

Ellis Legour, Juan Ismael (1888–1947)

JAVIER ALBERTO CASTRELLÓN

Javier Alberto Castrellón holds a B.A. in Education (Adventist University of Central America), an M.A. in Educational Administration from UMCA University (Costa Rica), an M.A. in Higher Education from Cartago University (Panama), and a Doctorate in Educational Sciences from the University of Panama. He worked as a professor at the Panamanian Adventist Institute, in Chiriquí; director of the Bilingual Adventist School of David, in Chiriquí; director of Education of the South-Central American Union. Currently, he works as director of Education, Communication and Family Ministries at the Panama Adventist Union.

Juan Ismael Ellis Legour was a pioneer of pioneers, the initiator of the Hispanic Adventist work in the province of Chiriquí and the founder of churches and schools in Panama.

Early Years

Juan Ismael Ellis Legour was born on May 6, 1888, in the province of Panama.¹ He was the eldest of three brothers, including Osmond and Nathaniel. His parents were Carlota Legour and Alfredo Ellis. His father, an excellent cook, worked on a boat. On some of his trips, he simply disappeared for long periods of time, leaving his family in complete abandonment. Due to the absence of his father, Juan Ismael could only study up to the fourth grade. As an older son, even at his young age, he began to work to help his mother support the family. He learned the trade of blacksmithing, which opened the doors for him to get a job in the canal area. Knowing the great value of books, he read and studied in his spare time, gradually learning all he could. He taught himself English and, in his work, he made many Chirican friends who invited him to travel to that province. At 27 years of age and accompanied by his friend Raúl Alba, he arrived in the community of Remedios in the province of Chiriquí.



Juan Ismael Ellis Legour

Photo courtesy of Central Panama Conference.

Marriage

In Remedios, he met Zacarías Pérez Amores, the daughter of Patricia Mora and Juan Pérez, whom he married in the city of David in the Catholic Church La Sagrada Familia on April 12, 1915. Ismael worked in the construction of the railroad and located his residence to the community of San Andres.

Living in San Andrés, he was visited by his mother and brother Nathaniel. She and her children had recently come to know the Adventist message and were eager to share it with Ismael and his wife. She brought them a Bible as a gift. At home was Mrs. Patricia, who took care of her daughter during her pregnancy. The relationship between the two mothers-in-law was quite tense. Communication was difficult because one spoke only English and the other only Spanish. Besides, those "odd and strange beliefs" of which Doña Carlota spoke were not pleasant subjects for her.

Preparation and Study of the Bible

In his spare time, Juan Ismael enjoyed reading the Adventist books and the Bible that his mother brought them.

Although he raised pigs to earn money, as he read in the Bible and the writings of Ellen White that these were filthy animals, he decided to stop rearing pigs and instead began a tobacco plantation. He cultivated this plantation until the birth of Carlota, his first daughter, on August 16, 1917. He did not continue this activity because, through reading and studying Ellen White's books, he found tobacco to be harmful to his health and that of others.

Ismael and his family moved to the city of La Concepción, leaving believers in San Andrés, Bijagual, Sortová, and Volcán since he shared his biblical discoveries with all those who could hear him in the different villages he visited on his mare Mariana.

When Ismael moved to Concepción, he already carried in his heart the love of our Lord Jesus Christ and, as he himself repeated: "When Christ dwells in the heart, man cannot remain silent." In La Concepción, a town that grew with the construction of the railroad, he worked in the local store with his friend Carlos Troetsch.

Ismael rented a ranch, one block from the park that was the boundary of the town, on a hill. There, he decided to hold study meetings on Saturdays with the believers he evangelized in San Andrés, Bijagual, Sortová, Volcán, and Mata Gorda. They arrived on Fridays so they could be together on Saturday and continue studying the Bible.

Pastor Max Trummer, upon realizing the existence of the group, decided to travel to La Concepción, and it is there that he baptized Juan Ismael, Zacarias (Mary, his wife), Leoncia Muñoz (Tita), Patricia (his mother-in-law), Gregoria (Ismael's sister-in-law), Guberto Grajales with his wife Nicolasa and Ubaldino Concepción (Librado Concepción's father). These were the first eight people baptized in the province of Chiriquí.

