

# West Central Venezuela Conference

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## MANUEL VICENTE SIVIRA

Manuel Vicente Sivira Agüero, MPTTh (Inter-American Adventist Theological Seminary), is currently the president of the West Central Venezuela Conference. He has served as a district pastor for twenty-four years. He also worked as a department director of Stewardship and Youth Ministries and as a chaplain. He is married to Taidi Yaliza Rodríguez and has two daughters.

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West Central Venezuela Conference is an administrative unit of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in West Venezuela Union Mission in the Inter-American Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

Territory: The state of Lara.

Statistics (June 30, 2022): Churches, 108; membership, 26,025; population, 1,692,362.<sup>1</sup>

## Origins of Adventist Work in Conference Territory

The earliest documented evidence of Adventist work in the state of Lara dates to around the 1920s. The Adventist message arrived in this territory through the printed page. In 1926, the Venezuela Mission sent colporteur and Bible worker, Francisco Cabrera Rodríguez, to minister in the state of Lara.<sup>2</sup> In 1928, José Alberto Acosta Hurtado, who was in charge of the churches in the eastern and southern parts of the country, arrived to Barquisimeto. Upon his arrival, he dedicated himself to preaching the gospel there, and contributed to the construction of a church now known as the *Iglesia Central de Barquisimeto*.<sup>3</sup> Later, some members moved to this territory from Botucal and Aroa in the neighboring state of Yaracuy.

Meanwhile, in approximately 1925, Julio García Díaz, who had given up his business to accept the call to become a Bible worker, was sent to care for numerous groups. These included the group in Barquisimeto. He became the first Adventist pastor in Venezuela.<sup>4</sup> His dedication and work resulted in many people in the state of Lara becoming acquainted with the Adventist message and laid the foundation for what would become the first church in this field.

Among the first baptized members in Barquisimeto were Luis A. Linares, César J. Colmenares, Victor Vásquez, Adelaida Vásquez, Micaela de Colmenares, Abigail de Aldana, Ester Aldana, Casta Aldana, Carmen Reyes, Luisa de Álamo, Manuela de Reyes, Francisco Cabrera, Clara R. de Cabrera,<sup>5</sup> Antonio Mendoza, Ezequiel Pérez, Pablo Suárez, Celestino Suárez, Isabel Suárez, Petra Cordero, Francisco Hipólito, Victoria Núñez, and the González family including Felipe González, María de González, and daughters Fidela and Thirsa.<sup>6</sup>

The Barquisimeto Adventist church was organized on March 10, 1928. Originally, it was located on *Calle Ayacucho* (today *Carrera 17*) between *calles* 14 and 15, in the home of Leonor de Suárez. One of the first

preachers there was colporteur and Bible worker Francisco Cabrera Rodríguez.<sup>7</sup>

Bible worker José Ángel Lamas worked hard to acquire the funds to build an Adventist church in Barquisimeto, which was finally finished under the leadership of José Alberto Acosta Hurtado.<sup>8</sup> This church is the same one that is now the *Iglesia Central de Barquisimeto*.

At the board meeting of the Venezuela Mission on May 10, 1932, it was voted that José Ángel Lamas and his wife would assist in the next evangelistic meetings to be held in Barquisimeto and Cúcuta.<sup>9</sup> The evangelism conducted by these Bible workers was instrumental in the growth of the Adventist Church in Barquisimeto.

Around 1938, the congregation moved to *Calle 25*, between *carreras* 17 and 18, close to the former government buildings of the state of Lara. With the missionary work of Julio García and his church members, the congregation continued to grow. In 1942, the location of the church was moved to its current location on *Calle 22* on the corner of *Carrera 23* in Barquisimeto.

In 1944-1945, the first Adventist school, the *Escuela Adventista*, was established with Sara Elena Acosta as its principal. With the support and urging of José Ángel Lamas, Alberto Acosta, and Margot de Acosta, the elementary school offered education for grades 1 to 3 in the beginning. The school was located on *Calle 25*, between *carreras* 18 and 19.<sup>10</sup> This school was later named the *Unidad Educativa Miguel Ángel Granados*. From 1980 to 1981 the school was on church property behind *Iglesia Central*. At that time, middle grades added to the program. The school was relocated to a new building in the western part of the city and renamed the *Instituto Metropolitano Adventista*. This school offered only elementary-level education.

