

# Portuguese Venezuela Mission

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## JOSÉ LUIS VÁSQUEZ

José Luis Vásquez, M.A. (Inter-American Division Adventist Theological Seminary, Mayaguez, Puerto Rico), is currently the executive secretary for Portuguese Venezuela Mission. He has served as a district pastor for 19 years in different fields of West Venezuela Union Mission.

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Portuguese Venezuela Mission covers the entirety of Portuguesa State, one of the 23 states that, together with the Capital District and the Federal Dependencies, form the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

The capital of the state is Guanare. Portuguesa State is located in the west central region of the country and is bordered on the north by Lara, on the east by Cojedes, on the south by Barinas, and on the west by Trujillo. It has 14 municipalities and 39 civil parishes. Its main cities are Guanare, Carígua, and Araure, and its population in 2017 was 1,024,300.<sup>1</sup>

In 2019, the Portuguese Venezuela Mission had 43 churches and 14,519 members in a population of 829,046.<sup>2</sup> It also had three schools, seven ordained ministers, eight licensed ministers, and 91 employees of which one had missionary credentials, two had missionary licenses, and three were chaplains. The mission's headquarters is located at 7-227 Carrera 13 between 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> streets, Barrio Maturín, Guanare, Portuguesa State, Venezuela. This mission forms part of West Venezuela Union Mission and is in the territory of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Inter-American Division.

## Origins of Church in Territory

Around 1933, a man named Emilio Escobar from the small town of Botucal, Portuguesa State, was running some personal errands in Arismendi, Barinas. While there, he bought a book titled "The Great Controversy" published by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. As he read the book, Emilio began to learn the precious truth of the gospel just as it is written in the Bible and preached by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He accepted the gospel joyfully, and he later shared it with his loved ones.<sup>3</sup> Shortly after that, an Adventist colporteur visited Botucal. His name was Antonio Tirado, and he had been traveling down the river with his nephew, Manuel Soto. On seeing the interest the families in Botucal had in the gospel, Antonio returned to Camaguan and, with his wife, Felipa, his daughter, Josefina, and his nephew, moved to Botucal in order to minister to the growing group of believers.<sup>4</sup>

In those days, there were several family groups who became acquainted with the Adventist message. These families included the Escobar Pérez, Rivas Escobar, Escobar Collado, Escobar Vargas, Escobar Amaya, and Salazar families.<sup>5</sup> The first baptism in the area was conducted by Pastor Julio García Díaz, the first Venezuelan

ordained minister, on March 16, 1934, in which 30 people were baptized.<sup>6</sup> That same year, the first church in Botucal was organized and built. It was named “Botucal Seventh-day Adventist Church.”

The Adventist families in Botucal had many children, and, with time, they requested an Adventist school in their town. Near the end of 1938, their dream became reality as the leaders of the Adventist church in Venezuela sent to them Ernestina Moreno, a pioneer of Adventist education in the area.

For seven years, Ernestina taught over 20 children and adolescents. She adopted two young women, Lourdes and Haideé Rivas, as her own daughters. She then encouraged and helped them to go study at the Adventist university in Medellín, Colombia, known in those days as the Colombia-Venezuela Union Training School. The women graduated from that university with degrees in education. In 1945, due to ill health, Ernestina left Botucal and returned to the city of Caracas, leaving her adopted daughter Heideé Rivas in charge of the school.<sup>8</sup> Heideé is still an active member of Central Guanare Church.

In Guanare, the Adventist message was planted by the late Brother Gregorio Jiménez and his wife, Alejandrina Vásquez de Jiménez. They had both been baptized by Pastor García Díaz on June 29, 1940, in the city of Barquisimeto. They later moved to the city of Guanare, where they began to live out their new faith. The first person baptized in the city of Guanare was Brother Medardo Betancourt on July 5, 1941, and he was also baptized by Pastor García Díaz. For a while, these were the only Adventists in that city.<sup>9</sup>

One day, Gregorio Jiménez was walking through the Peñita neighborhood when he noticed a man on a corner whistling a melody of a song – one of the hymns sung at Adventist meetings. The man was Juan Morillo originally from Arismendi, Barinas. He had been left an orphan there and was adopted by Brother Antonio Tirado, who then moved with all of his family to the city of Camaguan, Guárico. There, he and his wife and children – including Juan – became acquainted with the gospel. After several years, Juan had moved to Guanare. Now, after this encounter on the corner, Juan joined the group of believers and, with great joy, was baptized by Pastor Rufino Arismendi in 1957. That same year, another group of persons were baptized, among whom were the Henríquez family (Marian, Amalia, Vicente, and Alicia); Cirilo Galíndez and his brother, Pópulo; and Rita Henríquez and her daughter, Petra.<sup>10</sup>

Sometime later, Luciano Guarate originally from Las Animas in San Nicolás, Portuguesa State, joined the group of first Adventists in that city. After becoming acquainted with the Adventist message, Luciano attended meetings held in Gregorio Jiménez’s home, accepted Christ as his personal savior, and was baptized.

