

PANAMÁ



Panama

Photo courtesy of Panama Union of Seventh-day Adventists.

Panama

ROSALINDA HILS

Rosalinda Hills D'Gracia has a degree in nursing and is director of SIEMA and director of the Children, Teenagers, and Women Ministries of the Panama Union Mission.

Panama is located in the southeast of Central America. Adventism reached Panama in the late nineteenth century.

Country Overview

The country's official name is the Republic of Panama, and its capital is Panama. It borders the Caribbean Sea to the north, the Pacific Ocean to the south, Colombia to the east, and Costa Rica to the west. It has a total area of 75,420 square kilometers.¹ Because it connects South America with Central America, Panama is known as “the bridge of the world and heart of the universe.” Panama is comprised of ten provinces and five indigenous

regions.

As of 2018, the population was 4,002,360.² It is composed of mestizo, mulatto, black, white, and indigenous people. In addition, it has large communities of Chinese, Hindus, Jews, Spaniards, Americans, Italians, Greeks, French, Arabs, Germans, and Swiss people.

Spanish is the country's official language. It obtained its independence from Spain on November 28, 1821, after a prolonged period of negotiations, and it separated from Colombia on November 3, 1903, after the Thousand Days War.³ Through Ambassador Philippe-Jean Bunau-Varilla, the young country signed a treaty with the United States of America's government to construct a canal in Panama, connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Its condition as a transit country and the construction of the Panama Canal made it an early meeting point for cultures from all over the world.

The Republic of Panama is an independent sovereign state established in its own territory where the individual and social rights established in its political constitution are observed and respected. The will of the majority is represented by free suffrage.

Origins of Adventism in Panama

The church in Panama experienced rapid and solid growth throughout the years due to the fundamental commitment of pioneers, the vision of consecrated leaders and those responsible for preaching the good news of salvation, colporteurs, and schools and academies that opened their doors to initiate the education and nurture of the body, mind, and spirit.

The first Adventists to reach Panama were Pastors Daniel T. Bourdeau and John N. Loughborough. In 1868, Merritt Gardner Kellogg invited them to preach in California. To travel from the east to the west coast of the United States, it was necessary to cross the Atlantic Ocean, reach Colón in Panama, cross the isthmus by mule, and embark across the Pacific Ocean to California.⁴

In 1880, the General Conference sent Pastor Frank Hutchins and his wife, Cora Ella, as missionaries to the lands of Central America. He was responsible for shepherding and preaching in the territory from Honduras to the islands in Colombia. In 1901, the General Conference asked them to move and establish their residence in the province of Bocas del Toro in Panama, which they knew very well as a part of the territory they covered. Once established there, Pastor Hutchins bought a house. This house was used as the first meeting place for the organization in Panama. Pastor Hutchins stood out as a preacher, colporteur, nurse, and dentist.

In 1903, Panama Mission was organized with four churches, 129 members, and headquarters in Bocas del Toro.

In 1906, West Caribbean Conference was organized with Pastor H. C. Goodrich as president. Its territory included Panama along with Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Saint Andrews, Old Providence, and the Corn Islands. In

1907, the offices were moved to Cristóbal in the province of Colón, Panama, where missionaries, mostly colporteurs, were sent to other parts of the country.⁵

Medical Pioneer

Panama first saw Adventist work in the medical field in 1890, when Dr. John Eccles and his wife, Martha, arrived in Bocas del Toro and, with the Hutchins family, conducted high-impact medical missionary work. Dr. Eccles was born in Madras, India, in 1850. He studied medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, and, as a patient in the hospital in Battle Creek, Michigan, he accepted the Adventist message and was baptized. In those years, however, tropical diseases had no known cures; on February 2, 1902, Dr. Eccles died of one such disease. Six months later, Pastor Frank Hutchins also fell ill and died. Both were buried at Macca Hill Cemetery in Bocas del Toro.⁶

Recognition of the Church by the Government

In the Republic of Panama's first centennial celebration in 2003, the government included the Adventist Church as one of the institutions that emerged in 1903, when the country began its republican life. Under the motto of "100 years of patriotism, 100 years of the Adventist Church in Panama, 100 years of blessings," the church was recognized and participated in the celebration activities.

Educational Institutions

Educational institutions are geared to meet the most prevailing needs of the moment: training new members to support evangelism, training colporteurs to visit homes throughout the country, and awakening in members the need for church schools in the largest number of provinces. Since that time, schools and academies have played a major role in the training of workers, the growth of the church, and the church's outreach to the community. Worthy of mention is the work of Ismael Ellis, the pastor, colporteur, and educator who personally donated the plot of land where the first Hispanic school was established. This school, located in La Concepción, Bugaba, Chiriquí, had begun with 12 students enrolled for the 1919-1920 school year.

On April 5, 1921, West Caribbean Training School in Las Cascadas, Canal Zone, opened its doors to 30 students with J. Boyd as its director.⁷

In 1943, in the province of Chiriquí, Chiricana Secondary School, forerunner of the Adventist school of La Concepción, was launched with Rafael Acosta as its director. This school is considered the legitimate mother of Panama Adventist Institute. Located in the community of Bongo on a property of approximately 100 hectares of land, this prestigious institution supports education to this day.

Institutions and Administrative Units of the Church

The following institutions have come to enrich and strengthen the church throughout the country, giving the church recognition from the government as a serious and responsible church.