Around 1952 a medical clinic, the *Dispensario Adventista*, opened in the Barquisimeto Adventist church. In the 1960s, this clinic began to offer more specialized care. Notable names among the clinic's staff include physicians Daniel González and his wife Cruz de González,<sup>11</sup> and dentist José Carvajal.<sup>12</sup> In 1975, a property on *Carrera 17* at the intersection with *Calle 43* was purchased to which the clinic, now known as *Fundación Clínica Adventista*, was relocated.

The Adventist message arrived in the city of Carora in the 1970s when a colporteur from Barquisimeto tried to establish the Adventist work there. Colporteurs Paúl Gómez, Antonio Adán, and Alfonso Morantes arrived in 1978 and began to give Bible studies. In July 1979, Alexis Chávez and Célida Dorantes were baptized as the first members. These two immediately began work as colporteurs. This group of believers belonged to the West District of Barquisimeto led by Pastor Williams Gómez. Some of its first members were Beyla de Veliz, Luis D. Veliz, Eraclia Mendoza, Petra Esther de Álvarez, Elvigia de Pinto, and Flor Escalona.<sup>13</sup> The first Bible workers sent by church leaders to Carora were Juan de la Cruz Bernal and Juan Solís.

El Tocuyo, another city in the state of Lara, was reached through Adventist publications. In the 1960s, an unknown colporteur sold a large quantity of Adventist books in El Tocuyo. Several of these books were purchased and read by Santiago Linares, who became the first Adventist in that city. On April 26, 1967, Clarencio

Clomenarez, Igna de Colmenarez, Cristo Rey Orozco, Francisco Oliver, Tomás Hurtado, Enrique Hurtado, Orlando Hurtado, Betilde de Carrillo, and Yubirí Carrillo were all baptized.<sup>14</sup>

The Adventist message reached Cabudare, south of Barquisimeto, through the effort of Bible workers, among them Facundo Ardila. He, one of his nieces, and some other members dedicated themselves to giving Bible studies in this area. Little by little a group was formed in this area. Their work then extended south to Yaritagua and other areas.<sup>15</sup>

Adventist education was introduced to Cabudare when arrangements were made with the *Instituto Metropolitano Adventista* in Barquisimeto to provide supplies for a school which began operation in September 1984 with Luisa León as its principal. The school was named *Unidad Educativa Florencio Jiménez*. It presently operates both primary and secondary levels of education. In July 1987, the school was moved to a facility built by Atilano Goyo when Rómulo Lozano was district pastor.

More recently, the *Colegio Adventista Municipio Unión*, located on Carrera 3 con Calle 19 in Barrio Unión of Barquisimeto, was established under the leadership of Facundo Ardila, who saw a need for an educational facility for children who lived too far away to attend the *Instituto Metropolitano Adventista*. The new school began operation in September 1984 with only three small classrooms and a modest administration. At that time the school had only one building, a yard, and four bathrooms. Forty children registered in preschool and the first three primary grades.<sup>16</sup> The school's program started with two teachers: Maura de Palacios taught second and third grades and Luz Estrella de Martínez taught pre-school and first grade. As these were also responsible for the administrative and financial functions of the school, and Pastor Ardila and other church members assisted them.

The growth of the Adventist Church in the West Central Venezuela Conference led it to become the progenitor of other fields in western Venezuela.

## Formative Events

The Venezuela Mission of the Seventh-day Adventists, first Adventist organization in Venezuela, was legally registered on December 9, 1957. Since 1950 the Venezuela Mission had operated as two entities, and it continued to do so after 1957. The East Venezuela Mission headquartered in Caracas, and the West Venezuela Mission headquartered in Barquisimeto.<sup>17</sup> On March 10, 1991, the administrative board of the Venezuela-Antilles Union Mission voted to upgrade the status of the West Venezuela Mission to the West Venezuela Conference with Robinson Urdaneta, president, and Julio Palacio, secretary.<sup>18</sup>

At that time, the West Venezuela Conference comprised the states of Lara, Zulia, Trujillo, Mérida, Falcón, Carabobo, Cojedes, Yaracuy, Portuguesa, Barinas, and Tachira along with the western part of the state of Apure. The population of the western region of Venezuela grew substantially, and membership increased considerably.

