

“MY GANG IS JESUS”

Brazil’s evangelicals face the temptations of the drug trade

By Alex Cuadros



When Demétrio Martins was ready to preach, he pushed a joystick that angled the seat of his wheelchair forward, slowly lifting him to a standing position. Restraints held his body upright. His atrophied right arm lay on an armrest, and with his left hand, he put a microphone to his

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lips. “Proverbs, chapter fourteen, verse twelve,” he said. “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is . . .”

The congregation finished: “Death.”

The Assembly of God True Grapevine was little more than a fluorescent-lit room wedged between a bar and an empty lot in Jacaré, a poor neighborhood on Rio de Janeiro’s north side. A few dozen people sat in the rows of plastic lawn chairs that served as pews, while shuddering wall fans circulated

hot air. The congregation was largely female; of the few men in attendance, most wore collared shirts and old leather shoes. Now and then, Martins veered from Portuguese into celestial tongues. People rose from their seats, thrust their hands into the air, and shouted, “Hallelujah!”

Martins had come to bring three soldiers of the Comando Vermelho, Rio’s most powerful drug gang, to Jesus. “I served in the Comando

A mural commissioned by a member of the Comando Vermelho. All photographs from Brazil, December 2019, except where noted, by Nadia Shira Cohen for *Harper’s Magazine* © The artist

Vermelho for eight years,” he told the assembly. “I saw things and I was involved in things that I can’t talk about. First of all, for legal reasons. Second, because it would glorify that which should be thrown in the trash. But there are a few things I can tell you to show how God is true and how God is faithful.”

He described himself as he had been in the early Nineties, when he could still walk. At twenty-two, he was a “general

Late one night, he was walking down an alleyway with his entourage when a stranger approached. Martins and his men raised their rifles, but the stranger didn’t turn back. “Young man, God has a plan for you,” the stranger said, speaking directly to Martins. “This gun in your hands”—it was a 7.62mm—“can only take a life if God allows it. And let me tell you something: if you keep on like this, you’ll end up preaching the word of God

his body. He felt that he briefly rose outside of himself before returning. He would never move his legs again, but he found Jesus. “Look at me,” Martins told the assembly. “It’s better to lose your rings and keep your fingers.”

As the service drew to a close, the wife of another pastor took the microphone and asked someone I’ll call Antônio to come to the front. Holding an infant on his lap, he slouched in shorts and flip-flops. Later I would learn that

a hand on his head. “My Father,” Martins said, “God of miracles, God of mercy.” Antônio smiled. “Forgive his sins, oh Lord. Write his name in the Book of Life.”

Long the country with the world’s largest Catholic population, Brazil now has the second-largest evangelical population as well, behind only the United States. In the space of a generation, the country has seen the

ing that drugs and abortion remain criminalized. But the work of spreading the Gospel in Brazil presents unusual challenges. Reaching the poor means contending with drug gangs, which are not mere agents of violence and addiction but major employers and the de facto authorities on their turf. To preach in these areas, a pastor needs the local boss’s blessing.

For centuries, Catholicism was Brazil’s official religion, but the Church

bought one-way steamship tickets. In Belém, the capital city at the mouth of the Amazon River, their promise of miracle cures drew legions of the poor and dispossessed. Self-styled pastors soon founded churches of their own, importing new American ideas such as the prosperity gospel. Exorcising demons with Yoruban names like Exú, they also found a way to accommodate the Afro-Brazilian tradition even while branding it as unholy.



manager” for the gang, overseeing twenty-five drug-distribution points. Before snorting cocaine, he used to scrape it into lines that formed the letters C and V. He made \$12,000 a week. He kept his hair long and kinky, and he wore gold chains and rings. Women flocked to him. Yet it was not enough. “Do you know why a lot of people end up dead?” Martins asked now. “Because the more money they make, the more they want. The more power they get, the more they want.”

from a wheelchair.” The man was a *crente*—a born-again Christian, literally a “believer”—still a curiosity in the favelas back then.

