

Almonte Vyhmeister, Friedhelm Eliel Gerhart (1932–2001)

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Friedhelm Eliel Gerhart Almonte Vyhmeister served as a pastor and administrator in Chile.

Early Years

Friedhelm Eliel Gerhart Almonte was born on May 1, 1932, in the city of Los Angeles, the capital of the Bío Bío province in the region of the same name, located in southern Chile. His father was Eliel Almonte Vera, a pastor in the Adventist Church (1899-1990), and his mother, Thusnelda Vyhmeister Nickelsen (1900-1982), was a Bible instructor and a descendant of Adventist pioneers. The couple had three children: Friedhelm Eliel, his older sister Erna, and his younger brother Charles, and as they grew up, they were greatly influenced by their parents' exemplary testimony of faith. Friedhelm's father was connected to the whole developing process of the Adventist Church in Chile from its beginning. He exercised his pastoral ministry in several cities throughout the national territory, and he was the president of the Chile Conference between 1943 and 1950 and, later, the first president of Central North Chile Conference between 1951 and 1954.¹

Friedhlem Eliel did his primary studies at the Adventist school of Porvenir, Santiago, and his secondary studies at the Adventist Liceo of Santiago (1st cycle of Humanities) and at the Chile Adventist Academy, Chillán (2nd cycle of Humanities), between 1945 and 1950.² At the Academy, he completed his higher education, consisting of the two-year commercial course, which prepared future accountants, secretary-treasurers, and church administrators. While still a high school student at Chile Adventist Academy, he decided to be baptized and embraced the prospect of a life of faithfulness to God and missionary service. So, on November 28, 1948, at the age of 16, he was baptized in Chillán.³

Education and Marriage

After graduating from the commercial course, Friedhlem Eliel was called to missionary service as assistant treasurer of Central North Chile Conference, and so, starting in March 1953, he began a life of uninterrupted service to the Adventist mission. In 1958, he was promoted to the position of the conference treasurer, which he

held until 1966 when the Chile Union was organized.

While he worked in the offices of Central North Chile Conference, in Santiago, Friedhelm Eiel, best known as Eiel, befriended a young woman from the city of Ovalle who was named Nohemí Carvajal Rojas, the woman he married on February 7, 1963, in the Church of Porvenir, Santiago. The ceremony was officiated by his father, Pr. Eiel Almonte Vera. With Nohemí, who was his beloved and faithful companion in the ministry, he formed a family in which three children were born: Mirna Lilian (1965), Carlos Eiel (1968), and Ana Lorena (1976).⁴

Ministry

When the Chile Conference was organized in 1966 and the Central North Chile Conference was divided in two fields, the Central Chile Conference and the North Chile Mission, Friedhlem Eiel was called to serve as an assistant treasurer of Central Conference, a position he held until 1979. At that time, in addition to his responsibilities as an ecclesiastical administrator, he showed a clear ministerial vocation.

In recognition of his ministerial service and administrative leadership exercised in fulfilling his duties in the conference, although his professional training was in the field of accounting, the Church ordained him to the pastoral ministry together with pastors Sigfried Mayr, Higinio Monardes, Sebastián Lagos, Manuel Cea, and Andrés Gutiérrez, on February 21, 1970, during the Biennial Congress of Central Chile Conference.⁵

His faithful and responsible management in the functions designated by the Church would later lead him to an uninterrupted career in the administration of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Chile. After serving as an assistant treasurer at Central Chile Conference, he was appointed president of the Church in Chile (1980-1982) and then president of the South Chile Conference (1983-1985). In 1986, he was appointed president of the Chilean Union, a position he held for three consecutive terms, still the leader who has held this role for the longest period of time.⁶

While he administered the Chilean Church (1986-2000), the Adventist school system experienced tremendous growth in student enrollment and the opening of secondary schools largely due to the Church's decision to add the Adventist schools to the bonus program or state subsidy for education, a policy implemented by the Chilean State in the early 1980s.⁷

In the same period, the number of pastors ordained increased from 59 to 113, and church membership grew from 48,964 (early 1985) to 101,534 (late 2000), the biggest important quantitative leap experienced by the Chilean Church in terms of member growth.⁸ This increase highlights the effort and commitment of church members and administrators to the mission.

Other important achievements for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Chile that occurred during time are related to the development of Adventist broadcasting and television. An important milestone was the start of Adventist University Radio broadcasts in 1992,⁹ the first Adventist station officially authorized to operate in the

country. The radio and television network Hope Channel grew out of this ministry in Chile until its consolidation in the first decade of the 21st century.

In the areas of evangelism and mission, special efforts were led by Friedhlem Eliel to reach ethnic minorities, such as the Gypsy population and the Arab and Jewish communities. The first Gypsy Temple of the Adventist Church in Latin America was opened in 1989¹⁰ and, in 1997 by designation of the General Conference, the World Center for Jewish Brotherhood was formed in Santiago, Chile, a Global Mission strategy to reach Jewish communities with the Adventist message.¹¹

Although Friedhlem Eliel did not have a formal degree in theology, his personal search for the truth helped him maintain a solid knowledge of the Bible. Able to read in French, German, and English, he was a scholar and an avid reader. The people who were close to him always remember what he said: "The books are humans' best friends; they teach, help, and comfort. They can take you for a walk, and the best thing is that its friendship is faithful."¹²

Pastor Friedhlem Eliel expressed a special interest in the whole well-being of workers' families. In particular, he enjoyed visiting the sick and widows, and also expressed a special fondness for small churches. He loved the fraternal Christian atmosphere present in these congregations and the opportunities for service they offered. Personally, he loved nature and always shared special moments with his family there. His favorite hobbies were philately (collection of postage stamps) and photography.

His leadership qualities most recognized included: integrity, reliability, restraint, and the sense of responsibility with which he guided his administrative actions. They were recognized by the community of ministers around him and the church in general, and he believed that it was not about managing an organization, but instead was the work of the remnant church of God. Throughout his administrative ministry, he was clearly aware of that, especially whenever he had to settle critical situations in the church, occasions when he did everything to maintain the unity of the church in Christ. Friedhlem Eliel also understood that Adventists should establish and retain good relations with other Christian entities whose mission converged with that of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and for that reason, the Church maintained a partnership with the Chilean Bible Society.

Always active as a leader of the Chilean Seventh-day Adventist Church, Pastor Friedhlem Eliel represented the Adventist Church on the government commission that dealt with the rules on the legal constitution and the functioning of churches and religious organizations in the country. He also contributed to the first report of the Special Committee in the Chamber of Deputies.¹³ In 1995, while still presiding over the Chile Union, he led (with the Central Chile Conference) the project of evangelism that reached out to other denominations, an initiative that resulted in the baptism of five pastors from Protestant denominations and their wives, which was carried out on April 22.¹⁴

Later Years

Friedhlem Eliel served as president of the Chile Union until the year 2000. While he was still in office, his health was affected by a serious illness, and he subsequently died on March 7, 2001, at the age of 69, after 47 years of fruitful service in the work of God. He always placed his hopes on the Lord's return, and his body was buried in the Parque del Recuerdo cemetery in the city of Santiago.

Contribution

Friedhlem Eliel's entire life reflected Christian values, and the hope for Jesus' soon return led him to a life of selfless service in which he served the church as secretary-treasurer of Central Chile Conference (1967-1979); president of Central Chile Conference (1980-1982); president of South Chile Conference (1983-1985); and president of Chile Union (1985-2000).¹⁵

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