



Baja California Conference headquarters.

Photo courtesy of Baja California Conference.

# Baja California Conference

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## FERNANDO A. MEZA

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The Baja California Conference, located in the Northern Mexican Union, is part of Inter-American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Its territory is made up of the state of Baja California and the municipality of San Luis Río Colorado in the state of Sonora. It is located north of the Baja California Peninsula and northwest of Mexico.

The state has five municipalities: Mexicali as its capital, Tijuana as the most populous city, Ensenada, Tecate, and Playas de Rosarito. Its territory represents 3.65 percent of the national territory. It has 3,315,766 inhabitants, which is 2.8 percent of the country's total population. The population is 92 percent urban and eight percent rural. One in 100 people speaks the indigenous language.<sup>1</sup> The state of Baja California North has its rural population distributed in 385 ejidos or small towns.<sup>2</sup>

The north borders with the state of California, USA, the east with the state of Sonora and the Gulf of California, the south with the state of Baja California South and the west with the Pacific Ocean. It was originally populated by the Kumiai, which is one of the indigenous families that have populated the area, along with the Cucapá, Pai Pai, Kiliwa, Cahilla and Akula. The population is heterogeneous coming from the different states of the Mexican Republic.<sup>3</sup>

This diversity has manifested itself in the membership of the church. The missionary spirit and growth have been enhanced by the arrival of Adventists from different states such as Chiapas, Oaxaca, Tabasco, Michoacán, Sinaloa, and Veracruz.

The Baja California Conference has a membership of 19,813 in 100 churches and 62 Sabbath Schools. There are 19 ordained ministers, 15 persons with ministerial credentials, 56 with missionary credentials, 44 licensed missionaries, 13 colporteurs and 34 retired workers.<sup>4</sup>

## Institutions of the Baja California Conference

Adventist Christian education has played a leading role in this conference, since schools were founded in the early years of the arrival of the gospel. The conference currently sponsors five schools.

*Colegio Salud y Saber (Health and Knowledge Secondary School)*: The school was founded in 1956 under the leadership of Pastor Anastasio Salazar with Professor Apolonio Díaz Canul as its first director. With an administrative and teaching staff of eight men and 16 women, it has three academic levels - elementary, middle and high school. This institution serves the church of Tijuana, as well as 79 churches and congregations in the city.<sup>5</sup> Address: Av. Lucrecia Toriz # 751, Zona Centro. Tijuana Baja, California.

*Mariano Matamoros Campus*: The School "Salud y Saber, Mariano Matamoros Campus started on the initiative of lay brothers from the El Florido district; among them, Eutimio Bravo, Antonio Plata and Brother Reyes. The objective was to put Adventist education within reach of the children of the church in the southern part of Tijuana since the distance, time and costs made their transportation to the other campus difficult. Currently the school operates at preschool, elementary and middle school levels. This school has developed a bakery industry so that low-income families can get the means to pay for their children's tuition. Address: Calzada Principal 20880, Ejido Matamoros, Sección Horóscopo, C.P. 22230.<sup>6</sup>

*Colegio Elena Harmon (Ellen Harmon School):* This school emerged in 1961 in the Revolución church of Mexicali, with the name "Ramón López Velarde". Its name was changed to "Colegio Elena Harmon" in 1998. It was relocated to the children's department of the Zaragoza church, and is currently next to the Benito Juárez Colony church. It has three levels of study: elementary, middle and high school. This school has not only served Adventist children in the city of Mexicali but has also reached students from the churches of Ejido Durango, Ejido Guerrero and the Gulf of Santa Clara in Sonora. Address: Presidente Plutarco Elías Calles #1300 col. Benito Juárez.<sup>7</sup>

*Fernando Montes de Oca School:* This school had its beginnings in 1988, operating in the Tecate church. In 1991, the school moved to the current location and it was incorporated in 1992. Efraín Salinas, the director of the school, won the friendship of two American Adventists, S. Mc Bride and Eduard Chenoweth, who distinguished themselves by being generous donors and sponsors and so the school was built. This school has four levels - preschool, elementary, middle and high. Address: Callejón Lomitas del Cuchumá No. 1535, Colonia Bellavista. C.P. 21449.<sup>8</sup>

