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Lamas Helu, José Antonio (1886–1978)

JUAN CARLOS LEONES VILLEGAS

Juan Carlos Leones Villegas is executive secretary, ministerial secretary, and evangelist for the South Central Venezuela Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. His 21 years of administrative and pastoral experience include supporting youth ministries for 15 years. He is married to Martha Isabel Balaguera and has two children. His goal is to reach the kingdom of heaven with his family.

José Antonio Lamas Helu was born in Bagdad, Lebanon, on November 18, 1886. He traveled to Venezuela with several relatives on August 19, 1904. During the next ten years he learned the Spanish language and held various

jobs. He tried to return to Lebanon, but the 1914 Revolution kept him from returning. He became a merchant and arrived at Camagüán, Guárico state. It is there where he heard the Adventist message for the first time at an evangelistic campaign conducted by Pastor Baxter. Lamas was baptized when he was 35 on April 22, 1921. He became a member of the Adventist church in Camagua. His first Christian experience was while defending his belief on the observance of the Sabbath as a holy day when he was incarcerated; but the president of the republic, Juan Vicente Gomez, intervened and set him free.¹

First Responsibilities

Lamas had high interest in Adventist education and property acquisition, so he combined the two interests. The establishment of the first Adventist school in the region was on a property he personally bought. Mr. and Mrs. Greenidge were assigned to teach 56 students and, together with Lamas, turned this project into the first Adventist educational institution in Venezuela. Lamas possessed great marketing skills and dedicated himself to finding properties for the establishment of churches and building facilities that would enable the preaching of the gospel. He worked as a missionary in Valencia and Puerto Cabello and as layman to care for the first believers in San Fernando de Apure.²

Lamas went from house to house in the capital, sharing Christian brochures and offering Bible studies and reading courses. Until 1926 he was responsible for the sale and distribution of Christian books on diverse topics regarding family and health. He also conducted a fruitful evangelistic work in the state of Táchira.³ He and his first wife, Lilleth Newball, helped in the evangelistic efforts being conducted in Barquisimeto and Cúcuta.⁴ Lamas also assisted in the construction of the church in La Enfadoza, adequately administering all assigned resources⁵

Health Issues, Marriage, and Final Responsibilities

Lamas's health began to deteriorate in 1925, but even then he continued to help from his home that is now known as the Adventist Dispensary of Caracas.⁶ In 1926 he underwent surgery in Panama due to a medical condition. During Pastor Barrowdale's last missionary trip visiting the churches in the interior of the country, he left Lamas in charge of the mission, the church in Caracas, and the publishing agency.⁷

José Antonio Lamas married Amelia Correa in 1929 while he was a full-time missionary in the Venezuela Mission. They went to San Cristóbal and organized groups in Ureña, Rubieno, and Colón. They also went to Barquisimeto, Maracaibo, Valencia, and San José de Guaribe. They lived through his incarceration in Curaçao where he was sent to the island and sentenced to execution.⁸ Providentially, the governor's wife was an Adventist which led to his release. When they returned to Venezuela their marriage came to an end and his active service was interrupted for some time.

In 1937 the mission's board of directors agreed to call Lamas to help Pastor Julio García as a Bible worker for an evangelistic crusade to be conducted in Aroa, Estado Yaracuy. On April 25, 1938, Lamas was appointed to replace treasurer, Pastor Larson, when he left to visit the center of the country. In 1938 it was voted to assign Lamas as a Bible instructor in Guaira. On May 7, 1939, Lamas was Pastor Sherman's assistant for a campaign in Caracas.⁹ On May 12, 1941, it was approved to transfer Lamas to Maracay to conduct a campaign with the purpose of establishing a church.¹⁰ On September 4, 1941, a call was voted asking Lamas to go to Caracas to recruit and train Bible workers.

