



Pacific Union Conference headquarters.

Photo courtesy of Pacific Union Conference.

Pacific Union Conference

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The Pacific Union Conference is an administrative unit of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the North American Division comprising the following local conferences: Arizona, Central California, Hawaii, Nevada-Utah, Northern California, Southeastern California, and Southern California.¹

Territory: Arizona, California, Hawaii, Nevada, Utah, Johnston Island, and Midway Islands.

Statistics (June 30, 2020): Churches, 715; membership 221,584; population, 54,765,940.²

Beginnings

The Pacific Union was one of the six North American union conferences created during the denominational reorganization that took place in 1901. Initiated in Australia in 1894, the “union conference” was a new administrative level instituted in response to the overcentralization of authority at the General Conference that was inhibiting the world mission of the church.³ The intention was to disperse decision-making to leaders closer and better attuned to the culture and needs of the field.

Officially-sponsored Adventist work in the territory that would comprise the Pacific Union began in 1869 with the arrival of evangelists J. N. Loughborough and D. T. Bourdeau in California (See the California Conference article for more on the early development of Adventism in that state).⁴ Just before the two ministers headed west, Ellen White counseled that they should not approach their mission with the same mindset as in the East. This perspective is essential to understanding the process by which the work progressed and how the Pacific Union Conference was established.

In his account, Loughborough quotes the following from Ellen White’s letter: “You cannot labor in California as you did in New England. Such strict economy would be considered ‘pennywise’ by the Californians. Things are managed there on a more liberal scale. You will have to meet them in the same liberal spirit.”⁵

This did not mean “liberal theology” but a liberal spirit—generous, big-hearted, and open-minded. California society of the time was a heady mix of entrepreneurial enthusiasm and an openness to new ideas, with a population that came from all over the world. New ideas needed to be developed and outlooks adjusted to engage the thinking of this new time and place. The openness of the society, the charitable nature of many, the vision for a bigger, wider future—all this meant that the record of Adventism in the West involved a number of significant Adventist “firsts.” A few of many examples follow:

First Ordained African-American Adventist Pastor

Charles M. Kinny was born a slave in Virginia in 1855, 10 years before the abolition of slavery. As a young man he worked his way west to Reno, Nevada, where, in the summer of 1878, he attended Adventist meetings conducted by J.N. Loughborough and heard Ellen White preach as a guest. Kinny became a charter member of the Reno Seventh-day Adventist church. In 1883, the church members in Reno, together with the California Conference, sent him to Healdsburg College (now Pacific Union College) for further education. He became the first African-American ordained as a minister in the Seventh-day Adventist church at a service in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1889. Though his work would be in the South and Midwest, the open-minded liberality of the West was of critical importance in providing his education and launch into ministry.⁶

First Hispanic Adventists in the United States and the First Hispanic Ordained Adventist Pastor

In 1899 in Sanchez, Arizona, Abel and Adiel Sanchez had discovered while studying the Bible that the day of worship was the seventh day, *sabado*. They contacted Marcial Serna, pastor of the Tucson Mexican Methodist Church and overseer of the Spanish Methodist work throughout the Southwest, who was already studying the issue after a visit from two Adventist colporteurs and would soon reach the same conviction as the Sanchez brothers. Eventually so many of the Methodists in Sanchez became Adventists that the Methodists gave them their church on the condition that the Adventists help them build a new one, and the church in Sanchez became the first Hispanic Adventist church in the United States. Pastor Serna was granted a ministerial license by the General Conference and became the first Hispanic ordained Adventist minister.⁷

First Asian American Adventists

Adventist evangelism among the Asian community began in the 1890s in California. A Japanese convert, T. H. Okohira, was baptized after public meetings in Paso Robles, California, in 1892. He then went to Healdsburg College, and as a student there he led out in establishing the Golden Gate Japanese-English School in San Francisco. In 1894, he and the president of the college, W. C. Grainger, went as the first missionaries sent by the General Conference to Japan. In 1907 Okohira and H. Kuniya became the first ordained Japanese ministers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Okohira's son started the first Japanese church in Los Angeles.⁸