Martins failed to heed the stranger’s words, but one day, in July of 1992, they proved to be prophetic. He was walking through the favela alone when he was ambushed by the police. They opened fire and hit him once in the arm, once in the torso; the impact spun him around, and another two bullets lodged in his back. A sensation of cold flooded

his fellow gang members called him ‘Belão—“big hair.” He passed the child to his pregnant wife, shyly rose from his seat, and shuffled forward. “I was watching you, and God showed me a chain around your feet,” the pastor’s wife told him. “The devil was plotting against you. It’s in your hands which path you’re going to choose. Do you want to accept Jesus today as your savior?”

Antônio nodded, and the congregation thundered with applause. He got down on his knees, and Martins placed

emergence of an entirely new power structure. In Congress, the evangelical caucus holds one in three seats. The mayor of Rio, despite the city’s libertine image, is a pastor and gospel singer. Evangelicals helped to elect the country’s ultra-conservative president, Jair Bolsonaro, a Catholic who was rebaptized by a Pentecostal pastor in the River Jordan. The movement seeks to bring biblical morality to a nominally secular nation: teaching creationism in schools, limiting LGBTQ rights, ensur-

tolerated a popular form of syncretism born when enslaved Africans disguised their deities as Christian saints. Evangelical Christianity was all but unheard of in the country until Pentecostalism was introduced in 1910. Four years earlier, the one-eyed son of former slaves had started the movement in Los Angeles. When two Pentecostal missionaries heard the voice of God saying “*para, para,*” they searched an atlas, discovered the state of Pará, in northern Brazil, and

As Brazil’s cities swelled over the course of the twentieth century, this new strain of Pentecostalism took root in the favelas—the informal neighborhoods built by migrants from the countryside. Meanwhile, the same governmental failures that proved conducive to an ecstatic faith movement also gave rise to organized crime. The Comando Vermelho, or Red Command, emerged in the 1970s, during the military dictatorship, when left-wing insurgents were locked up

Churchgoers at the Assembleia de Deus Vivendo para Cristo, in Morro da Pedreira, a favela in the north of Rio de Janeiro

Demétrio Martins preaching at the Igreja Pentecostal Marchando pela Fé in Belford Roxo, a suburb of Rio de Janeiro

with drug dealers, bank robbers, and murderers at a maximum-security penitentiary on an island near Rio. The leftists taught their fellow inmates the discipline and tactics of urban guerrillas, and a new kind of gang was born—one that would thrive far beyond prison walls.

Rio's favelas were an ideal base for the drug trade. Blanketing steep hills throughout the city, some embedded among wealthy beachside

Martins grew up far from the beach, in a patchwork of favelas known as the Complexo do Alemão, on Rio's sprawling north side. As a kid in the 1970s, he flew kites and played soccer. When he was fourteen, he started smoking marijuana and huffing *cheirinho da loló*, a cocktail of chloroform and ether. He went to *baile funk* parties—all-night sprees of Miami Bass-inspired rap—and fell in with the gang members who funded them. They lent him guns to

in for the Yoruban god of war. On Alemão's highest hill, Orlando had an altar built to honor them. Every night, powerful lights flickered on, and the altar became visible from the bridge across Rio's bay, making it a kind of gangland variant of the city's Christ the Redeemer statue. Martins himself frequented a *pai de santo*, an Afro-Brazilian priest, who gave him a necklace of black and red beads to "seal" his body. When he went to war, he needed

death by a rival gang. The altar would never be rebuilt. The new boss of the Comando Vermelho was only seventeen, but a Pentecostal pastor already had his ear.

A year ago, I flew to Rio and followed Martins around for a few weeks as he preached. I hoped to reconcile two competing narratives of the evangelical church's role in the favelas. For the country's poor, all but neglected by the state, churches serve not only as

name. The new evangelical elite, in turn, proffer a version of this misreading on a larger scale.

