



Aliança de Batistas do Brasil

Fundada em 24 de setembro de 2005

CNPJ: 09.477.567/0001-28

Rua Miguel Palmeira, nº 1300, Bairro Pinheiro, Maceió - AL.

Brazil in the face of the pandemic and the crisis we face: the construction of iniquity

To Alliance of Baptists.

Beloved sisters and brothers,

We write this letter in the hope that you may join us in our search for solutions for the severe problems that Brazil is facing.

As we write this letter, Brazil has surpassed Russia, becoming the country with the second-largest number of confirmed cases of COVID-19, behind only the United States. In recent days, despite significant underreporting, there have been more daily deaths caused by COVID-19 in Brazil than in the United States. At this time, the number of lives lost due to the pandemic in Brazil approaches 30,000, and it is anticipated that this number will grow to beyond 100 thousand deaths in the coming months. Amid all the anxiety and anguish that the Brazilian population faces in this critical moment as our country becomes the new epicenter of the pandemic, we also have to face a severe political crisis that exacerbates the already very precarious public health situation. The two crises cannot be dissociated, nor fully understood apart from what has been going on for some years in Brazil.

For the sake of comparison, our neighboring nation Argentina has been so far successful in containing the pandemic's impact. Thus we are convinced that many of the thousands of deaths of Brazilians we are seeing result from the lack of transparency and responsibility of the federal government, worsened by the climate of ignorance and fanaticism fueled by President Jair Bolsonaro and his supporters, many of whom evangelicals.

In recent years, Brazil has seen significant increase of a cult of ignorance and attacks on science, side-by-side with the spread of racism, violence against women, LGBTQ-phobia, and the murder of the black and impoverished young people in the peripheries of the larger cities of our country.

In 2016 those who opposed the social progress achieved with much effort by the Social Movements during the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) administrations managed to stage a coup to impeach President Dilma Rousseff, the first female President in the history of our country. During that staged coup, they directed violent and misogynistic attacks at the President. Such acts and the culture it reinforced led to the election of Jair Bolsonaro (2018), the presidential candidate of the extreme right, accelerating the process of Necropolitics that, among other things, has threatened the rule of law and the most vulnerable populations, such as indigenous peoples, black Brazilians, women in general, LGBTQ+ people, community organizers, and human rights advocates all over Brazil.



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The electoral campaign of the current President was supported by a strong mobilization among some religious sectors. Large sectors of the neo-Pentecostal churches, for instance, but also significant numbers of Reformed and Catholic Christians, and even Kardecist Spiritists, formed a broad right-wing coalition, having as platform a pretense defense of moral values, the protection of a particular understanding of "family," the struggle against what they called "gender ideology" along with an alleged "gay dictatorship," and the never-ending fight against the ghost of "communism." They promoted these values through a robust professional communication structure (mainly via social media) used to spread fake news, managing to win the elections in 2018, among other things, through the spread of fear and misinformation. This same strategy continues to be used to attack and threaten individuals and communities that refuse to fall in line with the vision of society advanced by their national populist ideology.

One of the victims of this defamation machine was a young woman affiliated to the Aliança de Batistas do Brasil (ABB), Camila Montavani, who was forced to leave Brazil last year. In her farewell letter, she said: "I lost my rights! I lost the right to live in my own country! Whoever defends the secular nature of the state is slaughtered by a state that is no longer secular. I lost the right to live with my family and friends, to carry on with my work. I lost the right to live my life as I do today. I lost that right because the fundamentalism that governs Brazil today murders any prophet who denounces the sins of its leaders. (...) They took everything from me. But the smile characteristic of those who have peace in their hearts remains! Here or anywhere else I go, I will continue to fight for women's lives, respect for diversity, the guarantee of democracy, and against religious fundamentalism! From the struggle, I don't retire" (Another exile from the Bolsonaro era: Camila Mantovani left Brazil to avoid dying <https://www.justificando.com/2019/04/30/mais-um-exilada-da-era-bolsonaro-camila-mantovani-foi-embora-para-nao-morrer/>)

