

Adventist Training School of El Salvador

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Adventist Training School of El Salvador (ECAS) is the only educational institution in El Salvador that has boarding accommodations. It is located in the municipality of San Juan Opico, department of Libertad, and it belongs to the Central El Salvador Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

Developments that Led to the Establishment of the Institution

This institution was founded, in part, thanks to the vision and missionary spirit of a couple who arrived at El Salvador, Pastor Robert Elden Ford and his wife Venessa Standish Ford.¹ In the mind of Pastor Orley Ford, the idea of a boarding school emerged, an idea that was cultivated as time progressed. Pastor Orley Ford died in 1972,² but the idea did not stop. There were changes of church administrators in El Salvador, but the desire to create a boarding school continued.³ In the 1970s, Pastor Cami B. Cruz⁴ followed up on this idea, and it became more important with the administration of Pastor Raúl Rodríguez,⁵ although it still did not materialize. As a first step, in 1979⁶ the El Salvador Mission invited Pastor Robert Elden Ford to work as the mission education department director. At that time, Pastor Ford worked at the Adventist Vocational College in Belize⁷ and he had extensive experience in the foundation and administration of boarding schools.

In 1980, under the administration of Pastor Otoniel Perla, the necessary steps were taken to obtain assistance from the International Development Agency, USAID,⁸ and the support of the Inter-American Division.⁹ Pastor Ford was in charge of managing the funds, and Daniel Chaij was the direct intermediary with USAID. Thanks to the efforts made, the funding soon became available.

The Institution's Groundwork

Once the funds were approved, the search began for properties with appropriate characteristics for a boarding school. April 3, 1981,¹⁰ the purchase of land in Hacienda Los Palmitos was voted on by the administrative board of the mission. The property was a farm dedicated to the cultivation of rice and livestock, with few trees. In August 1981, the mission administration purchased Hacienda de Los Palmitos, near San Juan Opico, department of La Libertad, with an area of 164 hectares.¹¹

To care for and manage the property and the crops under development, Wilfredo Moran and his assistant, Patricio Huevo, were hired at the end of 1981.¹² On April 29, 1981,¹³ the administrative board voted to name the high school Adventist Training School of El Salvador (ECAS).

On March 19, 1982¹⁴ the first stone for the building complex was laid. The construction was the responsibility of Rafael Hernández and 20 workers. The plan was to move forward as quickly as possible, since the school had committed to open for the 1983-1984 school year. The stone-laying ceremony was carried out under the leadership of Pastor Ford and attended by authorities of the Central American Union and the Inter-American Division. ECAS became the first secondary school with boarding facilities in El Salvador.

The team of workers was led by Leonor Campos, who became cafeteria manager of the new school. By the end of January 1983,¹⁵ the final touches of the women's dormitory were completed. The same building housed the classrooms, offices, dormitory for men, and rooms for teachers.

The first school year began with an enrollment of 50 students, who had left the comfort of their homes to start this adventure. Operation began without such services as electricity and drinking water, among others. Water was transported from San Juan Opico in the director's vehicle, referred to as *la Cotorra* because of its green color.¹⁶

Pastor Robert Elden Ford was appointed the first director of ECAS. Initially he lived in a mobile home, just like the maintenance manager, Pastor Bechtel. The first group graduated from high school the weekend of November 2-4, 1984, thanks to the initiative of Robert and Vanessa Ford and the tireless work of the group of brave workers.¹⁷

History of Adventist Training School of El Salvador (ECAS)

In 1985 the rest of the buildings were finished and the men's dormitory was inaugurated. Pastor Ford's house was built by students who worked for a full year at the school to pay their tuition and then studied the rest of their years until finishing high school.¹⁸ In addition, the maintenance building was built by students (working to pay their tuition), as was a large part of the classroom building--all under the direction of Francisco Santamaría.

Pastor Ford retired in 1987,¹⁹ but he continued to work at ECAS as a volunteer until 1992,²⁰ when Professor Donaldo Clark replaced him as director.

