



Churches in Guatemala constructed by Maranatha Flights International, a group of dedicated volunteer Adventist laymen.

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## Guatemala Union Mission

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Guatemala Union Mission is located in the Central American country with the largest population.<sup>1</sup> It is bordered on the north by Mexico, on the northeast by Belize, and on the southeast by Honduras and El Salvador. Its offices are in the capital city of Guatemala. It has eight local fields, 985 organized churches, and 273 groups with a membership of 251,852 as of the end of 2018.<sup>2</sup> There are 119 pastors, each of whom cares for one district. Guatemala Union Mission is one of 24 unions that make up the Inter-American Division.<sup>3</sup>

The union sponsors an entity called Educational Institutions, Inc. that administers 27 academies and oversees 6,366 students, according to the January 2019 registration figures.

There are 376 personnel involved in the administration of these academies, including administrators, office workers, teaching faculty, and support staff.

The Adventist system of communications administers two radio stations, Unión Radio and Orión Stereo; three Adventist clinics, one in the metropolitan area, one in the western area, and another in the eastern part of the country; two recreational facilities for camping, one in the east and another in the north; and two caretaking facilities, one for the elderly and another to treat addicts. There is also an auditorium with a seating capacity of 2,700 located in the west.

## Origins of Guatemala Union Mission

The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists was interested in expanding the gospel proclamation in the territory of Central and South America. They assigned this task to Pastor T. H. Gibbs.<sup>4</sup> Pastor Gibbs entered the country of Guatemala on the Atlantic coast.

It has been confirmed that preaching the Adventist message in Guatemala had its origin in 1893<sup>5</sup> when the United Fruit Company (UFCO) and the International Rail Central America (IRCA) entered the country through Puerto Barrios, Izabal. Some of the workers with these companies, largely Jamaicans and others from Islas de la Bahía, professed the Adventist faith and it was they who began to preach the message in that place.

The official records of the Adventist organization indicate that the formal beginnings of the work in Guatemala began in 1908 when Guatemala is recognized as part of the Central American Conference, whose offices had already been set up in Guatemala.<sup>6</sup> Guatemala Mission was organized in 1913.<sup>7</sup> The country belonged to different entities during the twentieth century, including the Aztec Union, El Salvador, Belize, and, later, the Central American Union.

The expansion of the gospel prospered through the work of missionaries who arrived from different countries and who settled in various regions of the country. There they formed churches, despite facing considerable linguistic difficulties created by the large variety of Mayan languages spoken in Guatemala.<sup>8</sup>

After the preaching of the Adventist message in 1919, eight people were baptized in Guatemala.<sup>9</sup> The message was also preached through the printed word. In 1924, 403 *El Centinela* magazines were distributed in the country.<sup>10</sup>

Another method that proved effective was the medical work, implemented in 1926. Several physicians were recruited to launch the work among the indigenous populations. As they were sent out to work in these communities, the doctors increasingly gained the trust of the communities. This outreach opened the way for preaching the Third Angel's Message.<sup>11</sup>

Various evangelistic efforts held around the country contributed to the rapid spread of the message in Guatemala. Among the most notable are Quetzaltenango with Pastor William E. Baxter (1931);<sup>12</sup> José Aguilar and David García in Totonicapean (1935);<sup>13</sup> David García in Chichicastenango; José Aguilar in Antigua, Puerto Barrios (1938);<sup>14</sup> Escuintla (1940);<sup>15</sup> Ipala, and Huitán (1955);<sup>16</sup> Henry Westphal in the capital city of Guatemala (1956);<sup>17</sup> Gabriel Castro in the capital (1977);<sup>18</sup> Eliseo Piño De Sousa and Antonio Amorín in Antigua (1988)<sup>19</sup> and in Mega Gaute (1991).<sup>20</sup>

The radio was another fundamental instrument for the expansion of the gospel in Guatemala. The *Voz de la Profecía* (Voice of Prophecy) and *Voz de la Esperanza* (Voice of Hope) Bible courses were extremely popular and a means of reaching places that no pastor or layperson would have been able to reach.<sup>21</sup>