First African-American Adventist Church West of Ohio

On August 8, 1908, the Furlong Church in Los Angeles, California, became the first African-American Adventist church west of Kansas City, Missouri. It was established through initiatives led by pioneering Bible worker Jennie Ireland.⁹

First Adventist College to Become a Medical University

Loma Linda College of Evangelists opened in 1906. Its purchase was opposed by the General Conference, but Ellen White urged otherwise in a telegram to the local agent, John Burden, telling him to "secure the property by all means" and to do so "without spending time to ask the advice of the brethren."¹⁰ Due to this intervention, the Loma Linda property was secured.

Organizational History

In a report to the 1901 Fall Council on the progress of the organizational changes initiated at the General Conference session a few months before, denominational leader A. G. Daniells commended the Pacific Union Conference for its exemplary thoroughness in putting the union conference plan into operation. Twelve years before, as part of an earlier attempt to facilitate more localized administration of an increasingly far-flung denomination, the territory that became the Pacific Union had been designated General Conference District No. 6. The six districts covering the United States and Canada each had a superintendent who served as a liaison between the General Conference Committee and the district, but not as an administrator over the conferences

and mission fields in the district.¹¹

The union conferences established in 1901, though, differed from the districts in at least two important ways that better facilitated the rapid development of church work in the West. First, the unions were vested with administrative oversight nearly equivalent to that previously exercised by the General Conference. As Daniells put it, each union was “to take entire oversight of the work in its territory” and “carry forward” that work “as though no other Conference existed, except that it will cooperate with all other Union Conferences, and with the General Conference.”¹² The Pacific Union swiftly did just that following its formation at the General Conference session on April 16, 1901, with W. T. Knox designated as president.¹³ “Only those who have served on the General Conference Committee and Mission Board can fully appreciate the relief that comes from the transfer of all the details of the work on the Pacific Coast and Hawaiian mission field to a strong and experienced committee, located on the coast, and consequently in personal touch with all that demands attention,” Daniells commented.¹⁴

Second, the union conferences were responsible to and derived authority from their own constituent members—the local conferences comprising the union—not from the General Conference. As stated in the Pacific Union constitution adopted at the time, the membership “shall be composed of such local conferences as are, or may be, organized in any part of its territory” and the voters for the election of officers and other decisions at union conference sessions “shall be the duly accredited delegates from the local conferences, members of the Pacific Union Conference, and such laborers of the Pacific Union Conference as shall receive delegates’ credentials from the Executive Committee” (Article IV).¹⁵

Knox and the executive committee (composed of conference presidents and mission leaders in the former District No. 6) appointed at the General Conference session in April 1901 had only temporary authority to act until the union conference held its first official session. They moved promptly, meeting in June to organize for the formal beginning of operations on July 1, 1901, with headquarters at 1059 Castro Street in Oakland, California. The first issue of the union paper, the *Pacific Union Recorder*, appeared soon afterwards, dated August 1, 1901.

The new entity had responsibility for a vast territory: “the states of California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Utah, and Nevada, the Province of British Columbia, the Territory of Alaska, and such other territory as may hereafter come under its supervision.” In the latter category, Arizona and Hawaii, both still territories rather than states of the United States, were added right at the outset.¹⁶ The tally of church members stood at 9,492 in 190 churches, with 67 ordained ministers, 48 licentiates, and a tithe remittance of \$76,985.82 for the year 1900.¹⁷

At the first session of the Pacific Union Conference held in Portland, Oregon, February 28 through March 9, 1902, W. T. Knox was elected president, with J. J. Ireland, secretary, and E. A. Chapman, treasurer. The union thus became fully operational in accordance with its constitution, and that is why church sources at times, though

not typically, have given 1902 rather than 1901 as the starting date for the Pacific Union.¹⁸

