



Panama Adventist Institute

Photo courtesy of West Panama Conference.

Panama Adventist Institute

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Panama Adventist Institute or *Instituto Adventista Panameño (IAP)* is a secondary level educational boarding institution within the Seventh-day Adventist Church educational system. It is located in the Panama Union Mission's territory and eight minutes from La Concepción, province of Chiriquí, Panama. In an area of about 222

acres (90 hectares) are the classrooms, boys and girls dormitories, cafeteria, library, sports area, and other facilities. It currently has 493 students, of which 247 are Adventists and 246 are non-Adventists.

For over 70 years, IAP has offered a solid education based on spiritual values, and a strong academic, technological, and scientific curriculum. It offers a secondary education diploma in science, business, and computer science. It is the only boarding institution in the Panama Union Mission's territory that has served students from all over the country for many years.

Development in the Establishment of the Panama Adventist Institute

The Adventist message came to the province of Chiriqui with Juan Ismael Ellis Legour, a self-taught worker. After having received Adventist literature and studying the Bible with a literature evangelist named Alfredo Garnet, in 1916, a few months after being saved from death in an accident, he gave his life to Jesus. In November 1917, an Adventist pastor arrived at La Concepción and found Ellis, and seven other people he had prepared, ready for baptism. They formed the first group of Adventists and the first Hispanic congregation in Chiriqui and Panama.¹

In 1919 Ellis promoted the idea of forming an Adventist school. The project launched with 12 students, three of whom were Adventists. The school was directed by Brother Ellis and supported by the Thorp family from North America; however, the school did not have government authorization. By 1924, steps were taken to legalize the purchase of a piece of land for the school, but it was not until the 1940s that the school was legalized, with the name *Escuela La Chiricana*. On May 18, 1943, the government authorized its operation through Resolution 78.² *Escuela La Chiricana* as well as *Escuela Adventista de La Concepción* were forerunners of the current Panama Adventist Institute. These institutions provided education up to what was then known as "first cycle" (7th to 9th grade). The first graduation took place in 1944.

Establishment of the Panama Adventist Institute

The first schools had operated for 23 years and developed credibility among the residents. The educational work had advanced and the need for a secondary education level school had grown. Those who promoted this initiative included Warren Thorp, Librado Concepción, and William Franklin Moore, official endorser of the application submitted to the Ministry of Education.³ This new institution was the first high school in the whole district of Bugaba and the third at the province level. *Escuela Secundaria Chiricana* (Chiricana High School) began its academic operation in 1943, with five students. Its first director was Rafael Acosta from Puerto Rico, who had graduated from Antillian College. He worked in the institution from 1943 to 1947. In 1944, the first promotion of middle school (7th to 9th grade) graduates took place. The graduates were Franklin Moore, Jr., Wilfrida Espinoza, Ernesto Quiroz, Ana Cubilla, and Jose Isabel Caballero.⁴

Escuela Secundaria Chiricana operated with community students from 1943 to 1950. By the 1950s and 1960s, students from various regions of the country began to arrive at the institution, prompting the need to start a boarding school. Some students rented places near the school until rooms were built where they could live during the school year. It soon became evident that a larger place was needed to provide educational service in keeping with Adventist philosophy of education. During the years 1965 and 1966, under the direction of Fulton Archibold, from San Andrés, Colombia, the idea of looking for a new site arose, where a suitable place for the institution could be built.⁵

History and Establishment of Panama Adventist Institute

By 1967, Lamar Phillips, an American missionary and visionary, took over the leadership of the school. At the age of 27, he was determined to secure property for the institution. Finally, in 1968, after visiting some 40 farms in various areas of the province, through a man named Adán Concepción, they found a property of 40 hectares, belonging to Alcides Morales, in the community of Bongo. The property was for sale for USD\$40,000.00⁶

Lamar Phillips made every effort to raise that amount of money. He contacted the president of the Central American Union, Pastor Glen Maxon and asked him to travel to Panama to look at the property. Pastor Maxon traveled with other leaders from Guatemala, where the Union's headquarters was located, to see the property. Upon arrival, he took a tour of the area and saw the abundance of water, trees, and beautiful vegetation.⁷

As soon as the property was acquired, Lamar Phillips began mobilizing groups of students from La Concepción to the new site, with the goal of cleaning up the property. Students at the time, such as Sergio Beitía and Diógenes Sánchez, were given three dollars per hectare to clean the new property with a machete.

