



Upper Chiapas Conference headquarters.

Photo courtesy of Chiapas Mexican Union.

Upper Chiapas Conference

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The Upper Chiapas Conference is part of the Chiapas Mexican Union Conference in the Inter-American Division of the Seventh-day Adventists.

The conference headquarters is located at 25 Calzada de las Américas with zip code 29270 in Colonia San Diego in the city of Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas.

Territory and Statistics

The Upper Chiapas Conference is located in the geographic region named Bloque Macizo or Altiplano Central and in portions of the Montañas del Norte and of the Depresión Central in the state of Chiapas. This is a region that has great cultural, religious, political, and ethnic diversity. Most of the inhabitants are rural, native people, and the culture of the region is eminently indigenous. The economy is based on subsistence agriculture, cattle raising, and tourism. There are land heights that reach up to 3000 meters above sea level. This region has one of the highest rates of emigration and extreme poverty in the state.

Territory: Northeast part of the state of Chiapas: Aldama, Altamirano, Amatenango del Valle, Chalchihuitan, Chamula, Chanal, Chenalho, Chilon, Comitán de Domínguez, El Bosque, Frontera Comalapa, Huituipán, Huixtán, La Independencia, La Trinitaria, Las Margaritas, Las Rosas, Maravilla Tenejapa, Marques de Comilla, Mitontic, Oxchuc, Ocosingo, Panthelo, San Andrés Duraznal, San Andrés Larrainzar, San Cristóbal de las Casas, San Juan Cancuc, Santiago El Pinar, Simojovel, Sitalá, Socoltenango, Tenejapa, Teopisca, Tzimol, Venustiano Carranza, and Zinacantan.¹

Statistics (June 30, 2019): Churches, 169; membership, 42,511; population, 1,866,778.²

Institutions

Centro Educativo Amado Nervo, San Cristóbal Campus. This educational institution is located at 21 Periférico Norte in Colonia Diego de Mazariegos in San Cristóbal de las Casas of Chiapas. The school was opened on August 6, 2001, offering only elementary level education. Later, on December 7, 2006, a preschool was added, and on July 15, 2014, the secondary level was initiated. At the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year, a music academy was added, and it operates on an evening schedule. The enrollment for the school is now up to 295 students, of which 144 are Adventists and 151 are non-Adventists. Their personnel consists of 23 employees, of which 14 are teachers and nine are in the administrative and service areas.³

Centro Educativo Amado Nervo, Comitán Campus. This organization was officially opened with preschool, elementary, and secondary levels in August 2014. It is located at 7ª Calle sur, which is between 5ª and 6ª oriente, in Barrio San Agustín in Comitán de Domínguez of Chiapas. Its enrollment has increased to up to 260 students, of which 205 are Adventists and 55 are non-Adventists. Their personnel includes 19 employees, 14 of whom are teachers and five who work in the administrative and service areas.⁴

Campamento Los Sauces. This camp is located in a rural area called San Vicente Ojo de Agua on a stretch of road called Comitán La Trinitaria, and it is nine kilometers from Comitán, four kilometers from Copalar, and one kilometer from San Juan del Valle on the right side of the road. At the beginning of 2005, 27 hectares were purchased, and they were used for the current Los Sauces camp.⁵ This camp has an auditorium with a capacity

to hold up to 2,000 people. The camp also has a basketball court, a volleyball court, and a soccer field as well as a kitchen, a guardhouse, bathrooms for both men and women, a dining room for 250 people, eight cabins that could house 60 persons, a camping area for 7,000 persons, parking, and a water tank that can hold a volume of 8,000 cubic liters.

Origins of the Church in the Territory

The history of the Adventist Church in Chiapas records that the first missionaries came to Chiapas from Oaxaca in 1913, and they followed the costal route to Tuxtla Gutierrez, visiting, selling, and distributing Adventist literature in each town they went through on the way. History recognizes that by 1914, there were already 25 people in Tuxtla and Tonalá who kept the Sabbath, and they soon established an Adventist church.