At its founding, despite the wide swathe of territory it was responsible for, the Pacific Union included only four conferences: California, Montana, North Pacific, and Upper Columbia. Some mission work with skeletal organization was taking place outside conference boundaries, but large portions of the union's territory, often sparsely-populated, remained entirely unorganized. Initiatives originating in the existing conferences combined with action from union leadership brought rapid organizational advances. In August 1901, the Southern California Conference was formed with the remainder of the state continuing to constitute the California Conference. Nine months later in May 1902, the North Pacific Conference divided into two—the Western Oregon and Western Washington Conferences. In the mission territories formerly (and briefly) under the direct administration of the Pacific Union, new conferences were created in Arizona (April 1902), Utah (August 1902) and British Columbia, Canada (September 1902).¹⁹

Thus, after only about a year, the number of conferences in the Pacific Union increased from four to nine. Hawaii and Alaska were both organized as mission territories. The development of departments for the various aspects of the church's mission such as education, medical work, publishing, and Sabbath School, began in earnest but there would be considerable flux both in the configuration and naming of these entities during the early years of the union. Given its geographical scope and location on what was still the American frontier, the union was distinctive in creating a department of mission "for oversight of the unorganized fields within our territory."²⁰

In his report at the 1903 General Conference session, Knox acknowledged that the new Arizona, Utah, and British Columbia conferences were very small and "will have to be assisted financially and otherwise for some time to come." That was in keeping with the "object" of the union as expressed in Article II of its constitution: to oversee distribution of personnel and resources so as to "unify and extend the work of the everlasting gospel throughout this Conference and the mission fields of the world."²¹ Additionally, Knox recognized the importance of the Pacific Union acting in accordance with the same principles that prompted the General Conference to establish union conferences. The organization of the small conferences "has relieved the Union Conference of much care, and has resulted in giving these conferences a better management than could have been otherwise obtained," he stated.²²

Even with the progressive measures the Pacific Union was taking to fulfill its missional purpose, Knox recognized that a fundamental problem remained. The union's territory, extending from the Mexican border up through western Canada to Alaska, in addition to the Hawaiian islands, was far too large. Knox concluded his 1903 General Conference report with the observation that it was "almost impossible" for one man as president to "attend all the general meetings . . . and give proper attention to the many enterprises conducted within this conference" and therefore recommended that the Pacific Union be divided.²³

Support for the division strengthened, and its implementation further illustrates the dynamics between the General Conference and the union conferences. The General Conference did not have the authority to divide a union conference. That could only be done by vote of delegates representing the union conference constituency, which took place at the Pacific Union's third biennial session in Portland, Oregon, February 15-25, 1906. With the northern part of its initial territory organized as the North Pacific Union Conference (NPUC), the Pacific Union Conference now comprised the states of California, Nevada, Utah, and the territory of Arizona.²⁴ A General Conference vote was then required to recognize the NPUC as a constituent, and this took place on May 13, 1909 at the first meeting of the next GC session.²⁵ The 1906 vote ceded the Hawaiian mission to the NPUC, but the General Conference assumed responsibility for it in 1907. In 1929 the mission was returned to the Pacific Union. It became the Hawaii Conference in 1982.²⁶

The territory of the Pacific Union has remained essentially stable since 1929. Its office headquarters moved from Oakland to Mountain View, about 50 miles to the south, in 1906. In 1914, the office moved to the Glendale suburb of Los Angeles where it remained until moving to its present location about 35 miles to the west in Westlake Village in 1976.

The division of territory in 1906 left the Pacific Union with a membership of 6,741 in 121 congregations. Statistics reported for the close of 1919 show a membership of 13,977 and reveal that during that year the Pacific Union surpassed the Lake Union to become the largest union by membership in the North American Division. Remarkably steady incremental growth averaging a little over 1,000 per year brought the total to 40,328 by the beginning of 1945, an increase of about 200% over that 25-year period. In the post-World War II years, Adventism continued to boom on the west coast, along with much else in the wider society. At the conclusion of the 25-year period ending in 1970, the union's membership had more than doubled, climbing to 107,969. The rate slowed somewhat but remained vital during the 50 years that followed. Due in part to American demographic changes favoring the "Sunbelt" states, the Pacific Union, after 85 years as the largest in the NAD, was surpassed in membership by the Southern Union Conference in 2004.²⁷

