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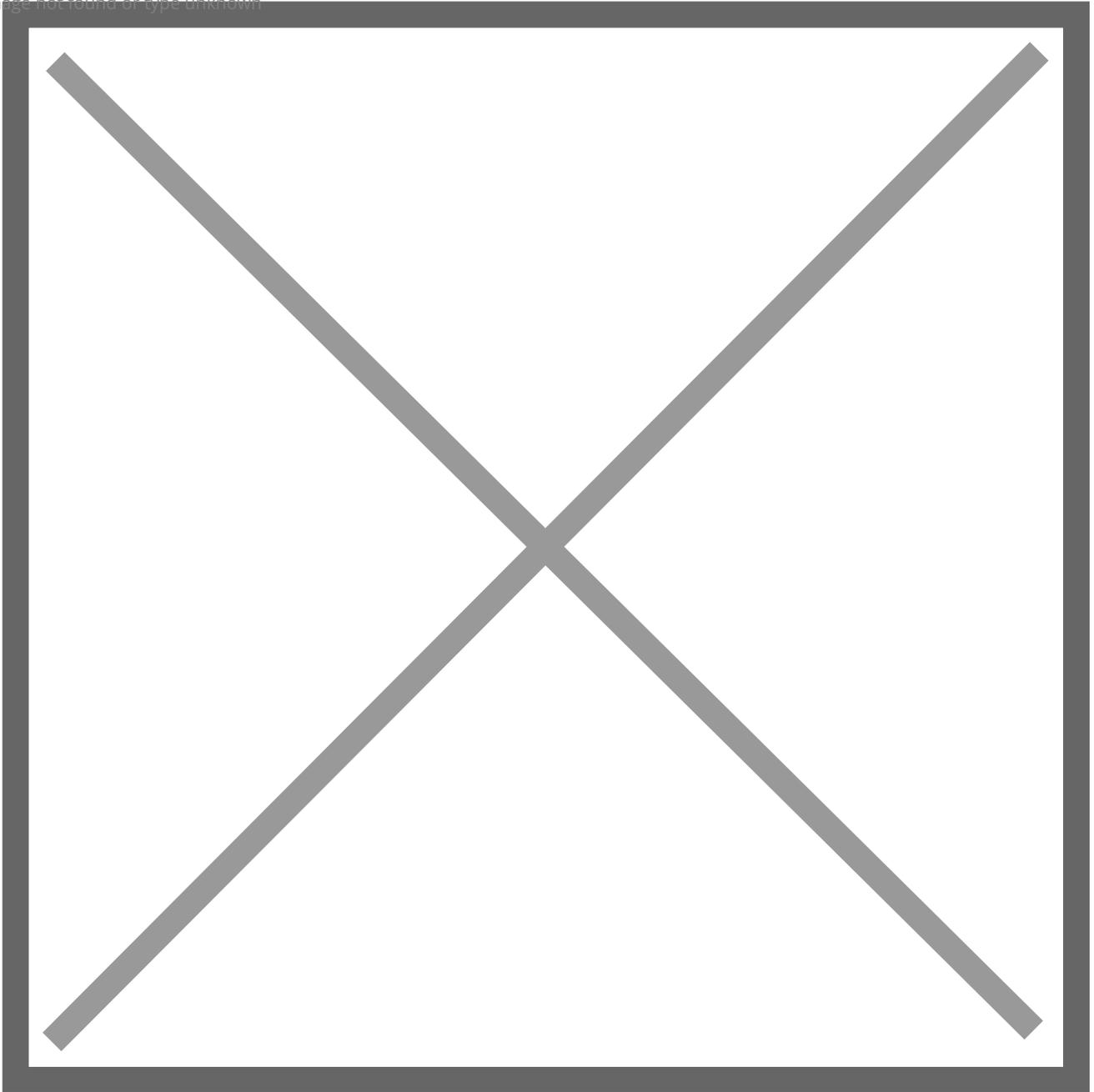


Photo courtesy of West Panama Conference.

