Is Brazil’s Universal Church of the Kingdom of God a field hospital or a marketplace?

A look inside the thriving (and sometimes controversial) neo-Pentecostal denomination

by Paulo Pereira in the September 22, 2021 issue

A Universal Church of the Kingdom of God church in Campinas, Brazil. (Photo by enioprado, used via Creative Commons license)

I was doing a hospital visit as a newly ordained Presbyterian minister in Brazil. It was late at night when I encountered Sergio at the edge of his terminally ill mother’s bed. (All names of interviewees have been changed to protect their privacy.) After 30 hours of travel, Sergio was still cheerful. I was aware that he was part of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD), which he’d encountered after moving to the city in search of job opportunities. While his mother died as a Presbyterian, before her last breath she also received a prayer from an IURD pastor.

Years later, Sergio told me that the IURD is “like an emergency room of heaven”: open 24 hours a day, easy to find and identify, and ready to receive desperate people. A fast-growing neo-Pentecostal organization with headquarters in São Paulo, the IURD is present in almost every Brazilian municipality, even small towns with no

hospital.

Local IURD churches present themselves as welcoming, faithful communities. *Obreiros*—deacons—are a constant presence at the door. As de facto emergency rooms, they respond to people's basic concerns: health, employment, security, family. They neither give people fish nor teach them how to fish. Instead, they teach people to believe that the fish are there, under the water, ready to be received as a divine gift.

Social projects, such as building housing or schools, are neither the church's priority nor the source of its institutional legitimacy. Local churches do not offer Sunday school or small groups. Instead, IURD's work is focused solely on daily practice. The emergency room is geared toward saving the souls of those who pass through its doors each day. "There is not much theology in the Universal Church," said Sergio. "They work through the Holy Spirit."

This practice follows an intense weekly schedule. Monday is the day to entrust finances to Jesus—IURD understands and welcomes its constituents' struggles with poverty. The pain of not having enough money for basic needs is tangible, embodied. IURD's response is based on concrete rituals, such as constituents' bringing donations to the front of the altar. Such rituals are intended as a way to honor God and receive God's blessings.

Tuesday is the day of exorcising evil spirits. The people call on the Holy Spirit to burn and cleanse their lives, with procedures done through prayer and the laying on of hands. Praying in a calm tone without the laying on of hands has no place in the IURD. Strong prayers, spoken with great energy and the declaration of God's power over evil, point to the climax of the human-divine relationship and profound transformation. According to Sergio, "it is impossible to leave indifferent to the Tuesday exorcism."

Wednesday is the day to seek the Holy Spirit. Participants kneel, pray, and give thanks. On this day, the faithful are encouraged to put the Spirit of God before their needs. It is already the third consecutive day in church, and these churches conduct about five services per day. Day-to-day life in the IURD reflects the ideals of what Max Weber called *this-worldly asceticism*, in which a person devotes the whole of life to God, not just Sundays. The IURD not only follows this pattern but pushes it forward.

Thursday is the day to pray for the family; Friday, for healing. On Saturdays, the church offers a love therapy service (a ritual where couples search for God's desires and blessings for their lives). Sunday is the day to worship the triune God. In the country of evening soap operas, credit cards with 24 interest-free installments, and Carnival, the IURD has created a parallel plan for happiness, one that addresses people's basic needs—health, employment, safety, and family—at the level of personal spiritual healing.

This lifestyle of deep daily devotion, of intramundane asceticism at a maximum level, is directly linked to a sort of kingdom market. The happiness plan is guaranteed by a currency that includes attendance, faith, commitment, denominational engagement—and financial contributions. One never enters an IURD sanctuary empty-handed, with the promise that they will not leave with an empty heart. Which is to say, one never leaves without having participated in the dynamics of the kingdom market. If the image of the divine emergency room is imprinted on one side of IURD's coin, surely the image of the kingdom market is on the other.

