



Southeast Venezuela Conference

Photo courtesy of Southeast Venezuela Conference.

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# Southeast Venezuela Conference

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Southeast Venezuela Conference is one of eight conferences of East Venezuela Union Mission.

The conference's headquarters is located in Estado Bolívar, in the Venezuelan Guayana, the southeast region of the country. As of June 2019, its territory includes the municipalities of Angostura, Caroni, Cedeno, Heres, and Piar in Estado Bolívar. It includes 117 churches and 33,723 members in a population of 1,812,041<sup>1</sup> Spanish is the main language spoken in the territory, but other languages, particularly Pemón, Panare, and Kariña, are spoken in some sectors. The conference's territory has a great variety of culture, music, and craftsmanship<sup>2</sup>

## Institutions

**Colegio Adventista Maranatha:** In 1983, El Roble Church's members started a church school. It closed and was reopened with the support of *Corporación Venezolana de Guayana*, which offered 3,000 square meters of land in the alacranes sector in San Félix as a loan to begin construction. In September 1983, the school reopened with an enrollment of 70 students. After 22 years, "Maranatha Adventist School" had 1,068 students enrolled. As of April 2019, it had the largest enrollment of all the educational institutions of East Venezuela Union Mission.

**Colegio Andrés Bello** in Puerto Ordaz is located in sector Castillito and offers pre-school to mid-secondary education levels.

**Colegio Venezuela** in Ciudad Bolívar offers pre-school through complete secondary education levels and is located in Callejón Angostura, Casa Nro. 9, sector Cruz Verde, Ciudad Bolívar.

**Colegio Adventista Augusto Mijares** in Guarataro is a new, small school that offers elementary education to those living in the nearby neighborhood.

**Radio Stations:** Using its technology platform, the conference opened three radio stations: *Viene 96.5 FM* in Puerto Ordaz on July 20, 2013; *Viene 99.1 FM* in Bolívar on September 2011; and *Esperanza 101.3 FM* in Upata on November 12, 2012.

**Publishing Agency:** The publishing agency of Southeast Venezuela Conference opened its doors on April 13, 2008, in the Moripa business center in Puerto Ordaz. The agency offers published materials to the general public and necessary materials to Adventist churches.

**Vegetarian Restaurant "Sabbat":** On June 8, 2016, the vegetarian restaurant "Sabbat" was bought to help popularize the gospel through the health message the church holds.<sup>3</sup> It is located in Alta Vista, Puerto Ordaz, in Ciudad Guayana and offers a variety of vegan breakfasts, lunches, and dinners at very affordable prices.

## Origins of Church in Territory

Lilia de Guimón lived by the shores of the Orinoco River and was a regular listener of radio programs broadcasted from Ciudad Bolívar. Once in 1951, while looking for good music, she changed radio channels and found a program that caught her attention. The program, *La Voz de la Profecía* ("The Voice of Prophecy"), had

been broadcasted from Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. That is how she first connected with the Adventist Church. She requested Braulio Pérez Marcios's lectures from the program but never received them. After some time, she was visited by Enrique Urbina and another young man named Depiney, who were canvassing the area selling Christian books. They told her about the Bible and God. Even though Lilia's husband did not like the message that they shared with her, he told the canvassers that Lilia and he believed in the radio program. Urbina and Depiney identified themselves as Adventists and said that they shared the same faith and belonged to the same church as the producers of the radio program that Lilia and her husband listened to. The four started meeting on Sabbaths with another family and especially with Luisa Pérez, who had already been keeping the Sabbath by reading "The Great Controversy" and "The Desire of Ages," books she had bought. The small five-person group started visiting their neighbors with *El Centinela* magazine. Pastor D. C. Prenier visited Ciudad Bolívar and baptized the first five people of the small group along with others that had studied the Bible with them.<sup>4</sup>

They found land for sale on Lezama Street, which they bought with the financial support of Bs1,000 VEF provided by East Venezuela Mission in Caracas. Construction of a church started immediately. In 1953, Pastor H. William, an American sent by the mission, arrived at the church as its first pastor. Pastor William also received a donation from workers of Cerro Bolívar to help build the church. In 1959, Pastor Harrison was assigned to the zone. Around that time, a brother from the United States donated a boat, which they called *La Mensajera* ("The Messenger"). With that boat, Pastor Harrison and his wife, a nurse, traveled the Orinoco River, taking care of inhabitants' health needs and especially malaria cases, a common sickness in the zone at the time. In 1960, the group's membership had grown to 58 baptized members.<sup>5</sup>

God's help and blessings were evident from the beginning. The group spread the Adventist message throughout Ciudad Bolívar, resulting in 26 organized churches and five groups that still exist today. On January 1, 1975, with the introduction of the iron industry in the country, many groups of people arrived looking for work and new opportunities. This provided the opportunity to spread the gospel further. Many Adventists from other parts of the country migrated to the region for new opportunities as well. Other groups of people that migrated from other parts of the country became interested in the gospel message, and many accepted the Adventist faith.