*Francisco I. Madero School:* This school began in 1963. Two pastors were very influential in this: Pastor Jaime Castrejón and his wife Gloria made the plans while Professor Josué Molina who was then the mayor of the municipal prison and teacher by profession, offered support. The school started in the 14th Street Church. Land was obtained in front of the church and during the years that followed, with the help of the school board, directed by Sara Díaz de Ramírez, it was further developed. Address: Calle 14. Colonia Centro, Ensenada, Baja California.<sup>9</sup>

The aforementioned have not been the only educational institutions of the Baja California Conference. There were two others that were closed due to financial reasons and the size of student body. The school "24 de Febrero" operated for more than 20 years, offering primary level education to Adventist children of San Luis Río Colorado, in Sonora. The other institution, the Valle de la Trinidad Academy (COVATRI), founded in 1967 operated for 50 years at the elementary, middle and high school levels. The middle and high schools had housing facilities receiving students from the region, from different parts of Mexico, and also from the United States.

*Valle de la Trinidad Clinic:* This clinic had its beginnings around 1967, and has provided services to the inhabitants of that agricultural region. Dr. José Luis Ledezma was in charge for 12 years. The clinic was closed but reopened under the direction of Dr. Helen Armenta. In addition to its daily medical services, the Adventist Medical Ministry and the White Memorial Hospital of Los Angeles California, led by chaplain Edgar Urbina, provide dental and ophthalmological service every quarter in the clinic facilities.

*"Rancho Escondido" Campground:* When this conference was inaugurated in 1989, with Pastor Mauro Reyes as president, the church acquired 34 hectares of land for camping. Located 20 kilometers from Tecate, its cabins

can accommodate up to 200 campers. It has the following facilities: kitchen, dining room, auditorium, gymnasium, medical clinic, basketball and volleyball courts, soccer field, and pool.

## Origins of Adventist Work in the Territory of the Baja California Conference

*Mexicali.* Mexicali was the first place where the Adventist message found a place in the hearts of the people in this conference. In 1918, during the war, the couple Juan and Sixta Molina emigrated from Texas where they had received the Adventist message from Bernardino Sánchez. Upon arriving in Mexicali they built their house and a palm grove where they celebrated morning and evening worship services. They sought help in Calexico, CA., finding it in brother Effler, of German origin. Over time the first results were seen in the conversion of Juanita Sáenz, Victoria Cortés (mother of Juan, Esthela and Solomon), Guadalupe de Flores (grandmother of Professor Celia Flores) and other persons.<sup>10</sup>

On January 28, 1926, a doctor from Loma Linda Hospital, named Iner Sheld, who had spent much time in Mexico, made reference in the "Medical Evangelist" to a Sabbath School in Mexicali with 15 members attending. By March 1927, there was a church of 30 members, and two months later, about 50 church members.<sup>11</sup>

In 1930, in the minutes of the union, a vote appears where a church from Mexico, namely Mexicali be transferred to the Southern California Conference with the aim of serving it better.<sup>12</sup> Although no administrative evidence was found to know if this was done, what is known with certainty, is that American pastors played an important role in the beginnings of the gospel in this city. Pastor Carlos Robaina met with the Molina family under some palm trees, and there they held worship services.<sup>13</sup> In 1930, Pastor Carlos Robaina worked with a group in an evangelistic campaign on both sides of the border, Calexico and Mexicali. During this time, a missionary Adventist school started in Calexico, California, the "Calexico Mission School", an institution that has been linked to the gospel and education in this area.<sup>14</sup>

The growth of the group necessitated a bigger meeting place. The Zaragoza church acquired land and under the leadership of Pastor José Morales and engineer Juan Gil, the church was built. Before its completion, Pastor José Morales relocated and it was Pastor Andrés Pérez who dedicated the church building on January 10, 1953. From Mexicali, the Adventist message came to the colonies and the entire surrounding agricultural valley. The Becerra brothers took the gospel to Ejido Veracruz where the message was accepted by Don Miguel Tinoco (who became a missionary par excellence) and his family; Pastor Armando Miranda Conchos' mother, and many others. The message was accepted in San Luis Río Colorado by Manuel Enriquez Orozco, who later became a distinguished missionary, in Ejido Guerrero by Fernando Castillo, and many who are not mentioned by name but who dedicated their lives to the Lord and His church.<sup>15</sup>

By the grace of God, pastoral leadership and dedication of faithful members, the church of Mexicali Zone currently has the following: five pastors and five districts in the city; three pastors and districts in the valleys; 26 churches, 21 Sabbath Schools, with a total of 5,753 members.