Martins claimed to be waging a "war" for gang members' souls. He seemed sincere in his mission, yet he was anything but antagonistic to Rio's drug bosses, whom he still greeted with a smile on the streets of Alemão. I wondered whether he was doomed to be misunderstood by such people—or, worse, co-opted. To me, his efforts

sewage. Power lines hung in low, anarchic bundles—informal hookups to the grid. The favelas have changed quite a bit in recent decades, not least in the profusion of evangelical churches. On many of the winding, narrow streets, bright signs advertised various Assemblies of God.

Cresting a hill, we parked at a church across the street from what looked like a lone stall at a farmers market. "That's a *boca de fumo*," Martins said,



neighborhoods, they formed dense labyrinths with natural choke points at their entrances. To win over residents, the Comando Vermelho paid for food and medicine, and punished crimes like robbery and rape. Soon, though, rival gangs emerged, copying the Comando Vermelho model. Rogue police officers also created *milicias* that extorted "taxes" for gas and electricity. The result was a shifting archipelago of criminal fiefdoms perpetually at war with one another.

carry out robberies. Eventually, he grew close to a rising star in the Comando Vermelho, Orlando the Player (so nicknamed for his soccer prowess). In 1990, Orlando took control of Alemão in a bloody raid, with Martins fighting alongside him.

In those days, gang members sought protection from the spirits of Afro-Brazilian syncretism—like Zé Pilintra, the zoot-suit-wearing entity traditionally honored by hustlers and bohemians, or St. George, the Catholic stand-

only to wrap the necklace around his wrist; he would always hit his target, and no bullet would touch him.

Martins's violent encounter with the police occurred as the evangelical wave in Brazil was becoming a mainstream force. Pastors now gave sermons on the radio and television. Born-again politicians were starting to win elections. And in the favelas, too, the nature of power was changing. In 1994, Orlando's altar was destroyed by a *crente*, and Orlando was shot to

a source of spiritual salvation but as a haven of last resort—a place to find community, job tips, and counseling, or simply to gather and sing without fear of violence. Yet stories of crooked pastors abound in the new Brazil; in recent years, several have been caught transporting weapons for the drug trade. While many gang members find in Jesus the courage to quit this life, others seem to have internalized a skewed set of biblical lessons, even committing acts of violence in Jesus'

hinted at another war being fought in the favelas, one for the soul of the church itself.

Entering Chapadão, a Comando Vermelho area, Martins's taxi driver rolled down the windows, letting in the sticky Rio air, so the local sentries could see our faces. We weaved around cement barricades meant to slow down the police. Dull red cinder-block shacks sat one atop the other, and I caught whiffs of raw

meaning a point of sale for drugs (literally, a "mouth of smoke"). Two teenagers manned a table displaying baggies of various substances. One played with his phone, a Kalashnikov slung carelessly across his chest. Just before the service was about to start, a member of the church invited the dealers to attend. The kids said they couldn't abandon their post, but maybe next time.

As an itinerant preacher, Martins brought gang members to Jesus in favelas across Rio. I wondered how he

could hope to overcome the logic and allure of gang life in an area like this. I wondered, too, whether he felt any fear. “The Bible says that where sin abounds, the grace of God abounds even more,” he told me. “What’s dangerous is if the police show up, and there’s a confrontation, and you’re caught in the middle. But there’s no risk from the gangs themselves. On the contrary, they call us. They request the presence of the church.”

evangelical. “To convert means to change one’s path,” he said. A gang member might have faith, might frequent church, but to be born again—and to gain access to heaven—he has to repent and quit. In Martins’s view, this makes the evangelical church Brazil’s most important social institution. Every time someone in the favelas converts, “that’s one less drug dealer, one less kidnapper, one less murderer, one less drug addict, one

I had watched Antônio accept Jesus. The rehab center was on a plot of land in Rio’s northwestern outskirts, with a soccer field, a chapel, a kitchen, and several rooms containing bunk beds. Men in sweat-stained clothes performed yard work or read the Bible. Martins told me that Antônio would have to be interned here, far from the temptations of home, to get clean as he prepared for baptism. Gang members use drugs as well as sell them—cocaine

until someone let slip a name. Then he would switch voices and tell the person to deposit money in an account or their “son” would die. One day, he tried to scam a born-again Christian, who said he had been sent by God to help him. The call changed Santos’s life.

