

West Venezuela Conference

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West Venezuela Conference is an administrative unit and part of West Venezuela Union Mission in the Inter-American Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. The main office of West Venezuela Conference is in Maracaibo, Venezuela.

West Venezuela Conference covers the state of Zulia, one of the 23 states of Venezuela. Its capital is Maracaibo. The state of Zulia is located in the far northwest and borders on the north with the Caribbean Sea, on the east with the states of Falcón, Lara, and Trujillo, on the southeast with Mérida, on the south with Tachira, and on the west from the Guajira Peninsula to the Perijá Mountains in the Republic of Colombia. Covering 63,100 square kilometers, it is the fifth largest state and the most populated, with 5,125,579 inhabitants.¹

The state of Zulia is divided into 21 municipalities and 107 civil communities. Its main cities are Maracaibo, San Francisco, Cabimas, Ciudad Ojeda, Santa Bárbara del Zulia, Machiques, La Concepción, and Los Puertos de Altagracia.²

The name “Venezuela” comes from the area around Lake Maracaibo. The Spanish conquerors who arrived in this place over 500 years ago found the local Indians living in huts supported on pillars along the edges of the lake, so they called this area “Little Venice,” or *Venezuela*.³

The climate in Zulia is warm, with a yearly temperature of about 27.8 °C in the lowlands, and moderate, even cold temperatures on the western slopes of the Sierra Perijá.

As of June 30, 2017, West Venezuela Conference had 96 churches and 27,912 members in a population of 3,532,422 inhabitants.⁴

Institutions

The Sierra Maestra Adventist School, located in the city of Maracaibo, currently has 806 students distributed among the preschool, elementary, and secondary levels. The Libertador Adventist School currently has an enrollment of 729 students with preschool, elementary, and secondary levels, and is located in the city of Cabimas on the *Costa Oriental del Lago*.

The conference has four radio stations, two of which are in Maracaibo and two in the *Costa Oriental del Lago*, and a Living Healthy Center located in the city of Maracaibo. The conference headquarters is located on 82nd Street, between 11th and 12th avenues, House Number 11-99, Veritas Sector, Maracaibo, state of Zulia, Venezuela. The conference forms part of the West Venezuela Union Mission.

Origins of the Church in the Territory

One of the first two missionary couples sent by the General Conference from the island of Bahamas in 1910 sold Adventist publications to cover their cost of living and their work for the new organization. In 1919, Brother Ricardo Greenidge colporteured in the city of Maracaibo for two months, a method used to enter new territories.⁵ In 1936, a Venezuelan colporteur by the name of Rufino Serapio Arismendi was sent by the Venezuela Mission from Caracas to the town of Lagunillas in response to a request from the Castellanos Segovia family. They had come in contact with the Adventist Church through the magazine *El Centinela*, which advertised Bible studies through the radio/postal school. The letter had their address on it, and the colporteur was able to find them and begin his missionary work by giving Bible studies to several interested persons while selling books to earn the money to go to Medellín, Colombia, to study theology and become a pastor. This method was repeated time after time with different colporteurs until 1940 but without a single baptism and without leaving an Adventist presence.⁶

In 1945, when young Rufino Serapio Arismendi graduated, he received a call from the central offices of the mission in Caracas to serve in the state of Zulia. There he settled in the city of Maracaibo in the Santa Rosalia sector in a place he rented from Lola Fernández, a native of San Cristóbal who already had contact with the Adventist message through some colporteurs. Arismendi continued colporteur-ing and giving Bible studies, and as a result, that same year the first baptisms took place. Among those who decided to get baptized was Lola, who was baptized by Pastor Julio García. Lola can be considered the first Adventist member in the state of Zulia although there is a record with very few details, written by Pastor García himself that says he had baptized Francisca Carrizales in 1937 and Vicente Contreras in 1940.⁷

Worships were now held more formally. Young Pastor R. S. Arismendi rented a place in the Valle Frío sector. One day, when shopping at a nearby grocery store called *La Firma de Oro*, he observed a middle-aged man reading from a book he knew well, *The Great Controversy*. The man reading it was Armando Arenas, and he told him that he had inherited it from his dead brother Andrés Arenas who had become an Adventist in Carúpano, a city in the eastern part of the country. Armando told him that he was an evangelical from the El Salvador church but that he liked the Adventist message.

That happy encounter in 1945 resulted in the beginning of a friendship and an interchange of opinions about religious affairs with the Arenas Sánchez family. After some time, Pastor Arismendi invited Armando to attend the worship service on Sabbaths. For two years, the couple partially kept the Sabbath, and by the first quarter of

1948, Armando Arenas and his wife Mariana Sánchez decided to completely keep the Sabbath.