West Panama Conference

LUIS ALBERTO GUERRA

Luis Alberto Guerra Beitia, MAPM (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan), is the president of West Panama Conference. He has served as a pastor, publications director, youth director, radio director, and executive secretary. He is married to Nilka Araúz and has two daughters.

West Panama Conference is an administrative unit of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Panama. It is a part of Panama Union Mission in the Inter-American Division of Seventh-day Adventists.

Territory and Statistics

West Panama Conference includes the Province of Chiriquí and is located in the western sector of Panama. Its borders are the Province of Bocas del Toro and the Indigenous Region of Ngäbe Buglé to the north, the province of Veraguas to the east, and the Pacific Ocean to the south.

Chiriquí Province has a total area of 6,490.9 square kilometers and a maximum altitude of 3,474 meters at Volcán Barú.¹ It has a variety of climates, which include hot and humid lowlands and cool, moist highlands. Its population is 462,056 with a density of 71 inhabitants per square kilometer.²

The main language of Panama is Spanish, but several indigenous languages are spoken in this area as well, including Ngäbere, which is spoken by over 133,000 people. Other groups speak languages such as English, Chinese, French, Italian, German, and Yugoslavian, among others.³

As of 2020, the conference had 153 churches and 20,327 members in a population of 548,930.⁴ It also had seven primary schools, two high schools, 20 ordained ministers, and six licensed ministers. Its offices are located at Carretera Panamericana, Coquito, David, Chiriquí, Panama. It is a part of Panama Union Mission and falls within the territory of the Inter-American Division.

Institutions

Escuela Adventista Ismael Ellis is located in the Cerro Iglesias community in the Ngäbe Buglé indigenous region. The school was founded in 1932 by Ismael Ellis, a pioneer of Adventism in that territory. Its enrollment is a little over one hundred students.

Escuela Adventista de San Andrés is located in the San Andres community and was founded in 1924. This school was established through Ismael Ellis's efforts and, throughout history, has been a stronghold for Adventist work. Its enrollment is around 150 students. It is the only private school in the area and is well respected in the community.

Escuela Adventista de la Concepción is located 250 meters north of Manuel Amador Guerrero Park, between Segunda Norte and Quinta Norte avenues. This school was founded in 1919 by Ismael Ellis and was officially recognized by the government in 1943. It has around 425 students and remains the largest private school in the La Concepción district. It has around 30 full-time employees.

Escuela de Cerro Punta is located on Calle Principal of Cerro Punta, Panama. It was founded in 1946. It is the only private school in the area and has around 85 students.

Escuela Adventista Bilingüe de David is located on the Pan-American Highway next to the *Colegio Adventista Bilingüe de David*. It was founded in 1976 and is a primary-level institution. It has around 440 students, the largest enrollment at the primary level in the Adventist education system in Panama. It has around 35 full-time employees and is considered one of the best schools in the area.

Academia Adventista Bilingüe de Volcán was founded in 1946 and is located behind the Adventist Church of Volcán on Volcán district's main avenue. It has around 30 full-time employees and an enrollment of around 350 students.

Centro Educativo de Barú is located behind the baseball stadium in Río Mar. It was founded in 1979 and has an enrollment of around one hundred students.

Colegio Adventista Bilingüe de David is located next to the *Escuela Adventista Bilingüe de David* on the Pan-American Highway. It was founded in 1991 and built by Maranatha Volunteers International. It currently has the largest number of secondary-level students in Panama's Adventist education system and offers programs in computer science and information technology. It has about 600 students and around 50 full-time employees.

Instituto Adventista Panameño is located on Vía Volcán Road and eight minutes from La Concepción. It was founded in 1943 and has around 550 students. The institution sits on over 90 hectares of land. For over 70 years, it has offered a solid education based on spiritual values and advanced academic, technological, and scientific teaching. It offers programs in science, business, and information technology. It is the only institution in Panama Union Mission's territory that offers student housing, which has served students from all over the country for many years. Currently, it has the following industries: a bakery, pastry, livestock, and agriculture. In 2018, "Bongo Natural and Fresh" opened its doors to the public as a restaurant that promotes healthy eating and a good lifestyle.