¹¹ Lamas continued working until he retired in 1948.¹²

Later Years and Personal Contribution to the Church

In September 1961, Lamas moved to Maracay and worked as a distributor for the paper bag company "MAMPA." Around that time, he built his home in El Limón, state of Aragua, and established a poultry farm called *Los Pinos* to produce eggs, chickens, and fruit. This would become the site of the Adventist secondary school of Venezuela, now INSTIVOC.¹³

When the mission board began talking about the need to establish a school, someone mentioned Lamas's property and the board decided to send a committee to talk with Lamas and ask him if he would consider donating his property to establish a school instead of a hospital. The committee consisted of Oscar Soto, Luis Camacho, Nathaniel García, Pedro González, and Lucas Thismón, accompanied by brother Burley, union treasurer, who happened to be visiting Caracas. After the initial greetings, the committee mentioned the purpose of the visit while Lamas quietly listened.

Lamas responded, "I will repeat the same thing I have told my brother Nathaniel many times, all that I have my God has loaned to me; it belongs to Him, and when the church needs it, I will give it to Him with pleasure. It seems the time has come. Everything is at your disposal...you can have it." Then he got up, went to the kitchen, and offered them freshly squeezed orange juice. Brother Burley could hardly believe how an almost 80-year-old single man could be so willing to sacrifice his farm and donate it for the establishment of a boarding school. Lamas's words were sincere when he said, "Give me a few days to purchase a house I saw in a housing development called Calicanto de Maracay and when our business is settled, I'll move there. In the meantime, I'll be taking inventory of my farm, processing the transferring papers, and at the same time, the mission should be finding people to take care of the farm."¹⁴

Brother Camacho, East Mission treasurer, was in charge of the donation documentation in order to speed up the establishment of the Adventist secondary school (COSEVE) which started operating in September 1962. The property's inventory included: four concrete homes, five sheds of various sizes, 1,671 hens, 1,930 chickens, 48 feeding and 30 drinking stands, and materials and equipment valued at Bs. 226,226.75 VES. The mission voted to add Bs. 1,000 VES monthly to Lamas's retirement check as compensation for his generosity. Lamas moved to Maracay, but he felt too far from his brethren in El Limón, so he bought a house on Camagüán Street in El Limón, where he lived until his death. He donated that house to the mission to be used as the district pastor's home. With the sale of the home in Calicanto, Lamas acquired another house on Tejerías Street in El Limón and a portion of land on El Sendero Street, which he donated for the construction of another Adventist school, Andrés Bello.¹⁵

Legacy and Death

During his entire life, Lamas was a tireless promoter of Christian education. While working at churches, he would establish church schools, buy property to donate to the church, and even in his old age would sponsor students attending Adventist institutions. Before his death on August 26, 1978, he willed all his assets to the Adventist Church, except for his personal library which he had donated to El Limón Church in gratitude for the care they always had for him.¹⁶ His collection of books remains there now.

José Antonio Lamas Helu, after accomplishing much fruitful work during his life, rests in the Maracay Municipal Cemetery awaiting the return of his Lord.

SOURCES

Central Venezuela Conference meeting votes. Central Venezuela Conference records, Urbanizacion, Montalban I, Caracas, Venezuela.

García, Nathaniel. *Sin temor al futuro*. Caracas: Talleres Gráficos de Litobrit, 1990.

NOTES

1. Nathaniel García, *Sin temor al futuro* (Caracas: Talleres Gráficos de Litobrit, 1990), 61-64.?
 2. Ibid., 65, 66.?
 3. Ibid., 67.?
 4. Central Venezuela Conference, 1932, vote 102, Central Venezuela Conference records, Urbanizacion, Montalban I, Caracas, Venezuela.?
 5. Central Venezuela Conference, 1933, vote 168.?
 6. Central Venezuela Conference, 1941, vote 463.?
 7. García, 68.?
 8. Central Venezuela Conference, 1939, vote 320.?
 9. Garcia, 67, 68.?
 10. Central Venezuela Conference, 1938, vote 250.?
 11. Central Venezuela Conference, 1938, vote 312.?
 12. Central Venezuela Conference, 1941, vote 458.?
 13. Garcia, 69.?
 14. Ibid., 70.?
 15. Ibid., 71.?
 16. Ibid., 72.?
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