

# Altiplano Guatemala Mission

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## EDDY ORLANDO HERNÁNDEZ

Eddy Orlando Hernández Ramírez has served the church since 1997 as a district pastor, personal ministry department director, field secretary, mission president, and coordinator and president of South Central Region and Northwest Guatemala Region, respectively.

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Altiplano Guatemala Mission is a part of Guatemala Union Mission. Its headquarters are in San Cristóbal, Totonicapán, kilómetro 187, Carretera Interamericana, Guatemala. Its activities are regulated by the model constitution for missions of the Inter-American Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

Altiplano Guatemala Mission's territory consists of three departments in the northwest part of the country of Guatemala, Quiché, Sololá, and Totonicapán. As of June 30, 2019, it had 130 churches and 30,719 members in an estimated total population of 2,336,515.<sup>1</sup>

The mission's territory is rich in culture and traditions. It is mainly populated by indigenous groups of Mayan origin. It also has a great variety in languages. Among the main ones are K'iche', Tz'utujil, Kaqchikel, Uspantek, Ixil, Sakapultek, and Spanish. Its geography is varied with high, well-known mountain chains ideal for a variety of crops and forests.

The main economic activities of the zone are agriculture (coffee, corn, wheat, barley, potatoes, and vegetables), weaving (unique to the area and mainly used to make clothing), tourism (foreigners and locals visiting its variety of lovely landscapes), and handmade crafts.

## Institutions

El Alba School is located at 1ª calle 2-81, zona 4, Momostenango, Totonicapán, Guatemala. On May 17, 1949, the government issued operation permit No. 211 to the school. The school offers preschool, elementary, and secondary levels and has a total of 361 students and 14 employees, including teachers and administrators. Its first principal was Pastor Moisés Tahay. El Alba School was initially established when Pastors Eliseo Escalante, Moisés Tahay, and Salvador Monzón with Professor Napoleón Beteta obtained a provisional authorization to start classes. On February 10, 1949, the school began operations with 56 students. As of 2019, Claudia Astrid Dávila was the school principal.

Braulio Pérez Marcio School started operations in 1982 and was named after Dr. Braulio Pérez Marcio, who was a speaker, writer, and poet. The school is located at 6ª Avenida 0-66, zona 1, Santa Cruz del Quiché, El Quiché, Guatemala. At first, preschool and elementary (1-3) grades were the only levels offered. The school's first principal was María Angélica Girón de García. Under the leadership of Basilio Morales López, the rest of the

elementary grades were added. In 1989, Rebeca Cáceres Rodríguez added the secondary level grades. As of 2019, the school has 386 students in all levels, and the principal was Professor Maidelyn Girón.

Maranatha School was established through the desire of the members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in zona 1 of the main department of Totonicapán in 1979. It started as *El Progreso* School under the leadership of Pastor Rudy Rafael García. At first, the school operated in Palín Church for two years, and it then moved to the current buildings in the parish of Parramón, zona 2. In 1992, the name was changed to “Maranatha Adventist Co-Educational School.” The school began with 48 students and had 220 as of 2019. The school facilities were built by a group of Maranatha volunteers, and, in 2015, under the leadership of Altiplano Guatemala Mission, the building was expanded.

Nueva Jerusalem School is located in Joyabaj, department of Quiché. It started operations in 2002 with Professor Rufino Pérez as its first principal and an enrollment of 56 students. In 2011, the secondary level was added. As of 2019, it offers preschool, elementary, and secondary levels and has a total of 162 students.

Orión Stereo Radio Station started operations in 1999 through the inspiration of a group of lay members in the department of Totonicapán. Among them were Francisco Hernández, Benjamín Hernández, Federico Casia, Francisco García, Pedro García, Elías Socop, Abelino Tzic, Carlos Navas, and Fidel Pú. They received support from the administration of the local field, which loaned them the money to acquire the frequency in an auction. The cost was approximately \$70,000 USD. The radio was installed in Totonicapán in a hotel room, whose owner was a relative of Elías Socop, the radio station’s first director. A little later, the Alvarez family offered the third floor of a building in the same city, which offered more space and better operating conditions. The radio station remained in that place until 2016. As of 2019, the Orión Stereo Radio Station was a part of the Adventist Communication System, and its director was Juan Carlos Pu Gutierrez.

