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Christian Congregation in Brazil, Congregação Cristã no Brasil



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Definition

The Christian Congregation in Brazil (CCB) is the oldest, second-largest Pentecostal church in Brazil and the largest Pentecostal church in the state of São Paulo. Part of the first Pentecostalism wave in the country, the church is defined by scholars as a classical Pentecostal church sui generis and sectarian with little susceptibility to external influences. Members are referred to as “*crentes*” meaning “believers” as opposed to “*evangélicos*” or evangelicals. The national (and international) headquarters of the church is at Brás, São Paulo. The church is apolitical and does not use media for proselyting, and all ministerial and appointed positions are unpaid.

Introduction

The Christian Congregation in Brazil (CCB) is the oldest and second-largest Pentecostal church in Brazil. Established in 1910 through the missionary work of an Italian American missionary named *Louis Francescon, the church has grown significantly over the last century expanding to all Latin American countries, as well as Europe, North America, Asia, and Africa (73 countries total; Congregação Cristã no Brasil 2016). According to the 2010 Brazilian census, the church had 2,289,634 members (IBGE 2010) and approximately 20,000 congregations spread across Brazil. The vast majority of members are concentrated in São Paulo, Paraná, and Minas Gerais.

CCB beliefs are set forth in the 12 *Articles of Faith which include the belief in the whole Bible as the infallible word of God and belief in the Trinity, water baptism, and speaking in tongues as a sign of baptism of the Holy Spirit. The church is classified by scholars as a classical Pentecostal church.

American Roots

Louis Francescon was an elder at the First Presbyterian Church in Chicago (*Prima Chiesa Presbiteriana Italiana di Chicago*) when he felt

that baptism required full water immersion (as opposed to aspersion). He was baptized by water immersion and left the Presbyterian Church with a group of members who adhered to this belief, giving start to a small religious Italian community in Chicago that would later be called “Assemblea Cristiana Italiana di Chicago” (Toppi 2007). A few years later, in 1907, he witnessed the Pentecostal movement at the Baptist Church of Chicago at 943 W. North Mission (Araújo 2007), where Pastor William Durham preached about the baptism with the Holy Spirit. When Francescon stepped into that church for the first time, God told him, “This is my work” (Francescon 2002). Francescon, his wife, and members of the Italian group he led started to attend this mission and were baptized with the Holy Spirit speaking in tongues. Francescon dedicated himself to spreading the message of Pentecostalism among Italians and on September 15, 1907, was invited to preach at the Tuscan Church. After he exhorted the church to seek the baptism with the Holy Spirit, a great manifestation and revival occurred, marking the start of the Pentecostal Italian Movement in Chicago and the inception of the Unorganized Italian Christian Churches of North America in Chicago (CCNA 1977).

Start in Brazil

In 1910, Francescon traveled to Brazil and established the First Pentecostal Church among the Italian communities in the states of Paraná and São Paulo. Francescon performed the first water baptism in the city of Antonio da Platina in the state of Paraná on April 20, 1910, baptizing 11 people. In São Paulo, he was invited to preach at the Presbyterian Church at Brás and caused a schism among members. In addition to the members of the Presbyterian Church, a few Baptists, Catholics, and Methodists also accepted his message in São Paulo, and a total of 20 people were converted and baptized, “some being healed, others being baptized with the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Francescon 2002). Felipe Pavan and

Ernesto Finotti were soon ordained as the groups’ first elders.

The church flourished among Italian colonies in Brazil, especially in the southeast regions of São Paulo and Paraná, and the services were conducted in Italian until 1938. For many years the church did not have an official name, some referred to them as “o povo do Glória” (the people that glorify), and the church was informally called “Assemblea Christiana” or “Congregazione Cristiana.” Around 1921 the church started to be called “Congregação Christã,” but it was only in 1936 that the church adopted officially the name *Congregação Cristã do Brasil*, later changing it to *Congregação Cristã no Brasil*.

Francescon maintained frequent contact with the members in Brazil. Between 1910 and 1948, he traveled to Brazil ten times, staying for more than a year on most trips (Francescon 2002). At the time of his death on September 7, 1964, he was the senior elder of the Christian Congregation Church in Chicago. In 1980, Miguel Spina and Vittorio Angare, who were senior elders of CCB, visited the United States at the invitation of Miguel’s nephew, Joel Spina, and participated in the assembly that established the Christian Congregation in the United States through the unification of three churches: the Buffalo Christian Congregation, the Italian Christian Assembly of Alhambra, and the Christian Congregation in the United States in Chicago. These churches all had roots in the “Unorganized Italian Christian Churches of North America,” which Francescon helped establish in 1927 (CCNA 1977). CCB has expanded to countries in all continents as a result of the missionary work of many Brazilian members. This expansion created an international fellowship of congregations sharing the same faith, doctrine, and liturgy. The CCB headquarters is located at Brás in São Paulo, Brazil, and oversees the ministry of all Christian Congregations, in Brazil and abroad.