Vito Cavarcante was another person to join this group. He first arrived in Caracas from Montevago, Sicily, Italy. From there, he traveled to Cumagoto and then to Guanare with his wife, María. Vito was already acquainted with the Adventist message because his family in Italy was Adventist, but he had not been baptized. His wife had been baptized and was a fervent member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In Guanare, Vito, Maria, and their children had a providential encounter with Brother Juan Morillo and joined the meetings held in Jiménez’s home. Vito Cavarcante later joined the church through baptism.<sup>11</sup>

The group of people that met in Jiménez's home decided to meet in the home of Medardo Betancourt. They later moved to Carrera 8, corner of 19<sup>th</sup> Street, a location that belonged to a local named Cristóbal Oberto. The place was rented with help from West Venezuela Mission with offices in Barquisimeto, Lara. This group continued to grow until Jiménez asked the mission for financial help to purchase a property and build a church for the congregation. His request was approved, and a property was purchased on Carrera 9 between 18<sup>h</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> streets, where, in 1960, the first Adventist church in Guanare was built.<sup>12</sup>

On August 1, 1987, the second congregation in Guanare, the Progreso Church in El Progreso Barrio, started its formal meetings in that city.<sup>13</sup> Currently, there are 13 congregations in the city of Guanare and 14 in the cities of Acarigua and Araure.

In 1954, in the city of Acarigua, what is now Cecilio Acosta Secondary School was founded. Its first principal and founder was Lucrecia Flores de Girón. The school started with grades 1-3 of elementary school and an initial enrollment of 55 students. Currently, it offers preschool through secondary levels and has an enrollment of 751 students. In 2018, the school won first place in the science fair of the second circuit of the municipality of Páez.

In 1966, in Guanare, what is now Andrés Bello Secondary School was founded. Its principal and founder was Professor Pedro Toloza. The school started with grades 1-3 of elementary school and an initial enrollment of 16 students. Currently, it offers both the elementary and secondary levels and has an enrollment of 395 students.

In 1981, in Guanarito, Colegio J. N. Andrews was started with grades 1-4 of elementary school and an enrollment of 30 students. Its first principal was Diógenes Belisario. Currently, it offers both the elementary and secondary levels and has an enrollment of 232 students.

A radio station, *La Voz* 106.3 FM, was started in Acarigua in 2008, reaching the cities of Acarigua and Araure and their neighboring communities. Radio station *VIENE* 95.1 FM was started in Guanare in 2009. It covers the entire city of Guanare and reaches the edges of the state of Barinas.

In 2015, in Peñas Blanca, Biscucuy, *Redención* Center for Healthy Living was established with the purpose of giving health education and preventive health care to the residents of that area and other parts of this region through the eight natural remedies.

## Organizational History

The members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the current territory of the Portuguese Venezuela Mission were originally part of West Venezuela Mission in 1950.<sup>14</sup> They became part of West Venezuela Conference in 1990, of West Central Venezuela Conference in 1992, of West Los Llanos Venezuela Mission in 2009, and of West Los Llanos Venezuela Conference in 2015.

On February 12, 2017, in the city of Barinas, at the West Los Llanos Venezuela Conference annual session, it was proposed to reorganize the conference territory. This proposal resulted from a recommendation and evaluation

by the administrative board of the union in efforts to establish a new field. The proposal was passed unanimously.

On June 20, 2017, the West Los Llanos Venezuela Conference administrative board requested that West Venezuela Union Mission create a new mission for the territory of Portuguesa State. This request was passed on to the Inter-American Division for study on October 22, 2017. The vote of approval was registered at the Inter-American Division mid-year meetings in March 26-27, 2018.

On February 26, 2018, Pastor Tomás Torres, vice-president of the Inter-American Division, was present when the administrators and department heads of West Venezuela Union Mission met with 73 delegates from the churches in Portuguesa State for the inaugural session of this new mission. The session took place in the capital of the state, the city of Guanare. The new field – 150<sup>th</sup> in the territory of the Inter-American Division and 10<sup>th</sup> of West Venezuela Union Mission – was officially opened.

This mission started operating with 13,218 members, 40 organized churches, 13 groups, three educational institutions, two radio stations, and one center for healthy living. It had 91 employees. Its first administrators were Pastor Ulises Humberto Mosquera Infante as president, Pastor José Luis Vásquez as secretary, and David C. Suárez as treasurer.<sup>15</sup>

## List of Presidents

Ulises H. Mosquera Infante (2018- ).

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## NOTES

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4. Heideé Rivas de Soto, interview by author, Guanare, Venezuela, March 2019.
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10. Ibid.
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14. Schupnik Fleitas, 130, 131.
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