

North Guatemala Mission

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The North Guatemala Mission forms part of the Guatemala Union in the territory of the Inter-American Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

Background, Territory and Statistics

The North Guatemala Mission has the largest territory of all the sub-entities in the Guatemala Union. The department of Petén is considered the cradle of the Mayan culture because vestiges of ancient cities and of the Spanish Conquest are present in the different ruins and metropolises to this day. From Izabal to Petén, there are archeological sites that show the passage of the Mayas through Guatemala.

The territory of the North Guatemala Mission is rich in culture. Of the 22¹ Mayan tongues that are spoken in Guatemala, 5 Mayan dialects exist in the mission's territory.² Aside from them, Spanish is spoken throughout the territory of the mission. Also, in the region of Livingston, Puerto Barrios, the Afro-Caribbean language Garifuna is spoken. This language is from Izabal, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Belize and is not of Mayan origin. Rather, it comes from groups in Africa and the Caribbean. In 2008, Garifuna was added to the UNESCO list of languages representing the cultural heritage of humanity.³

In Guatemala, the Adventist Church has a radio transmitter, Unión Radio, that can be heard at 105.7 FM. It transmits from the capital of the country. Since 2010, it has had a repeater in the department of Petén, located in Canchacán San Luis. Because the department of Petén comprises a vast territory, this repeater has two antennas to transmit the signal. One antenna is in Melchor de Mencos, on the border with Belize, and the other is in Aldea el Caoba in that same department. There is also a repeater in the building of the North Guatemala Mission headquarters.⁴

The territory of the North Guatemala Mission includes the departments of Alta Verapaz, Baja Verapaz, Izabal, and Petén, all of which are located in the north region of Guatemala. The mission is divided into three administrative zones: Petén, which has seven districts; Izabal, which has three districts; and Las Verapaces, which has seven districts. The North Guatemala Mission has 43,376 members in 116 congregations.⁵ It has five

schools, four with a morning session for the elementary level and afternoon sessions for the secondary level. The fifth school has just one session for both levels. In the North Guatemala Mission, there are seven ordained and seven licensed ministers. Its headquarters is located on Calle Miguel García, in the 3 de Abril neighborhood, Zone 1 of San Benito, Petén.

Institutions

Bethania Adventist School is located on 7th Avenue, between 14th and 15th Streets, Puerto Barrios, Izabal. It opened as the Eben-Ezer Adventist School in 1955, located at the corner of 5th Street and 5th Avenue in that same city. It began as a school of the First Spanish Church at the instigation of Javier Sosa, who was one of the most influential pioneers of the church in Izabal. As of 2018, this educational institution offered classes at the preschool, elementary, and secondary levels.⁶ The Bethania Adventist School operates with eight teachers, two administrative personnel, and one service person.

Ellen G. White Adventist School is located in Barrio Capitania of the municipality of Livingston, department of Izabal. This institution can be reached only by boat. It is accessed by the Río Dulce Village of Izabal, and mostly through Puerto Barrios. It was started in 2006 thanks to the initiative of Adán Oliva Benavidez. As of 2018, the Ellen G. White Adventist School offered the levels of preschool, elementary, and secondary.⁷ This school operates with 10 teachers, 2 administrative personnel, and 1 service person.

Petén Adventist School (CAP) was founded in 1995 at the initiative of the members of the Church. Motivated by Pastor Rudy García Santisteban, they started classes. At first, classes were held in the Sabbath School rooms of the San Benito Central Church. It operated for some years under the name Co-Educational Adventist School until the name was changed to the current one. It is located on a property next to the offices of the North Guatemala Mission, which is at 0-54 First Avenue, 3 de Abril, San Benito, Petén. Since 2017, CAP has offered the preschool, elementary, and secondary levels.⁸ The school has 12 teachers, 2 administrators, and 1 service person.

Getsemaní Adventist School is located in Aldea Las Cruces, Petén. This school was started in 1993 with the authorization of the Ministry of Education to offer the first four grades of elementary school. As of 2017, it offered the preschool, elementary, secondary, and preparatory levels.⁹ Getsemaní Adventist School has eight teachers, two administrative staff, and one service person.

Las Lajas Adventist Camp was created at the initiative of the administrators of the North Guatemala Mission in 2013. Their purpose was to end the illegal exploitation of natural resources that some non-Adventists were carrying out on the property. The camp has more than 600 hectares (more than 1,500 acres) of land, which the Guatemalan government granted to the church in the 1970s. The camp has some structures, including a meeting place that can be used for youth events and meetings of the leaders and departments of the church.¹⁰ The camp was closed during 2017 and 2018 due to the costs of maintenance. But, at the beginning of 2019, the

necessary repairs and remodeling were initiated. The property has two employees who provide security and maintenance.