Organization, Ministry, and Other Positions

The Christian Congregation follows an organizational model of kinship and patriarchy (Nelson 1992). Leadership is ranked by seniority rather than charisma or competence, and all ministerial roles are unpaid. At the very top of the organization hierarchy is the “president elder” who oversees the church and presides over the Annual Assembly at Brás, São Paulo. The presidency only ends in case of physical or mental debilitation; otherwise, it is a ministry for life. The current president elder is Claudio Marçola.

The president elder is chosen from the “council of elders,” a group of about ten elders who are the oldest and/or most influential elders in the church. All decisions (e.g., the ordination of new ministers) and teachings come from the council of elders. They are not only in charge of the congregation in Brazil but also of congregations abroad and preside over the general meetings and assemblies in other countries. These meetings are not open to members; only the ministerial body (elders, deacons, and cooperators) can attend.

Below the “council of elders,” are the regional elders, who are in charge of different regions of the country and typically oversee all ministers within their region and the local elders of individual congregations. Elders are ordained by the imposition of hands during a special service.

Under the elders, there are the deacons, who oversee the work or “piety.” The same patriarchal structure applies to the deacons; leadership is ranked by seniority; the oldest deacons are the most respected, and younger deacons assist them in their ministry. There are also the “sisters of piety,” who are women of good testimony that are chosen to help the deacons. The functions of the sisters of piety include visiting members of the church (particularly the poor), praying to receive revelation of any financial need among church members, and making recommendations to the deacons based on these revelations.

Below the elders and deacons are the local cooperators who preside over services. Each congregation has a local cooperator and a youth cooperator. Youth cooperator is not a ministerial

position but an appointed position given to the member who presides over the young peoples’ services.

A prerequisite to become an elder or deacon, besides having a good testimony, is being baptized with the Holy Spirit, i.e., speaking in tongues. The ministry at CCB does not have any theological training; some do not even have a bachelors’ degree. They all have different professional careers outside of the church, and everything they do in their ministry is unpaid and volunteered. Yet there is a great congregational respect for what they preach or say, because members believe they are guided by the Holy Spirit.

The hierarchical system of organization strictly centralized at Brás still reflects the Italian communal kinship traditions. This organizational structure has contributed to maintaining the church intact to religious, cultural, and social changes that have impacted most Pentecostal churches in Brazil.

Other volunteer (i.e., unpaid) church positions include:

Orchestra conductors: The directors of the church’s orchestra are trained musicians who are appointed to oversee the musical performance during the services, coordinate and direct the music school, and preside over musical rehearsals (both local and regional). Regional conductors oversee local conductors. The CCB orchestra was instituted by Francescon in 1932 with the goal of helping the members sing hymns. The orchestra is composed by modern symphony orchestra instruments ranging from the violin to the tuba, but no percussion instruments are allowed.

Musicians: Members who qualified to play in the orchestra during the services. Any member with a “good testimony” who desires to play an instrument can go to the music school for free at their local church. In order to become an official musician, however, there are several steps to take, and the person needs to have an advanced skill level and be baptized.

Organists: Women are only allowed to play the organ and do not have music classes provided for them at the church. Since there is only one organ per congregation, only a single organist can play per service, while male musicians can play every service in their chosen instrument. In a typical service, the orchestra may have between 50 and 100 male musicians but only 1 female organist.

Examiner: An older organist with very high musical skills that oversees other organists and examines organist candidates during the official tests.

Administrators: According to the church's bylaws, the administration is constituted by a president, treasurer, secretary, their respective vices, and a fiscal council as well as volunteers. Each region has an administration that oversees it. The administrators are elected by the elders every 3 years and the fiscal council annually and confirmed during the annual general meeting. Reinstatement is allowed. Although the statute does not prohibit it, there are no women occupying administrative positions.

