



East El Salvador Conference headquarters.

Photo courtesy of Abel Pacheco Lopez.

# East El Salvador Conference

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East El Salvador Conference is a part of El Salvador Union Mission. Its territory is comprised of La Unión, Morazán, San Miguel, and Usulután. It has 201 churches and 55,475 members in a population of 1,389,750. Its address is Km. 126.5, Carretera Panamericana a San Miguel, El Salvador.<sup>1</sup>

## East El Salvador Conference Institutions

East El Salvador Conference has two major educational institutions, San Miguel Adventist Secondary School and Redención Adventist Secondary School. It also has the following elementary and middle schools: *Colegio Adventista de Usuluteco*, founded in 1978; *Colegio Adventista de Cantón el Norte*, founded in 1998; *Colegio Adventista de Caulotillo*, founded in 1999; *Colegio Adventista de Playas Negras*, founded in 2007; and *Colegio Adventista de Jocoro*, founded in the early 2000s.<sup>2</sup>

In 2000, East El Salvador Mission established *Radio Stereo Adventista* 106.9 FM. The owner of a secular radio station with a countrywide broadcast named *Stereo Infinito* decided to sell the station's east zone for 3,500,000 SVC, and East El Salvador Mission bought it. This acquisition energized the spread of the Adventist message in the east of El Salvador. The station broadcast its first program on May 17, 2000. East El Salvador Mission voted Pastor Abel Pacheco as the radio station director, voted Alexander Quijano as coordinator, and voted to establish an executive board to manage the station. The board was named *Junta de Stereo Adventista - Misión*.<sup>3</sup>

## Origin of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Territory

In 1926, Brother Daniel Rodríguez arrived to live in the municipality of La Unión in the department of the same name and work as a tailor with a rented sewing machine. His love for the church and his willingness to share the gospel prompted him to preach whenever he found an opportunity. By 1928 his efforts had gained eight believers, including a lawyer. He also worked in Conchagua in the department of La Unión, and three more people soon accepted Adventism.<sup>4</sup> This is the oldest known story of the beginning of the Adventist Church in the east of El Salvador.

In the 1930s, when the first Adventists arrived in the east of El Salvador, the general situation of the country was not the most favorable. Economic and social inequality existed among the people, and its society was unstable. It was said that this social inequality was marked by the possession of land; the upper class, known as "the coffee oligarchy," controlled most of the land, while thousands of indigenous people and others had no land rights.<sup>5</sup>

In 1931 the first Adventists in the department of San Miguel in the municipality of the same name emerged. They were a small group of three men and two women, all of advanced age, who met in a small room on Saturdays. This group was led by José N. Vanegas, who possibly started the first church in this city.<sup>6</sup>

In the small village of El Corozal lived Lázaro Romero, who frequently traveled 24 kilometers to San Miguel to sell agricultural hand tools for weeding before planting. Somehow, Romero became interested in the Adventist message and asked José N. Vanegas for a Bible. He started to study it in secret, since he did not want his neighbors to know that he was studying the Bible. When he discovered all the Bible truths, he did not want to keep this knowledge to himself, so he visited and shared what he knew with Juan de la Rosa Umaña, who

eventually became his brother-in-law. These two began holding worship services in Juan de la Rosa Umaña's house, and the first Adventist group in El Corozal was formed.<sup>7</sup>

In April 1932, two colporteurs arrived in San Miguel and heard of the new group of Adventists. The colporteurs visited the group on a Saturday and helped them organize the first Sabbath School in the eastern part of El Salvador, with seven adult members and a few children, almost all from the same family. When the colporteurs arrived to San Salvador, they brought news of this new group. President L. H. Olson of Salvador Mission then visited this group and found that seven of the group were ready for baptism. The first baptism in El Corozal was held May 31, 1932.<sup>8</sup>

In 1934 the faithful lay members shared the message in unentered territories. This is how the Adventist message entered the town of Sesori, in the north zone of the department of San Miguel. The first convert in that town was Arístides Jerez.<sup>9</sup>

By 1939, the Adventist group in El Corozal had grown sufficiently to warrant the construction of a place of worship, the first Adventist church in the east of El Salvador. Since the group had little financial means, they built a modest house. However, the group was happy to have a special place to meet.<sup>10</sup>

In 1937 and 1938, Brother Lázaro Romero traveled on Sundays to sell his farming tools in the municipality of El Divisadero in Morazán. While there, he met and established a friendship with Ilario Perla, another merchant who was originally from the *Caserío Camarones* in the municipality of Sociedad in Morazán. One day, while Romero was talking about the message to a man who was too busy to listen, Perla overheard the conversation. After the unnamed person left, Perla approached Romero and asked him to explain the message in more detail. Romero explained the message, and shared about Jesus's Second Coming.<sup>11</sup> Perla, in turn, shared it with his brother Juan Pablo Perla, who was 26 years of age, a member of a large family, and a distinguished citizen of the El Bejucal community. While reading the pamphlet, Juan Pablo Perla became determined to find whoever distributed it, even if he had to cross all of El Salvador.