The facilities of ECAS also served the church for events such as brethren day, councils, seminars, and pathfinder camps. It became a special place to not only prepare students to serve society, but also as a convention and congress center for the entire church of El Salvador.²¹

Another important area of vocational development and training for students was the farm. There were grown sugar cane, corn, beans, cassava, pineapple, oranges, mangoes, vegetables, and cattle for milk production.

The student population increased in both dorms. The country was engulfed in war, but there were no regrets over the establishment of the school; rather, some of the authorities took refuge there, which resulted in the school becoming a safer environment.²²

In 1987, the institution was visited by Dr. Daniel Chajj, who had been influential in obtaining financing for the purchase of the land. His visit was to verify that the aid had been used correctly. At the end of the tour of the dormitories, kitchen, cafeteria, some of the classrooms, the farm, and the campus, he was satisfied in the way that USAID financing had been invested.²³

As the student population grew, the need for new services also grew. That is how the ECAS elementary school, with three students, was founded in 1992, and in 1996 preschool sections were added.²⁴

By 1993 the student population had grown to 267 students, served by 22 teachers. That year 64 students graduated, and in attendance at the graduation were authorities of the El Salvador Conference, representatives of the local government, and authorities of the central government, along with 1,500 guests.²⁵

In 1995 the school donated a plot of land to an orphanage project started by Mr. Saravia from Mexico. Development of the orphanage was taken over by Maranatha. It is also an opportunity for students to earn income and pay their tuition.²⁶ Maranatha Ministry, led by Mr. McNeillus, built the elementary school, pool, and personnel housing,²⁷ helping to expand infrastructure and services.

ECAS began offering bachelor's degrees in agricultural, education, accounting, secretarial administration, and computing. Later, due to the demand and the educational reform of 1995, the general and administration baccalaureate continued to function, which later was terminated.²⁸ At the beginning of 2000, the family of Rosita de la O and her husband agreed to help the institution and, among other projects, began construction of the institution's church. Until then, worship services were held in the cafeteria. The church was dedicated in 2016, and the family continued to assist by remodeling classrooms and the computer lab.²⁹

Until the end of the 1990s, boarding students were the largest percentage of the student population; however, by the beginning of the 21st century, the original philosophy changed, and slowly the number of resident students decreased.³⁰

On October 26, 2006, Pastor Robert Elden Ford, died peacefully at his home in Loma Linda, California, and his family, in memory of his work at ECAS, suggested that, mourners donate to the fund for ECAS students.³¹

In 2015 the bakery was built, and the carpentry workshop was built in 2018, with the help of the Swiss foundation *Verein Hilfswerk El Salvador*.³² The same year the remodeling of two wings of the women's and men's dormitories was completed thanks to the help of Reach Out Ministries. Currently, the family of Rich Uphus maintains a valuable scholarship project.³³

In 2017, representatives from Reach Out Ministries, based in North America, visited the institution and were interested in supporting the educational work carried out there. Impacted by the testimony of how this work

began, they decided to contribute financially to remodel the dormitories of both women and men. In a joint effort with workers, members, and student volunteers, progress has been made in improving the campus, painting all the buildings, building sidewalks, paths, and sanitary services, remodeling the gardens, and providing educational grants to about 80 students.³⁴

The number of students who enroll annually at ECAS has grown over the years. In the 1980s the average enrollment was 116 students, after starting with only 50 students in 1983. In 1989, the enrollment grew to 153 students. In the 1990s the average enrollment reached 236 students. During that period, the year with the least enrollment was 1998, with 199 students. The highest enrollment was in 1993 with 267 students. The first decade of the 21st century again experienced growth, reaching a yearly average of 343 students enrolled. The year 2001 experienced the lowest enrollment by enrolling 214 students, but 2009 had an historical enrollment of 446 students. The 2010s experienced new growth. Through 2018 the average has been 392 students. The year 2011 has had the lowest enrollment with 362 students, and the year 2014 the highest enrollment with 417 students.³⁵