*Tijuana.* The Adventist work in Tijuana was linked in the beginning with the church in the San Diego area. By 1923, Pastor R. B. Stauffer made early efforts in preaching the Adventist message among the Hispanic population in San Diego, National City and Tijuana. One of the means that was used, was the Paradise Valley Sanitarium, which was an effective instrument in creating interest in the Adventist message, among the Mexicans of this city.<sup>16</sup>

Years later, a Tijuana resident named Macario Flores suffered an accident, and not finding a clinic in the city, he crossed the border into National City to find one. He found help at an Adventist institution, Hospital del Paraíso (Paradise Hospital), where he was treated. While in that institution he was contacted by Pastor Brown and a lay pastor, Arthur Nelson (Vázquez corroborates his missionary work),<sup>17</sup> who presented the gospel to him. That was how the brothers Macario and Gerarda Flores converted to Adventism.

The Flores family opened their home and the first group of Adventists met to worship with the help of Pastor Nelson. For several years that house, located on 5th street, # 329, was the place of worship. Among the first members were Paula de Quijada, Francisca Hernández, Margarita Pacheco and Teodomira Encinas. Later there were three small groups worshipping on Saturday in different places. Under the leadership of Pastor Anastasio Salazar, these groups got together to form the "J" Church and its building was dedicated on July 1, 1950!<sup>18</sup> This church placed great interest in preaching, through the formation of Branch Sabbath Schools, and 100 groups were formed under the direction of Aurorita Kim. Later, from these Branch Sabbath Schools, the churches of La Mesa, La Obrera, Miramar and Libertad emerged.

Over the years, the building became inadequate and plans were made to buy land behind the church. The purchase began under the leadership of Pastor Venancio Salazar, and a board was formed to fund and build the new "K" temple to replace the former "J". Throughout the project, there were outstanding, dedicated members, who encouraged the church and sought donations: Javier King and Sara Yu (presidents), Ema Kim (secretary), Nilda Llanes (treasurer, designer and director of the project), engineer Álvaro Sauza, Mauro Reyes (pastor), Pedro Pacheco, Clementina Pacheco, and Dimas González. The dream was crowned on October 2, 1982, with the dedication of the most representative and beautiful church building in the region.<sup>19</sup> Present at the ceremony were Pastor Velino Salazar, president of the union; field administrators: Eliasib Sánchez, president; Carlos T. Salomé, secretary; and Guillermo Sánchez, treasurer; and all the pastors of the conference.

In the church records (1971), the dedication of the church La Mesa in Tijuana, BC, under the leadership of Pastor Venancio Salazar, is mentioned. For 40 years it had been the only famous "J" church and brought an era of great growth.<sup>20</sup> With pastoral leadership and the dedication of faithful brethren, in the city of Tijuana, including Tecate, there are currently: 15 pastors and 15 districts, 60 churches, with a total of 11,331 members.

*Ensenada.* The Adventist church in Ensenada has as its pioneers the Preciado family and Beatriz Meza de Félix. Beatriz received the Adventist message in Navolato, Sinaloa. She emigrated with her family to the city of Tijuana (where she was living in the house of Macario Flores, pioneer of Tijuana), and later she went to live in the city of Ensenada. At that time San Diego's Pastor Arturo Nelson, and Brother Macario Flores came to help them in the missionary work. This first group met at the Preciado brothers' house until 1947.

Sister Chuy Parra gave the land to build the first church on 14th Street. Among the members was Graciela de Luna, wife of Major Alberto Luna, an officer of the Mexican army, who sympathized with the church. Major Luna was moved by the Holy Spirit and made a rare and unique decision: he gave the order for his soldiers to build the church and so the 14<sup>th</sup> Street church was built in 1947 by the Mexican army. It was dedicated around 1952 by Pastor José Morales.<sup>21</sup> The church was growing and its missionaries began to reach the Valle de la Trinidad and the San Quintin Valley, spreading the Adventist message they loved so much.

The church of Ensenada and its valleys currently has five pastors and five districts, 14 churches, and 16 Sabbath Schools, with a total of 2,846 members.