## Origins of Church in Territory

The Adventist message arrived in the territory where the Altiplano Mission is located in 1926-1928. Since Guatemala was a country with a mostly indigenous population, in 1926, the Inter-American Division recruited specific people who could start the work with this type of population. It was decided that the best way to establish the church in Indian communities was through the medical work.<sup>2</sup>

The Quiché Indians obeyed and accepted the counsel of their chief. It was very difficult for someone who was of mixed blood or not a tribe member to be accepted. Thankfully, an American doctor was well accepted and received the approval of the chief and his secretary. Although there was a great deal of work to do, with God’s help, it was possible to start the medical work without losing sight of the mission to preach the message.<sup>3</sup>

In his visit to Chichicastenango in 1927, Ellis P. Howard observed the many Indians who “came with their clay incense burners. With lighted incense they waved these vessels in the air while on bended knee on the many

steps of the Catholic church they offered their prayers...to the spirits of their ancestors." This scene helped him understand how rewarding it would be to continue the work in that area, where plans had been made to build a school and bring more missionaries to preach the Adventist message.<sup>4</sup>

In 1928, the Adventist missionary work directed towards native Indians began in Sololá. A property was purchased to teach the Indians in Sololá about the rotation of crops and the cultivation of fruit trees. Also in 1928, "Pastor E. E. Andross while visiting in Guatemala spent a short time at the mission station where Brother and Sister Boehne are beginning work among the Quiche Indians. He feels that the prospects for our mission work in that field are very promising" as the Boehnes preached the gospel in the Sololá zone.<sup>5</sup>

Santa Catarina, a Wahuala Indian town where foreigners and those of mixed blood were not accepted, was visited by Pastor C. E. Wood and others in 1928. They had pictures of some of the town's officials, which had been taken by Brother Howard. These pictures made the acceptance of the new missionaries possible. Pastor Wood met Miguel Rashelean, the secretary to the town's mayor, and found that Miguel was familiar with the Adventist message because a colporteur had arrived in this town three years prior and had sold a medical book to the town's priest. That colporteur also gave a small book to the school teacher and one to Miguel. The fact that Miguel knew about the Adventist doctrine contributed positively to the spread of the message.<sup>6</sup>

In 1929, W. E. Baxter noted that, during his visit to the Boehnes in their mission home, they told him that the Boehnes had gained the Indians' trust. "Many thousands of Indians pass our station every week; and they are beginning to feel that it is a place where they can get help when they are sick." After being cared for and healed, many returned with gifts of gratitude.<sup>7</sup>

Pastor J. R. McWilliam, superintendent of Guatemala Mission, wrote a letter in 1930 about the work that was being carried out in the Sololá territory among the Indians being treated in the Boehnes' mission home. One of the methods used to share the message was that, while patients waited to be seen, they would listen to the gospel in their native language.<sup>8</sup>

In 1935, Pastor José Canjura Aguilar and David García, a student from Costa Rica, went to Totonicapán where they planned to hold a series of meetings. Pastor Aguilar had a letter written by the chief of police of Quetzaltenango as a recommendation to the chief of police of Totonicapán, asking him to help these men. The chief of police of Totonicapán told them that he would help them however possible, but the town was busy preparing for a visit from the president of the republic, Jorge Ubico Castañeda.<sup>9</sup> Pastor Aguilar looked for another place in which to hold the meetings but was unsuccessful. He was providentially led to write to Juan José Santos in San Felipe to try to find him a suitable place. He received word that there was a building he could use. Pastor Aguilar conducted his meetings, and Juan José Santos was baptized with his wife and others.<sup>10</sup>

In 1944, the Adventist work was established in Totonicapán. Pastor Aguilar held meetings in the city, and the first Adventists in that area were baptized. As a result, the first church in that area, Palín Adventist Church, was established. About that same time, the church work was begun in Quiché. Pastor Justiniano Castillo worked

intensely in Santa Cruz and Chichicastenango. In 1946, Pastor Aguilar carried out a series of meetings in Totonicapán. A new believer donated a property in which to possibly establish another church.<sup>11</sup>

In 1949, "a group of Indians in the mountains near Totonicapan...accepted the Adventist message. They were formerly Spiritualists, but [M. W. Sickler] found them living up to all the light they had and awaiting baptism. Their first interest was aroused when one of their members received the 'Voice of Prophecy' lessons."<sup>12</sup> *Centro Cultural Indigenista* in Momostenango, Totonicapán, was used in 1954 to teach missionaries techniques in working with the Indians of Guatemala, especially in Momostenango.<sup>13</sup> In 1961, a property was purchased in San Cristóbal near Quezaltenango with the purpose of establishing a medical clinic. Dr. Antonio Solares, who had just finished his medical studies, moved to San Cristóbal with his wife and three children. He had arrived to direct the clinic, which would serve 85,000 people who lived in the area.<sup>14</sup>

José Octaviano García and his family were the only Adventists in Paxtoca, Totonicapán. They knew that if a church was built, preaching the message would be easier. In 1969, they began to search for a property but soon realized that they didn't have enough money to buy one. They decided to take this problem to God in prayer and decided to save as much money as possible. José and his family had reduced their spending so much that their clothing became ragged, but they knew that it was worth the sacrifice of whatever was necessary to advance the Adventist work. The owner of the property lowered the price, and they were able to buy it.<sup>15</sup>

