the *IELB*.

All this effort combining the work of LSFM, *Hora Luterana*, and Brazilian pastors serves the purpose of sowing the seed in Brazilian soil, also in the midst of the concrete.

## Conclusion

One of the implications of wearing the lenses through which we look at missions as a work of sowing is that, in this way, our trust is placed in God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as we participate in His mission. One of the biblical promises that uses the image of sowing to speak of God’s Word is this: “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be

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that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Is 55:10–11). These words serve during those times when we face a certain uneasiness and even during times of anxiety. The Word that is sown accomplishes the Lord’s purposes.

Dear brothers and co-workers of southern Brazil, let us put our hands in the dirt, let us get the dirt under our nails if necessary. Let us sow in concrete, trusting in the One who sends the rain!

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Justin Rossow, *Preaching Metaphor: How to Shape Sermons that Shape People* (Brighton, MI: Next Step Press, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Paulo Buss, *Um Grão de Mostarda: A História da Igreja Evangélica Luterana do Brasil* (Porto Alegre: Concórdia, 2000), 2:164–5.

<sup>3</sup> Already in 1973, seminary professor Oswaldo Schueler introduced the term “contextualization” to faculty members and students in an inaugural lecture in the opening of that year. Schueler argued that the information provided by social scientists should inform the pastors of the *IELB* in order for them to preach the Gospel in a better contextualized form. But it was only about twenty years later that a pastor picked up on Schueler’s proposal and wrote a master’s thesis on the contextualization of the Gospel for the Brazilian context. Rony Ricardo Marquardt, author of this thesis, showed the importance of Schueler’s work by noting the difficulty of the church to become an urban church in a period when the urbanization rate was rapidly increasing, and the *IELB* was in danger of losing members in Brazilian big cities. Oswaldo Schueler, “A Leitura do Tempo,” in *Lar Cristão* (Porto Alegre: Concórdia, 1974), 104–8. See also Rony Ricardo Marquardt, *A Contextualização na Ação Missionária da Igreja* (Canoas: Ulbra, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> For more on these developments, see Samuel Reduss Fuhrmann, “Mission in the Margins: An Emplaced Missional Ecclesiology for the Brazilian Church in Urban Environments” (Ph.D. diss., Concordia Seminary, 2019), 61–5.

<sup>5</sup> See Anselmo Graff, “Teologia da Missão e a Teologia Luterana,” *Missio Apostolica Brasil* 1, no. 1 (Outubro 2019): 18–20. See also David Peter, “A Framework for the Practice of Evangelism and Congregational Outreach,” *Concordia Journal* 30, no. 3 (July 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Again, Graff writes informed by Peter’s article as he looks at the reality of Lutheranism in Brazil.

<sup>7</sup> In light of what we have been discussing and concerned with in our church body since our last National Convention in 2018 regarding Pastoral Ministry, it seems that we have reduced the Ministry of the Word to the pastoral, congregational task of tending the gathered sheep, neglecting the missionary office of reaching out to the lost that is part of the Ministry. Therefore, it might be helpful to look at our understanding of Ministry in light of what Detlev Schulz proposes when he addresses what he calls the “Parochial Captivity of Ministry.” This might be a good way to advance our reflection on the limits of our mission practices in order to find a way forward to overcome this particular perceived limit. See Klaus Detlev Schulz, *Mission from the Cross: The Lutheran Theology of Mission* (Saint Louis: CPH, 2009), 263–82.

<sup>8</sup> *Favela* is a housing category that refers to an urban built environment where one encounters social, cultural, and spatial diversity, and often the problems of violence and poverty, all of which configure a challenge to the Lutheran Church.

<sup>9</sup> Mario Rehfeldt, *Um Grão de Mostarda: A História da Igreja Evangélica Luterana do Brasil*, vol. 1 (Porto Alegre: Concórdia, 2003), 26, 32.

<sup>10</sup> Paulo Buss, *Um Grão de Mostarda: A História da Igreja Evangélica Luterana do Brasil*, vol. 2 (Porto Alegre: Editora Concórdia, 2000), 309–17.

<sup>11</sup> Anselmo Graff, *Testemunho, Misericórdia e Vida em Comunhão* (Porto Alegre: Concórdia, 2013), 8.

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