

Cuba Adventist Theological Seminary (SETAC)

ANNIA ESTHER VIVES

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The Cuba Adventist Theological Seminary (SETAC) is the only educational institution of the Adventist church in Cuba. It accepts students from the conferences and missions of the Cuba Union Conference who wish to obtain a bachelor's degree in theology. In addition, students come from other Latin American countries and from other continents, with representatives from Mexico, Belize, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Panama, Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela, Chile, Peru, Canada, the United States, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Congo, and Angola.

SETAC is located in the Cuban capital, in the locality of Santiago de Las Vegas, a strategic area near the José Martí International Airport. Its address is 7 Camino Circular, Reparto Santa Elena, Santiago de Las Vegas, Boyeros, Havana, Cuba 17200.

Origin of the Institution

Adventist education in Cuba began at the very start of Adventist work on the island in 1904. The first Adventist who came to Cuba considered education to be one of the fundamental pillars for the spread of the gospel. They started with very small self-supporting schools, some of which were held in family homes (1907, Santa Lucía School; 1908, Las Minas School; 1909, San Claudio School). These continued to operate until there was opportunity to open other schools with the clearly-defined purpose of training students for missionary and colporteur work.¹

With this purpose the Bartle School in las Tunas was established, and it operated from 1922 until 1940. Then it moved to the center of the country, and Antillian College was created in Santa Clara to carry on the work of Adventist education. This college operated from 1940 until 1967, when it was closed by government decree. During the time of its gradual closing—1961 to February 1967—the school was forbidden by the government of the revolution to offer any classes that were not ministerial, and classes could not be conducted at the level of the bachelor's degree. Antillian College then changed its name to *Seminario Adventista de Cuba* (Cuban Adventist Seminary).²

With the definitive closing of Antillian College in Cuba, the hopes of many students who wanted to become future pastors were shut down. Between 1967 and 1970 it was impossible to offer Adventist education, as there were neither buildings nor permission from the government, both needed in order to hold classes. In 1970, as a result of a request presented to the government, permission was given to use the old offices of the Antillian Union in Rancho Boyeros, Havana, as classrooms. A new opportunity was given for teaching young people in the ways of the church.³

With small groups of students—supervised and pre-authorized by the government—Adventist education moved forward in Cuba, preparing young ministers and Bible workers. The challenges were immense, but even greater was God's love for His faithful people. In 1987 plans were made to change the junior college status of the seminary to that of a full senior college whose credits would be validated at other colleges and universities. Montemorelos University in Mexico led out in this project and played a fundamental role in preparing pastors and teachers who could be the faculty who taught classes on the campus in Cuba.⁴

Circumstances in Cuba became more flexible in the 1990s, and students began to be able to leave the country. This made it possible to prepare a group of graduates from the Cuban Seminary to enroll in postgraduate courses abroad so that they could later return as teachers at their own seminary. In this way, the school gradually was able to become independent so it was not necessary to employ professors from other countries.

Establishing the Cuba Adventist Theological Seminary

The hope of having a school that belonged to the Adventist Church and where pastors would be prepared to take the gospel of salvation to all of Cuba was latent for a long time. After many requests to the Cuban government, and 28 years after the closing of Antillian College, a place was chosen and permission was given to begin the construction of buildings for the new seminary. This was on land occupied by a fruit orchard on the outskirts of Havana and near the offices of the Cuban Union Conference.

In the late afternoon of May 5, 1995, the foundation stone was laid for what would be the new Cuba Adventist Seminary. Present at the ceremony were the president of the General Conference, Pastor Robert Folkenberg; president of the Inter-American Division, Pastor Israel Leito; and their respective wives. Also present was the president of the Cuban Union Conference, Pastor Daniel Fontaine; the treasurer, Pastor Idelfonso Ara; the secretary, Pastor Waldo Santos; the director of the seminary that was operating in Boyeros at the time, Pastor Aramis de Armas; and their respective wives. Also sharing this special moment were all the theology students from that year, a special group from Maranatha Volunteers International, and other spectators and photographers.⁵

In spite of the decision made by the Church and the much-valued help of Maranatha Volunteers International for the financing and construction of the seminary, the government had still not given the permission necessary to begin the building process. A building permit was finally issued on Friday, October 6, 1995. Asking for God's

guidance, the builders began their work on October 9, 1995.⁶ Soon there would be buildings ready to serve as the new seminary.