A Brazilian prison guard’s job is mostly preventing escape. On the inside, the gangs each have their own tacitly recognized territories where

church upon release. In the meantime, they must pray multiple times a day, and the gangs will be watching to see that they’re sincere.

Santos was sincere. He’d abandoned favela slang and traded in his shorts and flip-flops for button-downs and ties. On top of his duties as a counselor, he now helps to spread the word of God. Even his former enemies respect his change of heart. The other day, he told me, he was getting off

“Now that you’ve stopped me, let me pray for your life,” Santos responded. Then the soldiers laid their guns on the ground, and he told them about Christ’s love.

In one favela that I visited, murals of biblical scenes—the Last Supper, Moses parting the Red Sea—covered the walls. Between them, cursive quotations stretched across a background of bright clouds.



The gangs see the church as neutral, Martins said. Pastors often preach in the communities where they grew up, and they would never report a local *traficante* to the police. This allows them to mediate conflicts with a unique sort of authority. He told me about a pastor who’d saved someone from a gang’s death sentence by citing Matthew 5:7, to the executioner: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.”

Still, Martins insisted that no one who sells drugs can truly call himself

less robber.” In a country with sixty thousand murders a year, this is a worthy mission. The government provides few alternatives for wayward young men. All the gangs see of the state is the police and the prison system.

Pastors also offer concrete help to former gang members, providing lawyers for those who might serve time and even distributing donations to their families. One day, Martins took me to a free drug-rehabilitation center run by the True Grapevine, the church where

to stay alert for late-night invasions, marijuana to take the edge off.

The center’s head counselor, Felipe Santos, was thirty and had deep acne scars. He himself had been in the Terceiro Comando Puro (TCP), or Pure Third Command, a Comando Vermelho rival, but converted in prison. From his cell, he’d carried out fake kidnappings, calling numbers at random, and crying to the person who answered, “Oh Daddy, oh Daddy,” or, “Mother, help me!”

they dominate almost every other aspect of inmate life. But evangelicals also control an area where drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, and pornography are prohibited, and visiting pastors baptize converts in plastic kiddie pools. If you break a gang’s rules, which encompass everything from bathroom schedules to prohibitions on sexual violence, the only way to avoid a beating is to join the “believers.” Unsurprisingly, many inmates make a show of conversion, only to abandon the

a bus when a group of kids with automatic rifles called out to him. The area was controlled by the Amigos dos Amigos, or Friends of Friends, a TCP rival.

“Remember me?” one of them asked. “I don’t remember you, blessed one,” Santos replied.

“I remember you, but I can see you’re a man of God now.”

“Amen,” Santos said.

“No worries, brother,” the kid said. “No need to be afraid.”

There was Psalm 91:7, promising protection from disease and death: “A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.” There was Isaiah 40:31: “But those who trust in the Lord will find new strength.” And Deuteronomy 17:12: “Anyone who shows contempt for the judge or for the priest who stands ministering there to the Lord your God is to be put to death.” Shirtless young men, pistols in their waistbands, smoked

joints next to graffiti reading, “Jesus is the *dono*”—the owner—“of this place.” *Dono* is also the term for a favela’s drug boss.

