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Southwest Venezuela Conference

PEDRO ALEXANDER BERRIOS HUÉRFANO

Pedro Alexander Berrios Huerfano (MPT, Venezuelan Adventist University, Nirgua, Yaracuy) has served the church, since graduating in 1994, as pastor, publications director, stewardship director, education director, ministerial secretary, and music director. Currently, he is a district pastor in the East Andean Venezuela Mission and is married to Yasmin del Valle Delfin Gil.

The Southwest Venezuela Conference is part of the West Venezuela Union Mission in the Inter-American Division of Seventh-day Adventists.

The Southwest Venezuela Conference has as its territory the state of Táchira and the western part of the state of Apure (the municipalities of Páez and Rómulo Gallegos) in Venezuela. The official language of the region is Spanish. This conference belongs to the West Venezuela Union Mission and is located in the territory of the Inter-American Division of Seventh-day Adventists.

As of June 2019, the Southwest Venezuela Conference had 93 organized churches and 34 organized groups, with 23,862 members distributed in 19 pastoral districts, cared for by nine ordained pastors and 11 licensed ministers. There are also 130 employees in three secondary schools, and the conference has a dental and medical clinic. The headquarters for the conference is located in the urban area of Las Lomas, Zulia Avenue, Quinta Misia Nena B-72, Parish of San Juan Bautista, San Cristóbal, Táchira, Venezuela.

Origin of Adventist Work in the Territory

The origin of the Adventist work in the territory of the Southwest Venezuela Conference began in 1921 when the Puerto Rican colporteurs, Rafael López Miranda and Bernardo Hernández, left Caracas to carry out evangelism in the Andean region of Venezuela. At that time, freedom of religion was not well received, especially in this region of the country, something that is true to this day.¹ Rafael López Miranda arrived in San Cristóbal, Táchira, and made it the center of his work. He established a strong friendship with the owners of the inn where he was staying. In his first month of work he sold a large quantity of Adventist literature, including the book *Heralds of the Morning*.

Then death threats were made against the two men. López Miranda did not stop his work because of the threats, but his companion, Bernardo, decided to return to safety in Caracas.² On May 10, 1922, Bernardo sent a telegram to the mission office in Caracas. The telegram said "I am in trouble; act quickly." "At the same time, he wrote to Venezuela's Minister of the Interior, telling him that he (Bernardo) was a North American citizen and that the priest of the village of Rubio was interfering in his business. In reply, the Minister of the Interior sent a message to the governor of Táchira, instructing him to protect Mr. López."³ By now, the situation had turned difficult and complicated. On Sunday, May 14, Rafael López Miranda started to travel to the village of Grita, with the intention of delivering books from the two boxes he had sent ahead. As he was walking along the edge of the river, he was ambushed by a group of men and shot several times.⁴ This tragedy occurred the morning of May 15, 1922. When Rafael's body was discovered, it was seen that he had money on him, which ruled out the motive of robbery.⁵ After the death of López Miranda, Pastor Fitch was commissioned by the Venezuela Mission to gather the belongings of the deceased man and to bury him in the Venezuela Andes.

On March 10, 1928, a church was organized in San Cristóbal with 14 members. In 1929, Antonio Lamas was sent to San Cristóbal, Táchira. From there he moved through the territory of the state, organizing groups in Ureña, Cordero, Rubio, and Colón. He built the church of La Enfadosa and organized a Sabbath School in Cúcuta, Colombia, which later became the Cúcuta Church. In the minutes for the meetings of the Venezuela Adventist Mission Session held in Caracas from March 6 to 11, 1930, the name of José Antonio Lamas is listed as presenting a detailed report about the work in Táchira. At the second Biennial Session (Caracas, April 26-29, 1932) José Antonio Lamas and Amelia Correa de Lamas are listed as delegates from the state of Táchira. The board meeting minutes for the mission meeting held on May 10, 1932, show a vote recommending that "Brother José A. Lamas and his wife and Lilith Newball help in the upcoming evangelistic meetings that will be held in Barquisimeto and Cúcuta." On March 13, 1933, the administrative board voted to "Accept the request from the San Cristóbal Church asking for 400 Bolívares (VEF) to finish the construction of the church in La Enfadosa, sending Brother Lamas to administer it."⁶

On April 1, 1939, the La Enfadosa Church was organized with 38 members. In 1948, Ernestina Moreno was moved to San Cristóbal as a teacher, thus beginning the education work in this region. In 1945, Rufino Serapio Arismendi was transferred to Táchira to organize the churches of San Cristóbal and Miranda, as well as several groups and the school in San Cristóbal. Here we should note the formation of the village of Miranda, started by Arismendi in honor of the martyr Rafael López Miranda, who was assassinated in this region. The village had its own school, church, electrical plant, and water pump. Unfortunately, the church members began to emigrate, and in time the village disappeared.⁷