Another controversial aspect of IURD's work is its lack of openness. The church has rigid hierarchies and can be intensely secretive. Information is kept strictly confidential among qualified IURD authorities. Church members and leaders in São Paulo, the richest state of Brazil, are not allowed to respond to interviews. There is an official IURD department that is exclusively responsible for answering questions about the institution.

People who are integrated into IURD's community, such as Sergio, tend to emphasize the emergency room side of the church. Those it has harmed tend to see the church primarily as a kingdom market.

Pedro is a former IURD member who now attends a Protestant church in the São Paulo countryside. Early in his second marriage, Pedro found in the IURD the sacredness he was searching for with his new wife. But then they went to a love therapy retreat, at which the pastor asked the couples to hand over their wedding rings; after all, "the marriage was with God and not with men."

"I was revolted, man," said Pedro. "I could have made an offer for the same amount of money, but the wedding ring was the symbol of my marriage." After two weeks, Pedro left the IURD and started searching for another church.

Sergio, who began attending an IURD church in the 1990s, is aware that many people leave, some of them discontented. They typically migrate to other Christian denominations, many of which are growing in Brazil. For Sergio, this is not a result to be ashamed of. On the contrary, “it is a source of pride to know that IURD is a blessing for other denominations.” This is one reason he calls the IURD “the emergency room of heaven”: patients are at some point discharged and move on.

Julia, a high school teacher in a city of 10,000 residents, sees it differently: “IURD blesses and oppresses.” She sees her students’ challenges up close—poverty, unemployment, drugs, teenage pregnancy, emotional crisis, dysfunctional families, and more. Last year two of the most difficult students started using crack cocaine and disappeared from school for months. In the new term they returned, almost unrecognizable. Hair cut and neatly combed, long pants, shined shoes, polished language: they were totally different. Over the next few months, they were closely accompanied by IURD *obreiros*, who met with them daily. Initially Julia was astonished: “The students improved their performance at school while working in heavy manual labor, and all their salary was destined to help the parents and as offering to the church.”

They had arrived at the IURD on stretchers, ill and helpless, and been received with open arms. As soon as they began to recover, they were invited to serve the church. Almost every evening was dedicated to church, from finance Monday to love therapy Saturday. Every week they were encouraged to give more and more to the church. “Of course, their good performance at school and at work became unsustainable,” says Julia. This is the oppressive part of the equation. After four months the students left the IURD for another Pentecostal church. However, the students continued to do well in life with their new congregation. One even opened a clothing store after graduating from school.

Throughout my immersion in the IURD, I saw signs of the Holy Spirit’s work and presence in the lives of the people there. Marginalized by society, they are empowered to be part of this broader movement of faith. Even Pedro, who decided to leave the church, said that he “felt the presence of the Holy Spirit. It was really cool.” I felt it, too.

Despite its sins, the IURD is a genuine expression of Christian community—but in an unorthodox, non-Western way. Maybe this is why other churches often struggle to understand or appreciate the IURD. (When I searched for IURD connections through

colleagues from historic Reformed denominations, I found only ex-members, no current ones.) Often the Reformed churches bring up the IURD only to define themselves in opposition to it—what Martin Buber calls an “I-It” relation, the opposite of “I-Thou.”

Rubem Alves, a Brazilian theologian and poet, elucidates the I-It relation with a story of a man who hated a yellow ipê tree in his front yard. He hated it because its yellow flowers were always strewn across his sidewalk and into his doorway. So he would sweep them away. If the man had stopped to really look at those flowers, to appreciate their place in his front yard and his neighborhood, then he might have understood that whatever problems they caused, they also offered something beautiful. Instead, he poisoned the tree. When it died, there were no more flowers for him to sweep away.

At the IURD, I didn’t feel the urge to try to sweep the church’s work away. Instead, I found myself swept away by the Spirit toward emergency rooms of heaven everywhere.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Heaven’s emergency room.”