

Venezuela

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Venezuela is a federal presidential republic with twenty-three states, a capital district, and federal dependencies, which include the islands and islets near the coast of Venezuela. The Seventh-day Adventist Church was established in Venezuela on March 25, 1911.

Overview

Venezuela was originally named the Venezuela States until the first constitution of 1864 officially named it the United States of Venezuela, a name it carried until 1953 when the name was changed to the Republic of Venezuela. On November 12, 1999, the National Assembly approved the current name, which is the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.¹

Venezuela is located in the northern part of the South American continent, and is made up of a continental land area and a large number of small islands and islets in the Caribbean. Its capital and largest urban area is the city of Caracas. Venezuela is one of the most urbanized countries in Latin America; the great majority of Venezuelans live in cities in the northern part of the country. Venezuela has a territory of 916,445 square kilometers. The mainland portion of the country is bordered on the north by the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, on the west by Columbia, on the south by Brazil, and on the east by Guyana.²

Venezuela has a great deal of biodiversity; it is seventh on the world list of countries with the most species. It has many diverse habitats, ranging from the mountains of the Venezuelan Andes in the west to the tropical jungle of the Amazon River basin, the plains of *Los Llanos*, the coast of the Caribbean, and the delta of the Orinoco River in the east.³

The predominant religion of Venezuela is Roman Catholicism. Even though the country opened its doors during the decades from the 1950s to the 1970s to an extensive, dynamic, and varied immigration that was fundamentally European, which gave its population a mixture of races and colors, the official language of Venezuela is Spanish.

The territory of Venezuela was colonized by Spain in 1522. In 1811, the country became one of the first Hispanic-American territories to declare its independence—something it did not achieve until 1821—when Venezuela was still a department of the Federal Republic of Greater Colombia. It became completely independent in 1830.⁴

Venezuela's hero and the father of the country was Simón Bolívar, called "The Liberator."

It is thought that by 1910 the population of Venezuela was about 2.5 million inhabitants. As of June 30, 2019, its population, according to the National Institute of Statistics, was 32,219,521.⁵

Origin and Development of the Church

It is possible that Seventh-day Adventists visited Venezuela as early as 1907. "In December of 1907, while in Trinidad attending union meetings, Mr. B. E. Connerly from Puerto Rico planned his return trip to go through Venezuela with books and pamphlets. He travelled on the Orinoco River to Caracas, the capital, giving out all the Spanish books and pamphlets that he had with him."⁶ Colporteur and pastor Brendon Ernest Connerly of the United States worked in various countries of Inter-America and in the Potomac Conference of the United States. He wrote a letter to the General Conference that appeared in the of April 15, 1908, reporting "This year, 1908, should not go by without us having a representative here." In another paragraph of the letter he adds: "I found many persons with whom the Spirit of God is working. I rapidly sold all the books I had with me, and took orders for the *Centinela* in all the towns I went through, and I passed out many tracts."⁷

The first official Adventist missionaries arrived in Venezuela in August 1910. They were Pastor Frank Lewis Lane and his wife Rose, accompanied by the colporteur Richard Greenidge and his wife Rebecca. Lane was working as a missionary on the island of Barbados in 1907 when he formed a friendship with a Venezuelan gentleman who invited him to evangelize "the country of Bolívar," an idea that was not unpleasant to Lane. When he received a call from the General Conference to start the work in Venezuela, he was happy to accept. When the Greenidges heard about this call, they decided to form an evangelistic team with the Lanes and accompany them to Venezuela. The Greenidges were nurses who specialized in hydrotherapy and had worked at the Adventist hospital in Barbados.⁸