Ellis wanted to found church schools. With the maps of the streets and avenues of the city, he located, about 100 steps from the ranch where they met, the land where the new school would begin. He sold a piece of land he had in the neighborhood of El Porvenir and bought the lot of land for the new school-church.

In 1917, the church was built where the school began to operate in 1919. He was the school's first teacher and lay worker. Among his students were Librado Concepción and Clementina.

In 1924, when the purchase of the land acquired six years earlier was formalized, Ismael put the property in the name of the West Caribbean Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. The chapel and the church school were already functioning there.

As a self-supporting worker, he ran the primary school, the church, and the Thorp family store, which was on the corner of the land diagonal to the school. Above the store was the abode of the Thorp family, where their youngest daughter, Patricia Isabel Ellis Perez, was born on June 9, 1925. She was named after her maternal grandmother, who claimed this right since their first daughter had been named after her paternal grandmother.

In early 1926, Ismael moved to David where, with the Guerra and Atencio families (José, Amala and their son Antonio) who were already there, they formed a group of Adventist members. In David, he served as a district councilman in addition to being pastor of the church.

After having worked as a lay worker and school teacher without a direct salary from the church, he was called to be a full-time worker paid by the West Caribbean Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

God was preparing a group of believers in Boquete. From the village of La Concepción, some brethren went to Boquete to work and harvest coffee. There, they listened to a group of young people meeting on the banks of the river. These young people sang and worshiped on Saturday since they had found literature at the train station arriving in Boquete that convinced them to keep the Sabbath. When Ismael discovered this on one of his train journeys, he looked for and found "the madmen" (as they were called). It was the Quirós family: Teófilo and his wife, Ángel, Máximo, Félix, Fermín, Antonio, Adelina (Teófilo's mother) and grandmother of the other five, all brothers and cousins. The group was prepared and soon baptized by Pastor Ismael Ellis.

In March 1927, Ismael left for the Indigenous Region with his wife Zacarias, his daughters Carlota and Patricia, and Santos Justavino (a friend). They travelled by sea from the port of Pedregal to Remedios and journeyed on horseback to Chichica, the place where they settled to begin the evangelistic work in the Ngäbe Buglé region. This experience was not an easy one since, on one occasion, their house was burned to the ground and some had even made several attempts to poison them. However, Ismael continued with his plans.

When they arrived in Chichica, after traveling a whole day, they stayed in a hut that they later rented as a residence and meeting center. Whole families came there daily with their sick, and they were cared for by the Ellis family. God enlightened them on what to do in each case, so the sick was healed. This news spread throughout the region, and thus the number of patients and believers continued to grow.

A few months after arriving in Chichica, Pastor Ismael became ill and had to travel to the capital city to receive medical attention. He found his friend, Dr. Arnulfo Arias, there, serving as secretary of Public Health. When he told him about the work he was doing among the natives, Dr. Arias gave him a large quantity of first-aid medicines, which he found very useful.

In 1931, he established the Adventist School of Cerro Iglesias, that functions still today as an educational institution that serves the community, educating young people and preparing them for service to the nation in the fear of God.

In 1932, Ismael again fell ill and was transferred to Panama City for treatment. After his recovery, he was sent to work in Bocas del Toro, where he lived for several years.

On April 22, 1947, he rested in the Lord. His body is in the cemetery of Corozal, Panama City, where he waits to hear the Lord's call in His Second Coming.

Legacy

Juan Ismael Ellis Legour was a pioneer of evangelism in Chiriqui and a leader in Adventist education in the Republic of Panama. He built the first Spanish-speaking Adventist church in the province of Chiriqui in Panama and Central America. Knowing the power of education, he began recruiting students and, in the same church, began classes for the 1919-1920 school year, opening the first Spanish-speaking Adventist school in the Republic of Panama. He began evangelization and education in the Ngäbe Buglé Indigenous Region, using the Bible as a textbook. Today, there is a school with 120 students, and the name it bears is the Ismael Ellis Adventist School in recognition of his contributions.

Note

1. Information in this article was obtained from Oliva McKay Ellis, granddaughter of Juan Ismael Ellis, daughter of Patricia Ellis. Oliva McKay is a 42-year-old retired educator.

encyclopedia.adventist.org is an official website of the [Seventh-day Adventist World Church](#)

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000