Some gang members, Martins conceded, simply want to appease born-again girlfriends or mothers with these sorts of homages. Others are seeking the same kind of supernatural protection Martins once found in Afro-Brazilian syncretism. In the favela of Acari, the sociologist Christina Vital

The church also offers solace that can make gang life more tolerable. After a service in a favela one night, I followed a young man I’ll call João to his car. He sat in the driver’s seat, holding an AR-15 on his lap; when he spoke, I noticed braces on his teeth. He was only twenty-two but had been in the TCP for five years. His family was Catholic, and he had found the inflamed Pentecostal style frightening at first, but no Catholic priest had ever

ident, when a couple of friends in another car sped through without stopping. The police opened fire. João took the opportunity to drive away, but one of his friends was killed. Though he hadn’t been to church for a while, he returned the very next day. “There are times when you go heavy and come back calm,” he said. He didn’t understand everything the pastor preached, but sometimes he got goose bumps.

just sell drugs; it helped the community by doling out food, medicine, cooking gas. The local boss also paid for gospel singers to perform at concerts in the favela.

The boss, João said, was very devout. He always tried to avoid “the trunk,” which is to say, killing people. Even when someone committed theft or rape—capital crimes in other favelas—he preferred merely to have them beaten.

“slave” to the drug trade for fifteen years—half his life. “But now I’m going to be coming every week without fail,” he said. “I’m not going back.”

Antônio’s pastor also sought to “free” young men from Afro-Brazilian faiths such as Candomblé and Umbanda. Their spirits, he said, were manifestations of the Enemy. The pastor was far from alone in his denunciation. The decline of Afro-Brazilian faiths is not just the result of changing preferences.

want your superstition here? I belong to the honor and glory of Jesus.” He waves a baseball bat that reads *DIALOGO* in front of the camera. “It’s just a dialogue I’m having with you,” he says. “If I catch you again or you try to rebuild this shit, I’ll kill you.”

The victims of such attacks were afraid to speak to me, even though I promised not to print their names. While I was in Rio, an Afro-Brazilian priest named Leandro Souza de Jesus



da Cunha has recorded what she calls *oração de traficante*—the gang member’s prayer. Every morning at five-thirty, one soldier addresses the others by walkie-talkie, asking God to watch over the favela’s workers, its children, and the gang itself: “Lord, I ask you protection not for myself but for my friends. Free them from death, Lord, and may they not be treacherously killed, and may they not kill any police officer or enemy who attacks our favela.”

approached him at a *boca de fumo*, as the local pastors did. Explaining why he had accepted their invitations, he said, “I started having bad dreams, just death stuff and prison. I would feel my heart being squeezed and annoying jolts in my body.”

Just a few nights earlier, the police had set up an unexpected blockade in the favela. João was driving through when they ordered him to stop and get out of the vehicle. He was stalling, claiming to be an ordinary favela res-

“There are days I wake up crying,” he went on, flicking the safety back and forth on his gun. He knew the drug trade was wrong in God’s eyes. His pastor wasn’t shy about telling him this. But some weeks he earned the equivalent of \$500—around eight times the country’s minimum wage—and he had no idea how else to support his wife and three children. “Not all gang members want to be in the drug trade to do bad things,” he said. The way he saw it, the gang didn’t



A month after Martins’s sermon at the True Grapevine, Antônio had yet to move into the rehab center. I returned to the church on my own to speak to him. Throughout the service, he occasionally buried his head in his hands; when the congregation sang, he did not mouth the words. He had yet to adopt the dressed-up look of evangelical men in the favelas. He wore a tank top, his hair gelled into shiny curls. Afterward, he told me he had been a

Some gang members yearn to express their devotion to God but are so accustomed to the language of force that they hear this talk of an Enemy as a declaration of holy war. In recent years, the so-called *narcopentecostais* have mounted escalating attacks on Afro-Brazilian temples, sometimes posting videos as warnings to others. One shows a man in a T-shirt printed with Jesus’ face, ripping apart sacred necklaces, while another tells the temple’s priest, “Don’t you know that the boss doesn’t

was murdered inside his temple. But one Candomblé priestess, a *mãe de santo* I’ll call Xica, agreed to receive me in a sitting room decorated with statues of Jesus, the Wise Men, and Oyá, a spirit from the Niger River. She told me some of her disciples lived in Cidade Alta, a favela recently taken over by the TCP. Men in suits went door-to-door to deliver letters announcing that it was now forbidden to practice *macumba*—a derogatory term for Afro-Brazilian

faiths—or even to wear all white, as required for their rituals. “Jesus has ordained that the community of Cidade Alta be freed from this evil,” the letter said.