The president of the General Conference, Pastor Robert Folkenberg; and the president of the Inter-American Division, Pastor Israel Leito; along with other administrators and representatives of the Adventist work in Cuba, inaugurated the first buildings of the Cuba Adventist Seminary in Santiago de Las Vegas on September 18, 1996.

⁷ Pastor Israel Leito spoke words of dedication, and Pastor Robert Folkenberg had the prayer. On this occasion, the stone was laid which would be the foundation for other buildings needed for the seminary. The buildings which were ready to occupy were the men's dormitory, the classrooms, and the administrative offices.

Construction continued on a cafeteria and the women's dormitory, which were completed in August 1997. God showed that He is in control, and every step that was taken and every blessing received during this time of construction was evidence of this.

On September 19, 1997, another important event took place. The school year 1997-1998 began, marked by the presence of the leaders of the General Conference, the Inter-American Division, and the Cuban Union Conference. Once again classes could begin in an institution belonging to the Church, an institution whose objective was clearly defined as the preparation of pastors and Bible workers to take the gospel message to all corners of this Antillean island. The dream of Antillian College, suspended in 1967, was once more a reality, to the glory of God.

For the first school year, 1997-1998, there was an enrollment of 39 students. For the next two years it varied from between 24 to 30 students. After that, the number of students gradually rose. Short courses on different topics were offered in the summers so that the pastors who were active in their ministry could attend and complete their academic preparation. In 2001 the first group of students graduated, completing their bachelor's degree in theology at the Cuba Adventist Seminary in Santiago de Las Vegas.

The campus continued to grow, its professors went to study in the postgraduate programs of other Adventist institutions, and Montemorelos University in Mexico made it possible for the Cuba Adventist Seminary to operate as a branch of that school. The collaboration of these two schools began in 1987 when the seminary was still in Boyeros. Operating under the umbrella of Montemorelos University, the Cuba Adventist Seminary graduates could receive a bachelor's degree in religion. Montemorelos University continued to work with the Cuba Adventist Seminary until 2008, at which time the seminary received the official certificate of accreditation from the Adventist Accreditation Association (AAA).

The Cuba Adventist Seminary also worked with the Inter-American Adventist Theological Seminary (SETAI), which made it possible for a master's degree in pastoral theology to be offered on the Cuban campus for the first time starting in the summer of 2005. The inauguration ceremony was presided over by Dr. Jaime Castrejón, president of SETAI, as well as the administrators of the Cuban Union Conference and the administrators and professors of the Cuba Adventist Seminary. With an enrollment of 39 students, five of which were young women, a new

chapter of postgraduate studies was initiated in the educational center in Cuba. It was on that memorable occasion (summer of 2005) that the Cuba Adventist Seminary changed its name to Cuba Adventist Theological Seminary (SETAC). By 2017, 85 Cuban pastors had finished their master's degree in pastoral theology.

It had always been the dream of the Cuban ministerial body to continue the preparation of pastors in the area of family life, as there was a definite need for counseling and support for Cuban families and the vulnerable groups within them. Some efforts were made to offer a master's degree in family issues under the umbrella of Montemorelos University in 2007, as is evident by the minutes of the administrative board meeting on March 28 of that year. Although some prerequisites were offered and taught, classes were not continued. It wasn't until June of 2018 that plans were in place to offer courses in family life to a single cohort of students on the campus of SETAC, in coordination of Montemorelos University.

In the summer of 2011 the seminary began to offer, in conjunction with Antillian University in Puerto Rico, the prerequisites for the master of arts in education with emphasis on administration and supervision of education. It was not until 2018, however, that summer courses in the actual postgraduate degree were offered.⁸ Later the seminary began to offer some of these classes during the regular school year and provide the opportunity to take classes online so students could continue their studies for this degree.

The development of Adventist education in Cuba has been affected by the sociopolitical conditions in the country and by the unchanging leadership of our God. The leaders of the seminary have been involved in each process, in the work of construction as well as in the educational tasks, thus making possible the development and strengthening of SETAC. One evidence of what they have achieved is the fact that the seminary functions as an independent educational center with its own program of studies, something that is evidenced by the different accreditations the institution has received.