## Adventist Church's Beginnings in Ciudad Guayana

In 1958, Gabriel Castro and his brother, Escalona, both Adventists born in Punto Fijo, Estado Falcón, arrived at San Félix to sell books on health, family, and other spiritual topics. They stayed at Carmen de Gutiérrez's home. Because of their work, Mrs. Gutiérrez was baptized as the first Adventist in Ciudad Guayana. The baptismal ceremony was officiated by Pastor A. R. Norklife, who worked in Ciudad Bolívar. These three Adventists and Pastor Norklife were interested in organizing the first group at Gutiérrez's home. Soon, they gave Bible studies, especially Gutiérrez, who shared the gospel with the first eight people that became interested: María Puga,

Bonifacio Lavady, his daughter Dora (currently 90 years old and still lives in El Rinconcito neighborhood), Ezequiela De Acosta, Subdelina Salas, Rosita Reyes, Carmen Carreño, and Dolores Guerra.

Dolores Guerra and her husband donated a property on Cedeño Street to hold church meetings. Esperanza de Huérfano and her husband, Eduardo Huérfano; Tomasa Betancourt; Ernesto Reyes; Nemenciana de Silva; and Dolores Salaberria later joined the group. Ms. Salaberria (currently 84 years old) is a member of El Roble Church. That is how the church started in Ciudad Guayana.<sup>6</sup>

The Adventist group moved locations a few times. In 1961, it moved from a site in Calle Sucre to Bonifacio Lavady's home. In 1963, it moved to Sixto Gutiérrez's home in *La Unidad de San Félix* neighborhood. The new Adventist church had 20 members. Pastors José Mendoza, José Castillo, Jaime Foronda, and Guillermo Arévalo, Sr., visited believers to provide spiritual support.<sup>7</sup>

By 1969, there were 30 members. Sixto Urdaneta and his wife donated a house in Guayana Avenue. In 1970, the group bought a house in Calle 19 de Abril, El Roble, which they remodeled for use as a meeting place. Currently, El Roble Adventist Church is in that house. Also in 1970, the group was organized as a church and held a ceremony officiated by Pastor Rufino Serapio Arismendi. El Roble Adventist Church began to spread the Adventist message, resulting in the establishment of other churches like La Esperanza, Castillito de Puerto Ordaz, UD 145, Vista al Sol, and Luis Hurtado Higuera.

## Events Leading to Organization of Southeast Venezuela Conference

On November 17, 1999, with the message spreading throughout the east of Venezuela, Venezuela-Antilles Union Mission decided to create the Indigenous Venezuela Region, named "Región Venezolana Indígena," readjusting East Venezuela Union Mission according to operating guidelines. An inspection committee was appointed to study the readjustment and make a recommendation to the division for its approval. On February 9, 2001, the division accepted the commission's report.<sup>8</sup> Inter-American Division President Israel Leito and Venezuela-Antilles Union Mission President Julio Palacio led the meeting that appointed three administrators: Pastor Humberto Orjuela as president, Roger Lezama as secretary, and Carlos Andrés Pérez as treasurer. The new region was composed of four districts: Gran Sabana I, Gran Sabana II, Cuyuní I, and Cuyuní II.<sup>9</sup>

At the beginning, the region's main offices were located at Santa Elena de Uairen. The new region experienced significant growth, and the Venezuela-Antilles Union Mission soon changed the status of the region, which was renamed Southeast Venezuela Mission. Initially, the mission's territory was not productive or self-sustainable due to lack of economic resources. The union began a progressive territorial readjustment program with East Venezuela Mission, which gradually gave up some territory, including all of its Estado Bolívar territory. In January 2002, Utape district was added, and, on May 15, 2002, the headquarters was moved to that city.<sup>10</sup> Since the mission needed to be progressively fortified, and since a strategic location to take better care of the membership of the mission more efficiently needed to be found, it was voted to internally adjust the mission's

territory by adding the Ciudad Bolívar, Upata, and San Félix districts. Those additions were voted on November 20, 2003, and Puerto Ordaz was also eventually added.<sup>11</sup>

At the Venezuela-Antilles Union Mission quadrennial congress in November 2005, Pastor Jorge Atalido was named mission president.<sup>12</sup> A month later, the relocation of the mission headquarters to Puerto Ordaz city was announced. A space in Centro Comercial Mami, a commercial center in the city, was rented for two years since the mission did not have its own space.

On August 21, 2008, a special meeting took place with the purpose of changing Southeast Venezuela Mission's status into a conference. Pastor Israel Leito, Inter-American Division president, and Pastor Josney Rodríguez, East Venezuela Union president, were present at the meeting. At that time, the territory had six zones, 21 districts, 93 organized churches, 34 groups, 925 small groups, four schools, six radio stations, one publishing agency, with nine ordained pastors, ten ministers, and a membership of 27,477.