Origins of the Seventh-day Adventist Work in the Territory of the North Guatemala Mission

The Adventist message entered Guatemala about 1893 or 1894 through Puerto Barrios, Izabal, which is in the territory of the North Guatemala Mission.¹¹ The message was brought by Adventist English-speaking members from Jamaica and the Bay Islands. They lived in Livingston and Puerto Barrios and worked for the United Fruit Company (UFCO), a North-American business, and the International Rail Central America (IRCA). They began to preach the message in the department of Izabal.¹² For 15 years, the work of the Adventist Church in Izabal belonged to the West Indian Conference. In 1908, E. L. Cardey and C. A. Nowlen organized a branch Sabbath School in Puerto Barrios, Izabal.¹³

On June 2, 1920, an Adventist colporteur, probably from Jamaica, wrote a letter in Los Amates, Izabal. This letter describes his experiences while canvassing in Rabinal in Baja Verapaz and Cobán in Alta Verapaz.¹⁴

In 1931, the Puerto Barrios church was annexed to the Belize Mission. It remained part of it for six years because the language used for preaching was English.¹⁵

The next year, 30 people who kept the Sabbath in Petén were waiting to be baptized. In 1937, Orley Ford baptized Javier Sosa, whose wife had been baptized six months before by Aguilar Canjura.¹⁶ In this way, efforts began to organize the Spanish church, which was officially established in 1938. During more than 30 years, this congregation worshiped in the English-speaking church on 7th Avenue between 14th and 15th Streets in Puerto Barrios, where the Bethania Adventist School now operates. The Adventist message was presented with power through printed material and dedicated people—people who were ready to overcome whatever obstacle there was to spread the gospel throughout this territory.

In 1975, Graciela Benavidez from the Puerto Barrios church began to visit the El Salvador consul and his family regularly. A few months later, the nephew and the mother of the consul accepted the Adventist message and were baptized.¹⁷

Two years later, in 1977, the España and Girón families, both Adventists from Ipala, Chiquimula, in the east of Guatemala, joined the group of believers in San Benito Petén and continued to preach the message. A story shared by Brother Wilfido tells of a certain occasion when he was sharing the message with his uncle Manuel, who lived in San Juan de Dios village. His uncle threatened to kill him with a knife if he continued to talk about the Sabbath. But with the passing of years, his uncle also embraced the Adventist faith.¹⁸

In 1985, Renee Martínez heard that there was a group of Sabbath keepers in the district of Petén, which covered 36,000 square kilometers (13,900 square miles) and was scarcely populated. After traveling for two days on a motorcycle in this dense jungle area, Martínez met the small group in the El Pato village. He was surprised to find that these humble people knew both the Bible doctrines and the health norms of our church. His surprise was even greater when he found out that the villagers in El Pato had a small, battery-operated radio. There they tuned into Unión Radio, the Adventist radio station in Guatemala. All the families in the village would get together each evening and each Sabbath to listen to Unión Radio. When the pastor arrived, they turned over to him the tithe they had set aside over the four years since they had started getting together, which amounted to US\$500.00.¹⁹

Formative Events Leading to the Organization of the North Guatemala Mission

From the time the gospel began to be preached in the north of the country, the Adventist Church in Guatemala has aimed to spread the gospel throughout its territory. By 2002, the Church had been growing throughout the territory of what is now the Northeast Mission of Guatemala. This field included the departments of Zacapa, Chiquimula, El Progreso, Jalapa, Jutiapa, Izabal, Petén, Alta Verapaz, and Baja Verapaz. Faced with such growth, the mid year Inter-American Division Session voted on May 15, 2006, to divide this mission. This is how the North Guatemala Mission came into being. Román Monroy was named as president by the administrative board of the North Central-American Union. The North Guatemala Mission includes four departments: Izabal, Petén, Alta Verapaz, and Baja Verapaz.

Starting a new mission carries many challenges. Plans were made to establish headquarters for the North Guatemala Mission in the municipality of Poptún. A year later, the offices were located at the Monroy's home. Later, in 2003, the offices were moved to the municipality of San Benito, Petén. On August 18, 2005, a trial North Guatemala Mission was inaugurated, and in 2006 the first quadrennial session was held at the Espléndido Hotel, municipality of Santa Elena, Petén.²⁰

It wasn't until the mid-year session held on May 15, 2006, that the Inter-American Division approved the reorganization as stated in the corresponding vote. The vote was to "accept the report of the commission for the study to reorganize the territory of the Northeast Guatemala Mission into two local fields: North Guatemala Mission, with headquarters in San Benito, Petén, and the East Guatemala Mission, with headquarters in Santa Cruz, Zacapa."²¹

What Remains to Be Done for the North Guatemala Mission to Fulfill Its Mission

1. In fulfilling the mission, the keys are spiritual revival and discipleship in pastors, administrators, and members.
2. Each one of the initiatives put out by the General Conference and the Inter-American Division (for example, Lord Transform Me and Total Member Involvement) has been adopted. These initiatives are carried out, and each member of the church is strengthened in carrying out the gospel commission.
3. Continue inspiring the members of the Church in the territory of the North Guatemala Mission and give them the tools necessary for ministry in the service of the Lord.
4. Promote stewardship in each church member to provide the means necessary to finish the preaching of the eternal gospel on this earth and to hasten the return of our Lord.
5. Overcome the linguistic barrier created by the many different Mayan languages spoken in this territory. Since 2015, projects have been started for producing materials in the Mayan languages to reach them with the gospel message.

List of Presidents

Román Monroy (2002–2007); Jaime Torres (2008–2011); Adolfo Xol Pá (2012–2017); Oswaldo Munguía (2017–).

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4. Juan López, director of the radio program, interview by Melvin Geovany Ramírez Acevedo, June 26, 2019, via WhatsApp.
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