Origins of Adventist Work in Conference Territory

By early 1917, a self-taught railroad agent named Ismael Ellis had received Adventist literature and became motivated to study the Bible. He decided to give his life to God after having experienced a near-death work accident.⁵

In those years, there was no Adventist pastor assigned to that area. Ismael Ellis would fast and pray every Sabbath for God to send someone to baptize him. In the meantime, Ellis began to share his faith with interested people in areas of San Andrés, Bijagual, Sortová, and Concepción. Ellis rented a ranch on a small hill, where several of the new believers met with him every Sabbath. Pastor Max Trummer, while on an evangelistic tour from November 1917 to March 1918, met them at the ranch when he arrived in Concepción. Ellis was finally

baptized with seven other people, representing the first Adventists. Since then, the Adventist faith has grown by the thousands in this area of the country.⁶

Thus, the first Hispanic congregation was established in Panama and located in La Concepción, Chiriquí province. Ismael Ellis, taking advantage of the newly built chapel, launched an initiative to open the first Adventist school for the 1919-1920 school year with an enrollment of 12 students.

In 1923, the church of La Concepción was officially organized as the first Hispanic church in Panama. As the years passed, the city became a fertile area for evangelism, and many churches arose with a high commitment to the mission entrusted by God. For 67 years, members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the province of Chiriquí were part of the great Panama Conference located in Balboa, Ancón, Panama City.

In 1990, when Panama Conference's territory was reorganized, West Panama Mission was created to serve the provinces of Chiriquí, Bocas del Toro, and Veraguas. The Adventist members of the province of Chiriquí were part of Panama Conference until 1990, West Panama Mission from 1990 to 2010, and West Panama Conference from 2010 to the present.

Events That Led to Organization of West Panama Conference

Panama Mission was organized in 1906. By 1929, it was reorganized as a conference, and its territory was comprised of the Republic of Panama, the Canal Zone, Talamanca Valley, and the Colombian islands of San Andrés and Old Providence. In 1929, it had 23 churches and 1,166 members.⁷

At the end of the 1980s, the Republic of Panama was in one of the worst moments in its republican history. The country was going through a political and economic crisis that threatened the nation's foundations. In that difficult time, Panama Conference, continuing God's mission, decided to ask Central American Union Mission to create a new field to better serve the brethren of Chiriquí, Veraguas, and Bocas del Toro.

Central American Union Mission led by Pastor Arístides González designated Pastor Johannes Nikels to attend to the field until the first Panama mission could be created. Pastor Nikels thus undertook his work with passion and enthusiasm. The country's banking system had been closed due to the crisis, and this pastor toured the churches in the different districts, collecting the churches' tithes and offerings to deliver to the conference's treasury.

After much effort and hard work, the brethren anxiously awaited the triennial congress to be held on January 23-25, 1990. The congress chaired by President Arístides González with 116 delegates present would be conducted in Veraguas province, a location central to the entire country. West Panama Mission was organized on January 26, 1990. Its first president was Pastor René Argueta with Eliaser Utate as secretary-treasurer.⁸

West Panama Mission's territory included the provinces of Chiriquí, Veraguas, and Bocas del Toro with a population of 647,800 people. The mission was organized with 58 churches, 13,003 members, 12 ordained

pastors, two aspiring ministers, 25 licensed missionaries, and 64 teachers. It also had seven elementary schools and a high school.

West Panama Mission's offices were located on the Pan-American Highway in David, Chiriquí, Panama. The new mission faced great challenges. Panama was recovering from a critical political/economic situation that caused a recession. Educational institutions also faced serious challenges. However, they developed and expanded over the years with God's blessing.

At the end of West Panama Mission's first triennial period, the field had 66 organized churches, 16,649 members, and ten district pastors. On January 1, 1993, Central American Union Mission appointed Pastor Emilio de León as president of West Panama Mission.

Under Pastor Emilio De León's leadership, the "Global Mission" project initiated by Central American Union Mission was launched. The project called all of the Adventist University of Central America 1993 theology graduates to plant churches in the mission's territory for one year. After several months of hard work, nine churches were planted, giving West Panama Mission's growth momentum.