Nevertheless, the larger presence of the Adventist Church in the territory of the Upper Chiapas Conference came much later and in a different way than it did in other regions of the state. It happened in the first half of the decade of the 1960s in the city of Comitán de Domínguez. People who had radio reception could listen to the program *La Voz de la Esperanza* that had Pastor Braulio Pérez Marcio as speaker. It was transmitted from the KGBT 1530 station in Harlingen, Texas, in the United States.⁶

In Comitán, Mrs. Leonila Gordillo Ordóñez became a student of the radio school and took several courses by correspondence. She wrote to Pastor Braulio Pérez Marcio, promising to donate a house to serve as a radio station in her town. The station in Texas forwarded the letter to the Inter-American Division in Miami, Florida, who in turn forwarded it to the offices of the union and the mission in Mexico City and in Tuxtla Gutierrez, respectively. The matter was placed in the hands of the secretary-treasurer of the South Mexican Mission, Pastor David Guzmán Marroquín, accompanied by Celerino Herrera y Zamarripa, head of the department of communication and publication of the South Mexican Mission. They made a trip to the city of Comitán to visit Mrs. Leonila on July 8, 1964. When they arrived at her home, they identified themselves as the representatives of the radio program *La Voz de la Esperanza* and of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the sponsor of the radio program. In the conversation they had with her, they discovered that she had already donated the house to another denomination.¹⁵

Recovering the donation took time and resources on the part of the Church. However, in the presence of Notary Public Enrique Robles Ramírez, Public Document 107 was signed. It contained a description of the purchase/sale of the property.⁶ This document protects the property as a legal donation offered by Mrs. Gordillo to the radio program *La Voz de la Esperanza*. To this day, the members of the Central Church of Comitán meet in this place that is located in District I in the very center of the city. Later, the South Mexican Mission made the decision to assign to this place a newly married missionary couple – Abraham Gutiérrez Hernández from Veracruz and Agueda Suárez Díaz from Tonalá, Chiapas.⁷ They were asked to support themselves through the sale of Adventist books and literature and to give Bible studies to Leonila Gordillo Ordóñez. They arrived in Comitán in

December 1964 and, for two years, they carried out their assignment in that city.

In 1966, another missionary took over the work started by the Gutiérrez Suárez couple in Comitán. Like the couple he replaced, Pastor Villaney Vázquez Alegría also started his service to the church by selling Adventist publications and distributing Adventist literature for several years.⁸ In 1970, he went to the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Until then, there had not been any Adventists in that area, but he did find dozens of radio listeners to *La Voz de la Esperanza* transmitted by Braulio Pérez Marcio. Thus, at the same time as Pastor Vázquez offered books and magazines for sale, he also offered courses from *La Voz de la Esperanza* and from *Tesoros de Vida*. Within two months, he was already giving more than 50 ongoing Bible studies.⁹

The first persons to make their decision to accept Christ were Tomás López and his wife, who lived in Barrio Ojo de Agua. There were also three families in Barrio Cuxitali who received the message: Juan López, Abelardo Gutiérrez, and Erasmo Gutiérrez, who were baptized soon after the López family. But it was in the house of Erasmo that the first branch Sabbath School was started, and it had 15 persons – eight adults and seven children. Idelfonso Molina, who with his family lived in town on María Adelina Flores Street, began to attend. Mr. Molina played an important role in the development of the church since he is the one who started the Honduras Church and later the Nueva Jerusalén Church. By 1974, the group in Brother Erasmo Gutiérrez's house was considered a congregation since it had 15 baptized members and eight children, a total of 23 members.¹⁰

In 1975, a Tzotzil Adventist member named Domingo López Angel arrived on the coast of Chiapas. He had embraced the Gospel in the Soconusco Conference. He was a very dynamic, enthusiastic man as well as a very courageous person, and he began to preach in the Chamula zone with marvelous results. The South Mexican Conference contracted him as a lay missionary. As a consequence of the progress of the work in the Chamula zone, there came persecutions and evictions that caused many members to emigrate to the city of San Cristóbal, and they gathered in a rented house for a long time.¹¹ For this reason, the South Mexican Conference decided to purchase a property in order to build a church there. For a year, offerings were taken called Faith Offering for San Cristóbal, and property was purchased on Honduras Street where today the Central Church in District One is located. The property cost \$80,000 MXN, and the first church was built by the Maranatha missionary group.¹²