By 1969, Lamar Phillips established contact with the administrators of the Chiriqui Land Company, a banana company in Puerto Armuelles, and managed to get support to build the first bridge over a river that passed through the property. The banana company donated the materials for the construction of the first bridge over the Mula River. That same year, Phillips organized a group of ninety people to clean up the school property. During three days of hard work, students, parents, church members, and friends of the community worked together on the project, which was the beginning of an activity that continued in the following years, known by the residents as "El Festival del Machete."⁸

Lamar Phillips, a proactive leader not afraid to ask people for support, asked the community to donate cattle. The campus livestock program started with about thirty cows for milking. Máximo Quiroz and Argelio Ancheta served as the first heads of the school's dairy. Lamar Phillips worked until December 1969, and from there was called to Costa Rica. The next director was Professor Leroy Antonio Abrahams, with Gabriel Gomez as manager. They arranged the financing to start construction. With a loan of USD\$15,000.00, granted by a bank in the area, the first of the multipurpose pavilions of the school was built, with buildings partially finished by June 1970. Bamboo partitions divided the classrooms. Under the direction of Professor Leroy Antonio Abrahams and

Treasurer Gabriel Gomez, the *Escuela Secundaria Chiricana* relocated on June 20 and 21, 1970, to the property where the IAP is now located. At the end of 1970 and under the same administration, 56 more hectares were bought.⁹

For those years and under humble beginnings, the school only consisted of three barracks, in which the boarding schools, the kitchen, the classrooms, and the teachers' houses were distributed. Several spaces were multipurpose, there was no drinking water, and kerosene schools lit the boarding schools. The school administration followed the philosophy for Adventist educational institutions, that students should learn to cultivate the land. Teachers and students participated in the planting, maintenance, and harvesting of everything needed to feed the small community. Crops included bananas, yucca, beans, corn, rice, vegetables, tomatoes, peppers, zucchini, oranges, and more, while students milked the cows.

By the 1960s *Escuela Secundaria Chiricana* began to be called the "Panama Adventist Institute." In 1973 the school asked the Ministry of Education to change the school's name to Panama Adventist Institute, which gave the school a definitive denominational identity. This change was made official through Resolution 1250, dated September 14, 1973.

The first graduating class of High School Diplomas specializing in Science (1974) left their "alma mater", already under the new name. The counselor of that first class of graduates was Professor José Isabel Caballero. Caballero helped develop the institution's academic platform, mentoring many of the new faculty members. In addition to teaching various courses, Caballero directed the institution in 1975 and served as academic assistant director for many years. He guided new teachers with talks, ideas, and practical examples about the practice of teaching, but he put special emphasis on the integration of faith in all facets of educational endeavors.¹⁰

The history of the Panama Adventist Institute cannot overlook one person who joined the Institute in 1961, Buenaventura de Quiroz, known as *La Tía*. She was responsible for students' meals for many years, getting to know hundreds of students as they passed through the Institute's dining room. She dedicated 27 years of her life to this difficult work.¹¹

During his term as director, Pastor Guillermo Meléndez (1973-1974) oversaw the construction of the campus road and the girls' dormitory. Students participated in the construction. At the end of that decade, with the support of Maranatha Volunteers International, the boys' dormitory and the first staff houses were built.

Under the administration of Pastor John Parchment (1981-1988), a Panamanian citizen, corridors were added to connect the buildings. More housing for teachers was also built and a soccer field was added to the infrastructure. Parchment did much to connect the institution to the community, leading to many improvements made with the support of local authorities.

At the beginning of the 1990s, when Pastor Humberto Moreno, a Panamanian citizen, was the director, a new girls dormitory was built, with the support of an offering from the world church.

In 1993, as part of the celebration of the school's golden anniversary, the yearbook of the institution was dedicated to Pastor Arístides González, in recognition of his support for the Adventist Church in the development of the Panama Adventist Institute, as president of the Panama Conference, and as secretary and then president of the Central American Union. In the dedication, the Institute's yearbook points out "his constant support through regular visits and sound advice".¹² Also in 1993, Panama Adventist Institute offered its newly approved High School Diploma in computer science, under Resolution No. 2110, August 10, 1993 of the Ministry of Education of Panama, Panama, graduating the first class in 1995.¹³

In 2018, under the direction of Alberto Montero and Antixa Rivera as manager of the institution, arrangements and modifications were made in the areas of livestock and organic agriculture, and a project of integral and self-sustainable development of the entire school property began. The project included a center for healthy living, an ecological trail, and other initiatives.

More than 40 classes of high school graduates and more than 75 "first cycle" or middle school graduation classes, as we know them today, have graduated from the classrooms of the *Instituto Adventista Panameño* (IAP). Many of these graduates are serving society in their different chosen professional fields, and many also serve at church institutions.

Historical Role of the Panama Adventist Institute (IAP)

IAP is well known for its location, infrastructure, natural environment, climate, educational system, and music band, and for its spiritual, academic, and sports activities. It is also an inspirational example for the entire region served by the Panama Union Mission, especially Seventh-day Adventists. Through the years, students have attended IAP from all over the country.