Likewise, Lusmarina Campos, a pastor in the Evangelical Church of Lutheran Confession in Brazil (IECLB) and an important ecumenical leader in the country, began to face death threats after taking a stand against religious intolerance. Among other things, she led a fundraising campaign to help a Terreiro de Candomblé that was likely burned down by people linked to fundamentalist evangelical churches in Rio de Janeiro. This city is also seeing a related phenomenon. A growing number of drug cartels and illegal right-wing militias identifying themselves as "evangelicals" command attacks against Candomblé houses in neighborhoods under their control. But it was after participating in a hearing at the Supreme Federal Court (STF) on the decriminalization of abortion that Pastor Lusmarina became the target of a smear and hate campaign. She received death threats mainly due to her public-health approach to the matter (one that, from a religious point of view, is welcoming and merciful). In response to the threats, she courageously doubled down on her commitment to stay in the struggle: "I would like to make it very clear that none of these attitudes will stop the women I know in this fight or me. They will not stop those who struggle for human rights. These people will have to find another strategy to deal with me, because they don't scare me, and all their threats do not compare to the number of messages of solidarity that I receive, which strengthens me" ("Threatened with death by those who say they are pro-life" <https://www.sul21.com.br/ultimas-noticias/geral/2018/09/ameacadas-de-morte-por-quem-se-diz-pro-vida/>).



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Amid this terrible scenario, the pandemic is unveiling, even more drastically, the inequality and inhumanity of the society in which we live. Besides religious intolerance, the ideological advance of prosperity theology (with its emphasis on individual and selfish accumulation), and the logic of oppression that affects significant portions of our population, we are now experiencing a great deal of insensitivity and indifference to the piles of bodies that accumulate daily, above all among the most impoverished.

This escalation of iniquity and inequality and the accompanying culture of hatred that continues operating through social media (contagion networks) and Fake News, feeding ignorance remains the primary political strategy of the far-right administration led by the fascist agitator Jair Bolsonaro.

This current situation, which we describe as one of iniquity, is behind the unprecedented unemployment we are facing, the hunger already affecting a significant part of the population, and their lack of access to essential services, education, and health care. This situation results, among other things, of the national congress' approval in the past few years of neoliberal reforms which have weakened the State, freeing, for instance, public resources to fund public debt remuneration policies and attacks on workers' rights. These reforms were meant to protect the elites in Brazil (and international capital flows) reinforcing the erosion of social security, and the dismantling of labor rights, which forced many workers into the informal sector. Concomitantly, the Brazilian Congress also approved a public spending ceiling law, freezing investments in health, education, social assistance for 20 years. Such reforms also dismantled the compensatory policies created by past administrations which lifted millions of Brazilians out of absolute poverty in the previous decade.

The actions of Jair Bolsonaro make this grim political scenario even worse. With the military's support, he continues to spread hatred, persecute those who dissent, and act in violation of the Brazilian constitution to make the Brazilian State subservient to the interests of economic elites and obscurantist hordes that oppose scientific and social progress. Bolsonaro, who has always advocated torture and the physical extinction of his opponents, remains an apologist of the bourgeois-military dictatorship that, for 21 years (1964-1985), arrested, tortured, and murdered hundreds of Brazilians. Despite being elected President, he still spreads similar fascist proposals encouraging the extermination of those who think differently (e.g. he and his supporters often talk about the extermination of communists). At this moment, in the middle of a pandemic, Bolsonaro is blocking or limiting federal funds to states and municipalities facing an unprecedented public health crisis, while encouraging populist protests against social isolation measures. He has also promoted the use of chloroquine and other medication for the treatment of people infected with COVID-19 without any scientific evidence (some of which may, in fact, contribute to the death of patients). At the same time, he repeatedly attacks the Congress and the Supreme Court and fires any member of his cabinet who take a less irresponsible and more humane stance in the fight against the pandemic. On top of that, he has used the public funds to benefit big business, militias, and the military who support him at the expense of an increasingly impoverished and unemployed population that gets only a very small incentive check, insufficient for their survival.



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In short, Brazil is in chaos. The Christian sense of solidarity has been entirely abandoned by the government, business elites, and religious leaders who continue to encourage behavior that only exacerbates the public health crisis we are experiencing. Both the government and the Brazilian bourgeoisie are at the root of this grave iniquity.