The "Great Branches" of the Work

A clause in the 1901 Pacific Union constitution referring to "the three great branches of our work—the educational, medical, and publishing" highlights the critical role of the union conference in fostering and managing institutions devoted to these purposes.²⁸

Adventism's second major publishing enterprise, Pacific Press Publishing Company, was founded in 1874 with its plant and central office located in Oakland, California. For most of the first decade of the Pacific Union's history, its president also served as president of the Pacific Press (W.T. Knox, 1902-1904; H. W. Cottrell, 1906-1912). During these years the company, formerly owned by stockholders, was reorganized as a nonprofit, nonstock association and correspondingly renamed Pacific Press Publishing Association (PPPA).²⁹ The association

operated in the interests of the denomination more broadly and thus did not come under direct management of the Pacific Union. Still, PPPA's locale and the Pacific Union presidents' role on its board of directors continued to bind the publishing association and the union conference closely together.

Walla Walla College in eastern Washington state was the first college for which the Pacific Union became responsible. The General Conference turned the school property over to the union along with \$31,000 in liabilities. Fortunately, the campaign to devote proceeds from the sale of Ellen White's book *Christ's Object Lessons* for the financial relief of denominational schools did much to help alleviate the debt. At its first biennial session in 1902, the Pacific Union adopted a plan leading to incorporation of the college and formation of a board of directors in harmony with Washington state law. The college was turned over to the North Pacific Union when the latter was organized in 1906.³⁰

The Pacific Union Conference along with the Southern California Conference had an important role in the launching of what eventually became the Loma Linda University School of Medicine. The two entities cooperated in overseeing formulation of the educational program for Loma Linda College of Evangelists which opened in 1906. The school remained under the auspices of the Pacific Union when, after receiving authorization from the state of California to offer academic and professional degrees, its name was changed to College of Medical Evangelists (CME), also called Loma Linda College, in December 1909.

Rapid development of Loma Linda into a full-fledged school of medicine became a contested issue at the Pacific Union's fifth biennial session in January 1910. In view of the heavy debt already incurred to develop sanitariums and the imperative of building up the newly-acquired Angwin campus of Pacific Union College (see below), union president H. W. Cottrell opposed going even deeper into debt in order to move ahead with the ambitious plans for Loma Linda.³¹ Finally, though, in harmony with communication received from Ellen White, the delegates voted that CME proceed with offering a full medical course. In order to broaden the base of the school's support, the union also proposed that the school's board include representation from the General Conference and other union conferences. The plans for CME's future were finalized in May 1910, making the school a General Conference institution. However, the Pacific Union and Southern California Conferences continued to have a leading role, and the union president continued as chair of the board until 1918.³²

1909-1910 also brought major changes involving the Adventist college in northern California. Healdsburg College, founded in 1881, continued under the management of the California Conference until, under financial duress, it closed in July 1908, with plans for relocation pending. It re-opened a year later in Angwin with the name Pacific College. It became Pacific Union College after the union took responsibility for the school in February 1910. To strengthen the school, an ambitious fund-raising campaign was launched and links established bringing Lodi Normal Academy and San Fernando Academy into unified management with the college.³³ The union gradually formalized governance of the college. The union president (E. E. Andross) became board chair beginning in 1912. Measures to add the presidents of the local conferences in the union to the

board and incorporate the Pacific Union College Association for legal holding of the school's property were approved at the eighth biennial union session in November 1915.³⁴

In 1944, the Pacific Union assumed governance of La Sierra College in Riverside, California. Originating in 1922 as a secondary school jointly operated by the Southern and Southeastern California conferences, La Sierra Academy rapidly advanced in status, becoming Southern California Junior College in 1927, and then, as La Sierra College, gradually advancing to accreditation as a four-year college, attained in 1946. In bringing La Sierra under its purview, the Pacific Union Conference became the first (and only) union in the NAD that operated two senior colleges. As the result of a merger effected in 1967, the college became the La Sierra campus of Loma Linda University, and thus under the management of the General Conference. It became a separate institution, owned and operated by Pacific Union Conference once again in 1991, and was renamed La Sierra University.