## Key events that led to the organization of the Baja California Conference.

The history of the church in this region began in 1907, when in a national congress, the Adventist church in Mexico was divided into six districts. One of them was the district of the Northwest, composed of the states of Sonora, Sinaloa and the territory of Baja California.<sup>22</sup> In 1924, the decision was made to establish five missions in Mexico. One of them was the Sonora Mission based in Navojoa, Sonora. In 1928, it was renamed Sierra Madre Mission with base in Chihuahua. The leaders at that time were all foreigners.

In 1931, the states of Sinaloa, Sonora and Baja California were added to the Lake Mission, which formerly belonged to the Sierra Madre Mission. A year later (1932), the headquarters were relocated to Nogales, Arizona, United States. In 1939, the decision was made to change the name of Lake Mission to Pacific Mission, relocating the headquarters in Guadalajara, Jalisco to Mazatlan, Sinaloa, because that city was at the center of the territory of the new Pacific Mission. In 1948, the nomenclature was again changed to Corporación del Pacífico with headquarters in Guadalajara, Jalisco. It was in 1952, that two pastors were appointed to this area: Daniel Zertuche, district director of Tijuana and José Morales as district director of Mexicali. In 1956, the name of the territory was changed to the Pacific Mission of Seventh-day Adventists.

In July 1976, the division approved the change of status from Pacific Mission to Pacific Conference. On this occasion, the delegates represented 4,974 members of the states of Sinaloa, Sonora, Baja California Norte, and Sur, with 38 churches and 88 Sabbath Schools. Pastor Félix Cortés Antonio was appointed as president, based in Nogales, Sonora.<sup>23</sup>

At a meeting held on July 24, 1988, it was proposed that the Baja California Conference be separated from the Northwest Conference. On that occasion, the vote taken read: "The Northwest Conference is divided; forming the new Baja California Conference with the States of Baja California and Baja California Sur; the purpose being to give better attention to the church for the advancement of God's work."<sup>24</sup> Later, the municipality of San Luis Río Colorado was added to the Baja California Conference.

After a study was conducted, it was decided to separate the state of Baja California Sur as a new mission field. This statistical information was presented to the conference's board of directors in February 2005. The new region was left with five districts, 1,128 members, six churches and 15 congregations.<sup>25</sup> On June 15, 2005, Pastor Javier Guichard was appointed as coordinator of the new region and Baja Sur was registered.<sup>26</sup>

## Conference plans to fulfill its mission

*Lay and Pastoral Leadership.* The Baja California Conference has had in its members and pastors, strong leadership and the initiative to carry out new projects in the development of the church and to share the gospel with the community.

*Church construction.* In the city of Tijuana, a group of members (Pedro González, Antonio Godínez, Clementina Pacheco and Abel Álvarez), realizing the need for new churches for several congregations, formed the group "Constructores por Fe" (Builders by Faith). They secured funds and built six churches for those who most needed them: Rosarito, Internacional, Libertad, Florido, Reforma and Guaycura.<sup>27</sup>

*Health.* Historically, there has always been an interest in the medical missionary work in this conference. In 1958, the Nayarit Clinic was founded under the direction of Dr. Juan Cortés. Doctors Elías Tinoco and Rafael Lara followed. The clinic received medical interns from the School of Medicine of Montemorelos University. It was finally closed 20 years later.<sup>28</sup>

Medical brigades have been used as evangelistic tools from very early in the history of the church in this state, when it was the Pacific Mission. Around 1976, service began with Dr. Nilda Llanes and in the 80's Dr. Guillermo Espinoza and Dr. Silvia Rosiles in Tijuana continued.<sup>29</sup> Currently, service is being offered by Víctor Andrade (pharmacy), Helen Armenta (general practitioner), Gerardo Ruiz and Christian Gutiérrez (optometrists), and Lucila Gallegos and Maribel Ortiz (dentists). Víctor Sánchez, optometrist, and his Mexicali team are present in each brigade giving away hundreds of lenses in each event.<sup>30</sup> Dr. Elías Tinoco gave his talent and time for 18 years, serving as honorary director of the Conference Department of Health (1987-1996), promoting health reform and medical brigades throughout the territory.<sup>31</sup>

Professor Daniel Suárez, a member of the Mexicali church, created a foundation called "Chimalitquic", whose purpose is to educate thousands of young people in public, private and Adventist schools, to avoid smoking. Such was the influence of the program, that it became an important factor for the government of Baja California

to issue a law on October 6, 1995, prohibiting smoking in public spaces.<sup>32</sup>