On March 1, 1996, Central American Union Conference appointed Pastor Milton Castillo as West Panama Mission's president. The mission had 72 organized churches and 20,415 church members. It also had eight ordained pastors. Under President Milton Castillo's leadership, the youth movement throughout the field grew, and the church was blessed. The West Panama Mission brethren were challenged to obtain a presence in radio media and, in 2000, acquired the 90.1 FM stereo frequency.

At the end of 2000, in a Central American Union Conference session held in Nicaragua and directed by Union President Juan Otoniel Perla, Pastor Jesús Vicente Meza was appointed president of West Panama Mission, which began its administrative period on January 1, 2001. The mission had 89 organized churches, 27,997 members, and 13 ordained pastors.⁹

The new headquarters of West Panama Mission was inaugurated on December 21, 2006. Inter-American Division President Israel Leito and South Central American Union Conference President Wilfredo Ruiz attended the inauguration along with West Panama Mission's administrators and board of directors.

Since 1990, the number of districts and pastors in West Panama Mission increased, the "Global Vision Radio" studios were built, and the Adventist radio sponsorship system was established. On February 17, 2009, West Panama Mission requested a change of status from South Central American Union Conference to change the mission's status to a conference.¹⁰ South Central American Union Conference then made the request to the Inter-American Division to conduct a change of status study.

West Panama Mission was renamed West Panama Conference on March 14, 2010. The event took place in Hotel Bambito in Chiriquí province with 256 delegates present. It was attended by Inter-American Division President

Israel Leito and, from South Central American Union Conference, President Wilfredo Ruiz and Treasurer Silas Martínez. Pastor Máximo Braulio Concepción Quiel was named president of West Panama Conference with Pastor Carlos Alberto Saldaña Álvarez as secretary and José Gilberto Smith Romero as treasurer. West Panama Conference had 128 organized churches, 47,987 members, and 17 ordained pastors. Its territory included Chiriquí, Bocas del Toro, and Veraguas provinces with a population of 1,087,790.¹¹ Its goals were to foster growth, strengthen the youth department, and work to create a new mission in Bocas del Toro.

Development of West Panama Conference

West Panama Conference soon grew in finances and evangelistic outreach. In a four-year term, 32 districts were established, and 37 pastors were appointed. Its educational institutions were one of its strengths. In 2014, the Bilingual Adventist School of Santiago in Veraguas province opened. It was built by Maranatha Volunteers International.

The Bocas del Toro province experienced great growth, and West Panama Conference requested Panama Union Mission to organize Bocas del Toro as a field. Panama Union Mission participated in the purchase of land and construction of a building. Bocas de Toro Mission was established on December 21, 2014, with 17 organized churches, 26 groups, 3,261 members, and eight pastors. Present at the event were Inter-American Division President Israel Leito and, from Panama Union Mission, President José De Gracia, Executive Secretary Carlos Saldaña, and Treasurer José Smith.

By March 2019, the Dolega Educational Center, which was also built by Maranatha Volunteers International, opened in Panama. Also, the 98.1 FM radio frequency was acquired for Bocas del Toro province, and the 95.1 FM frequency was purchased for the city of Chitré and the provinces of Herrera, Los Santos, Veraguas, and Coclé.

Prospects for Conference Development

Develop educational institutions

Build and equip a youth camp

Establish six new districts in the city of David

List of Presidents

West Panama Mission

René Romeo Argueta Pacheco (1984-1993); José Emilio De León (1993-1996); Milton Alberto Castillo Gómez (1996-2000); Jesús Vicente Meza Baidés (2001-2010).

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Máximo Braulio Concepción Quiel (2010-2018); Luis Alberto Guerra Beitia (2018-).

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5. Osmel Serrano Serracín, "Our Land of Promise: History of the Panama Adventist Institute," unpublished document, 2017, 21-24, personal archives.
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 11. "West Panama Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2011), 166, accessed April 16, 2019, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Yearbooks/YB2011.pdf>.
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