



Central California Conference

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The Central California Conference is an administrative unit of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Pacific Union Conference.

Territory: The Californian counties of Fresno, Kern (north of the Tehachapi Mountains), Kings, Madera, Mariposa, Merced, Monterey, San Benito, San Francisco, San Luis Obispo, San Mateo, Santa Barbara (west of the 120th meridian), Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Stanislaus, Tulare, and Tuolumne.

Statistics: (June 30, 2019): churches, 132; membership, 34,336.¹

Origins

The Adventist message first touched the West in the territory of the future Central California Conference. In 1859, Merritt Kellogg, stepbrother of John Harvey Kellogg, arrived in San Francisco with his wife and young family. By 1861 Merritt had gathered a group of fourteen believers together. Recognizing the need for an evangelist, Kellogg asked the General Conference for help, but it was not until 1868 that such help arrived in the form of John Loughborough and Daniel Bourdeau.

The early Adventist work centered on San Francisco and even more significantly in Oakland, where the church headquarters was situated and the *Signs of the Times*, along with other publications, was printed at the Pacific Press. For more details regarding the early work in California, refer to the article on the former California Conference.

Early Growth

Because of increased membership, the California Conference in 1911 reassigned the counties of Tulare, Madera, San Benito, Fresno, Kings, San Luis Obispo, Monterey, and the portion of Kern County north of the Tehachapis, to comprise the Central California Conference which began operation on March 1. The new conference covered an area of 29,850 square miles (77,312 square kilometers), with a population of 200,426; it had 26 churches with a membership of 1,115 served by 11 ministers. The conference office was located in Fresno.²

The first annual conference session was held in Hanford, February 1-5, 1912. Delegates attended from Armona, Bakersfield, Barstow Colony, Burrough, Dinuba, Exeter, Fowler, Fresno, Hanford, Island, Laguna, Lemoore, Monterey, Selma, Tulare, Visalia, and Wallace District. Conference president J.H. Behrens declared that the blessings received during the first year as a separate organization "have been both spiritual and temporal, resulting in double prosperity to many of its charter members." It seems the formation of the new conference

was seen as long overdue and of a particular benefit to the membership.³ In 1915, 203 new believers were baptized increasing conference membership to 1,569 worshipping in 29 churches.⁴

In addition to the numerous social and economic problems caused by World War I, Adventists were also facing the threat of the imposition of Sunday laws in California. As a result delegates to the 1918 session voted a strong resolution directed to the lawmakers in the state capital, Sacramento:

Whereas, Sunday law champions have launched a movement to compel all California cities to adopt enforced Sunday observance, preparatory to an effort to force a state Sunday law through the Sacramento Legislature, in spite of the repeatedly expressed will of the people against such measures; and, Whereas, Separation of church and state, and freedom to worship God without hindrance, according to the dictates of the individual conscience is a fundamental principle of the American government ; and, Whereas, Sunday laws, of whatever kind, are based upon the religious nature of the day, and therefore are religious laws, and in conflict with true American principles therefore Resolved, That we, the delegates of the Central California Conference, in biennial session assembled, hereby respectfully, but most earnestly and emphatically protest to the various law-making bodies against the passage of Sunday ordinances or other religious laws.⁵

The missionary spirit of the conference was well illustrated at the 1920 camp meeting held at Visalia, May 27-June 6, that drew an unusually large attendance of more than 2,000 to Sabbath services. At a consecration service on the final Sabbath, six couples headed for missionary service in the diverse fields of India, Hawaii, Cuba, the Inca Mission in South America, and the Philippines were introduced. Not only did Central California finance the work of these missionaries, those attending the camp meeting donated or pledged an additional \$30,000 for foreign missions. Such extensive support of overseas mission, both in terms of funding as well as personnel, on the part of a local conference was exceptional, but it reflected the spirit of "California liberality" that was part of the Adventist experience in the West from the beginning. Nor was the local work neglected. At the annual session held in conjunction with the camp meeting, the conference reported the addition of 237 new members since the previous year, bringing the total to 2,339. By this time twenty-one church schools were operating in the conference, two of them offering ten grades.⁶

Evangelists such as H.M.S. Richards, Robert L. Boothby and I.M. Burke conducted major campaigns in Central California during the late 1920s and early 1930s. They began using the new medium of radio, including weekly Sunday evening broadcasts over station KMJ in Fresno. 1931 was a "banner year" for baptisms with a total of 344 – more than twice the annual total recorded for the previous three years and the largest in the conference's history.⁷

To help meet the needs of Californians suffering the brunt of the Great Depression, the conference expanded the church's welfare work by opening a Penny-a-Dish Café in Fresno in 1931. During its first six months the café served 42,492 meals and provided 559 Thanksgiving Day meals and 419 on Christmas free of charge.⁸

An advance in conference facilities came in 1929 when land in Wawona was purchased for a youth camp, eventually extending to 31 acres, situated within the boundaries of Yosemite National Park.⁹ In 1931 conference headquarters moved from Fresno to a new building constructed in San Jose.¹⁰

In 1932 the California Conference was dissolved and its territory was divided between the Central and Northern California conferences. The additions from the former California Conference along with 616 new members in 1932 brought the Central California Conference membership to 5,752 in 70 churches with 25 ordained and licensed ministers.¹¹

Diversity

Central California has been an area of great diversity from the beginning, and this has been a large part of the conference's identity:

Central has long been one of the most ethnically diverse conferences in North America. In the first part of the century, there were Italian, German, Japanese, and Russian churches. In 1923 O.A. Troy formed the first African-American church in San Francisco. By 1950 there were at least four Hispanic churches in Fresno, San Francisco, San Jose, and Santa Maria.¹²

San Francisco's Chinatown saw a church organized for the Chinese in 1950.¹³ In more recent years the conference has added Chinese, Hmong, Vietnamese, Samoan, Korean, and Filipino companies and churches.¹⁴

This emphasis has continued throughout the conference's history. As just one example, a camp meeting for the Japanese believers in the Pacific Union Conference was held in July 1952 at Camp Wawona.¹⁵ The Conference continues to foster the work among the diverse ethnic and racial communities in its territory through its departments for African American Ministries, Hispanic Ministries, and Asian/Pacific Ministries. As of 2020 the Conference reported its membership as 8 percent African American, 55 percent Anglo, 8 percent Asian, and 29 percent Hispanic.¹⁶

Youth Work

A permanent camp meeting location of 87 acres in Soquel was purchased in 1947, with a camp meeting first held there the following year. Later the site was improved by the addition of buildings such as an auditorium, cabins, and a dining area.¹⁷

Pathfinder clubs began to be organized in Central California Conference in 1948 with the number of clubs reaching 23 by 1949. That same year conference youth director Henry Bergh wrote the Pathfinder song that has been used by the program ever since.¹⁸

Ministerial Development

As part of its ongoing program of ministerial development, the Conference holds frequent training sessions. One notable event was in 1967, when a three-day series featuring the H. M. S. Richards “Lectures on Adventist Preaching” was attended by 225 ministers from the Northern and Central California Conferences at the Soquel campground.¹⁹

An unusual initiative has been to hold regular Sabbath services in Yosemite National Park during the summer. According to a *Review and Herald* news note in 1959, Sabbath services were being held that summer in the “Church Bowl” and vespers every Friday evening in the Village Chapel.²⁰

Education

The conference operates an extensive educational system.²¹ At the time of its organization in 1911, Central California inherited a number of elementary schools from the former California Conference. Armona Union Academy became the conference’s first 12-grade academy in 1912. It soon reverted to a 10-grade school before once again becoming a 12-grade secondary school in 1939. A church school begun in Modesto in 1910 grew quickly, which required a number of relocations. It became Modesto Adventist Academy in 1937.

In 1948 a former World War II military base on the coast near Watsonville was purchased for a boarding school. Monterey Bay Academy opened in 1950, and has 3,000 feet of ocean frontage. It is the only boarding academy in the Central California Conference.

In 1965 Fresno Central church purchased a 40-acre (15-hectare) farm and built a new elementary school there. The Fresno Adventist constituency funded the building of a new academy facility at a cost of \$620,000 that opened its doors in 1972.

In 1968 Bakersfield Academy became a senior academy with 12 grades. A new academy facility was constructed at a cost of \$279,000. In 1972, Miramonte School was moved from Villa Street to the new school facility in Los Altos.

Twenty elementary schools, three K-10 junior academies, six 12-grade academies, and seven early childhood education centers were operating with the support of the Central California Conference as of 2020. The total school enrollment stood at 1,815 with an average of 250 children in early childhood education centers.²²

Health care

A wide range of Adventist-related health institutions are active in the territory of the Conference.²³

Hanford Community Medical Center (now Adventist Health Hanford) started in 1908 and was gifted to Central California Conference in 1963 as a 54-bed acute-care hospital.

San Joaquin Community Hospital (now Adventist Health Bakersfield) was established in 1910. In 1964 the then owner requested that the hospital be managed by members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a nonprofit entity. The hospital was joined Adventist Health System/West in 1987 with a bed capacity of 178.

The Sonora Community Hospital (now Adventist Health Sonora) was started in 1900 as the Bromley Sanitarium and Hospital. The present facility was built in 1957, donated to the conference in 1961, and 10 years later became part of the Adventist Health System/West. It merged with the Sierra Hospital in 1971.

Headquarters

After moving to San Jose in 1931, conference headquarters moved to new locales in the same city in 1941 and again in 1957. In 1984 it moved to its present location in Clovis at 2820 Willow Avenue.²⁴

Vision and Mission

From 2013-2015 the Conference developed a strategic plan that is now being implemented.

Vision: Reflecting Christ, transforming communities.

Mission: Empowering every person to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and a center of influence for the kingdom of heaven.

Core values: Biblical authority, prayer, service, soul-winning, dependence, innovation, diversity, growth, integrity, alignment.²⁵

Initiatives: Cradle to Crown, Bridges: Bay Area for Jesus, The Master's Keys, and Life Hope Centers.²⁶

Presidents

J.H. Behrens, 1911–1914; B.E. Beddoe, 1914–1915; N.P. Neilsen, 1915–1919; H.S. Shaw, 1919–1923; E.L. Neff, 1923–1929; H.H. Hicks, 1929–1930; R.S. Fries, 1930–1933; David Voth, 1933–1937; T.L. Copeland, 1937–1942; W.A. Nelson, 1942–1945; R.C. Baker, 1945–1955; D.E. Venden, 1955–1964; Elmer R. Walde, 1964–1968; M.C. Torkelsen, 1969–1970; E.W. Amundson, 1970–1976; Charles F. Cook, 1976–1988; Herbert H. Broeckel, 1988–1995; Jerry N. Page, 1995-2010; Ramiro Cano 2010- .

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NOTES

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