Since 1946, the Pacific Union, in cooperation with the Arizona Conference, has operated Holbrook Indian School, a boarding academy that offers instruction in grades one through twelve for Native American children and youth. A satellite elementary school is located on the Navajo reservation in Chinle, Arizona.³⁵

Generally, though, the local conferences and churches within the union operate and control Adventist primary and secondary schools. The union endeavors to foster and coordinate the work of schools in providing quality education animated by Adventist values. It is a role on which the Pacific Union has placed high priority from its beginning, as seen in an action voted at its first session in 1902 charging the union's "Educational Committee" to "provide a uniform course of study, and adopt a series of text-books for all the church-schools" in the union. This mandate was followed by a request to the Pacific Press "to keep in stock the text-books to be used in our schools."³⁶ As of 2019, 31 Adventist secondary schools were operating in the Pacific Union, none of which existed when the union was formed in 1901. The total enrollment of 9,326 in the union's 108 primary schools as of 2019 was the highest among the unions in the North American Division.³⁷

A major thrust in advancing the Adventist medical work in the first decade of the 20th century involved establishment of Paradise Valley Sanitarium near San Diego, California (1904), Glendale Sanitarium in the Los Angeles area (1905), and Loma Linda Sanitarium (1905). The Pacific Union's role in connection with these new institutions, along with St. Helena Sanitarium in northern California (founded 1878), was one of support and consultation rather than governance.

However, the growth and broadened scope of Adventist medical work over the decades led to the formation of corporations to manage the church's health care institutions. Adventist Health System/West was established in 1980 to oversee 15 medical institutions—12 in the Pacific Union and three in the North Pacific Union—with a board of directors chaired by the president of the Pacific Union Conference. These institutions, with their far-reaching social, economic, and spiritual impact, thus became even more integral to the work of the Pacific Union. As of 2021 AHS/West includes 24 institutions, each of which has been re-branded with the preface "Adventist Health" (for example, Adventist Health St. Helena).³⁸

Elmshaven, near St. Helena, California, was the home of Ellen G. White and locale of a publishing agency for her writings coordinated by her son W. C. White from 1900 until her death in 1915. The property is now owned by the Pacific Union Conference. It was purchased by Adventist evangelist Charles T. Everson in 1927, and, after his death in 1956, made available to the Pacific Union by his widow, Nettie Belle Sanborn Everson. Restoration of the home, which took place from 1978 to 1981, was made possible by the Pacific Union, the General Conference, and substantial gifts made by institutions and individuals eager to see Elmshaven continue to witness to the memory of Ellen White.³⁹ It is an historical site open year-around for tours, through which visitors may gain deeper understanding and more vivid appreciation of her life and ministry.⁴⁰

Embracing Diversity

Embracing diversity is a continuing theme of Pacific Union Conference history. From its earliest days, the very society in which the church operated made mutual respect and toleration an essential aspect validated by its Christian message. Consequently, in the West the wide variety of ethnicities and languages has brought tremendous benefits to the spreading of Adventist beliefs and principles.

In the 1940s, when Adventist leadership in other areas of the United States looked to separate regional conferences to strengthen the work among African Americans, the Pacific Union Conference chose a different route. as explained by Louis B. Reynolds in his history of the Black Adventist experience:

The Pacific Union Conference and the local conferences that it comprises have exhibited a certain awareness of social change in the sixties and seventies and put forth some effort to keep pace. In 1945 and beyond, when regional conferences became a reality in the East and Midwest, the approximately 1,500 blacks and the sixteen conference workers who made up the regional department's constituency of Pacific Union Conference felt that the two major groups could work well together and that a certain posture of integration would take hold in the West.⁴¹

Sentiment in favor of regional conferences on the west coast did gain momentum from time to time. However, Calvin B. Rock observes that even at its peak in the mid-1990s, it never gained support from the majority of Black pastors or members, and since then has faded.⁴²

