



Marrakesh, Morocco

Photo courtesy of Dilson Bezerra.

# Morocco

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## DANIEL BENITEZ, AND MELANIE RICHES WIXWAT

Daniel Benitez, B.A. in theology (River Plate Adventist University, Argentina), was born in Paraguay to missionary parents. He served as a pastor in Paraguay from 2008 to 2015. Since 2015 he has been serving in Morocco with the Middle East and North Africa Union. Benitez is married to Svetlana Frizel Benitez with two daughters.

Melanie Riches Wixwat, B.B.A. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan), currently lives in Beirut, Lebanon with her husband Michael, the treasurer for Middle East and North Africa Union (MENA U). She is administrative assistant to the president and the executive secretary of MENA U in addition to working as assistant to the regional editor for the ESDA project. One of her hobbies is studying Arabic and this has led her to be involved with one of the local Arabic Adventist Churches in Beirut.

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Morocco is the most western country of North Africa and is known as the Maghreb or the “Arab West.” Its first exposure to Seventh-day Adventists began in the city of Casablanca in 1925.

Bordered by the Atlantic Ocean, Mediterranean Sea, Algeria, and Mauritania, the Kingdom of Morocco is a constitutional monarchy with a prime minister who heads the cabinet, and a king who still has extensive political powers over all areas of the government.<sup>1</sup> Since receiving its independence from France in 1956, its king has continued to be the commander-in chief of the army and has remained the highest religious authority in the country.<sup>2</sup>

The vast majority of the population today is a blend of Arab and Berber mixed with European and African influence. Islam is the official state religion with 98 percent of the population Sunni, 1 percent Shi’a, and the remaining percent a mix of Christian, Jewish, and other religions. Ruling since the seventeenth century, the current royal family claims to be direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, which makes them highly revered by Moroccan Muslims.<sup>3</sup> Although the constitution grants freedom of worship to all religions, it applies only to the foreigners living in the country and not to the indigenous people.<sup>4</sup>

## Adventist Work Preceding Independence in 1956

In 1925 a European SDA layperson began a Sabbath School. That same year the evangelist Jean Reynaud and his wife arrived. They held public meetings, primarily among the European population, and by the end of the year Alfred Meyer conducted the first baptism. A few colporteurs worked with them and for many years literature evangelism remained the predominant means of introducing the gospel in Morocco.<sup>5</sup>

By 1928 the Morocco Mission had organized and established its headquarters office in the city of Casablanca with Alfred Meyer serving as the first president. Working with him was one ordained minister, one licensed minister, and one Bible instructor.<sup>6</sup> As a result of the canvassing program, interest was also beginning to grow in four major cities: Ceuta (known as Spanish Morocco), Casablanca, Tangier, and Fez, and plans began to initiate canvassing in Marrakesh.<sup>7</sup>

Shortly after the arrival of Reynaud in 1925, Ernest Veuthey and his wife (a nurse) settled in Fez. They rented a building and used one part of it as a chapel, and converted the other part into a dispensary. Veuthey held two meetings a week there—on Saturdays and Sundays—with an average combined attendance of around 70 individuals. Although the people were European (mostly Spanish, French, and Italian), the hope was that the medical program would also serve to open doors of the gospel to the local people.<sup>8</sup>

In 1932 and 1933 a husband and wife team of physicians from North America, R. R. Hilborn and his wife, established a little sanitarium in another area of Morocco. They worked for a few years as self-supporting medical missionaries, mostly among the indigenous population.<sup>9</sup>

By 1935 Morocco had a population of five million people, but only a few Adventist missionaries and colporteurs. That year, Jean Reynaud held public meetings in Casablanca and the church membership was expected to grow a little more. David Riemens began outreach in Fez and other parts of Morocco. Although no churches existed elsewhere, there were a number of good interests.<sup>10</sup>

The Moroccan Mission purchased new headquarters in Casablanca in 1948, and W. Fuchs replaced Meyer as its director. Interest in Adventism continued to grow very slowly in this difficult field. For 20 years the outreach to the Europeans met with some success, but that for the local population remained disappointingly meager.<sup>11</sup>

Around 1950, two doctors, Isidre and Hermine Aguilar, settled in Tangier and began medical work. A year later, an evangelist by the name of A. Sanchez joined them. In 1952 they began a series of public meetings, with Sanchez in charge of the evangelistic part and the doctors giving lectures on health.<sup>12</sup> Even though the work in Morocco was extremely difficult, it did produce some successes. Charles Cornaz, president of the French Moroccan Mission, reported that during the first 10 months of 1955 37 people were baptized in Morocco.<sup>13</sup>

By the time Morocco received its independence from France in 1956, several churches existed across the country, mainly in principal cities such as Casablanca, Rabat, and Fez. The membership was not large and mostly European. After independence, however, things began to get dangerous for the Europeans living in Morocco.<sup>14</sup> A wave of persecution began and the situation for the Christian groups was especially hard. More than 1 million Europeans fled from North Africa to their home countries, and among them 90 percent of the church members. The very small remaining group of believers struggled to survive. The government confiscated most of the religious properties and for the next 30 years the Adventist presence practically disappeared from Morocco.<sup>15</sup>

In 1959, however, a handful of missionaries tirelessly and faithfully sought to keep the work going. Many of them lived in isolation.<sup>16</sup> By 1964 the country had five churches and 165 members. Radio broadcasts and correspondence attempted to reach the indigenous population. Adventist World Radio, located in Portugal, began Arabic broadcasts to North Africa in 1971. Esaie Pellicer, fluent in Arabic, directed the Arabic Bible Correspondence School for the Euro-Asia Division. Every month approximately 100 people enrolled in Bible lessons and about 30 would graduate. However, mail was not always reliable and correspondence sent to the smaller villages often got lost. Pellicer took an intense personal interest in each of his students, and as a result he tirelessly kept in contact with them, achieving a moderate amount of success. The ministry of Adventist World Radio, aided by the Bible lessons, became the only public witness to the people of North Africa.<sup>17</sup>

In 1971 the Moroccan government banned the Adventist Church and it no longer had an organized presence in the country.<sup>18</sup> Since that time there has been no organized work. Small groups of Adventist foreign university students meet from time to time for spiritual encouragement.

## Challenges and Mission

Morocco has been a challenging territory for many years, largely because of its dominant religion and the lack of an official organized presence of the SDA Church in the country. Continued efforts to share God's love through people and media present opportunities that can bear fruit in the future.<sup>19</sup>

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## NOTES

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