Ushers: Each church has at least one male and one female usher. Larger churches can have several ushers. Their role is to greet everyone who arrives for the services and provide any help they might need, including providing hymnbooks, Bibles, or veils. The male usher also takes requests for prayers which are later given in a piece of paper to the presiding minister before the supplication prayer.

Young people's helpers: Single, young, baptized members of the church who prepare and organize the children and young people's recitals (recitation of Biblical passages) during the young people's services. They also take care of the children and young people during the young people's service.

including the preaching of the Scriptures, which is not prepared beforehand but revealed at the time of the "Word."

A typical service starts with the orchestra tuning and playing a hymn by itself. Then, a minister, either a cooperator or an elder, gets up in front of a pulpit and opens the service. Three hymns are spontaneously called by members, and the whole church sings the hymns in unison, while the orchestra plays along. This is followed by a spontaneous supplication prayer (up to three prayers can be made during this time) raised by anyone who feels in their heart to pray out loud. After the prayer, another hymn is sung, and then it is time for the testimonies – anyone who feels like it can get up in front of the church and testify telling a work, or a miracle, or a delivery that happened in their lives, or to pay a vow. Then, another hymn is sung, and it is time for the preaching of the Word. The presiding brother will typically "wait for the Word," asking other members of the ministry if they have the Word while the church remains in communion. Any minister who feels to have the Word will read the revealed passage of the Scriptures and preach from it. The Word is not prepared in advance and is believed to be guided by the Holy Spirit. After the Word, there is a spontaneous closing prayer, and once it is over, the whole church stands up, and a final hymn is sung. The service ends when the presiding brother says, "May the Peace of God, his Holy Word, and the Communion of the Holy Spirit abide in our hearts forever." The whole church answers in unison, "Amén," and the service is over. The orchestra plays the verse of a hymn by itself, while members greet each other with a Holy kiss (men kiss men, women kiss women; mixed genders only shake hands) and start making their way out of the church.

Both prayers are made while kneeling down. Men and women seat separately during the service, and all women use a white veil. All congregation buildings look exactly the same inside and outside. The building is very plain, without decorations, and simply contains a pulpit and wooden benches (in larger churches, a baptismal tank will be located in front of the church behind the pulpit). The only embellishment is the

Liturgy

The services at the CCB are similar in structure, order, and spontaneous manifestations. The members believe that everything done during the service is inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit,

saying, “*Em Nome do Senhor Jesus,*” (In the name of the Lord Jesus) written in large letters up in the wall behind the pulpit.

The hymnal titled, “*Hinos de Louvores e Suplicas a Deus,*” includes many known Christian hymns, but with altered lyrics. Some hymns have been composed by church members, most notably by the examiner Anna Spina Finotti. The hymnbook has had five versions. The first version, the *Libro di Inni e Salmi Spirituali*, and the second version *Nuovo Libro di Inni e Salmi Spirituali* were in Italian (they were the same hymnbooks used in the Italian Pentecostal churches in Chicago). The latest version, which came out in 2013, contains 480 hymns. The previous hymnbook (version 4), which was used for more than four decades, had 450 hymns. The hymnbook contains special hymns for baptism services, Holy Supper, and funerals and 50 hymns for young people’s services, plus 6 choruses. The hymnbooks (as well as Bibles) are sold in the church without making any profit.

Baptism

Baptism services are very similar to conventional worship services, with the exception that there are no testimonies and after the Word the baptism is performed. Once the elder is in the baptismal tank, which is typically in front of the church, hymns are sung, and anyone “feeling” the calling of God can get up and be baptized. A prayer with imposition of hands will be made for the first person who goes in to be baptized, and everyone is baptized “in the name of the Lord Jesus, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” At the end of the service, the number of people that were baptized is announced, and the Article of Faith number 9 which states, “*We believe it is necessary to abstain from things offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication, as decreed by the Holy Spirit in the general assembly held in Jerusalem (Acts 15:28-29;16:4;21:25),*” is read admonishing the newly baptized souls to avoid idolatry, food with blood or from strangled animals, and fornication. Only those who are

12 years or older are allowed to be baptized. An exception is made only if a child has already received the baptism of the Holy Spirit speaking in tongues. Also, unmarried couples that live together are advised to get married before getting baptized.

The CCB does not recognize the baptism of other Christian churches, even if by immersion, except in the United States. Therefore, anyone who wishes to become a member must be rebaptized. The CCB does not have communion with any other Christian or Pentecostal churches. This seclusion is partially due to the belief that CCB is the only “true” church. During testimonies and preaching, it is common to hear that “God revealed his grace” or members saying that they thank God for calling them “to this grace.” In fact, many members simply refer to CCB as “the grace,” and the majority of members believe that the church itself is the grace of God (Valente 2015b). It is only recently that some in the ministry have started to preach that the grace is actually Jesus Christ and that people from other churches will also be saved.