Accreditation

In 2003 the Cuban Adventist Theological Seminary initiated the actions needed for the accreditation of its bachelor's degree in theology.⁹ The first visit of an accrediting committee was on November 15 and 16, 2005. Its objective was to determine whether the seminary was ready to function independently of Montemorelos University. The committee recommended to the International Board of Ministerial and Theological Education that the Cuban seminary offer the bachelor's degree in theology, and the Adventist Accrediting Association (AAA) gave the seminary the status of candidate for accreditation.¹⁰

On November 4, 2007, an evaluation of the progress of SETAC was carried out by the Adventist Accrediting Association.¹¹ On this second visit, the evaluation committee recommended that the seminary receive full accreditation for a period of three years ending in December 2010.

The seminary turned out to celebrate on May 31, 2008, not only the school graduation, but also its certificate of accreditation from the Adventist Accrediting Association. Dr. Luis Schultz, associate director of education of the General Conference, presented the certificate authorizing the operation of this educational institution as fully independent and capable of implementing its own program of studies according to the needs of the Adventists in the country.¹²

The third visit of the AAA happened during the month of June 2010. In a recommendation made to the commission by the board of Higher Education of the Inter-American Division, the seminary was accredited for a period of four years.¹³ A fourth evaluation of the operation of SETAC took place on January 21-23, 2014. The committee went over the documents presented by the institution, interviewed various members of its staff, made observations on site, and gave a recommendation to the AAA to retain accreditation of the institution for another period of four years, ending in 2018.¹⁴

The fifth visit of the AAA was on October 23-25, 2018. Based on the report from that visit, the accreditation of SETAC was extended until December 31, 2022.¹⁵

Mission, Vision, Motto, and Values

Mission: The Cuba Adventist Theological Seminary is an institution of the Seventh-day Adventist Cuban Union Conference which prepares leaders through biblical principles with the purpose of educating them in a holistic manner to serve and guide a people into the salvation of Jesus Christ.

Vision: To be a multidisciplinary theological university based on the principles of the Adventist philosophy of education and recognized by its faithfulness to God and the quality and integrity of its graduates.

Motto: Transformed in living, prepared to serve.

Values: Integrity, dedication, excellence, unity, humility, mercy, justice, and temperance.

Important Events

The Seventh-day Adventist Cuban Union Conference's educational institution has hosted important events that have impacted the educational and ministerial dynamic in the country. On June 4-5, 2010, it hosted the Adventist Educators Conference, gathering together the Adventist teachers throughout the country and providing a fruitful interchange of experience for them.

The inauguration of an assembly room for SETAC was a very meaningful event for the institution. The event was celebrated on March 26, 2011. It was attended by Pastor Ted Wilson, president of the General Conference; Pastor Israel Leito, president of the Inter-American Division; Don Noble, president of Maranatha Volunteers International; and college alumnus, Caridad Diego, head of the Religious Affairs Office of the Central Committee

of the Cuban Communist Party.

With the idea of expanding the seminary's influence in academic areas and in support of the ministerial field of the Inter-American Division, on August 7-11, 2017, an agreement of cooperation was signed between SETAC and the Panama Union Mission. The agreement offered scholarships to students from the Ngnobe-Bugle community in Panama who wish to study theology and so minister to the communities from which they come.

On September 30, 2017, a celebration was held in honor of the 20th anniversary of SETAC. The ceremony was attended by important guests and emphasized the sincere gratitude of the seminary towards all who had contributed to the growth of the institution. Different facilities on campus were reinaugurated, such as the modernized and re-equipped kitchen, the new library that had more space and was more comfortable, the computer room with 31 new computers and two servers with access to the internet, and an electric generator.

Other Important Events Sponsored by SETAC

International Symposium of Theological History "Celebrating the 500 years of the Protestant Reformation," November 10-11, 2017.

Visit of the Cuban Agency of Theological Studies to offer external accreditation to the institution, May 2, 2018.

International Symposium on the Spirit of Prophecy, November 8-10, 2018.

Historic graduation for Cuban pastors who had studied during the period (1987-2009) when SETAC was a campus of Montemorelos University, February 9, 2019.

International Conference of Faith and Science "The Bible and Science: Confirming Our Faith," March 23-25, 2019.

Inauguration of a classroom dedicated to virtual meetings and postgraduate programs, August 21, 2019.

Study Tour to Turkey and Greece "In the Footsteps of Paul," in which the professors from SETAC were participants, October 13-23, 2019.

SETAC has gone through a profound transformation, both in its academic offerings as well as in its physical campus. It has received much valued help from many different contributors. God has guided each generous heart and each working hand to make this school a lighthouse of Adventist education in Inter-America, which has had a strong impact on the entire Adventist Church in Cuba.