In 1947, Pastor Gabriel Castro held a series of meetings in the home of Lola Fernández. However, because of one of her family member's health condition, the group of eight had to move to *Valle Frío*, and there, under a *cují* tree, the new church met for some time. The number of persons who became interested grew, and it became necessary to find a new place to meet. They found a property near 4th Avenue, Bella Vista, between Streets 87 and 88, what is today known as the *INCE Marrón*. A tent was raised in which to hold worship services.

Soon they again had to move, and once again pitched their tent, this time on the site that would later hold the first permanent Adventist church in the city of Maracaibo located on 79th Street, corner with 13th Avenue in the Belloso sector. At that time, the place was quite isolated, with an unpaved street travelled by burro-pulled carts. Pastor Campbell Mackay Christianson made the purchase of the property of 1,127 square meters from the Zuliana Industrial Company. He paid 33,000 VES and registered it in the name of the General Conference Corporation of Seventh-day Adventists on April 7, 1952. The building of the church was placed in the hands of Engineer José Gutiérrez starting on February 17, 1953, and he was paid 4,000 VES⁸

Several things happened at the end of the decade of the 40's and the beginning of the 50's. The work of the church continued to take place in *Costa Oriental del Lago* with the help of the Castellanos Segovia family although with great hardship. Several religious groups would attack the Adventist faith, but on December 10, 1950, a historic baptism of seven persons took place. That group included Mariana Sánchez de Arenas, Carmen Torres, Eustaquio Morales, Edit de Wilson, José del Carmen Castellanos, Carmelita de Castellanos, and Miss Jones. Pastor Arismendi cared for these members until 1951 when he was moved to another city. His replacement was Pastor John Griswell, who had been sent from the United States.

The first public evangelistic campaign was held by Professor Henry Westphal from August 18 to November 14, 1959, in alternating sites on Fridays and Sabbaths. The sites were the Baralt Theater, Paraiso Theater, *La Concha Acústica*, La Ciega sector, and in the churches of Belloso and Cabimas. The Zulian press gave ample coverage to the event.

In 1955, the Cabimas church was born, and its first pastor was Rufino S. Arismendi. The church was located in Las Cabillas sector and was the first in *Costa Oriental del Lago*, state of Zulia. Later, in 1960, the first Adventist school in the state was organized next to the Cabimas Church. It was named *El Gallinero* and was led by Mrs. Pragedis, the wife of Pastor Eliseo Freites.⁹ Also, in 1960, the Concesión 7 Church was started in the municipality of Baralt.

During the next school year, 1961-1962, grades one through three were offered, adding young Deisis Chirinos as a teaching aid. After several years, all elementary grades were offered. In 1993, the first year of secondary school was provided, and in 1998, a higher education level was added.

In 1962, the work of evangelism started in the municipality of San Francisco, supported by Freddy Acosta, Oswaldo Montiel, and Arturo Wilson. There they worshipped God in the midst of an orchard of loquats. The building of a church became possible through donations, and the Sierra Maestra Church was built with José Rodríguez as its first pastor. In 1968, a Bible worker by the name of Inés Figueroa arrived from Medellín, Colombia, and started a home school with 10 children of church members. The home school only lasted a year but was the foundation on which, in 1977, the Sierra Maestra Adventist School began, the second in the state of Zulia.

In 1972, six women who were fondly known as “the grandmothers”—María Finol de Nava, Lilian Smith, Hilaria de Emmons, Cleotilde Díaz, Euclides Soto, and Rosa Mogollón—lived in Cabimas and began to evangelize in Ciudad Ojeda. Soon afterwards, a church was organized. In 1973 in *Costa Oriental del Lago*, Luis Arteaga allowed meetings on the Adventist message to be conducted in his home, and that same year in Menito, the need to have a church arose. Soon a property was bought, and the Menito Church was built. The Adventist work grew in *Costa Oriental del Lago*, and also in 1973, a church was established in Punta Gorda.

History of the Former West Venezuela Conference

In 1992, the “former” West Venezuela Conference, whose territory consisted of the entire western part of the country of Venezuela, was voted by the Inter-American Division to be divided into two fields: the West Venezuela Mission (later to become the West Venezuela Conference featured in this article) and the West Central Venezuela Conference. The West Venezuela Conference, as it was known up to 1992, would no longer exist as such since it had been divided into these two fields.