From 1913 to 1998 all of Guatemala constituted one mission. In 1999, due to church growth in the country, the field was reorganized into the Central Guatemala Conference, the Southwest Mission, and the Northeast Mission.<sup>22</sup>

Until 2002, the territory of Guatemala was part of the Central American Union which covered six countries from Guatemala to Panama.<sup>23</sup> Then it was decided that, due to membership growth, Guatemala and Belize would form the Central American Union of the North,<sup>24</sup> an administrative organization that operated until 2008 when Belize separated and Guatemala Union Mission was formed.<sup>25</sup>

## Buildings of Guatemala Union Mission

The construction of buildings for what was then known as the Central American Union, began in 1964 when those offices had to be moved to Guatemala due to eruptions from the Irazú volcano in Costa Rica. Initially, these buildings were constructed in a temporary location in Zone 2 of the capital city until more permanent buildings were built in 1966.<sup>26</sup>

Robert Folkenberg whose presidency of the Central American Union began in 1975, played a pivotal role in the construction of the later buildings and the remodeling of the offices which now belonged to Guatemala Union Mission. Although, at first, these offices occupied the first floor and a small house used as a sentry hut, the latter now houses the radio station Unión Radio.

Early in 1976, and with the funds budgeted for dwellings, three houses were built for the administrators. The third of these houses was built as a two-story building in order to make better use of the sloping property. Two apartments for office workers occupied the ground floor and the upper floor was the home of the administrator.

A German philanthropic organization supported the building projects of the Adventist church, thanks to the intervention of Pastor Folkenberg. With this assistance, the warehouses of ASA/ADRA were built. The offices of the Metropolitan Conference currently occupy the upper floor in one of these warehouses.

Later on, Pastor Folkenberg raised funds that were used to remodel the building: the chapel that was converted into the president's office and, on the left, the dual-purpose worship/conference hall with an adjoining kitchenette. On the right, were the offices of the treasury, secretariat, secretaries of administrators, a warehouse, and restrooms. These funds also were used in the construction of the Zona 15 church which was inaugurated in 1979.<sup>27</sup>

## Formative Events that Led to the Official Organization of the Union

On April 17, 2003, during the Spring Meeting of the General Conference Executive Committee, a vote was taken to: "Divide the Central American Union into three unions: the Central American Union Mission of the North (Guatemala, Belize); the Central American Central Union Mission, and the Central American Union Conference of the South."<sup>28</sup>

In the midyear council of the Inter-American Division, held on May 20, 2008, the following vote was taken:

Central American Union of the North—Change of Name

Voted: To change the name of the Central American Union of the North to Union Mission of Guatemala, due to Belize's separation from the union and the organization of the new Union Mission of Belizean Churches.<sup>29</sup>

Thus it was that in 2008 two events were celebrated: the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formal establishment of the Adventist church in Guatemala and the creation of a new union which consisted of six fields.

## Development of Guatemala Union Mission

Once the union mission was established in Guatemala, the Adventist Church continued a steady growth, both in membership and finances. This contributed to the formation of eight local regional fields, located geographically, as follows:

Central Region: Metropolitan Conference, Central Conference, and Del Lago Mission, with a total of 38,606 members and 231 churches.

Western Region: Western Conference and the Altiplano Mission, with a total of 79,528 members and 277 churches.

Southern Region: Southern Mission, with a total membership of 49,779 and 225 churches.

Northeastern Region: Eastern Mission and Northern Mission of Guatemala with a membership of 83,939 and 252 churches.<sup>30</sup>

Each one of the above conferences/missions has a building for its administrative offices and two of them have an appropriate place for camp meetings or retreats.

