



Atlantic Panama Conference

Photo courtesy of Atlantic Panama Conference.

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OLIVER PINZON

Oliver Pinzon Aparicio, M.A. in Pastoral Theology (Inter-American Adventist Theological Seminary, Mayagüez, Puerto Rico), served as a district pastor, region coordinator, and field president. He is married to Marlenis Santos and has two children.

Atlantic Panama Conference is an administrative unit of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Panama. It is a part of Panama Union Mission in the Inter-American Division of Seventh-day Adventists.

Territory and Statistics

Atlantic Panama Conference includes the province of Colón with around 241,817 inhabitants, the *comarca indígena* Guna Yala with around 33,109 inhabitants, and the Chilibre district of the province of Panama with around 53,955 inhabitants.¹ This territory encompasses a little bit over 6,000 square kilometers. As of June 30, 2019, the conference had 32 churches, 11,578 members, and 343,849 inhabitants. It is located in New Mejico, Barriada Los Diamantes 1; Sabanitas, Colón, Panama, and is a part of Panama Union Mission.²

The province has an ethnically cosmopolitan population with percentages of around 70 black, 25 indigenous, and five white. The population also includes Chinese, Hindu, and Arab people. Its geographical position has played an important role in Panama's economy and history. During the colonial era, it was a strategic transit point for colonies to ship their treasures to Spain. This city was also marked by the construction of the Interoceanic Railway and the Panama Canal. Colón is a province that enjoys historic and abundant wealth as well as natural and cultural treasures.

Origins of Adventist Work in Territory

The first missionaries to arrive in Panama were Frank and Carrie Hutchins. They arrived in Bocas del Toro in 1901. After Frank Hutchins's death, the work continued under the supervision of E. G. Knight. He was very successful and organized a conference in 1906 under the administration of West Indian Union Conference, which had been officially organized on June 26, that same year. West Indian Union Conference included the conferences of Jamaica, British Guiana, East Caribbean, West Caribbean, and South Caribbean, and the mission fields of Central America, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Venezuela, and all the islands in the Caribbean Sea.³

E. G. Knight and his wife settled in Bocas del Toro in 1903. By the end of that year, they reported having three churches, four groups, and 83 members in Panama.⁴

Events Leading to Organization of Atlantic Panama Conference

The Seventh-day Adventist Church had a presence in Panama beginning in 1906 as West Caribbean Conference. In 1929, West Caribbean Conference was renamed Panama Conference and had 23 churches and 1,166 members. Its territory consisted of the Republic of Panama, the Canal Zone, Talamanca Valley, and the Colombian islands of San Andrés and Old Providence.⁵

The Atlantic Panama region has been known as a historic pillar of the Adventist Church in Inter-America as, between 1917 and 1955, this territory held the Pacific Press headquarters in Cristóbal, which built a stabilizing influence in the initial work in Colón.

With the motivating motto of “A New Dawn on the Path to Growth,” East Panama Conference’s board of directors voted to create Atlantic Panama Region and appointed Pastor Enoc Rodríguez as area coordinator to achieve appropriate levels of church growth and establish a new local field in the Colón province. After Pastor Rodríguez’s retirement, Pastor Oliver Pinzón Aparicio was appointed field secretary of the future Atlantic Panama Mission. Under his leadership, the appropriate levels for church growth were achieved to establish a local field.

Atlantic Panama Mission Growth

For many years, the territory of Panama Conference only had one educational institution in Colón. However, on November 12, 1953, under President C. D. Christensen, the Ministry of Education granted operating permits to Cabo Verde Adventist School in Panama City and Colón Adventist School in the city of Colón, which is now Colón Adventist Academy.

In 2003, 50 years later, under President José de Gracia of Panama Conference, El Veinte Adventist Academy was established as a church school with an enrollment of seven students. The growth was so great that, in six years, it had over 300 students. Its first director was Marlenis de Pinzón. The academy is located in Barriada Juan Demóstenes Arosemena, Nuevo San Juan, Colón province.