Official Organization of the Conference

On September 17, 2001, the administrative board of the West Venezuela Mission located in Maracaibo, state of Zulia, voted to study the practicality of reorganizing the territory of the Venezuela-Antilles Union, a vote that is recorded in the minutes for 2001.⁸ On November 19, 2001, at the yearend meetings of the administrative board of the Venezuela-Antilles Union, it was voted to create the Southwest Venezuela Mission, with headquarters in San Cristóbal, Táchira, naming Pastor Bemilde Almerida as president and Professor Juan Zúñiga as secretary-treasurer.¹⁰

Development of the Conference

As time went on, the growth of the mission was evident in every aspect. Soon growth and consolidation made it necessary to reorganize. By 2001 the West Venezuela Mission had 114 organized churches and 88 organized groups, for a total of 202 congregations,¹¹ which made it very difficult to care for all the members and reach every corner of the vast territory. In September of 2004, at its first quadrennial session, the Southwest Venezuela Mission had 64 organized churches, 40 organized groups, 14,425 members, nine ordained pastors, six licensed ministers,

five credentialed missionaries, five educational institutions, two clinics, and two bakery/restaurants. By 2009, the mission had 23,302 members, by 2010 it had 25,339 members, by 2011 it had 26,456 members, and by 2012 it had 27,292 members, 101 organized churches, 60 organized groups, 18 ordained pastors, and five missionary ministers¹²

In 2012, there were 28,021 members, 15 ordained pastors, ten missionary ministers, and 106 organized churches. In 2014, there were 29,760 members, 125 employees, 17 ordained pastors, eight missionary ministers, 114 organized churches, and 67 organized groups.¹³ On November 24, 2014, at the quadrennial session of the conference, it was voted to ask the Inter-American Division for a division of the territory. On March 1, 2015, the conference administrative board voted to purchase property for the headquarters of the new field, named the Central Andean Venezuela Mission. On December 13, 2015, the conference administrative board voted the operating capital to start the Central Andean Venezuela Mission, which was officially established on January 2, 2016. By February 1, 2016, the conference had 21,168 members with 76 organized churches and 42 organized groups, ten ordained pastors, and seven licensed ministers.

Future Plans

As we look at our history, we find some lessons that can guide us in the future. We need to promote the revival and reformation of our members' spiritual lives. We need to make it possible for all of the departments of the church to work together in a unified, coordinated way so as to fully use the gifts and talents that God has given us, and so achieve the mission given to the Church. We need to involve the majority of our members in carrying out this mission. We need to make our members aware of the principles of faithful stewardship.

In the short term, we have made plans to enter the towns of La Tendida and Pregonero in the state of Táchira, bringing them the message of salvation. These are the capitals of municipalities and are located in a part of the state that has very little Adventist presence. The goal is to establish a congregation in each of these places through the recruitment and training of Adventist missionary pioneers. The plan would be to place a couple in each place to live and work there for a year. There would also be a colporteur living in each place for at least a year, selling religious literature and giving Bible studies. There would be a special week held for youth volunteers in these places.

In the long term, it is planned to carry out a reorganization of the territory of the conference. On November 24, 2014, at the quadrennial session of the conference, it was voted to create a region for the Apure highlands. The most important goal is that each city, town and village, family and individual in the territory know the message of a crucified, risen, and soon-coming Savior.

List of Presidents

Southwest Venezuela Mission

Benilde del Carmen Almerida (2002-2005); Luis H. Orjuela (2006-2007); Eufrazio Oropeza (2007-2010); Jesús Martínez (2010-2012); José Guillermo Vargas (2012-2014).

Southwest Venezuela Conference

José Guillermo Vargas (2014-2015); Jesús Alexander Barrios (2015-2018); Efraín Martínez (2019-present).

SOURCES

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NOTES

- ¹ Carlos Schupnik, *Aquí Obró Dios* (Nirgua, Yaracuy, Venezuela) 2010, 56.
- ² Francisco Javier Vega, *Génesis de un Movimiento*, 2014, 99.
- ³ Luis E. Greenridge, "Comienzos y Desarrollo de la Obra Adventista en Venezuela," Unpublished Thesis, USA, 1935.
- ⁴ Vega, 100-101.
- ⁵ Schupnik, 56.
- ⁶ Nataniel García Robayana, *Sin Temor al Futuro* (Caracas, Venezuela)1989, 29.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Administrative Board of the West Venezuela Mission, 2001, votes 068, 077, and 081.
- ⁹ Administrative Board of the Venezuela-Antilles Union Mission, yearend meetings 2002, vote 167.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., vote 120.
- ¹¹ Juan Zúñiga, "Caminando en las Huellas de Jesús y Viviendo su Vida," Quadrennial Session of the Southwest Venezuela Mission, September 2004.
- ¹² "Unidos en la Testificación de la Verdad," Change of Status Meetings of the Southwest Venezuela Conference, November 2014.
- ¹³ Statistics from the Archives of the Secretariat, Southwest Venezuela Conference, San Cristobal, Venezuela.

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