Months later, after Frank Lane had learned Spanish, he began to prepare a series of evangelistic meetings. To go along with his topics, he also began making illustrations of prophetic images out of rubber and wood. He needed more wood, so Greenidge went to a nearby woodshop in order to get supplies. It was there that he met Miguel Corro, a carpenter, who offered to transport the wood in his cart. As Corro was going through the house to leave the wood at the back, he saw a series of illustrations of the prophecies of Daniel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Revelation. Full of curiosity, he asked Greenidge what they meant. Greenidge called Lane, who with two Bibles—one in Spanish and the other in English—tried to explain the prophetic message. Corro went away impressed by the words of the missionary, who had invited him to come back for a visit.⁹

Corro did not wait long to visit again. A few hours later he showed up accompanied by his friend Antonio Pinto, who was profoundly impressed by the words of the missionary. Soon both of them were inviting other people to go with them to visit the missionaries, and a Bible class started to meet every night in the living room of the Lanes' house. After seven months, several of the new believers accepted the Bible teachings and began to live

the Adventist principles. The first baptism was held on March 25, 1911, in the Anauco River, in the Coticita del Cerro el Avila sector of Caracas. These eleven newly baptized members, along with the two missionary families and a young man named Juan Porras, who was the translator, made up the membership of the first Adventist church in Venezuela.¹⁰

The second baptism was carried out a year later, on February 10, 1912, when seven people were baptized by Lane in el Avila. Unfortunately, Rose Lane became ill, and Frank Lane requested a permanent return to the United States from the General Conference. As this was unexpected, there was no one available to take the Lanes' place, and when they left in July 1913, their replacement, Santiago A. Oberg, did not arrive until eight months later. Oberg was transferred from Puerto Rico and arrived in Caracas on March 25, 1914, assuming the post of superintendent.¹¹

On their part, the Greenridges continued establishing hydrotherapy clinics and colporteuring in different areas of Caracas, the last of which was on the corner of San Mauricio (today Santa Capilla on Urdaneta Avenue), Caracas. This clinic was closed in 1922 when the Greenridges went to Camaguán, Guárico, in the center of the country, to start a boarding school for young people. This school was the first Adventist educational institution in all of the territory of the Colombia-Venezuela Union. This school was to graduate many of the first Venezuelan workers who carried out the work in many regions of the country and abroad. The Greenridges remained in Venezuela until 1934, when Richard Greenidge had to go to the United States for a surgery and died there. His wife returned to Caracas a few years later, in the company of their son, Pastor Luis Greenidge. She died in Caracas at a very advanced age, on March 17, 1965.

While this was happening in Caracas, the story of the origin of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Venezuela was being written simultaneously in another place, starting another surprising and marvelous chapter for the Church in the southeast of the country. Neither group of believers was aware of the other, as they were separated by more than 1,100 kilometers.

In 1910, Ovid Elbert Davis, president of the British Guyana Mission in what is today Guyana, decided to open a way through the jungle from the Guyana highlands to the territory known as the Great Savanna, responding to a request from an indigenous group in the territory. These natives had sent their message with explorers and adventurers, asking for a man with a black book in response to a dream recorded thus:¹²

At some time in the decade of the 1880's, the chief of one of these tribes had a dream or a vision that included aspects of the gospel of Jesus Christ, including creation, Sabbath, the fall of man, salvation through Jesus, and His return in glory. In addition, the vision said that a white man with a black book would come to explain these things and teach the tribe. The chief, obedient to the vision, reformed his life and that of his people, so that they stopped all human sacrifices, abolished polygamy, and started to keep the Sabbath as a day of rest. But the old chief died, and he did not live to see the final part of his dream carried out—the man with the black book did not come.¹³

This story moved Davis, who undertook the long trip accompanied by a miner named Jorge Dinklage. They spent about three weeks traveling down the rapids of the Cuyuni River, but sadly, Davis became sick with malaria and had to turn back without reaching his goal of meeting the indigenous tribe.¹⁴

Davis's diary, which was published in the *Review and Herald* of November 9, 1911,¹⁵ indicates that he started his second trip from Georgetown on April 21, 1911. Again, he reached the home of the miner with a fever caused by malaria, which is very common in those lands. Even so, he decided to continue his trip. He hoped that this time he could carry out his mission to the tribe. Between the 7th and 9th of July, about 140 natives came out to meet him, and on July 15 he met Chief Jeremiah of the tribe whose Chief Auká had had the vision many years prior. Davis was surprised to hear that the natives had been waiting for him for many years. When he asked how they knew that he was coming, they answered that an angel told Chief Auká that a white man with a black book would come and teach them more of the message of salvation.