One of Xica’s disciples, herself a *mãe de santo*, shut down her temple and moved away, but another decided to

“How is your saint?” Xica asked, referring to the spirit her disciple worshipped.

“He’s on top of a wardrobe, hidden.” “Hidden why?” asked Xica, prodding her forward.

“Because if they find something they’ll break it and kick us out.”

them,” he told me. “But this is wrong.” Even he, though, called these religions “witchcraft.” My first night at the True Grapevine, Martins had blamed a spirit known as Pomba Gira, who takes the form of a voluptuous woman in a red dress, for leading young men into the drug trade.

gelicals in Switzerland purchased the wheelchair for him.

Martins did not lead a life of luxury. He didn’t even own a car. He accepted whatever donation a church might offer him to preach, and after every sermon he sold DVDs of his conversion story for ten reais (around \$2.50), along with

tied up the guards and took their weapons. One guard and thirty-four inmates from rival gangs were killed, their bodies mutilated and set on fire. The leaders of the uprising said they would negotiate only with Pereira, so police flew him in by helicopter and the uprising was quelled.

somehow acquired the title to a \$2 million apartment on Copacabana Beach. In 2013, a former Comando Vermelho soldier told investigators that Pereira was laundering drug money in the form of tithes to his church. Prosecutors accused Pereira of acting as a “carrier pigeon”



continue practicing in secret. Someone alerted the gang, and she was ordered to stop, but she didn’t. Early one morning, in the middle of a ceremony, a convoy of motorcycles showed up. Four men broke in, shooting into the air to scare off worshippers. They threw the elderly woman to the ground, beat her, and smashed her altars to pieces.

As we spoke, Xica called out for a disciple who still lived in Cidade Alta. A young woman walked in, knelt, and kissed the priestess’s hand before taking a seat. She wore a white head wrap; her body looked tense, her expression shy.

“Kicked out of your house, and then they put—”

“—other people to live in your house,” the disciple finished. “Their people.”

Xica said there were pastors who blessed the TCP’s weapons, who blessed its drugs. This seemed a stretch to me at the time, but Martins later told me that he had himself seen a woman from an evangelical church anointing a gang’s rifles with holy olive oil. Martins did not agree with this practice. He condemned the gangs’ attacks on Afro-Brazilian temples. “They think that they’re pleasing God and that God will protect

Martins told me he never took drug money, even when he was hospitalized with Fournier’s gangrene a few years ago. The doctor said that Martins could no longer sit for extended periods and that to continue preaching he would need a five-thousand-dollar wheelchair that could support him in a standing position. A drug boss offered to buy it for him, but he refused. It was in part a practical matter: “I’d be giving them the right to frequent my home, to stash things there,” he said. He also felt he would lose the moral authority to persuade them to quit their lives of sin. Fortunately, he said, a group of evan-

bonbons made by his wife—Marta, whom he met in church—for two reais. Still, he acknowledged that some pastors commit “bad testimony.”

After Orlando the Player was killed in 1994, seventeen-year-old Márcio dos Santos Nepomuceno—better known as Marcinho VP—became boss of Alemão. Marcos Pereira da Silva is the pastor who taught him about Jesus. Though Marcinho went to prison just three years later, he continued to rise within the Comando Vermelho, and Pereira continued to visit him, becoming a trusted ally. In 2004, a riot broke out at a different prison. Inmates from the Comando Vermelho

One night, I went to Pereira’s church, the Assembly of God of the Final Days, in Rio’s rough northern suburbs, for a celebration of his sixty-second birthday. A few hundred people stood in front of a brightly lit stage in the parking lot, rapt before a lineup of gospel singers and born-again politicians. After the 2004 uprising, Pereira was often called in to mediate prison riots, and he became a kind of celebrity, growing close to evangelical power brokers. Police suspected that he was more than just a pastor to his gangland flock; he had started sporting Rolexes and driving vintage cars, and his church had

for Marcinho, helping to coordinate attacks on the police and even orchestrating prison riots himself to raise his profile.