Holy Supper

The Holy Supper service is conducted annually, and members participate in the service at their home congregation. During this service, the death and suffering of Jesus Christ is remembered. The service is similar to regular services, with a few exceptions. The liberty for testimony is only given to those who feel that they need to ask the church for “forgiveness” before partaking of the Holy Supper. Reasons can vary but typically involve having left the church for a while or going to another church (this liberty remains open until the end of the service). Only hymns designated for the Holy Supper are called, and both prayers are made by the ministry. After the Word, the ministry, typically elders, pray for the bread and for the wine that the church will partake, and from that moment on, the bread is a symbolic representation of the body of Jesus and the wine of his blood. Then, members go to the front of the congregation where they kneel and

wait for one elder to come distributing a piece of bread, followed by another elder who provides a sip of wine. In the end, any leftovers of bread or wine are buried by the elders.

A controversial practice during the Holy Supper is that everyone will drink from the same wine cup. Although the elder who is in charge of the wine rotates the cup as he distributes it and cleans the edge with a cloth, the whole church will drink from the same chalice.

In Brazil, because of the large number of members, the Holy Supper is given annually and members can only partake of it once every year due to logistics. Thus, even if members attend another church service while a Holy Supper is being held, they do not participate again. Some members' belief that this rule emerges from the fact that the Passover was celebrated annually and therefore the Holy Supper should be done annually, but in reality, in Brazil it is just a matter of logistics. In churches abroad, members are asked to partake of the Holy Supper in their home congregation, but if they are present by any reason during the Holy Supper in another congregation, they will take part in it.

Young People's Services

The young people's service is presided by the youth cooperator. This service is exclusive for children and unmarried young adults. They have complete liberty to call hymns, testify, recite, and pray (which they are not allowed to do in regular services). During the supplication prayer, the children recite the "Our Father" prayer with the assistance of the helpers. Before the testimonies, there are the recitals – children and unmarried young adults get up in groups (by age), and each recites one verse of a Biblical chapter. After the recitals, the children and young people can testify. The Word is directed to the young people and children, and even the majority of members in the orchestra are also young people. These services are traditionally held on Sunday mornings, with some exceptions.

Recently, in a surprising turn of events, Bible School was reestablished for children under 12.

This service is conducted in parallel to the official regular services and presided over by a sister. The members in this position are typically well educated and actually work as teachers or in some cases as professors. The Bible School service is opened in the name of the Lord Jesus; the children sing, pray, testify, and recite. The sister who is presiding reads a predetermined Biblical passage and then explains and preaches a lesson from that passage. Then the children get together in groups and do activities related to the Biblical passage that was read (this includes drawing, painting, assembling puzzles, etc.). The Bible School service is not available in all congregations due to lack of physical space; it is currently being held only in large congregations. The predetermined Biblical passage and the whole curriculum and syllabus that the sister must follow were determined and approved by the council of elders. This is quite unprecedented given the church's traditional and long-standing opposition to Bible study and theological education.

Customs and Teachings

The Christian Congregation differs from other Pentecostal churches in several aspects. The church has kept itself aside from religious, cultural, and social dynamics, which has influenced most religious groups in Brazil. As a result the CCB attest a Pentecostalism *sui generis* and sectarian, with little susceptibility to external influences (Foerster 2006; Mariano 1999; Nelson 1989; Valente 2015b). This is displayed by the church's rigid and conservative morality, dress code, isolationism from other churches, opposition to the use of mass media and modern communications, and strict teachings discouraging members from owning and watching TV, going to movie theaters, going to swimming pools or the beach, drinking alcohol, dancing, gambling, and dressing like "the world." The church's teachings state that clothing must be conservative and not revealing or provocative in any way. Women can only wear skirts and dresses, while men are taught not to wear shorts or sleeveless shirts. In addition, women

are prohibited to cut or dye their hair, wear makeup or jewelry, and paint their nails. Men are supposed to shave their beards daily. This dressing code varies from region to region. Lately, especially in large urban areas, middle- and upper-class sisters can be found using pants, cutting their hair, and using makeup and jewelry, despite teachings being preached against these practices.