Davis had the opportunity, although in delicate health as his diary indicates, to meet with the natives day after day and teach them more about the truth of God, the coming of Jesus, as well as Christian hymns.¹⁶ Davis communicated with the natives through his translator and travel companion, Mr. Bagot, in the Pemon language, but he taught them the hymns in English. This, along with other things, made it possible years later for the Cott family to identify them. Alfred W. Cott, with his wife Betty and their little daughter, arrived in the Great Savanna in March 1927, staying among the tribe for eight years until the Cotts were deported by the national government to British Guyana.¹⁷

Davis was greatly enfeebled because of the high malaria fevers and the lack of adequate nutrition; he died on July 31, 1911, becoming the first Adventist martyr in Venezuela. His tomb is still there at the foot of Mount Roraima, on the Venezuelan side, near what today is the village of Paraikepuy.¹⁸

The Adventist work in Venezuela had a marvelous and miraculous beginning, and it continued to grow until 1919, when the Venezuela Adventist Mission was established under the presidency of William Baxter, with C. D. Raff as secretary-treasurer.¹⁹ Baxter came to Venezuela charged with acquiring a building for the church, which he bought that same year, 1917. It was a large house on the corner of Cárcel a Pilita #2, (today West 14th Avenue) where the building still stood at the time of writing in the center of Caracas. This property became the first Adventist church in Caracas, now known as the Concordia Adventist Church.²⁰

Through the printed page, the gospel advanced, and in August of 1918, two colporteurs arrived in Caracas—Angel Ojeda and Rafael López Miranda, who joined Richard Greenidge in this ministry. By 1920, there were seven colporteurs in the country. The ministry of these men produced many baptisms, and it became necessary to organize the second church in Venezuela in Camaguán in 1921. López Miranda was assassinated on May 15, 1922, the second martyr in the history of Adventism in this country.²¹

The educational and medical work continued to grow in Venezuela as schools were established in Camaguán (1922), San Cristóbal (1933), Caracas (1936) and in Barquisimeto (1944), and the first Adventist clinic was

started in Caracas on October 12, 1940.²²

In January 1950, the first territorial reorganization was carried out, creating the East Venezuela Mission, headquartered in Caracas, and the West Venezuela Mission headquartered in Barquisimeto in western Venezuela. As the work grew, it spread out in all directions.²³ By 1956, the two missions had twenty-two churches with 1,858 members.²⁴

The Church has been blessed by the efforts and dedication of lay members and pastors throughout its history, for they all understood the mission and worked selflessly to accomplish it. Through their efforts, the Venezuela-Antilles Union Mission was organized in 1989, formed by Venezuela and the Netherland Antilles: Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao. The union was made up of two conferences: the Central Venezuela Conference with its headquarters in Caracas, and the Netherlands Antilles Conference with headquarters in Curacao. In addition, there were two missions, the West Venezuela Mission with headquarters in Barquisimeto, and the then newly created East Venezuela Mission with headquarters in Maturín. Its first president was Iván H. Omaña G., and its secretary-treasurer was Gonzalo Prada. The initial membership was 43,758 members, and there were 187 churches cared for by seventy-three ordained ministers and fifty-one licensed ministers.²⁵

In 2020, this same geographic territory contained three unions, twenty-one conferences and missions, seven medical institutions, thirty-five schools, one university, fifty-three radio stations.²⁶ At the conclusion of 2019, there were 1,685 congregations in Venezuela, of which 1,232 were organized churches, and 453 were organized groups, with a total membership of 358,190.²⁷

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