



Orley Ford performing dental examination of a patient, Colta Lake Mission Station.

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Orley Ford: A Champion Missionary in South and Central America

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The pioneer missionary work of Pastor Orley Ford in Peru, Ecuador, and Guatemala among indigenous peoples affirmed the principles of the Adventist Church's approach to ethnic populations as it produced incredible results. In Ecuador all types of communities, including high government offices, recognized and respected Ford's approach and work. Furthermore, the South American countries where he labored came to know his medical

missionary activities very well.

In Costa Rica and in El Salvador his leadership helped evangelism become ever stronger. His vision regarding the size of church structures made provisions for future growth. In all the countries where he lived, he took the planning of big and beautiful structures very seriously.

Finally, in El Salvador, to demonstrate his commitment to Christian education and to establish Adventist schools to serve both the denomination and the local community, he built two elementary and middle schools that continue to operate today.

Peru (1918-1921)

Orley Ford and his wife, Lillian, arrived in Peru January 13, 1918. They were the last couple of five assigned in 1917 to the Lake Titicaca region.¹ While he worked there, he was under the leadership and mentorship of F. A. Stahl, better known as “the Incas apostle” in South America.² Stahl regularly visited Ford to conduct baptisms and supervise the opening of schools and churches.

When Pastor and Mrs. Ford arrived to Pomata, R. A. Nelson, who had been there for almost a year but soon would have to leave because of his wife’s health, met them. However, Nelson did arrange to stay a couple weeks with the new missionaries. The Pomata Mission had both an unfinished church and house. Each lacked doors, windows, floors, and ceilings. At the beginning, Ford, while treating almost 30 patients per day and doing his missionary work, still managed to labor as a carpenter despite lacking any carpentry knowledge in order to finish the house where he and his wife would live and a church where they would meet with 80 to 100 people. When they arrived to Peru, the Fords did not know Spanish, but in three months they were able to communicate with others. Soon Orley Ford had prepared about 30 people for his first baptism. Pomata had a population of around 10,000 people, most of them Indians, and the only health center was at the Adventist mission run by the Fords.³

Many stories have survived about Pastor Ford’s time in Pomata, the only place where he worked in Peru. One notable example recounts an incident that occurred a few months after they had arrived. Orley received an urgent request to treat the son of a local chief who was about to die from a gangrened leg. The locals called it a “warlock leg,”⁴ and amputation was the only way to save the boy’s life. With only four months of medical training, Ford not only knew little about surgical procedures, he had no surgical instruments. But he did the best he could with improvised tools, and according to his words, “God did the rest.”⁵ With a butcher knife, a carpenter’s saw, and without anesthesia, he removed the boy’s leg, and in a short time the youth was completely healed. With the same tools, he made a rustic wood prosthesis for the boy to use temporarily until Dr. P. T. Mangan could send him a special one. The surgery saved the life of the chief’s son, and Pastor Ford not only won the heart of a family who had been hostile to the mission but also helped him to get closer to hundreds in a tribe that had not wanted to listen to his message.⁶

At the end of their time at the Pomata mission, Pastor Ford had 28 requests to open schools. The church, despite its capacity for 400, was not big enough, since every time the church met it was so full that many people had to remain outside the building. Ford prepared 75 people for baptism and had more than 400 people in a new baptismal class. He had better results in the final two months than in all the time he had previously spent in Pomata. Clearly, he had won the hearts of the local community.⁷

Ecuador (1921-1931)

At the end of 1921 the Fords arrived at the port of Guayaquil⁸ in Ecuador and from there they began their long journey by train to Quito, the capital. Since he had received notification that they would be sent to Ecuador, Orley and his wife constantly prayed that God would direct them to the right place. They asked Him to give them a sign, to provide them with a house surrounded by people, and that the local community would welcome them. He spent several weeks visiting places where the missionaries Howard and Lorenz had worked as well as other new communities. Unfortunately, no one was willing to offer them a house. When he felt moved by God to visit the Colta region, many tried to discourage him. They told him that criminals dwelled there and that it was a terrible place to live. Ignoring the comments, he visited the place and was surprised to find a community of 20,000.⁹