The influence of the medical brigades moved the heart of a young couple from Tecate, Josué and Genet Armenta. He as a teacher and she as a dentist, started a ministry called "Sanando Sonrisas" (Healing Smiles). This group of six dentists have treated more than 3000 patients from 2012 to 2015. They later joined the Adventist Medical Ministry that worked in the city of Ensenada.<sup>33</sup>

Given that there were several groups active in health ministries, the decision was made to integrate them into a single ministry in the conference. In 2017, Ministerio Médico Adventista (MMA) (Adventist Medical Ministry) was established as a non-profit institution with Dr. Jairo Rodríguez (ophthalmologist) as general director in Ensenada and Tijuana, and Dr. Ernesto López Donnat in Mexicali. The MMA is composed of pastors, health professionals, health students, health directors and personal ministries directors of the churches and has representatives and members in all the churches of the conference.<sup>34</sup>

*Youth.* Pastor Jorge Suárez, youth director of the Pacific Mission in 1971, with the desire to conserve and train young missionaries, launched the first Federation of Adventist Youth in the Pacific Mission. Its first president was Public Accountant Abel Álvarez and the secretary Margarita de Tinoco. Among the youth leaders who distinguished themselves in those years were Guillermo Ximénez and Noé Benavides. This federation held spiritual, missionary and sports programs three times a year. In 1978, Guillermo Ximénez and Abel Álvarez launched a Choir Festival that was held once a year, with the aim of promoting the formation of choirs, groups, quartets and educating young people to appreciate quality and ennobling spiritual music.<sup>35</sup>

*Personal Ministries.* The conference has held a Lay Congress annually attended by 1800 members. Missionary activity is promoted and the materials for the evangelism of the year are provided. A congress of evangelists is also held, where training takes place for the laity, who work together with the pastors in the annual campaigns held in each of the churches. This field has a group of 147 lay people who hold a one or two week evangelistic campaign each year.<sup>36</sup> Abel Álvarez and Isaías Medrano have served as instructors for preachers and lay missionary instructors for many years.

In the summer of 2010 Mexicali and its valley were hit by an earthquake measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale. The greatest damage occurred in the Mexicali Valley, leaving the homes of many people covered by water and mud that spouted from the earth as if they were volcanic eruptions. This tragedy was an opportunity for the church to be present through ADRA, the conference and the churches of Mexicali. A group of Adventists from the Church of La Mesa in San Diego California, including Soledad Guardado and Blanca Félix with their husbands, felt the urgency of supporting the need and together with other members they began to provide food, clothing and tents. By visiting the places, and seeing so much devastation, they were motivated to find a way to help build homes and promised to seek the help needed to build houses for church members who had lost everything. The churches of San Diego and the Hispanic Church of La Sierra contributed money and provided personnel to carry out the construction work. In total they built ten houses at a cost of 70,000 dls.<sup>37</sup>

*Small groups.* This field aims at establishing small groups as the basis of missionary work. These small groups strengthen the Adventist community and help in the consolidation of faith, not only of the new members but also for established members of the congregations.

*Small extension groups:* Each organized church works with one or more leaders who wish to do missionary work in a new place - it must be in a community where in the future, it is feasible to start a congregation. For this particular period, 70 leaders have been prepared to fulfill this function.

*Centers of Influence.* These centers have become a means of witnessing. The three that stand out are: Tecate and Maneadero, both with a community food pantry and kitchen and El Florido, with a doctor's office.

## Challenges to fulfill the Mission

1. Preaching to the growing urban population (92 percent) in large cities.
2. To reach the rural population (eight percent) of the 385 towns and ejidos.
3. To reach the immigrant population that has been moving to the state: Chinese (the group that has been there longest), Haitians, Guatemalans, Salvadorans, Nicaraguans, Africans.

## List of Presidents

Mauro Reyes Carvajal (1988-1990); Carlos Uc Gorocica (1990-1993); Mario Villarreal Rodríguez (1993-1997); Saúl Barceló Guerrero (1997-2005); Adán Dyck Gámez (2005-2011); César Turrubiates Gutiérrez (2011-2016); Fernando Meza Escobar (2016-2017); Juan Hilario Olguín (2017- ).

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