Faced with this political and social scenario, we believe we need to build a vast network of solidarity that can help us rescue the Christian sense of social life. We cannot be silent and fail to act when impoverished men, women, and youth are constantly killed by our government and its allies. As Christians, we must advance solidarity and fellowship when God's people are being attacked and exterminated. Brazil already approaches 30 thousand deaths due to COVID-19, and we are far from the peak of this crisis. The ABB wants to help create an extensive network of solidarity to resist all the iniquity and social inequality we are faced against.

At this time of the pandemic, the churches affiliated to the ABB, as already reported in the letter you received from pastor Paulo César (published online by the Alliance on May 5, 2020), are already being impacted by the oppression the Bolsonaro administration represents and the respective attitude of neglect by the State. The Baptist Church of Porto Calvo, located in a small town in the northeast region of Brazil is an example. Two members of this congregation were the first cases of infection by COVID 19 in the town. Others have also tested positive. In a city with thirty thousand inhabitants, there are already more than one hundred cases of infection.

Despite all difficulties, including in some cases trouble to pay their pastors and staff, ABB-affiliated churches have taken action to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and the government neglect in their communities and surroundings. Alongside the ABB itself, these churches have published notes calling out the President for his irresponsible actions when needed. Although ABB-affiliated churches stopped conducting face-to-face services to avoid crowds early, their leaders remain connected to all church members through virtual services, videoconferencing, individual phone calls, and social media. Also, each church has strengthened efforts in the concrete reality of their communities and according to their possibilities. Among other things, they are finding ways to provide basic assistance to church members who are unemployed or have been economically affected by the pandemic (all ABB churches do this, varying in accord to available resources); offer guidelines for the needy to apply for public aid, also working with partnering non-governmental entities (Igreja Batista Nazareth); strengthen social projects that make possible for the homeless to have access to proper hygiene and food (Projeto Banho Solidário at Igreja Batista do Pinheiro); share reliable information and dispelled false information; offer pastoral care through virtual means (services, pastoral counseling and virtual meetings of specific groups, such as youth, women - Baptist Church in Porto Calvo); and provide mental and physical health support (physiotherapists, psychologists, and other health professionals affiliated to our churches have made their services available to the broader community free of charge).

The pandemic reminds us of the global character of human life. And, we are also reminded - just as it happened after the Military Coup of 1964 - that solidarity must also be global. During the dictatorship years in Brazil, some churches and religious leaders formed an



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international network to denounce the military regime's abuses, tortures, and forced exiles. Figures such as Presbyterian pastor Jaime Wright, Catholic Archbishop Paulo Evaristo Arns, and Rabbi Henry Sobel created a major international solidarity campaign, with support from the World Council of Churches, to document the violence of the dictatorship and advocate for Brazil's return to democracy. This type of collaboration between religious leaders of the Brazilian resistance and their international partners and networks permitted the implementation of the "Brasil, Nunca Mais" project, which became a reference in the fight against dictatorship and for human rights, resulting in the weakening and subsequent overcoming of the Military Regime.

As we look at the "signs of the times," based on the recent history of Brazil and Latin America, as well as on Bolsonaro's repeated authoritarian maneuvers, intensified in recent weeks, we think we have a solid basis for affirming that we may be experiencing today a scenario that resembles the years that preceded the militarization of the Brazilian State in the early 1960s. Each day the Brazilian President is feeling emboldened to take more radical turns to the extreme right. In addition to having intensified his participation in demonstrations calling for the return of the military dictatorship and the closing of the congress and the supreme court, each of the recent changes in his cabinet has led to another military officer being placed in increasingly central roles in his administration. A couple of weeks ago, in the midst of the pandemic, after the second Minister of Health resigned in less than two months, another military interventionist was appointed by the President to lead the fight against COVID-19. All this because the two previous Civil Ministers of Health refused to support the President's excesses in forcing the immediate reopening of the economy, despite the growing number of deaths and the lack of any reasonable plan. He'd rather to see thousands of Brazilians die than temporarily decrease the profits of those who financed his campaign and continue supporting him.

In light of all these events, we call on our international partners to pray for our country at this critical moment in our history and join our prophetic outcry, as we will not rest, despite any threats: "For Zion's sake I will not be silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not keep quiet until her righteousness shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a blazing torch."(Isaiah 62: 1)

Fraternal hugs from Brazil,

Salvador-BA, Brasil, May 31th, 2020.

Nívia Souza Dias

President of the Aliança de Batistas do Brasil