Developments of the Newly Established West Venezuela Mission

Pastor Robinson Urdaneta was named president of the West Venezuela Mission that had started with 51 churches and 13,305 members within a population of 4,980,000 inhabitants.¹⁰ The states of Zulia, Falcón, Trujillo, Mérida, Táchira, the west of Apure and Santa Cruz de Guacas, and the Canton of Barinas would now form the newly established West Venezuela Mission. The mission’s first office was at Pastor Urdaneta’s office in the Central Church of Maracaibo, which was located on 79th Street on the corner of 13th Avenue in Maracaibo. Months later, the office was moved to a location across from the church and next to the *Distribuidora Santiago*. From there it moved to its current site in the Veritas sector.

Readjustment of the Mission Territory

During those years, the West Venezuela Mission grew and developed significantly, and by 2003, it carried out its own first readjustment of territory that was authorized and voted on by the executive committee of the Inter-

American Division. The states of Táchira, Mérida, the west of Apure and Sta. Cruz de Guacas, and the Barinas Canton would now form part of the new territory, the Southwest Venezuela Mission. The West Venezuela Mission kept the states of Falcón, Trujillo, and Zulia.

Change of Status from Mission to Conference

By 2008, the West Venezuela Mission had grown to 101 churches and 25,238 members within a population of 4,815,022.¹¹ That year, the West Venezuela Mission held its quadrennial session in the month of August with Pastor Orlando Ramirez as president, Pastor Pablo Yendes as secretary, and Brother Joseph Emmons as treasurer. Among the actions taken was the change of status from West Venezuela Mission to West Venezuela Conference (not to be confused with the original West Venezuela Conference that had previously ceased to exist). Pastor Orlando Ramirez was elected president of the West Venezuela Conference. However, in December of that same year, Pastor Ramirez was transferred to the Venezuela-Antilles Union Mission, and Secretary Carlos Schupnik was named president, Pastor Edwin García was named executive secretary, and Brother Salud Godoy was named treasurer.

Readjustment of the Conference Territory

As time went on, the church continued to grow, and by 2013, the West Venezuela Conference now had 143 congregations and 37,330 members in a population of 5,393,685.¹² That year, with Pastor Marcial Escobar as president and in view of the progress and growth of the conference, the Venezuela-Antilles Union Mission authorized the West Venezuela Conference to create a new mission comprising only of the state of Falcón, naming the new mission the Northwestern Venezuela Mission. Santa Ana de Coro was chosen as the site for its headquarters. The new administration started working in a provisional location, and Pastor Reymer Sánchez was named president. The new mission started with 44 congregations, 7,137 members, and a school.

Readjustment of the Territory Once Again

By 2014, the West Venezuela Conference had continued strengthening its territory and now had 153 congregations and 39,118 members.¹³ The conference readjusted its territory again on September 21, 2014, and the state of Trujillo became a new region, the East Andina Region. It was officially inaugurated with Pastor Ydelso Prieto as president. The new region began with 48 congregations, 12,065 members, and an elementary school. In 2016, the region was organized as the East Andean Venezuela Mission.

Challenges for the Future

The West Venezuela Conference has had the opportunity to grow from a mission to a conference and reorganize several times to create new missions.

In 2017, the West Venezuela Conference acquired a large farm with the purpose of establishing a center for healthy living. As a future project, it plans to develop a portable water business since this land has the necessary elements to support such a project. In 2019, a neighboring farm was purchased for conducting youth camps, activities, and other such projects.

Among the goals for the coming years is to strengthen evangelism through the conference's institutions: four radio stations, two schools, a center for healthy living, youth activities' farm, and its many congregations with the objective of sharing the message of salvation to all who are contacted by or come in contact with any of these institutions.

List of Presidents

West Venezuela Mission (1992-2008): Robinson Urdanete (1992-1995); Benilde Almerida (1995-2001); Jorge Atalido (2001-2005); Orlando Ramírez (2006-2008).

West Venezuela Conference (2008-): Orlando Ramírez (2008); Carlos Schupnik (2009-2012); Marcial Escobar (2012-2015); Mauro Herrera (2016); Jean C. Rivas (2016-).

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2. Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, República de Venezuela, XIV, *Censo Nacional de Población y Viviendas, Resultado por Entidad Federal y Municipios del Estado Zulia*. Zulia, 2015, 13.
3. University of California. *La Pequeña Venecia del estado Zulia: anécdotas, problemas, costumbres*. California, 1949, 12.
4. "West Venezuela Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2018), 145.
5. Carlos Rafael Schupnik. *Aquí Obró Dios*. (Nirgua: Talleres Gráficos IUNAV, 2010), 53.
6. Villamarín B. Patorocinio, *La Iglesia Adventista del Séptimo Día en Zulia* (Maracaibo, Zulia, 2014), 1.
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11. "West Venezuela Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2008), 158.
12. "West Venezuela Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2013), 152.
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