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## Argueta Pérez, José Antonio (1945–2015)

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### VICENTE NAFRI MACHADO ARÉVALO

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José Antonio Argueta Pérez was a layman, master guide, youth leader, church builder, and community worker.

## Early Life

Jose Antonio Argueta Perez was born January 17, 1945, in barrio La Cruz, San Francisco Gotera, Morazan city, El Salvador, and there he spent his childhood. He was the youngest of 15 children of Jose Toribio Argueta and Santos Perez de Argueta.<sup>1</sup> He studied first grade at Escuela Rural Mixta Canton Loma Larga in La Union city in 1954, and the rest of his primary studies were in Escuela de Varones Juan Jose Cañas in San Francisco Gotera, between 1955 and 1959.<sup>2</sup> He was not able to finish elementary school<sup>3</sup> until 1973. Because he was a young adult with family obligations, he studied at night in the Grupo Escolar Juan Jose Cañas of San Francisco Gotera. He finished his secondary schooling in 1978 and graduated as an academic bachelor with honors, getting the third highest grade in the country that year in the private exams by the Ministry of Education.

In 1969 Antonio Argueta was a soldier in the El Salvador army and took part in the “100-hour war” or “the football war.” During this experience he developed discipline and other abilities that would be useful in his ministry.<sup>4</sup>

In 1970 Dorotea Valera made the first missionary contact with Antonio Argueta since she was the owner of the inn where he rented a room for him and his family.<sup>5</sup> Then Dorotea’s husband, Filadelfo Gomez, started to give him Bible studies. At the beginning of 1971 he was asked if he wanted to be baptized, but he hesitated for a while, since he was the sexton of his parish church. One day while he was reading a book at the parish library, he realized that everything the Adventist told him was true, and he felt confused. He went to the parish priest, Friar Alfredo O’Lochráinn, who told him: “Toño, you will find the truth in the Bible. Read it.” Even so, he asked God for a sign. He said he would be baptized if his second child (his wife was then pregnant), was a girl. When his daughter, Lidia Guadalupe, was born, he made his decision.<sup>6</sup>

On June 16, 1971, in Rio Seco, Morazan, Jose Antonio Argueta Perez fulfilled his promise and was baptized by Pastor Luis Leonor, who at that time was president of the Adventist Mission in El Salvador<sup>7</sup> and thus began his ministry of service which lasted more than four decades.<sup>8</sup>

## Education and Marriage

In spite of his family obligations, Antonio Argueta wished to have a university education, and he started his studies to be an industrial engineer. He abandoned his studies because at the end of 1979 a civil war was started in El Salvador and San Francisco Gotera in Morazan was one of the fronts of the war. However, he developed in many other areas that contributed to his resume, including his activist work in the community.<sup>9</sup> The diplomas and certificates he acquired included:<sup>10</sup> trousers tailor, photography, mental health, interpersonal relationships, conflict resolution, administration, and leadership.<sup>11</sup>

In March 1982 he faced one of the most difficult periods in his personal life. Cristina, whom he had married in 1970, abandoned him and their four children: José Antonio (January 24, 1971), Lidia Guadalupe (March 12, 1975), Marleny Elizabeth (January 29, 1977), and Joel Eliseo (December 21, 1980). In spite of the circumstances, he was not discouraged and he continued to work hard for the church and to raise his four children. He had four jobs at the same time: World Vision manager,<sup>12</sup> tailor by night, photographer on weekends, and sweeping the park and movie theater from 1 to 5 am with help of his little son Jose Antonio.

On December 29, 1983, he married Cristina Elizabeth Contreras whom he had met at the Pathfinder club at his church. They were married at the municipal hall of Arambala. At that time, as was the case of many municipalities on the north of the province of Morazan, the offices were moved to San Francisco Gotera city due to the war. Cristina Elizabeth Contreras was born December 15, 1963, and Jose Cirilo Sanchez introduced her to Adventism.<sup>13</sup> She was baptized into the Adventist Church on May 12, 1979. The couple had three children: Josué Aarón (November 12, 1984), Josías Abdiel (October 31, 1985), and Jesiel Abraham (September 1, 1998).

## Ministry

The ministry of Antonio Argueta can be described as a leader of the youth movement and a lay leader.

When the civil war in El Salvador started in 1979, the province of Morazan became the scene of the bloodiest battles. As a result, thousands of people left their homes in the little villages and went to San Francisco Gotera city, looking for security and protection. Those refugees established settlements around the city and suffered needs that no government or government organization sought to fulfill. One of those organizations was World Vision, and Antonio Argueta was the manager of it for Morazan province beginning in 1978 and during the major part of the armed conflict until 1990.

Antonio Argueta brought humanitarian aid to people and he spoke to them about Jesus. He worked especially with the children and youth of the settlements, and he invited them to the Adventist church. Many people accepted the invitation, and, in that way, he became interested in working with the youth. While the church building for the Central Church in Gotera was built, on ground donated by Ninfa de Varela, which had been acquired thanks to Antonio Argueta, a lot of stones were needed for the foundation. Argueta went to all the families and children who participated in the projects he led, most of whom were not Adventist, and asked for help. Witnesses said that dozens of children and adults lined up in a row and carried on their shoulders and heads stones from a river located two kilometers from

the church building site. That was how the foundation was built. Later the same people, motivated by Argueta, donated bricks to build the walls of the church.

At the end of 1979 the first youth retreat was organized with the participation of many children and youth. He also attended the first national Pathfinder camp. In 1980 he organized the first Pathfinder club in San Francisco Gotera with more than 80 members, most of whom came from the settlements where he worked. In order to provide uniforms for so many children, he asked for donations of cloth, and he sewed each uniform.