The first home he visited was that of a prestigious and influential individual who was sick. As Ford began treating him, some neighbors arrived at the house, curious to see the “gringo,” as most Latin-Americans called foreign English-speaking people. After he treated the person, Ford told everyone there that God had sent him and his wife to open schools and heal people, and if they wanted, he and his family could live among them. The locals, telling him that they did not have schools and that the civil and religious authorities badly treated them, immediately asked the Fords to stay. Orley explained that he needed a house for his family, one for his interpreter, and a place for a school.¹⁰

By his second visit, the villagers had a hut taller than the others set aside for him and his family, another hut for his interpreter, and a third for a school. Afraid that the Fords would not like the huts, they showed them other huts to allow them to choose. Friendly and kind to Pastor Ford, they requested that he stay with them and teach them how to live and become Christians. They called him “little doctor” in a loving way, because of his height, and he became known by that title in Ecuador.¹¹

At the end of 1922 Pastor Ford became very ill, worn out from treating almost 4,000 people each month and accepting invitations to preach at many new places. Doctors recommended that he immediately undergo surgery, but he did not want to leave his post until a replacement would arrive. The mission did not have money to send for anyone else.¹² Finally, someone accepted the invitation to care for the Lake Colta Mission while Ford recovered his health. John Ford, Orley's brother, along with John's wife, left California and headed to Ecuador on December 7 to work among the people Orley had served for more than one year.¹³ It was then possible for

Pastor Ford to get the medical attention he needed.

John Ford served alongside his brother in the Lake Colta Mission¹⁴ during 1923¹⁵ and 1924.¹⁶ Taking advantage of his brother's help, Orley left with his wife on their first furlough or long vacation that they were entitled to as foreign missionaries. Most of 1924, during his vacation, he visited schools, universities, and churches to encourage youth to become volunteers in foreign missions and to support the cause financially.

In October 1924 the Fords returned to Lake Colta. Sadly, their little daughter had died in the United States during their vacation in Kansas. Even though, from the time of their arrival at Colta Lake, they had government permission to open a school, it was not possible until after 1924, at which time a church was already built at the Colta mission.¹⁷

What the Ford families accomplished at the Lake Colta mission began to produce an abundant harvest. Ecuadorian society became open to receive the Adventist message in the principal cities of the country.¹⁸

Guatemala (1931-1942)

On March 6, 1931, Pastor Ford and his family went from New Orleans aboard S.S. *Castilla* to Puerto Barrios, Guatemala,¹⁹ in response to a request by the young Inter-American Division to serve as president of the Guatemala Mission. The first three months after his arrival he dedicated to familiarizing himself with the field and conducting evangelistic meetings in Quezaltenango. Then he went to the northern part of the country and finally settled in the capital.²⁰

In 1933 he made an exploratory trip to Petén, accompanied by the secretary-treasurer of the field, A. E. Lutz.²¹ They traveled by car and train from the capital to Santo Domingo de Coban in Alta Verapaz. Then they walked for two weeks through mountains and densely populated villages that spoke Q'eqchi' and did not encounter another white person during that trip. After arriving at the La Pasión River, they sailed on it for three days, then walked to Lake Petén. For three weeks they sold and gave away literature in Flores and nearby communities. Every night they conducted public meetings in the villages. The locals were greatly interested in their message, which suggested that they would be receptive when evangelism started there.²²

One of the places Pastor Ford constantly visited to establish evangelistic work was the Jalapa region where, using the *El Centinela* and *El Herald de la Salud* magazines, they invited the people to attend the public meetings they conducted.²³ About 10,000 lived in Jalapa and 25 to 40 people attended the evangelistic meetings, sometimes held up to five times a day. Some walked up to 20 km. just to listen to the sermons.²⁴ Since the Fords had started working in Lake Titicaca in Peru, he had not found any place where people were so greatly interested in the gospel as at Jalapa.²⁵