The geographic location of the country makes it vulnerable to natural disasters, such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, floods, and droughts. In order to address this reality, ADRA has played an important role in helping affected populations each year. Culturally speaking, Guatemala has been a country with social conflicts that have kept its illiteracy rate high. Many of the union churches have been converted into schoolrooms to develop literacy programs coordinated by ADRA. The Adventist Church enjoys the support of the Guatemalan government in these socially-relevant programs.

The Adventist Church has joined forces with the international organization, *Advent Stiftung* (Adventist Endowment), for 13 years to make important contributions to society across the nation, preparing people to learn new skills through the annual implementation of seven workshops on sewing and tailoring and another on haircutting. These workshops are presented by INTECAP and carry ISO 9001 certification. Likewise, a large number of people have been provided with work tools. During the last quinquennium \$380,000 was invested in this project which, in turn, has benefitted 2,289 families and improved the quality of life for 11,445 people. Additionally, an estimated \$59,000 has been spent on the *Biblias que Salvan* (Bibles that Save) project, 12,000 Bibles in Mayan languages which have been extremely useful in preaching the gospel.

Adventist publications continue to play an important role in preaching the gospel. For that reason, the country has a publishing house with five branches.

The Adventist radio stations, Unión Radio and Orión Stereo, have carried out a transcendent work in preaching the gospel. When Guatemala Union Mission was established in 2008, this opened the way for the expansion of Radio Adventista. The system of communications was created to develop the two stations that can be heard in Guatemala: Unión Radio through eight FM frequencies and one AM, and Orión Stereo with two FM frequencies.

## Future Plans for Development of the Union

Guatemala Union Mission is committed to the church and its membership. One of its objectives is the retention of members. It also works arduously to bring back members that have left the church. This delicate and laborious work is carried out by a group of pastors and laypeople dedicated to God's service. We expect that the membership will not only grow, but that the gospel of the Lord will rapidly extend throughout the territory.

With the current radio frequencies, approximately 80 percent of the national territory is reached. It is expected that, with a few more frequencies, there will soon be full coverage of Guatemala. Great strides have been made in the educational area, and the proposed goal is to consolidate the educational institutions and begin to inaugurate new academies. The Church also aspires to create an Adventist university in Guatemala.

In relation to health, the objective is to create a *Centro de Vida Sana* (Center for Healthful Living) and, later on, an Adventist hospital.

As to infrastructure, plans are being made to build various buildings. The projected building for the System of Communications will house, not only the radio stations, but also a multimedia center. ADRA also needs a central office and it is expected that in coming years this objective will become a reality. Finally, the Educational System has progressed and grown, and there will be a future need for it to have its own offices. Plans are being made for the creation of two new camping sites, one in the area of the capital and another in the southwest region.

## List of Administrators

Presidents: E. L. Cardey (1908); N. V. Wiltess (1910-1911); Isaac Baker (1912); J. B. Stuyvesant (1913-1916); E. W. Thurber (1917-1922); C. P. Martin (1923-1924); E. P. Howard (1925-1926); W. A. Lusk (1927); J. R. McWilliam (1928-1929); Orley Ford (1930-1940); W. A. Wild (1941-1942); Melvin W. Sickler (1944-1949); K. L. Fleck (1950-1954); F. H. Niel (1955); R. E. Keprey (1956-1961); W. T. Collins (1962-1965); Lynn Baerg (1967-1968); G. E. Maxson (1969); Ira Nation (1970-1974); Alfredo Gaona (1975-1977); José González Rique (1978-1979); Israel Williams (1980); Arístides González (1981-1983); Jorge García (1984); Arístides González (1985); Emilio De León (1986-1993); Johannes Nikkels (1993); Oswaldo Magaña (1994-1998); René Martínez (1999); René Martínez (2000); Mario Calderón (2001-2009); Guenther García (2010-present).

Secretaries: Denis Slusher (2003-2007); Juan José Morán (2008-2009); Ramiro Hernández Hernández (2010 - present).

Treasurers: Juan José Moran (2003-2007); Juan José Morán (2008-2009); Abilio Cima (2010-present).

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