The church is also completely apolitical. The ministry is not allowed to be involved in politics, and members are admonished to avoid involvement in politics and even in civil protests. The church does not endorse any political candidates or political party and when political candidates attend the service (sometimes even presidential candidates), they are not allowed to speak.

The church has never used the media for proselytizing, nor does it have an official website. The church's website (<http://www.congregacaocristanobrasil.org.br/>) is simply a disclaimer that CCB does not use the Internet or media and does not authorize anyone to do so in its name.

The Role of Women in the CCB

When the church started in 1910, women held several positions of leadership, including ministerial positions of deaconesses, cooperators, youth cooperators, Sunday school teachers, musicians, and orchestra conductors (Valente 2015a). Women were never ordained elders; although in principle there was equality, men always monopolized priestly functions at CCB and were always at the top of the church hierarchy.

Today, women at CCB cannot hold any ministerial or leadership position in the church and cannot make any autonomous decisions. The female participation in the service at CCB is limited to calling hymns, praying, and testifying. The remaining positions held by women at CCB are as cleaners, cooks, tailors, young people's helpers, organists, examiners, and ushers.

The assistants to the deacons, the sisters of piety, have no decision abilities and must receive the approval of the deacons, who can confirm or deny their request, to take care of

the financial need of poor church members (by providing food or money to a family or an individual in need). Although some may claim that they have the same ministry as the deacons, this is clearly not the case; otherwise they would be called deaconess. In addition, if the sisters of piety were truly equal in ministry as the deacons, they would not only be able to make autonomous decisions and be ordained but also preach (which deacons are allowed to do) and open prayers in front of cooperators, youth cooperators, music conductors, male musicians, and any male members of the church during informal meetings or home visits. Instead, if there is no adult male member present, but only an unbaptized boy, he will be asked to open the prayer instead of the sisters of piety.

One of the most controversial issues involving the role of women at CCB today is the exclusion of women from the church's orchestra. Women were official musicians until around 1950, when they were barred from the orchestra without any explanation from the ministry. The problem emerges because in the vast majority of Christian Congregations abroad, women were never barred from playing and have continued to become official church musicians, playing any instrument of their choosing (except in France, Paraguay, and Japan that follow Brazil). When visiting Brazil, female official musicians are not allowed to play, while official male musicians are allowed to play in any congregation around the world. Hence, a double standard in recognizing the validation of an official examination of the church's musicians is in place. The officialization of a female musician is void outside the country in which she was officialized. This is one of the major departures and rupture in homogeneity among the Christian Congregations around the world. In every other aspect (liturgy, doctrine, customs, teachings, practices, etc.), the church is virtually the same everywhere around the world (Valente 2015b).

When the Bible School services were reinstated, some believed that the sister appointed to lead these services would once again hold the title of young people's cooperator or children's cooperator, which is what they are in practice. Instead, they have been referred to as "teachers"

or “children helpers.” In addition, to dilute any perception of leadership or equality to the male young peoples’ cooperator, instead of having one single sister in charge of the Bible School service per congregation, several were raised to this position (at least four per congregation). And, contrary to the liberty given to the young people’s cooperators to be guided by the Holy Spirit and preach what is revealed, they have to follow a predetermined syllabus and have very little room to actually preach or teach what they feel is necessary by the Holy Spirit.

Recent Trends

Recent studies have shown that the unwillingness of CCB’s ministry to accommodate to cultural conditions in a global modernizing context has contributed to schisms and to a significant decline in membership (Valente 2015b). Many have left, including elders who disagree with the council of elders’ practices and outdated teachings. From 2000 to 2010, CCB lost 200,000 members, while other traditional Pentecostal churches’ memberships continued to grow. The church also experienced an unprecedented number of schisms, including the Congregação Cristã Apostólica (2001), Associação de Membros da Congregação Cristã no Brasil (2004), Igreja Congregação Cristã (2005), Congregação Cristã Ministério Jandira (2010), and Congregação Cristã Ministério Bragança (2011).

After Claudio Marçola became the president elder, there have been small signs of changes. The establishment of the Bible School services, for example, was a surprising development given the church’s historical opposition to Bible study and theological education. Time will tell whether Marçola will embrace modernizing trends and revive the church or will continue to hold on to outdated traditions and resist changes that are generating schisms and contributing to the church’s decline.

Cross-References

- ▶ [12 Articles of Faith](#)
- ▶ [Louis Francescon](#)
- ▶ [Pentecostalism Waves in Latin America](#)

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