During the summer, taking advantage of the dry season, Pastor Ford tried to preach a sermon each day and sometimes more than one. He also worked hard to preach the gospel at the Lake Atlitan region so that it would

spread to the rest of the country. From November 1931 to February 1932 he conducted evangelistic meetings in Sololá and the lake zone, and also visited nearby churches. It led to the baptism of 27 people, almost the same number they had baptized in the whole country during the previous year. Those baptized included four from the Cachiuel tribe and two from the Man, the first baptisms from those ethnic groups in Guatemala.²⁶

In 1933 Ford dedicated himself to visit Petén and to construct a new building for the central church in the capital. The beautiful gothic style building had seating for 350 but could accommodate 500 if needed. Besides housing the mission offices, a bookstore, and a school, it also had a baptistery and a place for a choir. The total cost of the construction was \$2,750.00 USD. Pastor Ford decided to inaugurate the building in 1934 with a series of meetings that lasted two months and received coverage from the local press. The church was completely full every night with a total of 500 people. At the same time, fellow missionary Larrabee would conduct meetings in Jalapa, Jose Aguilar in Quezaltenango, and treasurer Lutz would work with the youth. Ford was not only a good pastor, he was also a good administrator.²⁷

When Ford arrived to Guatemala in 1931, the mission had no converts among the Indian population. Guatemala had a population of 2.5 million people and 80 percent of it were Indians. By the end of 1935, though, the Adventist message had reached two ethnic groups, and efforts to share it with a third ethnic group had started. That same year, Ford started to work in Momostenango where almost all members of a Pentecostal church accepted Adventism.²⁸ In November of the same year he began efforts to bring Adventism to Mazatenango and sent Harry Larrabee to conduct evangelistic meetings. By April 1936 a group of 40 people would meet for Sabbath School, 28 of them already baptized.²⁹

In 1938 evangelism started in Puerto Barrios and Chichicastenango. Pastor Ford encouraged Guatemalan youth to study at the division's Costa Rica school to become church workers.³⁰ During his administration, the church in Guatemala grew from 100 members to more than 500 in 1939.³¹ At the end of the same year, the modern church in Puerto Barrios was finished. It could seat more than 200 people and had classrooms for a school. Many considered it one of the best in Central America. More than 500 people attended its dedication.³²

From 1934 to 1939, under Pastor Ford's leadership, the mission built nine churches in Guatemala including the remodeling of the one in the capital.³³ In 1940 evangelism began in Escuintla, and Ford himself started the work in Jutiapa.³⁴

At the end of 1942 the Costa Rica Mission invited Ford to be its president. Until that year the Adventist Church in Guatemala consisted of 664 baptized members. In 1941 alone the mission had baptized 151.³⁵ In his last year as president of Guatemala Mission, the central church had become the largest Spanish church in membership in Central America, and evangelism soon began in the cities of Chichicastenango and Quiche.³⁶

Costa Rica (1942-1945)

When Ford arrived at the Costa Rica Mission, it had 600 members, of whom 500 lived in the province of Limon. The mission had five schools and an academy that prepared church workers for all Central America. Among the first places Orley visited was the province of Guanacaste, at the time a jungle region impossible to reach unless by boat or plane. With Ruiloba and literature evangelist Tito Castellon, Ford went by boat from Puntarenas through the Colorado Gulf and then up the Tempisque River as far as they could. Now Ford had his first opportunity to travel in an ox cart, an experience that lasted five days. For three weeks he was in the city of Liberia and its surroundings, giving biblical studies, conducting evangelistic meetings, and motivating the small Adventist group. Then he visited the Atlantic coast of the country, the location of most of the country's Adventist membership.³⁷

The year 1943 was a historic one for the Costa Rica Mission, because literature sales and tithes were the highest they had ever been. But for the Ford family it was a tragic time. During the month of July, while Orley was away from home, his youngest son, Donald, got seriously ill with a deadly form of meningitis, killing him in less than 24 hours. Pastor Ford barely made it home on time for the funeral.³⁸