Pereira did not hide his easy transit with gangs. In videos uploaded by his church, he descends on *baile funk* parties, commandeers the sound system, and turns the gang-run revels into revival scenes. After managing to get backstage at his birthday celebration, I met the daughter of an imprisoned drug lord from Penha known as F.B. Like all of Pereira’s female disciples, she wore a billowy pastel robe. She showed me pictures on her phone of how she used to dress—short shorts, high heels—before

she'd accepted Jesus. Now she was married to Pereira's son, also a pastor, who ministered to gang members in the northeast of Brazil.

Pereira was ultimately acquitted of drug charges for lack of evidence, but during the investigation several women—members of his church—said that he had sexually assaulted them. One of the victims was fourteen when Pereira told her to stop shaving her legs and wear the full-body

lice; she was murdered before she had the chance.

In September 2013, Pereira was sentenced to fifteen years in prison for rape, but by then his power reached far beyond the favelas. In Brasília, the evangelical caucus sprang to action. Calling him a victim of religious persecution, several congressmen—including Brazil's future president, Bolsonaro—lobbied for his release. On Christmas Eve of 2014, a Supreme

and snort is a satanic force." When I arrived in Rio, though, he refused to speak in person. At his birthday party I found him in a blinding-white three-piece suit, holding forth in a VIP room hung with Brazilian and Israeli flags. I approached, and he grasped my hand, but when I told him who I was he abruptly walked away. I returned to the crowd to watch him preach as a balloon printed with his smiling face floated overhead.*

trimmed lawns; out back were a small pool and a cement soccer court. It hardly compared to the estates of Pablo Escobar, but it was a big improvement for Gama, who grew up poor in Alemão.

Sitting on a wicker chair on her front porch, Gama wore sweatpants and a T-shirt, with a discreet gold chain around her neck. She referred to her husband as "the person the media claims to be one of the biggest drug lords of Rio de Janeiro, boss of the Comando Vermelho." But the man she knew was "God-fearing." He taught others in the gang to pray. He even wrote lyrics for their daughter Débora, a gospel singer. Still, he had not yet been born again, she said: "He still has too much outrage inside him." The state, she explained, unjustly blamed him for every crime committed by the Comando Vermelho. In 2007, for instance, he was convicted of having two of his rivals murdered, cut into pieces, and stuffed into a manhole.

Gama herself was arrested in 2010, after the city of Rio announced a plan to kick out the drug gangs and install a permanent police presence in the favelas. The gangs responded by setting fire to buses, attacking police stations with heavy weaponry, and stopping traffic on freeways to rob drivers. Gama was accused of using conjugal visits to help coordinate the assault. She was also accused of laundering drug money, and she spent six months in jail. She compared herself to the apostle Peter, who was freed from prison by an angel. "I don't have anything to do with gangs," she told me. "My gang is Jesus."

Gama, too, was evangelized by Pereira. She'd been born again after her husband went to prison. "I can talk to anyone in the drug trade about Jesus," she said. She pulled out her phone, opened WhatsApp, and showed me emoji-laden messages with the wife of Menor P., one of the imprisoned leaders of the TCP. "He's the enemy of my husband, but she loves me," Gama said. The two women became friends after Marcinho asked Débora to sing at the prison where he and Menor P. were both serving time. Menor P. was so impressed that he invited Débora to perform at his birthday celebration, held in his absence in his home favela of Maré.