IAP has promoted a healthy lifestyle, allowing its students a good development of all their faculties and, above all, to practice values such as respect, responsibility, integrity, friendship, kindness, discipline, patience, and trust in God. Through the years, various spiritual, academic, sports, cultural, social disciplines, community service, and social outreach have been promoted.

IAP has been a beacon of light to nearby communities. This area of the country has the largest number of Adventists, with more than ten Adventist churches near the school. Many administrators of the Adventist church in the country have emerged from its classrooms. Currently, the administrators of the Panama Adventist Union are graduates of this institution.

What Remains to Fulfill the Mission

The mission of IAP is to promote, through Adventist Christian education, a harmonious development of student's physical, intellectual, social, and spiritual aspects, forming good citizens who will be useful to the

community, the country, and God. Its vision is to be, by the grace of God, an institution recognized for its educational excellence and its biblical principles and values.

IAP has gained a place of respect in Panama's educational community. The courage, commitment, effort, and self-sacrifice of its teachers has been one of its main strengths. Its geographical location, its infrastructure, and the natural environment of its vegetation offers a unique and attractive model for the student community. In recent years, the institution has benefited from the construction of a classroom pavilion. It has also created an industry composed of a vegetarian restaurant, a bakery that serves students and the general public, and an area of livestock. The school has given a new focus to organic agriculture, and work is being done on a project for the integral and self-sustainable development of the entire school farm. Future projects include a center for healthy living and an ecological trail.

IAP envisions becoming a tertiary-level institution, offering various university-level degrees in its facilities. Panama Union Mission is preparing to start a university, taking advantage of the physical infrastructure, the land, and the existing infrastructure. The Mission foresees a place where Adventist and community youth will be trained as professionals to serve the church and the community.

List of Directors

Rafael Acosta (1943-1947); Valencio Robinson (1947-1948); Corina Candanedo (1948-1951); Eduardo Ruiloba (1949); Ema Argueta (1951-1954); Rosario Estela Valle (1955-1957); Rafael Prado (1958-1960); Dora Atencio (1960); Esteban López Porra (1960-1962); Gabriel Jeffries (1963-1964); Fulton Archibold (1965-1966); Lamar Phillips (1967-1969); Leroy Antonio Abrahams (1969-1971); Carlos Abott (1972); Seth Villarreal (1973); Guillermo Melendez (1973-1974); Jose Isabel Caballero (1975); Wilbert Oliver (1976-1977); Edmundo Alba (1977-1979); David Zimmerman (1979-1980); John Parchment (1981-1988); Abraham Magallón (1989); Humberto Moreno (1990-1995); Eliacer Utate (1996); Edwin López Alfaro (1997); Osmel Serrano (1997-2000); Humberto Moreno (2000-2001); Eluvinio Castrellón (2002-2004); Damaris Estribí (2004-2005); Humberto Moreno (2006); Eliacer Utate (2007-2015); Joel Gutierrez (2016-2018); Alberto Montero (2018-).

SOURCES

Panama Adventist Institute. *Alpha Yearbook 92*, 1992. Unpublished manuscript. Panama Adventist Institute archives.

Panama Adventist Institute. *Alpha Yearbook 93-94*, 1994. Unpublished manuscript. Panama Adventist Institute archives.

Panama Adventist Institute. *Alpha Yearbook 95-96*, 1996. Unpublished manuscript. Panama Adventist Institute archives.

Serrano, Osmel. "Nuestra Tierra de Promisión Historia del Instituto Adventista Panameño," 2017. Unpublished manuscript in author's library.

NOTES

1. Osmel Serrano, "Nuestra Tierra de Promisión Historia del Instituto Adventista Panameño" (unpublished manuscript, 2017, in author's library), 24.
2. Ibid., 25
3. Ibid., 50
4. Ibid., 52-53
5. Ibid., 60
6. Ibid., 75
7. Ibid., 75
8. Ibid., 83
9. Gabriel Gómez, interview by Loida Rivera, San Vicente, Concepción, Chiriquí, November 3, 2020.
10. "Dedicatoria," *Alpha Yearbook 92* (unpublished manuscript, 1992, Panama Adventist Institute archives), 2.
11. Eneida Quiroz, interviewed by Loida Rivera, San Vicente, Concepción, Chiriquí, November 5, 2020.
12. "Dedicatoria," *Alpha Yearbook 93-94* (unpublished manuscript, 1994, Panama Adventist Institute archives), 2.
13. "Presentación," *Alpha Yearbook 95-96*, (unpublished manuscript, 1996, Panama Adventist Institute archives), 4.

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