Juan Pablo Perla learned that the man who gave Ilario the literature was a Salvadoran Adventist who lived in San Miguel, 80 kilometers from El Bejucal. Juan Pablo Perla went to San Miguel, found the Adventist, learned everything he could from him, and stayed until Saturday to participate in the Adventist church worship service. The members gave him more literature, and, with Lázaro Romero, they traveled to San Salvador to visit the Salvador Mission. They were met by Pastor Peter Nygaard, who gave them Bible studies.<sup>12</sup> Brother Juan Pablo Perla became a strong lay preacher, with the support of Lázaro Romero and Juan de la Rosa Umaña.<sup>13</sup> They brought the message to El Bejucal in the municipality of Sociedad in Morazán. Not much later, he asked the mission to send someone to baptize him and his brother and father.<sup>14</sup> A larger group formed, and they built a beautiful church in that area.<sup>15</sup>

Juan Perla ... is a member of a family of [26], and he won all the family to the message and raised up a large church. One night an angry mob of unbelievers set upon him and beat him severely because of his new faith. They left him wounded and bleeding, tied, and gagged. They threatened to kill [him] if he did not leave [El] Bejucal. Juan moved to Jocoro...about [15] miles distant. Shortly after Juan settled in Jocoro his neighbor, Marcelino Fuentes, came to his house in an intoxicated condition with a long, sharp machete and warned him that if he didn't leave Jocoro he would kill him.

Juan did not leave Jocoro. Just a few days later Marcelino's child fell seriously ill. Juan and his wife spent the entire day and night caring for the sick child and praying for its recovery. The child recovered, and the two neighbors became not only fast friends but fellow Sabbathkeepers. Marcelino is the church treasurer in the new church of [67] members.

These [67] members are active laymen, who raised up another group in Pacora. Pacora produced still another new church in Montecristo. Montecristo produced San Pedro and San Pedro, Trinidad. There are now [17] new churches and groups in eastern Salvador, with a total of [400] church members, as a direct result of the tireless work of Juan Perla and the many converts he has won.<sup>16</sup>

In 1940 Pastor Peter Nygaard was the president of Salvador Mission. He arrived in San Miguel to lead a three-month series of conferences, resulting in many people receiving Christ and being baptized. He was accompanied by the evangelist Pastor Victor E. Printemps. Nygaard appointed Printemps to be in charge of the church in San Miguel to support the newly converted.<sup>17</sup> At the end of 1942, both Nygaard and Printemps traveled to Sonsonate to help begin construction on a church.<sup>18</sup> At the end of Pastor Nygaard's service as administrator in 1941, the Adventist Church had 10 churches and 506 members in all of El Salvador.<sup>19</sup>

In 1955 and 1956, San Miguel became the headquarters of the first district led by Pastor Daniel Moncada. By the end of 1956, there were already two organized churches and six groups in the city and its surroundings. In the eastern area were six districts, each led by its respective pastor.<sup>20</sup>

In 1960 Pastor Abel Orozco was assigned to the Uzulután district to establish new groups and churches. Pastor Orozco noted that some people walk or rode horseback from seven miles away into Uzulután "to attend Sabbath school each Sabbath."<sup>21</sup> A man found a coupon from the Adventist radio program *Voz de la Esperanza*, which offered a Bible correspondence course from Cuba. The man sent the request to Cuba, and, from there, his name was passed to the Salvador Mission. He began the study with great interest, then recruited another person to study with him. Soon a successful chain reaction was formed, and a group was begun, with seven people baptized by Pastor Orozco the same year of his arrival. By 1964, a plot of land was acquired on which the church now known as the *Iglesia Adventista Central Usulután* would be built.<sup>22</sup> The same year, another plot of land was donated to build a church in Hacienda Nueva, Usulután.<sup>23</sup>

## Events Leading to the Organization of East El Salvador Conference

On July 16, 1993, the board of directors of the Central American Union Mission met. The board voted to name an evaluation committee to study the El Salvador Conference. The committee had the responsibility to study the possibility of dividing the El Salvador Conference, which then included all of El Salvador, into two territories. After the evaluation was concluded, they requested the Inter-American Division conduct an evaluation and pertinent studies.<sup>24</sup>

On May 17, 1994, the board of directors of the Inter-American Division voted to name an evaluation committee to see if the El Salvador Conference fulfilled the requirements for a territorial readjustment. The committee would meet in El Salvador between February 8 and 9, 1995.<sup>25</sup>