Martins used to administer a private service every week at Gama's home, but after he came down with gangrene, a rail-thin pastor named Cléber Gil, also from Alemão, took over. When I attended a few days later, Gil stood on a back patio and gave an unusual sermon about Joseph in Egypt. Having been sold as a slave to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard, Joseph was falsely accused of attempting to rape Potiphar's wife. And yet, Gil pointed out, Potiphar put Joseph not in just any prison, but in the one that held Pharaoh's prisoners: "Potiphar could have put Joseph in state prison, but he put Joseph in federal prison."

Gil repeated this analogy a few more times. While it might have seemed strange to another congregation, he didn't need to remind Gama that her husband had been transferred from a state prison in Rio to a federal prison hundreds of miles away, to limit his communications with the rest of the gang. Now Gama could visit him only once every other week. Conjugal visits were forbidden—even after an evangelical congressman brought her to Brasília to lobby the country's justice minister for a reprieve.

"But God has his purposes," Gil went on. Because Joseph was imprisoned with Pharaoh's cup bearer, he would later be summoned to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, and Pharaoh would name Joseph viceroy of Egypt. "God had to take Joseph to federal prison so that he could arrive in the place that He wanted," Gil said. The implication was clear: God had a plan for Marcinho.

"That is our God," Gil said.
"Glory to God," Gama said.

Toward the end of my time in Rio, I went to see Martins preach at a tiny, sweltering church in a favela on the city's west side. Afterward, as two young churchgoers helped him sell DVDs and bonbons, the head pastor told us that the local drug boss had been in attendance. He had started coming to her services after being wounded in a shoot-out. "Pray for me, pray for me," he begged her. "I don't want to die."

"Do you expect God to give you another chance?" she asked him. "This is your last one."

The pastor's son said she shouldn't associate with such people. But she always welcomed the local boss, always gave him a blessing when he asked for one. "He's very feared here, you know?" she said to Martins. "What he says becomes law. If we have someone like that coming to Jesus..."

"He has credibility," Martins said. "He can influence people. Someone like that, converted—his word is like a gunshot."

From the church patio, high on a hill, we could see the lights of the city extinguishing themselves in the sea. A few doors down, a *baile funk* beat erupted, making our rib cages thrum. Justifying his outreach to Rio's criminal element, Martins liked to say that only the Truth could set them free. It was a conscious symbiosis, and it often bore fruit. But the Truth is open to interpretation. Even as they have acquired a newfound respect for Jesus, the gangs have grown, expanding far beyond Rio, into just about every city in the country.

Conversion is not always binary; redemption is not always permanent. Back at the True Grapevine, Antônio had said he wanted "a new life." The church worked hard to help him achieve it. Pastors visited his home to keep him on his path. But after attending a handful of services, he hadn't been seen in months. It appeared he had slipped back into his old life in the drug trade, a soldier with his own take on what it means to have faith. ■

February Index Sources

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robe. When her family protested, he claimed the devil was influencing them and moved her into a church residence with thirty other women. According to her testimony, he told her she was possessed by a "lesbian spirit" and the cure was to have sex with him. Some of the women said he threw orgies in the residence, ordering them to confess their sins at the end. They also said his private doctor had carried out abortions. In 2008, one woman intended to go to the po-

Court justice freed him on a technicality. (Pereira has always denied the accusations against him, and he was never charged in connection with the 2008 murder.)

Before visiting Pereira's church, I spoke with him by phone. He asked whether my magazine could get him into the United States; he had been turned back at the Dallas airport a few years earlier. "I want to prove to the American authorities," he explained, "that what makes a man rape, steal,

One day, Martins took me to meet Marcinho VP's wife, Márcia Gama. She lives in a middle-class neighborhood on Rio's west side, on a large property hidden behind vine-covered walls. Passing through a wooden gate, I was surprised not to see any guards. Kids ran in and out of lavender-painted buildings with clay-tile roofs. Palm trees rose from closely

* When contacted later by Harper's Magazine, Pereira said that my account was "all lies" and that I was possessed by the devil.