1917-1955: The establishment and stabilization of the Pacific Press offices in the province of Colón greatly contributed to spreading the message in the region.⁸

1922-1941: The offices of the Inter-American Division were established with headquarters in Balboa, Ancón, Panama. Pastor Elmer Ellsworth Andross was its president with H. E. Kellmann as secretary-treasurer.⁹

1990: The territory of East Panama Conference was reorganized, and West Panama Mission was created with the provinces of Bocas del Toro, Chiriquí, and Veraguas as its territory. Pastor Israel Williams, president of East Panama Conference, had seen the need to better serve the brethren living in the country's west area and so took initiative to prepare these productive provinces for the great challenge.

2007: The territory of East Panama Conference was reorganized, creating Central Panama Mission with the provinces of Coclé, Herrera, Los Santos, and West Panama as its territory. In 2014, its status changed, and it was renamed Central Panama Conference.

2013: Atlantic Panama Mission was created with the territory of Colón and the Guna Yala Indigenous Region. On December 17, 2018, its status changed, and it was renamed Atlantic Panama Conference.

2014: Southeast Panama Mission was organized on July 23, 2014, with the territory of Darién province and part of East Panama.

2015: Panama Union Mission was established on January 1 with two conferences and three missions. Its president was José De Gracia with Carlos Saldaña as secretary and José Smith as treasurer.

2016: The territory of West Panama Conference was reorganized, and Bocas del Toro Mission was established to serve that province. Three experimental fields were also established: Central Pacific field, Andes Metro field, and Ngäbe-Buglé indigenous field.

The Adventist Church and the Community

The greatest benefit that the church has had is the religious freedom that the country enjoys based on the national constitution: "All religions may be professed and all forms of worship practiced freely, without any other limitation than respect for Christian morality and public order. It is recognized that the Catholic religion is practiced by the majority of Panamanians."¹⁰

Under this protection, the church has advanced quickly and safely, remembering that the church does not operate as an island but supports every opportunity for service that presents itself in the day-to-day life of the

country. Since 1903, the church has been known to provide knowledge through its 38 educational institutions. In addition, programs such as the “NO to Violence” program, literacy programs, and values program are strengths the church shares through workshops and conferences for Panamanian society.

In 2007, the Ministry of Education and East Panama Conference signed an agreement to jointly eradicate illiteracy.

On May 15, 2014, Rector Gustavo García de Paredes of the University of Panama and President José De Gracia of East Panama Conference signed a cooperation agreement join efforts and coordinate initiatives in favor of Panamanian society, of the most vulnerable sectors, and of the family in particular. This agreement allowed a permanent collection of all the books produced by the church to be placed in the university library.

The 2019 secretariat records of Panama Union Mission indicate that the Adventist Church had 603 churches and groups, 91,374 members, 61 ordained ministers, 49 licensed ministers, 27 schools, ten academies, 443 educators, two trade schools, one health food factory, four bookstores, and eight youth campgrounds in Panama.

Challenges and What Remains to be Done

In Panama, rather than challenges, opportunities are found: opportunities to preach, teach, train, topple giants, live within and understand many cultures, reorganize the territory due to the rapid growth of the church, and see all church members involved in some form of witnessing.

What do we still have to do?

Establish ten new conferences

Operate a 24/7 self-funding radio and television system

Establish an Adventist university

Establish an Adventist medical center

Have 300 permanent colporteurs

Establish a vegetarian restaurant

Ensure that all educational institutions are self-supporting

Have a pathfinder and master guide club in every church

Raise one million dollars annually in the “Friends of Radio” sponsorship plan

Have all members fulfill the mission and become disciples

Reorganize Panama into two union conferences

In essence, "In every home, an Adventist; in every street, a small group; in every neighborhood, a church."

SOURCES

Beluche, Olmedo. *La verdadera historia de la separación de 1903: reflexiones en torno al Centenario* Panama, Republic of Panama: Imprenta ARTICSA, 2003. Accessed 2020.

<http://bdigital.binal.ac.pa/bdp/laverdaderahistoriadelaseparacion.pdf>

"Libro Mundial de Hechos." *Oratlas*. Accessed August 26, 2018. <http://www.oratlas.com/libro-mundial/panama/geografia>.

"Panama's Constitution of 1972 with Amendments through 2004." *Constitute: constituteproject.org*. Accessed 2020. https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Panama_2004.pdf?lang=en

Parrilla, Jewell. *El Rey de la Tormenta*. Miami, Florida: Inter-American Division Publishing Association, 1998.

"Población de Panamá." *Countrymeters*. Accessed July 26, 2018. <https://countrymeters.info/es/Panama>.

Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia. Second revised edition. Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996. S.v. "Kellogg, Merritt Gardner" and "Panama."

NOTES

1. "Libro Mundial de Hechos," *Oratlas*, accessed August 26, 2018, <http://www.oratlas.com/libro-mundial/panama/geografia>.
2. "Población de Panamá," *Countrymeters*, accessed July 26, 2018, <https://countrymeters.info/es/Panama>.
3. Olmedo Beluche, *La verdadera historia de la separación de 1903: reflexiones en torno al Centenario* (Panama, Republic of Panama: Imprenta ARTICSA, 2003), 191, accessed 2020, <http://bdigital.binal.ac.pa/bdp/laverdaderahistoriadelaseparacion.pdf>.
4. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Kellogg, Merritt Gardner."
5. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Panama."
6. Jewell Parrilla, *El Rey de la Tormenta* (Miami, Florida: Inter-American Division Publishing Association, 1998), 94, 105, and 119.
7. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Panama."

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Article 35 of "Panama's Constitution of 1972 with Amendments through 2004," *Constitute: constituteproject.org*, accessed 2020,
https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Panama_2004.pdf?lang=en.

encyclopedia.adventist.org is an official website of the [Seventh-day Adventist World Church](#)

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000