After that experience in 1980, Argueta became part of the national board of Pathfinders and the general board for youth ministry. He served as representative of the eastern zone and Pathfinder and Master Guide coordinator and communication manager.

That time was full with youth activities on a national level, and Antonio Argueta actively participated in all of them. He completed all the youth class programs and motivated thousands of young people to get involved in the club movement. Among the experiences that highlight his leadership, one occurred at the national Pathfinder camp in Pescadito de Oro in 1985. Pastor Walter Flamenco was director of the camp. While they were in a board meeting, an army unit arrived. The civil war was at its peak and the army was suspicious about so many young people together in one place. They asked who was in charge. When Pastor Flamenco said he was, the army wanted to take him. But Argueta said that they would all go and stand up next to the pastor. The army took them all and interrogated them, but in a short time set them free. When they returned to the camp, they found all the people there on their knees praying for them.<sup>14</sup>

In 1996 Mission Oriental Salvadoreña was born and the youth movement felt fragmented, but thanks to the leadership of Argueta and other leaders the movement was fortified. Since that year he was a member of the youth ministry board of the new mission in almost all the areas. Argueta's leadership was so well known in all the camps that a non-Adventist visitor invited by him to a camp gave testimony about the deep respect that all the campers and leaders had for him.<sup>15</sup>

As a layman, he was an elder of his church and was a respectful, kind, happy, optimistic, and tireless missionary. He helped to establish churches in places difficult to access, even during the armed conflict. Among the places where he preached and founded churches are: Lolotiquillo, Perquin, Ocicala, Delicias, San Simon, El Volcan, El Zapotal, Joateca, and others. While he was in Lolotiquillo, on some occasions people threw stones at them, but they were not discouraged thanks to the motivation received by Argueta. In another occasion, during the armed conflict, while they were preaching in el Zapotal, they were caught up in a confrontation between the army and the guerrillas. In order to escape, they walked through a little glen and came upon the dead bodies of fighters. They took refuge in an abandoned *tatú*<sup>16</sup> until the confrontation calmed down.

Some times when his district was without a pastor, he helped to manage the district without receiving any compensation. When the new pastor arrived, he showed him all the churches, some of which could be reached by walking for six hours. He always was respectful to the pastors, and they found in him a brother, friend, and mentor.<sup>17</sup>

As a community activist, he worked hard for organizations that promoted education, peace, coexistence, and culture. His final contribution to his community was as president of the support committee of the cultural house. This organization, in recognition of all his voluntary work and community support, named the most important cultural festival of the city in his honor in 2015, a few months after his death.

The community leaders always describe him as a dynamic and active person. He had vision, was an impeccable advisor and leader and, above all, gave an excellent Christian testimony. In all his community work he never denied his faith or his Savior.<sup>18</sup>

## Last Day and Legacy

On December 9, 2015, Antonio Argueta passed away in the community of Canton el Norte, in his home town of San Francisco Gotera, after his fight with chronic renal failure. We do not know how many people came to the Lord from Argueta's influence, but thanks to his work as a Master Guide and layman, it would undoubtedly be thousands. Before he died, he told his loved wife Cristina Elizabeth Contreras: "I am leaving happy, because in my crown won't fit the stars of all those who I carried to my Lord's arms." Thousands of people attended his funeral, from the church, youth movement, and especially from his community.

His community was impacted by the life of a Christian who always fought to make it a better place for children and youth. The youth movement in El Salvador, especially in the eastern zone, was motivated and fortified by his leadership. His church and district were built up thanks to his work and influence.

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## NOTES

1. According to the birth certificate from the city hall in San Francisco Gotera, May 18, 1973. The author has a copy.?
2. Author had access to primary school certificates of Jose Antonio Argueta Perez to bear out years and places of studies.?
3. According to the first three years of secondary study in the Anglo-Saxon system.?
4. Cristina Elizabeth Contreras de Argueta, interviewed by the author, San Francisco, Gotera, El Salvador, June 5, 2019.?
5. Inns in El Salvador are similar to modern apartment buildings, but with just one floor. The rooms will be the apartments but there is just one room where people live, eat, and sleep.?
6. Lidia Guadalupe Argueta Blanco, interviewed by the author, San Francisco Gotera, El Salvador, June 5, 2019.?
7. Castro, A., García, R., Marroquín, J., Merino, K. "Inicio de la Obra Adventista en El Salvador," Centro De Investigaciones White UNADECA, April 19, 2014. Accessed June 12, 2019, <https://unadeca.net/cwhite/2014/09/19/salvador/>.?
8. According to baptism certificate that the author has a copy of.?
9. Hilda Esmeralda Dinarte de Hernández, interviewed by the author, San Francisco, Gotera, El Salvador, June 5, 2019.?
10. Josías Abdiel Argueta Contreras, interviewed by the author, San Miguel, El Salvador, April 29, 2019.?
11. Author had access to dozens of certificates and diplomas of courses and training that Jose Antonio Argueta Perez received from different government and non-governmental organizations.?
12. World Vision is a Christian humanitarian development organization, dedicated to work with children and their families in order to prevent poverty and injustice.?
13. José Cirilo Sánchez, interviewed by the author, San Francisco, Gotera, El Salvador, June 5, 2019.?
14. Victor Hernández, interviewed by the author, San Miguel, El Salvador, June 7, 2019.?
15. Manuel Enrique Martínez, interviewed by the author, San Francisco Gotera, El Salvador, June 5, 2019.?
16. The *tatús* were small tunnels built into the ground where the guerrilla hid during the war.?
17. Abel Pacheco López, interviewed by the author, San Salvador, El Salvador, June 6, 2019.?
18. Lucia Isabel Gonzalez, interviewed by the author, San Francisco Gotera, El Salvador, June 5, 2019.?

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