In November 1992, the reorganization of the territory became necessary. The conference was divided into two new fields. The new West Venezuela Mission with headquarters in Maracaibo, Zulia, was led by Robinson Urdaneta, president, and José Ochoa, secretary-treasurer. The former West Venezuela Conference changed its name to the West Central Venezuela Conference with headquarters in Barquisimeto, Lara. Its territory included the states of Lara, Carabobo, Yaracuy, Cojedes, Portuguesa, and Barinas as well as the central part of the state of Apure. Its president was Julio A. Palacio.<sup>19</sup>

Ten years later, membership growth and solid leadership, led to another territory reorganization of the West Central Venezuela Conference. On July 5, 2003, the West Central Venezuela Conference was divided, resulting in the creation of the North Central Venezuela Mission with headquarters in the city of Valencia, Carabobo. By 2004, its territory was comprised of the states of Yaracuy, Carabobo, and Cojedes, alongside the southern part of Falcón. The West Central Venezuela Conference included the states of Lara, Barinas, and Portuguesa alongside the central part of the state of Apure.<sup>20</sup> Immediately after this reorganization of territory, the West Central Venezuela Conference oversaw 126 churches, nineteen ordained pastors, eleven licensed ministers, nine schools, and twenty-seven districts.

With the passage of time, and because of its growth and development, the West Central Venezuela Conference again found the necessity to make an adjustment of territory. Thus, on April 10, 2008, the West Los Llanos Venezuela Mission was established.<sup>21</sup> Its headquarters was located in the city of Barinas. The West Central Venezuela Conference retained the state of Lara, with sixty-two churches, thirty-two companies, thirteen districts, ten ordained pastors, six licensed ministers, and four schools. By January 2018, ten years later, the West Central Venezuela Conference had eighteen districts, 101 organized churches, and thirty-five organized companies.

## Prospects for the Future

Currently, the West Central Venezuela Conference plans to consolidate the membership of its 144 congregations, enter new territory, and strengthen its educational institutions and its two radio stations in the field so that the gospel can reach all corners of the state of Lara. It also proposes to prepare land for the construction of a youth ministry camp. The West Central Venezuela Conference moves forward with the hope of finishing the work of the great commission before the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## Presidents

### West Venezuela Mission

C. M. Christianson (1950-1953), Glen E. Maxson (1954-1956), Harold Bohr (1957-1958), Rufino S. Arismendi (1959-1960), L. C. Larrazabal (1961), Eduardo A. Escobar (1962-1965), Max Martínez (1966-1967), Stanley L.

Folkenberg (1968), J. Carambot (1969-1972), Alfredo Gaona (1973), Nathaniel García R. (1974), E. C. Santos (1974-1977), Nathaniel García R. (1978), E. C. Santos (1978), Nathaniel García R. (1979-1984), Norberto Carmona (1985-1988), Robinson Urdaneta (1989-1991).

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Robinson Urdaneta (1991-1992).

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Julio A. Palacio A. (1992-1995), Eufracio Oropeza (1995-2002), Vladimir Kabbas (2003-2007), Daniel Cabezas (2007-2010), Wilmer Figueroa (2010-2022), Manuel Vicente Sivira Agüero (2022- ).

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## NOTES

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2. Natanael García Robaina, *Sin Temor al Futuro* (Caracas, Venezuela: Talleres Gráfico Litobrit C.A., 1990), 81.
3. *Ibid.*, 84.
4. Carlos Rafael Schupnik Fleitas, *Aquí Obró Dios* (Nirgua, Yaracuy, Venezuela: Artes Gráficas del Instituto Universitario Adventista de Venezuela, 2010), 50.

5. García Robaina, *Sin Temor al Futuro*, 114.
6. Javier Euclides Páez Garrido, interview with author, Barquisimeto, Lara, March 19, 2019.
7. Ibid.
8. Schupnik Fleitas, 70.
9. García Robaina, 69.
10. Leída Durán González, interview with author, Barquisimeto, Lara, June 4, 2019.
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12. García Robaina, 105.
13. Eraclia de Jesús Mendoza de Dorantes, interview with author, Barquisimeto, Lara, June 20, 2019.
14. Mirian Aguilar de Parra, interview with author, Barquisimeto, Lara, June 21, 2019.
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