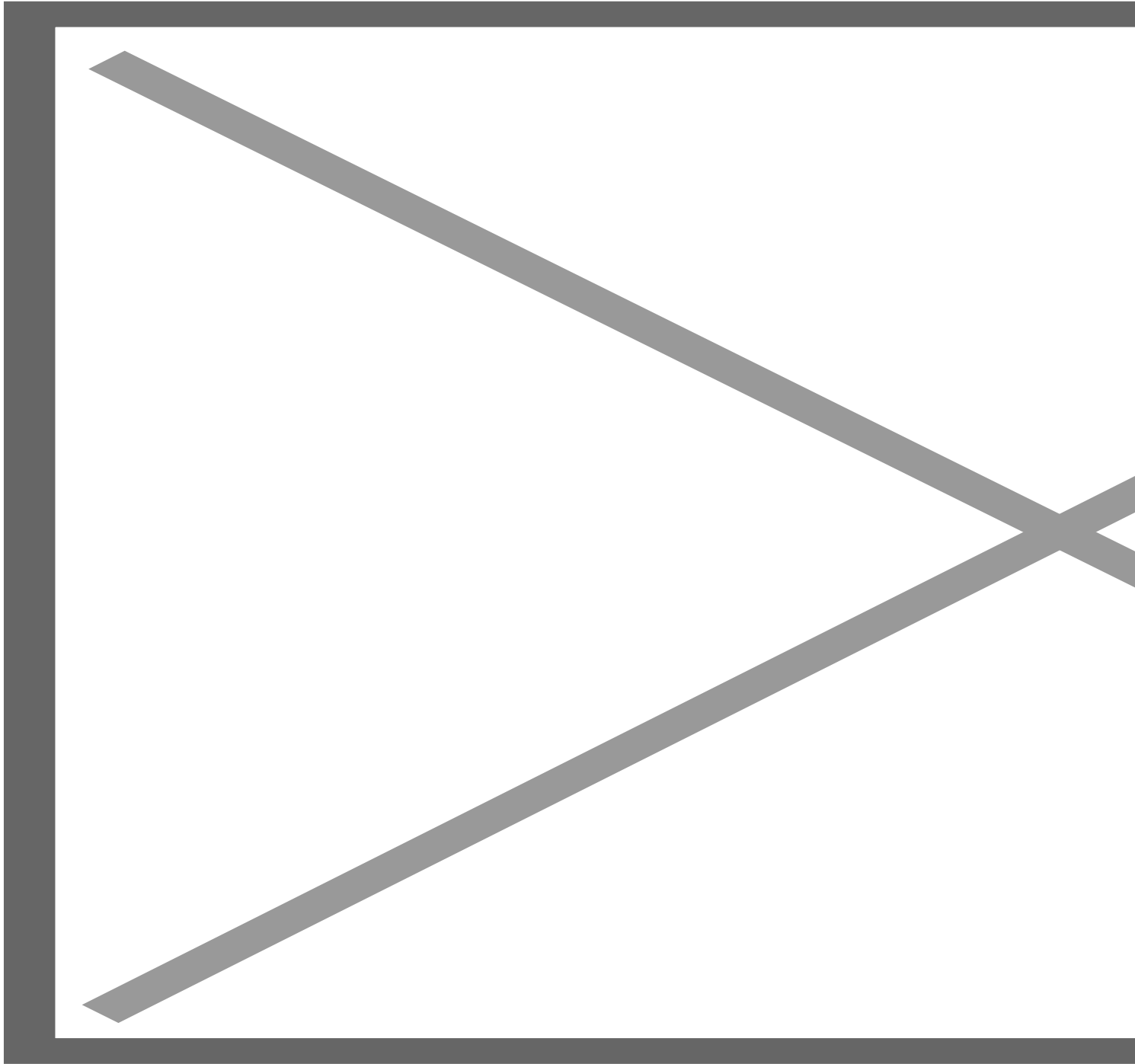


When drug lords get saved

In Rio de Janeiro, they don't necessarily turn away from sin.

by [Eduardo Campos Lima](#) in the [June 2026](#) issue

Published on May 19, 2026



An armed young Brazilian stands in front of a religious mural in Rio. (Photo by Alan Lima / *The Guardian* / © Guardian News & Media, Ltd. 2026)

Last year, police in Rio de Janeiro raided a luxurious property owned by a local drug lord. The officers described it as a resort because it had an artificial lake and a full gym. On the day the property was raided, dozens of the local favela children were playing and swimming in the lake.

The property owner, Álvaro Malaquias Santa Rosa, also known as “Peixão” or “Big Fish,” is one of the most wanted men in Brazil. His massive criminal network, Terceiro Comando Puro, or TCP, controls vast territories in Rio and engages in criminal activities in other cities as well.

Peixão faces at least 50 criminal charges, including charges for homicide and torture. But his fame has grown—not only for his crimes but also because he is a man of faith, adhering to an expression of evangelical neo-Pentecostalism.