In 1985, this congregation was divided for the first time by Pastor Juan Montejo in order to establish a work in Colonia Nueva Jerusalén. Brother Ezequiel Rodríguez led out in the new congregation since this was the first Spanish-speaking church in the city (earlier ones used the Tzotzil language). As a result of growth and consolidation, the first church in the city was organized in 1993. Brother Idelfonso Molina was the first elder ordained in that congregation, and after that, there was progress through the preaching of leaders, members, and pastors who are still in the church to this day. Together with more recent missionaries, there have been other churches established such as Periférico, Elhim, Bochojbo, and Petztoj.¹³

Formative Events

The United States, where the modern Adventist movement originated, had Mexico as its immediate neighbor, but the distance between the two countries was accentuated by different cultures, politics, religions, and races. For this reason, the first missionaries who went out from the United States saw Europe and Australia as “closer” to them than their neighbor to the south.¹⁴ It wasn't until 1891, when by different routes and with different goals, the first Adventist missionaries came to Mexico – Salvador Marchisio and Pastor L. C. Chadwich. With the passing of years, the presence of the Church in the country grew, and its growth mainly happened in the south of the country.¹⁵ In 1903, the work of the Adventist Church in Mexico was organized, and it was given the name “Mexican Mission,” and its first president was Pastor George M. Brown.¹⁶

By 1913, the fervor of the Brothers Jiménez from Ixtaltepec, Oaxaca, took the Adventist message to coastal Chiapas, following the route of the train. Later, they travelled on to Tuxtla Gutierrez.¹⁷ In 1924, the Aztec Union was organized with four missions in five countries, and in 1924, it was voted on during the union meetings that were conducted in San Pedro Sula to form five missions in Mexico, and among them was the Tehuantepec Mission with Pastor H. J. Winter as its first president.¹⁸ Two years later, in 1926, the Mexican Union was organized with its headquarters in Mexico City. It then had six missions, 17 churches, and 564 members.¹⁹

It wasn't until 1944 that the union voted to organize the Chiapas Mission that had 25 churches and 1,422 members. Its territory was the state of Chiapas that had previously been part of the Tehuantepec Mission. The president was Pastor Vicente Rodriguez, and the secretary-treasurer was Pastor Francisco Reyes.²⁰ In 1948, the territorial boundaries of the missions were redrawn, and the name “mission,” was changed—in Spanish—to “corporation.” The state of Oaxaca came to be part of the South Mexican Mission (Corporación del Sur) with its headquarters in Tuxtla Gutiérrez. Their president was Pastor Xavier Ponce, and their secretary-treasurer was Miguel Lara Flores.²¹

In 1974, the Mexican Union Administrative Board meeting from May 22-30 studied the request of the South Mexican Mission to change its status, and on June 26, a vote was taken to change the status of the South, Southeast, and Central missions and to create the West Mexican Mission.³³ Carrying out the change of status for the South Mexican Mission happened from January 3-6, 1975, in Tuxtla Gutierrez when the delegates of all the churches of the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca came together to elect their leaders. The official name was South Mexican Conference, and its administrators were: Pastor Jacob Saviñón as president, Pastor Pedro Romero as secretary, and Sergio Mejía as treasurer.²²

The organization of the Isthmus Conference is important because, as a result, the state of Chiapas remained alone as the only state in the South Mexican Conference. This occurred on January 13, 1982. Nevertheless, during that same year, the Mexican Union Administrative Board, with the consent of the Inter-American Division, approved the organization of the Soconusco Mission with its headquarters in Tapachula, Chiapas. On January 6, 1983, the delegates from the regions of the coast, the Sierra del Sur, and part of Upper Chiapas got together to

hold the organization congress for the Soconusco Mission. The territory was the south and east of the state of Chiapas, and it had 36 churches and 18,762 members. Its administrators were Pastor Carlos Uc Gorocica as president and, as secretary-treasurer, Irán Molina Alegría.²³

The decade of the 1980's showed a maturing of the Adventist Church as new fields were added and a division of the great Mexican Union took place. A request was presented in 1982 to the Inter-American Division citing a need to provide better care to its members because of the growth of the Church. On January 8, 1985, in Tacubaya, Mexico City, two unions were created: the North Mexican Union and the South Mexican Union. The administration of the South Mexican Union was formed with Agustín Galicia Montesinos, president; Isaac Gómez Tenorio, secretary; and Pablo Balboa Sánchez, treasurer.²⁴