## Events Leading to Organization of Mission

From 1912 to 1998, Guatemala Conference included the entire country of Guatemala. In 1999, it was decided to divide the conference and create two extra fields. Guatemala Conference became Central Guatemala Conference with Guatemala, Chimaltenango, Escuintla, Sacatepequez, and Santa Rosa.<sup>16</sup> East Guatemala Mission was organized with Alta Verapaz, Baja Verapaz, Chiquimula, El Progreso, Izabal, Jalapa, Jutiapa, Peten, and Zacapa.<sup>17</sup> West Guatemala Mission was organized with Huehuetenango, Quetzaltenango, Quiché, Retalhuleu, San Marcos, Sololá, Suchitepéquez, and Totonicapán.<sup>18</sup>

Guatemala's existing fields were productive in soul-winning, so, in 2005, changes needed to be made. Central Guatemala Conference was reorganized to become Metropolitan Guatemala Conference with Guatemala and Santa Rosa.<sup>19</sup> West Guatemala Mission was reorganized to now include Huehuetenango, Quetzaltenango, Quiché, Sam Marcos, Sololá, and Totonicapán.<sup>20</sup> South Guatemala Mission was newly organized and would include Escuintla, Retalhuleu, and Suchitopéquez.<sup>21</sup> A new Central Guatemala Mission was also organized to include Chimaltenango, Guatemala, and Sacatepequez.<sup>22</sup>

In 2006, East Guatemala Mission was reorganized to now have Chiquimula, El Progreso, Jalapa, Jutiapa, and Zacapa.<sup>23</sup> North Guatemala Mission was also organized with Alta Verapaz, Baja Verapaz, Izabal, and Peten.<sup>24</sup>

Pastors, colporteurs, and church members helped the Adventist message spread rapidly. In 2011, West Guatemala Mission was again reorganized to create a new trial field called Central West Mission with the departments of Totonicapán, Quiché, and Sololá and Pastor Roberto Sales Sánchez as its coordinator. The vote was taken at an administrative meeting of Guatemala Union Mission to be effective on January 1, 2011.<sup>25</sup>

In 2012, Guatemala Union Mission requested the Inter-American Division to change the status of the trial mission to Northwest Guatemala Region. This was done to align with the rules of operation that define a region as an entity of churches with limited financial resources that is administered by the union. In 2013, it was decided to name Pastor Eddy Hernández as coordinator of Northwest Guatemala Region.

On August 2, 2016, the administration of Guatemala Union Mission with the administration of the Inter-American Division organized Altiplano Guatemala Mission. It had 109 churches and 26,936 members in the midst of a population of 1,989,501 inhabitants. Pastor Eddy O. Hernández was elected president with Elmer López as secretary-treasurer.<sup>26</sup>

## Strategies for Fulfilling the Mission

Altiplano Guatemala Mission has a strategic plan based on that of Guatemala Union Mission. Its vision: "The Altiplano Guatemala Mission will be a consecrated, revived, and committed church in discipleship and in the preaching of the eternal gospel, producing growth and holistic development in its members and institutions." Its mission: "Baptized by the Holy Spirit, to proclaim the eternal gospel, preparing the church for the Second Coming of Christ." Its strategic plan has four main axes: revival and reform; discipleship and the growth of the church; holistic development; and institutional image.

The mission's main challenges are:

To take the gospel to the 18 municipalities of the department of Sololá due to the fact that only six of the 24 municipalities have an Adventist presence.

To establish Adventist churches in 40 new places of the territory.

To win 7,500 new baptized members.

To reinforce Adventist beliefs in each member.

To improve the financial potential to better support the work in the field.

To reconcile the numbers of members in the church books with what is listed for the field using the ACMS program.

To increase the number of districts to better care for the members.

To continue to improve the Maranatha and Braulio Pérez Marcio schools' facilities.

## Recent Events Experienced by the Mission

Altiplano Guatemala Mission has implemented the program, "Decide for Jesus," an evangelistic project that allows for holistic development in the local field. At the same time, it greatly eliminates rejection or indifference of church members to personal and public evangelism. This plan allows pastors, local church leaders, institutions, and members in general to carry out evangelism in a comfortable, sustainable, and spiritual environment. It consists of six phases: spiritual preparation, systematic meetings, friendship activities, planting, harvesting, and consolidating. This program has had good results such as increases in baptisms, the number of established churches, and tithe giving.

## What Still Needs to be Done

Altiplano Guatemala Mission faces great challenges, and among the most urgent are:

1. The presence of Adventism in the majority of the municipalities of the department of Sololá.
2. The maintenance of a healthy ratio of pastors and the number of organized churches.
3. The promotion and maintenance of members' fidelity in spiritual relationships with God and in stewardship.

## List of Presidents

Roberto Sales Sánchez (2011-2013); Eddy Orlando Hernández Ramírez (2014-2018); Cándido Fabián Natareno (2019- ).

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