Among the people, Peixão presents himself as a warrior guided by God to lead people and territories. Advancing or retreating during police raids, for instance, are decisions that he attributes to God, who allegedly communicates them to him.

“He personally identifies with the Old Testament’s characters,” said Viviane Costa, author of *Traficantes evangélicos*, a 2023 Portuguese-language book about evangelical drug lords. “He once said he had revelations from God—and he keeps his notes concerning such an experience.”

Evangelical drug lords are not new in Rio de Janeiro. According to Ivanir dos Santos, an expert in religious intolerance, the phenomenon began in the 1990s in the northeast municipality of Acari, when a local chieftain became an evangelical.

In 1970, more than 91 percent of Brazil’s population was Catholic. Over the past few decades, however, evangelicalism has been growing rapidly. By the 2022 census, only 57 percent of Brazilians identified as Catholic, while 27 percent identified as evangelical. Experts have identified Rio as one of the centers of this religious transition.

The spark for the more recent connection between drug lords and evangelicalism, dos Santos said, was increased ministry outreach to drug dealers in favelas and prisons.

During the state administrations of Anthony Garotinho (1999–2002) and his spouse Rosinha Garotinho (2003–2007), evangelical pastors had unprecedented access to the people detained in Rio’s prisons. The Garotinhos—themselves former evangelical pastors and radio evangelists—had a constituency that was largely evangelical. They tried to serve that constituency in multiple ways, including privileged access to prisons.

“While the Catholic Church had significant difficulty in managing to visit prisons, for the evangelicals it was much easier,” said Luiz Antônio Lopes, a Catholic priest who runs the favela pastoral ministry for the Archdiocese of Rio de Janeiro.

Furthermore, Lopes said, people who converted to evangelicalism would be considered for reduced prison sentences. Some converts would leave prison but not their criminal activities.

According to dos Santos, this double belonging—to both the church and a criminal gang—is an imperfect but acceptable condition for some evangelical pastors. Essentially, dos Santos said, these pastors say that the criminal activity of the people they converted is “not their problem.”

In fact, this “imperfect” situation can be convenient for some pastors. Christina Vital da Cunha, a sociology professor at Fluminense Federal University in Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, and a leading authority in the religious

dynamics in the state, said there is a small number of evangelical pastors who maintain relationships with drug dealers for their own economic interests. They may, perhaps, keep drug money in their bank accounts.

These pastors may also genuinely believe that God uses violent drug lords for higher, evangelistic purposes. For example, in Israel Complex—the name given to a group of five Rio favelas the TCP took over—Peixão removed Catholic sculptures and closed down centers associated with Umbanda and Candomblé, two Brazilian religions of African origin. (He also installed a gigantic neon Star of David at the highest point of the hill.)

But for the most part, evangelical pastors really are trying to conduct spiritual work, Vital da Cunha said. “And that’s not easy.” She once interviewed an evangelical pastor who stressed the difference between the act of conversion and the process of sanctifying oneself. Drug lords may have converted and then continued to struggle to change their lives.

Jonatas (he preferred not to reveal his surname) was born in Duque de Caxias, a city in the Rio de Janeiro metropolitan area, to poor migrants from Minas Gerais State. When his father left the family, things became complicated.

“We suffered a lot when he went away. We didn’t have money for anything,” he said.

One of Jonatas’s friends had an agreement with the local drug dealers: In exchange for bringing them lunch everyday, he was allowed to eat too, for free. Jonatas decided to do the same.

“I was only 13. I was not seduced by the drug lords’ power—it was not like that,” he said. “I just wanted to eat better food, get some new clothes.”

Unlike most other gang members, Jonatas wasn’t a drug user, and he remained focused on making money. Soon, he rose to the higher ranks of the gang and ended up being imprisoned twice—once for two years and the other time for five.

“One day, after being released for the second time, I was in a community that was not mine,” Jonatas said. “I was heavily armed, and I met with a Christian pastor. He began talking to me about Jesus.”

The pastor started sending prayers and messages to Jonatas’s phone every day. Jonatas noticed a similarity between the pastor’s words and those of his own mother—a person he knew loved him.

“Jesus took care of the rest,” he said.

As soon as he converted, Jonatas asked to leave the gang. His boss wanted him to stay but ultimately relented. Now, three years later, Jonatas has four kids and has been working regularly. For many local teenagers, his story is an inspiration.

In Jonatas’s opinion, it’s impossible to be an evangelical drug lord. “Either you’re Christian or a criminal,” he said. “There’s no middle ground.”

Dos Santos, who is also a Candomblé leader, agrees. Evangelical pastors can’t “play dead” after converting someone with a criminal background, he said.

“And if a convert still perpetrates crimes, the pastor has a moral obligation to criticize such a behavior,” he added. “But many of them are not working as they should.”