Contribution of Students and Professors

The impact that SETAC has had on Cuba includes evangelistic campaigns held annually in different churches throughout the conference, led by the students and professors of the seminary. For these meetings, 102,000 Bibles were donated by the Emmanuel Bible Society.

The students and staff of SETAC have organized and participated in health fairs and blood drives held in public places for the benefit of its neighboring community, and this in turn has been a support to the public health system of the country.

Institutional Projects

Didaskalia magazine. This is a biannual publication that includes articles written by students, professors, and pastors, with a theological and pastoral focus, and with topics of interest to the general Adventist population. It is accessible to both pastors and lay members throughout the country. Currently it is in the process of acquiring an ISSN (international identifier). This is a very effective way of sharing knowledge and confirming the faith of members.

Water Purification Facility. This facility was donated and installed by the Living Waters for the World, a ministry of the Presbyterian Church and is a very valued resource for SETAC. This system of filtration and ozonation of water produces potable water that is highly recommended for human consumption. The neighboring community comes to SETAC seeking water and, in this way, it comes in contact with the Adventist community. It is a very effective means of evangelism, and at the same time it supplies a vital need.

Center of Influence. Final touches are being made to the construction of a center that will be used to teach music and language to children, adolescents, and adults of the non-Adventist community.

SETAC continues to focus on its mission to reach and guide people into the salvation of Jesus Christ. Cordial relations with and impactful activities for both the Adventist and non-Adventist communities are crucial links in the work which it has been called to do. At SETAC, every day is a gift from God, and it can be said with full assurance, as the prophet Samuel said, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us" (1 Sam. 7:12).

Presidents

Bartle: Charles J. Foster (1922-1924); G. T. Vore (1925); C. L. Pohle (1926-1928); J. D. Livingston (1928-1931); David E. Lust (1931-1937); J. S. Marshall (1937-1940).

Santa Clara: J. S. Marshall (1940-1947); F. G. Drachenberg (1947-1954); R. L. Jacobs (1954-1955); Walton J. Brown (1955-1960); Alfredo Aeschlimann (1960-1961); Manuel Carballal (1961-1962); Vicente Rodriguez (1962-1967).

Rancho Boyeros, Havana: Isaías de la Torre (1970-1972); Pedro de Armas (1973); Virgilio Zaldívar (1974-1991); Ángel Aramís de Armas (1991-1996).

Santiago de Las Vegas, Havana: Ángel Aramís de Armas (1966-2000); Esther Díaz de Guerrero (2000-2008); Francisco Hernández (2008-2015); Elvis Hernández (2015-present).

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. E. A. Sutherland, "Self-Supporting Schools in Cuba," *ARH*, May 12, 1910, 18.

2. R. B. Caldwell, "Progress in the Antillian Union," *ARH*, February 15, 1962, 18.

3. Walton J. Brown, *¡O Mi C. A.! Historia del Colegio de Las Antillas* (s.l., s.e., 1990), 105-106.

4. Aramís de Armas, "Reseña Histórica de la Obra Educativa de la Iglesia Adventista en Cuba" (Thesis for Master of Arts in Pastoral Ministry, Andrews University, Michigan, U.S.A., 2003), 42.

5. Ibid., 44.

6. Aramís de Armas, interview by author, Santiago de las Vegas, Havana, Cuba, August 6, 2021.

7. de Armas, 44.

8. Elvis Hernández Rodríguez, "President's Report," board meeting of the Cuba Adventist Theological Seminary, Havana, March 28, 2017, 2-3.

9. Minutes of the Seventh-day Adventist Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges, and Universities, April 13, 2003, Vote 03-07.
10. Elvis Hernández Rodríguez, interview by author, Santiago de las Vegas, Havana, August 10, 2021.
11. Minutes of the Seventh-day Adventist Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges, and Universities, September 28, 2006, Vote 10-110.
12. Minutes of the Seventh-day Adventist Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges, and Universities, October 8, 2008, Vote 44-08, 76.
13. Minutes of the Seventh-day Adventist Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges, and Universities, October 4, 2010, Vote 06-4.
14. Minutes of the Seventh-day Adventist Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges, and Universities, April 1, 2014, Vote 14-19
15. Minutes of the Seventh-day Adventist Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges, and Universities, April 3, 2019, Vote 19-29

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