The Dorcas Society was another ministry for which Pastor Ford worked very hard during his administration. With his wife's support, by 1944 the mission had five Dorcas groups operating in Costa Rica.³⁹ He also worked with children, youth, and adults through the progressive classes his wife would establish. One time she graduated an 84-year-old man from a "children's" class.⁴⁰

Ford developed large evangelistic series in the Costa Rican capital of San Jose. Church members brought their friends and neighbors to the meetings.⁴¹ At the beginning of 1945 Orley conducted various evangelistic meetings in Puntarenas with Gonzalo González, who was blind, and the first baptism had 20 converts. That same year, Costa Rica had one of the most outstanding evangelistic programs in the Central American Union with 76 persons baptized in Puerto Limón from among the English-speaking population thanks to the efforts of Pastor R. T. Rankin.⁴²

In 1945, during their vacation, the Fords visited Walla Walla College. It surprised people to see how healthy and strong they were after 28 years of active service in Latin America. They were a powerful testimony to their families and friends about God's care for His faithful children.⁴³ In July they returned to Costa Rica,⁴⁴ and a few months later, they left for El Salvador.⁴⁵

El Salvador (1945-1972)

Pastor Ford was president of the field until 1958, almost 14 years.⁴⁶ As in Guatemala and Costa Rica and having his wife's support, he motivated youth work through the Missionary Volunteer (MV) program, and many young people actively served as volunteer missionaries in all the mission's territory.⁴⁷ Lillian Ford strongly helped with MV (now Adventist Youth), the precursor of the Pathfinder and Master Guide Adventist clubs in El Salvador. She also worked for other departments of the mission.⁴⁸ Realizing that the work of young people in the MV⁴⁹ would

bring the church great blessings, it was one of the reasons Orley encouraged and supported the youth department. In August 1949, during his vacation time, he organized the first MV Camp in El Salvador, and according to him, the first one in the Central American Union.⁵⁰

In 1947 El Salvador had only three pastors, 693 baptized members, and 1,003 Sabbath School members. Thanks to Ford's leadership and guidance, that year 153 more were baptized, something that never had happened before in the El Salvador Mission.⁵¹ Orley was sure that there was not another place in the world where the Adventist message had so much membership growth expectations as in the Inter-American Division, and he was right.⁵² The Inter-American Division was and still is one of the fastest growing divisions in the world. Pastor Ford established the motto "Always more, never less" as the work philosophy for El Salvador. He equipped the mission with 25 slide projectors that he disseminated throughout the country.⁵³ Also, for the month of May, he implemented a lay-preaching institute to prepare the laity as evangelists for the territory of El Salvador.⁵⁴

In 1950 Pastor Ford implemented the program "Share your Faith," motivating more than 50 MV youth to conduct humanitarian projects in the country's capital city. They led to the establishment of two baptismal classes. The youth developed their own fundraising activities to support their missionary activities, and the program led to 16 baptisms at its first baptism service.⁵⁵

At the beginning of 1953, the Inter-American Division leaders met with Ford in El Salvador to plan the remodeling of the San Salvador church, because it was not big enough to meet the needs of the growing congregation.⁵⁶ By 1956 the building was almost completed and the members started to worship in it. Ford had directed its construction.⁵⁷

On January 18, 1957, the new building of the San Salvador Central Church was inaugurated at the same time evangelistic meetings were being conducted. The old building had been sold. The members wanted to glorify God in a structure representative of the SDA Church. The new church's main floor had a seating capacity for 1,000 people, four classrooms, and offices for the mission. It was built of reinforced bricks and concrete to resist fires and earthquakes.⁵⁸ On March 16, 1963, the congregation dedicated the sanctuary and classrooms. At that time, the group that met there had 350 members but another five new congregations had been established.⁵⁹