East Panama Conference launched a strategic plan in 2006 titled “A New Dawn on the Path to Growth,” and, with the Holy Spirit, church growth was outstanding. New areas, regions, and churches were established in Palenque, Las Palmitas, Nuevo Vigía, Santa Cruz, Pueblo Grande, Sabanitas, Villa Catalina, Villa Luzmila, Pueblo Nuevo, Gatuncillo Norte, Gatuncillo Sur, Lo Nuestro, and Villa Caribe.

Due to the Atlantic Panama Region’s great growth, the East Panama Conference administrators completed all the requirements and presented to South Central American Union Conference and the Inter-American Division the request for the reorganization of Atlantic Panama Region into a mission.⁶ At a meeting duly convened by South Central American Union Conference on October 28, 2013, the establishment of “Atlantic Panama Mission of Seventh-day Adventists” was proposed.

South Central American Union Conference sent the proposal to the Inter-American Division, where, on November 19, 2013, the establishment of Atlantic Panama Mission with headquarters in the city of Colón was ratified. The mission’s territory included the province of Colón, the Chilibre District, and the territory of Kuna Yala.⁷

Atlantic Panama Mission conducted an inaugural session on December 17, 2013, at the Sheraton Hotel in the city of Colón with 136 delegates from 25 organized churches present. Atlantic Panama Mission began operations with 41 congregations and 7,768 members. Its first administration included Pastor Oliver Pinzón Aparicio as president and Erick Montenegro as secretary-treasurer.

The corporation of East Panama Conference, in accordance with the regulations for the growth and development of the new mission, delivered a check with the necessary funds to put the operating capital and liquidity at one hundred percent. In addition, the corporation purchased a building and office equipment.

Growth and Development of Atlantic Panama Conference

East Panama Conference assigned a radio station to Atlantic Panama Mission, which has been a blessing for this field. It is sustained thanks to the support of sponsors and friends of the church. In the presence of the administrators of Panama Union Mission, the radio station with frequency 105.1 FM was inaugurated on August 6, 2017.

In the field of education, the mission has established a school that teaches Christian principles to 34 students in the community of Chilibre.⁸

Because Atlantic Panama Mission grew in planted churches, baptisms, and finances, its administrators asked Panama Union Mission to request a change of status from the Inter-American Division. On December 10, 2018, at the Radisson Hotel in the city of Colón, a celebration for the change of status from a mission to Atlantic Panama Conference was held. Pastor Christian Espejo was elected president with Pastor Luis Flores as executive secretary and Luis Villa as treasurer.

The Ideals of Atlantic Panama Conference

The ideals of Atlantic Panama Conference are expressed in its mission statement, vision, and values.

Mission Statement: To glorify God and, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, to lead each believer to a personal and transforming experience with Christ that enables him to share the everlasting gospel with every person.

Vision: Each member of the body of Christ prepared for the kingdom of God.

Values: Unity, respect, integrity, excellence, spirituality, fellowship, glorifying God, service with love.

Motto: "Conquering New Horizons with Jesus"

Since its reorganization, Atlantic Panama Conference experienced constant growth. As of June 2020, the conference has 32 churches and 12,135 members.⁹

Future Growth

Atlantic Panama Conference's greatest resource is its brethren, who are aware preaching the gospel must be a priority. Radio media plays an important role in reaching those that cannot be physically reached. For example, the "Messengers of Hope," a group of brethren, volunteer their time to create radio programs for evangelization.

The conference has opportunities for growth as well as challenges that conflict with its progress. Among the challenges is unemployment, which grows daily. The local newspaper, *El Capital Financiero*, stated that: According to the percentage distribution by province, the highest unemployment rates were in Colón (7.1 percent).

List of Presidents

Oliver Pinzón Aparicio (2014-2018); Christian Espejo (2019-).

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NOTES

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3. "West Indian Union Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Takoma Park Station, Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1907), 97, accessed March 12, 2019, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Yearbooks/YB1907.pdf>.
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 5. "Panama Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Takoma Park, Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1929), 254, accessed March 12, 2019, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Yearbooks/YB1929.pdf>.
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