To strengthen the work among the diverse racial and ethnic groups in its territory, the Pacific Union Conference established departments committed to Asian/Pacific Ministries, Hispanic Ministries, and Regional Ministries and encouraged local conferences in the union to do likewise. Pacific Union Conference initiatives "greatly enhanced the Hispanic growth" both in its territory and beyond, and prepared many Hispanic leaders for administrative positions throughout the North American Division, writes Manuel Vasquez in his history of Hispanic Adventism.⁴³ The Pacific Union executive secretary's report for the 30th quinquennial session gave the following ethnic breakdown for the 226,207 church members in the Pacific Union as of 2015: Caucasian (56.2 percent), Hispanic

(22.6 percent), African-American (11.9 percent), Asian/Pacific (9.3 percent).⁴⁴

Pacific Union Conference has been at the forefront of affirming women in ministry. After more than four decades of close study and consideration of the theological and ecclesiastical issues involved, delegates at a special constituency session on August 19, 2012, voted (79 percent to 21 percent) to “approve ordinations to the gospel ministry without regard to gender.”⁴⁵

Though one other union in North America, the Columbia Union Conference, adopted a similar policy that same year and another, the Mid-America Union Conference, has done so more recently, ordaining women to ministry has not been endorsed by the world church. Proposals to allow each of the divisions of the General Conference to decide the matter for its territory failed at the General Conference sessions of 1995 and 2015.⁴⁶ In a statement issued in 2016, the Pacific Union Conference executive committee affirmed the union’s commitment both to “equality in ministry” and to “the global fellowship of Seventh-day Adventists.”⁴⁷

At its 31st constituency session in 2021, the Pacific Union elected Sandra E. Roberts, previously president of the Southeastern California Conference, as executive secretary. This was another Pacific Union “first,” as Pastor Roberts was the first woman elected to serve in union conference executive leadership in the North American Division. Delegates also voted on the coordinators for ethnic ministries and adopted changes in the bylaws that redesignate these positions—along with the director of education—as vice presidents for specialized ministries. Reaffirmed in these positions were VicLouis Arreola III, vice president for Asian Pacific ministries; Virgil S. Childs, vice president for Black ministries; Berit von Pohle, vice president for education; and Alberto Ingleton, vice president for Hispanic ministries.⁴⁸

Outlook for the Future

In defining its perspective and mission, the Pacific Union Conference in 2020 published its commitment to both church unity and diversity on its website:

Adventists in the Pacific Southwest are proud to be a part of a thriving global membership made up of 19 million people living in most of the countries in the world. This diversity is reflected in our membership here; the Pew Research Center describes our church as the most diverse in all of North America. A shared sense of community and a strong belief in Christian mission and discipleship drive our work in healthcare, education, and social justice. We enjoy worshipping together, studying the Bible together, and learning each day how to live as more effective disciples in practical ways.⁴⁹

The Pacific Union Conference has chosen the theme of “Love. Serve. Lead.” to express its vision and the experience of Adventists in the Pacific Southwest.

In these three words can be found a general description of the life and work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Pacific Union and throughout the world: love for God and for one another; service rendered in the name of Jesus; and the willingness to lead and be led in the proclamation of the gospel and soon return of our Lord.⁵⁰

Presidents

W. T. Knox, 1901–1904; W. B. White, 1904–1905; H. W. Cottrell, 1905–1910; G. A. Irwin, 1910–1912; E. E. Andross, 1912–1918; J. W. Christian, 1918–1921; J. E. Fulton, 1921–1922; J. L. McElhany, 1922–1926; J. E. Fulton, 1926–1932; J. L. McElhany, 1932–1933; Glenn Calkins, 1933–1941; L. K. Dickson, 1941–1945; W. B. Ochs, 1945–1946; C. L. Bauer, 1946–1956; F. W. Schnepfer, 1956–1959; R. R. Bietz, 1959–1968; W. J. Blacker, 1968–1973; Cree Sandefur, 1973–1979; W. D. Blehm, 1979–1986; T. J. Mostert, Jr., 1986–2008; Ricardo B. Graham 2008-2021; Bradford C. Newton, 2021- .

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NOTES

1. The Communication and Community Engagement department and the Office of the Executive Secretary of the Pacific Union Conference collaborated the preparation of this article.
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