ECAS has been a preparation center for workers of the Adventist Church and many of them serve in the Central America area, the United States, and other parts of the world. Among them are the current administrators of the El Salvador Union, Pastor Abel Pacheco, president; Pastor Luis Aguillón, secretary; and Carlos Martínez, treasurer. Pastor Elmer Alférez, former president of the El Salvador Central Conference and currently serving in the United States, also studied at ECAS. Dr. Roel Cea has worked for the University of Montemorelos, for the Mexican Union of the North, and the state of Nuevo León, Mexico, in promoting health programs and healthy lifestyles, is a graduate of ECAS.

Historical Role of the School

Since its inception ECAS has been of paramount importance to the work of the Adventist Church in El Salvador. In the 1980s, during the national civil war, it was a refuge for young people who lived in conflict areas and who wanted to finish high school. During that period and until now, its facilities have provided a safe place to hold meetings of churches, districts, conferences, and unions. Camporees, training schools, spiritual retreats, and many other activities have taken place at ECAS.

The insecurity that prevails in the country due to gangs and crime is a matter of concern today, but families have the option of a safe place for their children, where they cannot only train academically, but also learn spiritual and social skills. Through the institution, these committed educators have for 36 years prepared young people who have gone out to society to offer their productivity to a country with many needs.³⁶

What Remains to Be Done to Fulfill the School's Mission

At some point ECAS ceased to teach technical skills, but thanks to the work and contribution of altruistic people and organizations, today there is a carpentry workshop where about 25 students learn carpentry and manufacture tables, beds, cabinets, closets, bookshelves, and other things that are used by the institution or purchased by third parties. Both men and women participate in this project.

The ECAS bakery provides food for students and part of its production is marketed to the community. Each year more than 30 students are taught baking techniques, so they will have a profitable skill to use in the future. The current head of the bakery was an ECAS student who was then hired by the institution. The metal structures workshop is one of the projects that has been running the longest, and it also provides technical skills for the students. Kitchens, ovens, and carts are manufactured, among other things, for charitable projects sponsored by the Adventist Church in El Salvador. This workshop also provides necessary materials to maintain the buildings of the institution.

The farm had stopped producing, but in April 2019, about 600 lemon trees and 200 avocado trees were planted. When the trees begin to produce, income will be generated to finance the students. It is necessary to continue to strengthen the industries and the farm to provide more opportunities for low-income students.

In recent years the institution has benefited from the remodeling of its facilities; but it is still necessary to remodel 48 rooms in each of the dormitories. It is also necessary to remodel and update other facilities to meet new needs, especially the library, the high school classrooms, the kitchen, and the main road that surrounds the campus. This road is one and a half kilometers long.³⁷

Finally, the next step is for ECAS to offer university degrees in its facilities. The El Salvador Adventist Union is currently preparing for this project so that in the near future, taking advantage of the land and what already exists at ECAS, the Adventist University of El Salvador can begin. It is envisioned as a place where Adventist and community youth can be trained as professionals who serve the church and the community.³⁸

Director's List

Robert Elden Ford (1983³⁹-1986);⁴⁰ Donaldo Clarke (1987);⁴¹ Eliseo Martinez Ostorga (1988⁴²-1993);⁴³ Noel Ruiloba Fijaba (1994);⁴⁴ Eliseo Martinez Ostorga (1995⁴⁵-1999);⁴⁶ Jose Moratalla Penado (2000⁴⁷-2001);⁴⁸ Armando Ávila Hurtado (2002⁴⁹-2007);⁵⁰ Mauricio Ernesto Aguilar (2008⁵¹-2013);⁵² Hugo Edgardo Arévalo (2014⁵³-2015);⁵⁴ Ana Miriam Argumedo (2016⁵⁵-present).

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