In 1988, the South Mexican Union Conference made a request to the Inter-American Division for a readjustment of territory for the Inter-Oceanic Conference and South Mexican Conference.³⁷ In 1989, the South Mexican Conference, during a special congress that took place at the Río de Janeiro Camp, created two new conferences. There was the Central Chiapas Conference, with its headquarters in Tuxtla Gutierrez. It started with 55 churches and 29,352 members. The second conference was the North Chiapas Conference, with their headquarters in Pichucalco, Chiapas, and they started with 66 churches and 39,729 members. The administrators of the North Chiapas Conference were Pastor Rubén Rodríguez, president, Pastor Arain Juárez, secretary, and Josué Balboa S., treasurer. The Central Chiapas Conference had as its president Pastor David Javier Pérez, Juan Ramirez as secretary, and Salomón Maya R. as treasurer.²⁵

The growth of the church continued, and the South Mexican Union at its Plenary Session on April 13, 2004, held in Huatulco, Oaxaca, took action with vote number 765 to create a committee to study the possibility of forming a new mission, the Upper Chiapas Mission. This committee was made up of the following members: David Javier Pérez, Villaney Vázquez Alegría, Pedro León Arguelles, Isaías Espinoza, Igancio Navarro Pérez, Samuel Castellanos, Erwin González, Neptalí Alvarez V., Heber García V., Joel Hernández, Roldán Gallegos, and Eliéser Gómez.²⁶

The Administrative Board of the Soconusco Conference, in meetings held on January 30, 2005, in Tapachula, Chiapas, took vote number 4488 that modified its territory, ceding the districts of Comitán I, Comitán II, and Lagos de Montebello to the new Upper Chiapas Mission.²⁷ Also, the Administrative Board of the North Chiapas Conference, in its meetings held on February 17, 2005, took vote number 3258, ceding the districts of Huitiupán, Sabanilla, Simojovel, and Yajalón to the new mission.²⁸

Once the request was approved by the Inter-American Division, administrators were named: David Pacheco Cocom became president and José Elías Rivero Hass was named secretary-treasurer. The official name was Upper Chiapas Mission. It began with 27,512 members, 49 organized churches, 406 organized groups, all distributed into 17 districts that had earlier belonged to the Central Chiapas, North Chiapas, and Soconusco conferences.²⁹

The growth of the field led to the Chiapas Mexican Union, which took place during a plenary session on November 19-21 in vote number 0118 – a request to the Inter-American Division for a change of status for the Upper Chiapas Mission to Upper Chiapas Conference. In the mid-year meetings held on May 27-30, 2013, the Inter-American Division approved this request.³⁰ The conference was formed with 31 districts, 117 organized churches, and 394 organized groups, 15 ordained pastors, and 21 licensed pastors. Neptalí Alvarez Vidal was named president, Fredy Ortega Reyes secretary, and Benjamín Aarón Durán Alayón treasurer.³¹

The last development happened on May 2, 2016, when during a Constituency Meeting held at the Los Sauces Camp, with vote number 850, the districts of Sabanilla I, Sabanilla II, Tila, and Yajalón were ceded to form a new mission in the Palenque zone.³²

Fulfilling the Mission

The Upper Chiapas Conference is trying to fulfill its mission by:

Motivating all its members to have a personal relationship with Christ through Bible study and prayer.

Committing the church to adopt a lifestyle that will glorify God.

Promoting the presence of the Church in communities through community service activities.

Integrating the membership by evangelizing through small groups.

Consolidating the pastoral leadership to provide better care to the individual churches.

Guiding the churches to commit to total faithfulness in stewardship.

Maintaining a leadership that focuses on development and growth that is centered on the mission, having the members of the Church as their highest priority.

Strengthening the Adventist Educational System of the Chiapas Mexican Union Conference.

Involving membership in activities that have a missionary impact.

Making it possible for pastors to learn to speak the predominant languages in the region so they can reach more towns and communities that currently have no Adventist presence.

List of Presidents

Upper Chiapas Mission:

David Pacheco Cocóm (2005-2008); Adriel Clemente Martínez (2009-2011).

Upper Chiapas Conference:

Neptalí Alvarez Vidal (2011-2014); Eber García Vázquez (2014); Dimas López López (2014-2018); Samuel Castellanos Domínguez (2018-).

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NOTES

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