

East Puerto Rico Conference

FRANCISCO J. VEGA

Francisco J. Vega, D.Min. (McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois), is a retired minister who has served the church in Puerto Rico as president of West Puerto Rico Conference and North Puerto Rico Mission. He has also served as department director for personal ministries, education, and communications; district pastor; manager of *Radio Paraíso*; and, most recently, associate professor of Antillean Adventist University. He is married to Milca Sánchez Vargas and has three adult children.

The East Puerto Rico Conference was created in the late 1960s when rapid growth made it necessary to divide the Puerto Rico Conference.

Territory and Statistics

The territory of the East Puerto Rico Conference is Puerto Rico, comprising the municipalities of Bayamón, Cataño, Cayey, Cidra, Comerío, Maunabo, Patillas, San Lorenzo, Yabucoa, and all municipalities located east of these, including the islands of Vieques and Culebra.

In 2019, the East Puerto Rico Conference had 127 churches and 3 companies. Its membership in 2019 was 14,164 among a population of 1,482,697.¹

Origins of the Work

The Adventist presence in this territory began in 1903, with an Adventist who arrived from the island of Antigua.² The first baptism took place on September 27, 1906, officiated by B. F. Connerly.³ In August 1909, William Steele was appointed as the first president of the Puerto Rican Mission and established the office in the western region of the island. By the end of 1911, he moved to San Juan, where they established, in addition to the office, the first church in the capital.

In December 1912, five souls were baptized, four women and one man, Rafael López Miranda. López Miranda became Steele's right hand, working as a literature evangelist and dedicating himself to establishing new congregations.⁴ One of these was in Cayey, in an evangelistic campaign by Steele and López Miranda that they held in 1915. That same year, the mission bought a two-story building in Santurce, where in addition to the mission office, it housed a church, and they established the first school with 26 students.⁵

One of the reasons for the growth of Adventist work was the preparation of local workers. In the summer of 1916, William Steele conducted the first course in the city of Aguadilla with the participation of 8 youths.⁶ The following year, a second course was held in Cayey, with the assistance of 30 youths.⁷ In 1918, a plot of land was

acquired in Aibonito, where a preparatory college was established, which was inaugurated in 1920⁸

Development

The decade of the 1920s was one of rapid growth; churches were organized in Cayey (1921), Río Piedras (1922), Fajardo (1924), Cupey (1925), and Naguabo (1928). At the beginning of the 1930s, the situation changed due to the Great Depression in the United States, which affected Puerto Rico. The input of tithes and offerings dropped dramatically, to the point that several pastors were dismissed and others worked part-time. In the 1940s, the situation changed, and the Lord restored and strengthened the mission. There was growth of 130 percent, which led to organizing the mission as a conference; this was the second field of the Inter-American Division to achieve this status. At the General Conference Session held June 3–6, 1948, S. L. Folkenberg was elected as president of the newly founded Puerto Rico Conference. At that time, the Puerto Rico Conference had 35 organized churches and 2,627 members throughout the island.⁹ In 1950, Folkenberg was moved to the Antillian Union Mission office, and Eloy Acosta was appointed president, the first conference president who was born in Puerto Rico.

By 1952, the membership had grown to 3,215 in 43 churches. New schools were opened, and there were 25 literature evangelists. Institutions such as Bella Vista Hospital (1954) and the Colegio Adventista Puertorriquena (Puerto Rico Academy, 1957) were established. By 1960, there were 67 churches with 4,656 members.¹⁰ At the end of the decade, the number of members exceeded 10,000 in 122 churches.

Given the progress of the work on the island, the board of directors of the Antillian Union, in a meeting held on December 15, 1968, approved the reorganization of the Puerto Rico Conference into two: the East Puerto Rico and West Puerto Rico Conferences.¹¹

The East Puerto Rico Conference named Ernesto Santos as president, administering 70 churches and 6,068 members. In their first biennial congress held in 1970, they reported the baptism of 1,493 people, the organization of 14 new churches, and the employment of 52 literature evangelists. By 1980, membership grew to 13,000 in 120 churches and 15 companies. In the 1990s, members exceeded 16,000. In August 1999, what is now the Puerto Rican Union Conference requested the Inter-American Division to reorganize its territory.¹² By the year 2000, the north and south Puerto Rico missions were established.

In 1990, the East Puerto Rico Conference under the leadership of Abdiel Acosta bought the WZOL radio station. In addition, it had nine schools with an approximate enrollment of 1,179 students, a youth center, and the Pedro López Ramos Campground. The Advent movement was present in all 27 municipalities that comprised the territory of the conference.

Presidents

Porto Rican/Puerto Rico Mission: William Steele (1909–1920); C. V. Achenbach (1921–1923); H. E. Baasch (1923–1927); L. J. Borrowdale (1927–1935); W. E. Baxter (1935–1936); W. H. England (1937–1939); L. L. Dunn (1939–1944); C. P. Cramer (1944–1945); S. L. Folkenberg (1945–1948)

Puerto Rico Conference: S. L. Folkenberg (1948–1950); Eloy Acosta (1951–1955); Francisco Ruiz (1955–1957); D. W. Shoen (1957–1958); A. H. Riffel (1959–1962); R. R. Drachenberg (1963–1966); F. H. Figueroa (1967–1969)

East Puerto Rico Conference: Ernesto C. Santos (1970–1973); Héctor Brignoni (1973–1974); Raúl Villanueva Torres (1974–1975); Isaac Suárez (1975–1979); Francisco Ramos (1980–1983); Félix Ríos (1983–1990); Abdiel Acosta (1990–1995); Héctor L. Reyes (1995–1998); Abdiel Acosta (1998–2002); Pedro M. Canales (2002–2008); Oreste Natera Aguiar (2008–2018); José M. López (2018–).

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NOTES

1. *Seventh-day Adventist Online Yearbook*, "East Puerto Rico Conference," accessed March 31, 2020, <https://www.adventistyearbook.org/entity?EntityID=13934>; Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, "2019 Annual Statistical Report: Advance Release of Membership Statistics by Division for 2018," 5.
2. Mrs. A. M. Fischer, "Self-Supporting Work in Porto Rico," *ARH*, June 9, 1903, 14.

3. B. E. Connerly, "Porto Rico," *ARH*, November 22, 1906, 22.
 4. Letter from William Steele, April 15, 1944.
 5. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1916), 272.
 6. Wm. Steele, "Porto Rico," *ARH*, December 21, 1916, 10.
 7. Homer D. Casebeer, "Porto Rico Seventh Day Adventist Training School," *ARH*, September 6, 1917, 18.
 8. E. E. Andino 55, "Porto Rico," May 4, 1922, 20.
 9. "Noticias," *Messenger*, September 1948, 6.
 10. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1960), 118.
 11. Minutes of the Antillian Union, December 15, 1968, 1418.
 12. Minutes of the Puerto Rico Union Conference, August 19, 1999, action 99-173.
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