On December 6, 2007, a search was started for a property in Puerto Ordaz to serve as the conference headquarters' permanent location. On July 23, 2008, a house in Calle Mediterránea, Los Olivos of Puerto Ordaz, was purchased. The building was completely remodeled in February 2010. In March, the new conference headquarters was opened for business. On February 4, 2014, the headquarters was dedicated with Pastor Jorge Atalido as president, Pastor Areli Huérfano as secretary, and José Félix Carreño as treasurer. Pastor Israel Leito and Pastor Josney Rodríguez were present at the special ceremony.

The church continued to grow. On August 16, 2013, to better serve those members in indigenous zones, East Venezuela Union Mission divided the conference's territory in two: Southeast Venezuela Conference with offices in Puerto Ordaz, and South Bolivar Venezuela Mission with offices Santa Elena de Uairén.<sup>13</sup>

In 2016, in an effort to better serve distant locations, the conference voted to consider dividing the territory and create a new field in Ciudad Bolívar.

## Fulfilling its Mission

The gospel message continues moving forward in preaching the gospel. Thanks to God's blessings, the work has proven successful, and the Lord's hand has been felt in many areas:

By preaching God's word through Bible studies, resulting in a significant increase in church membership.

By teaching systematic giving, improving finances, and changing from being an unsustainable mission to a self-sustained conference. God has given numerous blessings.

By establishing new congregations and increasing places of worship due to the commitment of brethren and pastors preaching the gospel.

By permanently training departmental personnel and others in leadership positions.

By keeping the mission, vision, and values clear – Southeast Venezuela Conference's ideals are expressed in its Mission, Vision, and Values.

Mission: Glorify God under the influence of the Holy Spirit, and guide each believer to a personal and transformative relationship with Christ, training them to be disciples and share the eternal gospel to all people.

Vision: Each member of the body of Christ is to be made ready for God's kingdom.

Values: Give to God glory, integrity, respect, lifestyle, excellence, humility, compassion, justice, dedication, and unity.

By maintaining a grateful attitude to God for His infinite love and mercy in the territory's development and showing it with words and by giving time, resources, and talents to God's work.

By educating and positively influencing the lives of many students, parents, and employees in the territory – education is fundamental to evangelism; this has been proven through time, and the territory's four schools reach out with the gospel message to an average of 14,500 people annually.

By reaching and positively impacting many people through the territory's three radio stations with estimates of reaching over 65,420 people.

By promoting healthy eating through the vegetarian restaurant in Puerto Ordaz serving healthy food and distributing free books, magazines, brochures, and other literature to over 2,360 people.

## Recent Events

God's protection is evident throughout the conference; even with the critical, political, and socioeconomic situations the country experiences, the gospel of Jesus continues to be spread with honor and sacrifice. Due to recent migrations of people out of the country, churches have been impacted by the absence of congregation leaders.

The people in the territory also suffer from limited amounts of food and other necessary, important supplies. This situation has created new needs in communities and from church members. Limited transportation has impacted worship days, and yet church members move forward with faith and persistence, meeting in small groups in homes to conduct church services.

## What is Needed to Fulfill Mission

Southeast Venezuela Conference's territory is very vast since it includes Venezuela's largest state. Estado Bolívar is so large that the gospel has not yet reached every corner. An Adventist presence exists in only six of the state's 11 municipalities. Reaching every city and town has become the most important challenge for the conference after statistics demonstrated the ratio of one Adventist for every 47.9.

Pao is also an important city in Estado Bolívar with a population of 22,345 but with no Adventist presence. It is necessary to take the Adventist message of salvation to its residents. Guayana district, especially the churches El Arrozal and Pozo Verde, has decided to enter the territory taking the message to the people. Another challenge is the community of Cabruta, with a small congregation, but located in a very remote region of the conference territory. Yet another challenge is the membership of Caicara del Orinoco requiring careful attention for its growth. Ultimately, lacking pastors, lay people have been assigned to take care of those churches.

One of the major problems the church has been facing in the last few years due to the country's sociopolitical issue is the amount of church members migrating to other countries reducing the amount of church leaders, finances, and evangelism. The majority of brethren that migrated were church leaders who contributed by preaching the gospel. Even with the present situation being faced, church members are involved and motivated to take on the leadership of the church to expand to and conquest new territories. With that purpose in mind, new schools for lay people have been formed, new groups of leaders have been organized through continuous education, church elders and lay people have been trained to perform their new responsibilities, and support has been provided to churches in the area of leadership growth involving lay people in the leadership of districts.

## List of Presidents

Luis Humberto Orjuela (2001-2005); Jorge Rolando Atalido (2006-2015); Jonathan Emelson Pacheco (2015- ).

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## NOTES

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