On January 19, 1995, the board of directors of the El Salvador Conference voted to request that the Central American Union Mission call Pastor René Martínez, ministerial department director of the Guatemala Mission, to serve as coordinator of the eastern zone of the El Salvador Conference, effective January 1, 1995.<sup>26</sup> It was also voted to approve the project to divide the field presented by the strategic planning and budget committee of the El Salvador Conference, and at the same time request the evaluation committee to study it.<sup>27</sup>

The board of directors of the El Salvador Conference met March 16, 1995, and voted to register the expense of 248,000 SVC for the purchase and development of land in San Miguel for the headquarters of the East El Salvador Mission.<sup>28</sup>

On June 22, 1995, the board of directors of the El Salvador Conference voted to appoint Pastor Roy Rudy Gutiérrez as an architect for six months to direct the construction of the headquarters of the new East El Salvador Mission.<sup>29</sup> The land was located at Km. 126.5, Carretera Panamericana a San Miguel, El Salvador, and is where the offices of the East El Salvador Conference are currently located.

On October 31, 1995, the Inter-American Division approved the territorial readjustment of the El Salvador Conference into two fields: the El Salvador Conference with headquarters in San Salvador, and the East El Salvador Mission with headquarters in San Miguel. The new fields were inaugurated in a special session held between January 18 and 21, 1996.<sup>30</sup>

In the fifth quadrennial session of the El Salvador Conference in San Salvador, January 21 and 22, 1996, it was decided to accept the division of the El Salvador Conference field, and the new East El Salvador Mission of Seventh-day Adventists was established to serve the departments of Cuscatlán, Cabañas, La Paz, San Vicente, Usulután, San Miguel, La Unión, and Morazán.<sup>31</sup>

From January 23 to 25, 1996, the second quinquennial session of the Central American Union Mission was held in the city of San Salvador, El Salvador. At this session, Pastor René Martínez was voted as the president of the new East El Salvador Mission, with David Martínez as the secretary-treasurer.<sup>32</sup>

At the meeting of the board of directors of the East El Salvador Mission on November 26, 2003, it was decided to approve the reorganization of the East El Salvador Mission into two local fields, East El Salvador Mission and the experimental Paracentral El Salvador Mission. The new experimental local field was established to serve the departments of La Paz, Cuscatlán, Cabañas, and San Vicente.<sup>33</sup> The board of directors of the Mid-Central American Union Mission held a meeting on July 6, 2006, in which it agreed to request the Inter-American Division to form a study committee for the reorganization of the East El Salvador Mission.<sup>34</sup>

Also on July 6, 2006, the board of directors of the Mid-Central American Union Mission voted to request that the Inter-American Division name a committee to study the change of status of the East El Salvador Mission from a mission to a conference. The Inter-American Division studied the request, and, due to the growth, expansion, and development of the East El Salvador Mission, its status was changed, and it was renamed the East El Salvador Conference.<sup>35</sup>

The establishment of the East El Salvador Conference as a local field allowed for more attention and a more personalized approach to the eastern region, as well as a more focused action plan in the evangelistic approach of the territory. This led to development and growth in various areas, especially in the areas of communication, health, and education.

The work of the church continues to grow in the east of El Salvador. In recent years, new churches have been established, new groups in new places have emerged, and new districts have been formed. The membership increases every year. The different ministries and departments are serving the people and proclaiming the gospel in various ways.

## Challenges

A major challenge to the East El Salvador Conference is the impact of social problems such as crime that threatens the country and in various ways limits the expansion of the work. Another challenge is the influence of secularism on church members' level of commitment. These factors both force church leadership to seek new methods to preach the gospel in order to involve most of its members.

There is great hope to advance and solidify the work of the church in eastern El Salvador. Many initiatives in favor of the skills of the believers are being implemented so that they can better serve in any area of the church. The "Lord Transform Me – Total Member Involvement Mission" initiative of the Inter-American Division, for example, is intended to make each member an active disciple. The "Pass It On" initiative, meanwhile, is intended for each member who exercises leadership to contribute to the formation of another member with less experience.

The East El Salvador Conference promotes the development of four fundamental principles, dedication, unification, organization, and proclamation, with the objective of maintaining a doctrinal purity, the training of

church members, and a continual vision of growth.

## List of Presidents

René Martínez (1996-1999); Dennis Rodríguez (1999-2000); Otoniel Zelaya (2000-2001); Edgard E. Samudio (2001-2008); Francisco Alfaro (2008-2011); Raúl Ernesto Urrutia (2011-2019); Alexis Adrian Romero (2019- ).

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