Beginning in 1954, the El Salvador Mission promoted a radio postal Bible school, encouraging church members to distribute registration cards among their families and friends. An example of how effective the program proved to be, was the establishment of a Sabbath School that opened in Hacienda Chanmico, La Libertad thanks to Leonidas Alas, who filled out a registration card and subscribed some of her friends. Soon, a group of Adventist worshipers met in the community. Mrs. Ford managed the Bible school.⁶⁰

The Dorcas Society was another ministry launched in San Salvador during Pastor Ford's administration. His wife Lillian directed it, and it used their house as a workplace. In 1956 she sold dinners to fund their activities and purchase equipment and material to sew garments and distribute them to people in need. The members also

visited the maternity hospital when it discharged the mothers and babies, giving the women clothes for themselves and for their babies. Some of the women were so poor that they left the hospital with their infants wrapped in newspapers.⁶¹

Always a Missionary

After 42 years of active missionary service outside his country (1917-1959),⁶² Pastor Orley Ford retired. He and his wife chose El Salvador as their second home. Despite his retirement, he continued as always working as a pastor. "Retired but not tired," was the way his co-workers described him.⁶³

In 1962, the Inter-American Division invited Ford to the General Conference World Session. That year the division was celebrating its fortieth anniversary, and Orley Ford had 45 years of service, longer than the existence of the division itself.⁶⁴ In his speech Pastor Ford said: "I am officially retired, as all old Fords need to be; however, in a used car lot the older the car is, the more expensive its selling price is. So, like the most antique Ford, I take courage and feel I don't need to retire, but to accelerate once again."⁶⁵

Despite his official retirement, he continued in active service as a pastor in the El Salvador Mission. During those years, his routine did not change. He continued visiting the sick as well as church members and conducting evangelistic projects. Ford directed the construction of the church in Ciudad Delgado, a process that started in November 1963 and ended February 9, 1964. It was the third major church built in San Salvador.⁶⁶ In December 1966, thanks to Pastor Ford's work and leadership, the mission dedicated the 10 de Septiembre Church, the second largest one in San Salvador in size and membership. At that time, Adventists across Central America referred to El Salvador as "Ford Country," because of the incredible work and influence that the Fords had done in that nation.⁶⁷

On July 1, 1967, the Ayutuxtepeque church was inaugurated. Today known as Scandia, it has classrooms for a school and was another of Pastor Ford's projects in his retirement days.⁶⁸ Three weeks later, July 22, Pastor and Mrs. Ford celebrated their golden wedding anniversary as well as their service as missionaries. More than 1,000 church members joined them in the central church, and when the couple arrived at their home, more workers and friends accompanied the Fords for a second round of celebration.

On March 6, 1972, the El Salvador Mission board had to take a vote not to request Orley's help in any other assignment due to his critical health condition, an action needed because he did not want to stop working.⁶⁹ The first *Día de la Hermandad* (day for the gathering of the brethren) in El Salvador would be observed Friday and Saturday, November 17 and 18, 1972. It was the perfect event to give recognition to Pastor Orley and Lillian Ford for their 27 years of service in El Salvador. The Fords received a standing ovation from all present. Even though already suffering a critical health condition, Orley had enough strength to present a challenging message for all to remain faithful until the last moment. Those words would serve as his farewell message, because the following day, Sunday, November 19, 1972, he fell asleep in the arms of his Savior. His death deeply saddened

his fellow believers, since they considered him the most valuable and capable missionary that El Salvador ever had.⁷⁰

When Pastor Orley Ford died, he established a record in the Adventist world church as the missionary who had served the longest outside his country, having dedicated 45 years to it. At his request, Pastor Ford was buried in El Salvador, his second home, as he used to call it, in the Cementerio Municipal de Ayutuxtepeque in San Salvador,⁷¹ the city where he had built his last church. On December 8, 1990, his wife, Lillian Gertrude Shafer Ford, passed away and, honoring her last wishes, she was interned next to her life-long companion.⁷²

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