



Adventist University of Central America (UNADECA)

Photo courtesy of Walter Antonio Colindres Cruz.

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OSCAR MARIO CAMACHO

Oscar Mario Camacho Solano, Ph.D. (Montemorelos University, Nuevo Leon, Mexico), is the rector of *Universidad Adventista de Centro America* (UNADECA) and has served the church for 31 years as a teacher, professor, school principal, vice rector, and as UNADECA's legal representative. He is married to Marta Soto Ovares and has two daughters.

UNADECA is a Seventh-day Adventist co-educational university located in Alajuela, Costa Rica. It exists to offer Christian university education to Central American youth and others who will then provide needed leadership and professional services to the Seventh-day Adventist Church and society in general.

Origins, Purpose, and Enrollment

The urgent need for a tertiary level educational institution, especially for the Central American Union Mission, which covered all the countries of Central America including the Panamá Canal Zone and the Colombian Islands of San Andres and Old Providence, made the establishment of Adventist University of Central America (Colegio Vocacional Adventista de America Central or COVAC) in 1945 a necessity. In 1970, COVAC became Centro Adventista de Estudios Superiores (CADES). By the 1980s, the institution had achieved a high level of organizational development, enabling it to provide university-level services. Therefore, in 1986, CADES became the newly restructured Universidad Adventista de Centro America (UNADECA).

The institution is considered one of the oldest educational institutions in the Inter-American Division educational system since its origins date to 1925 when the church began a secondary-level educational center in the Las Cascadas community in the capital city of Panama, then transferred it in 1927 to La Sabana in Costa Rica. Its objective was to prepare personnel to serve at denominational educational and health institutions. The institution went through organizational changes from secondary to higher educational levels until the formation of UNADECA.

The profile of students sought by UNADECA is that of young Christians who desire to receive a comprehensive education and who have had experience in their local fields as leaders in their churches. Not only will they become pastors, but also teachers, administrators, engineers, psychologists, and nurses. It is hoped that the graduates will be committed to the philosophy of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, further its work, and value their service to God, the church, and humanity.

UNADECA is currently strategically located in one of the most important provinces of Costa Rica. Situated close to the airport, it has easy access for foreign students and visitors, and, because of its location, it is known by many since it is near a famous tourist area, the Poas Volcano. It is the only Adventist university in the entire region recognized by government entities.

In 2018, a total of 409 students enrolled in the university's first trimester, 410 in the second trimester, and 367 in the third trimester in 11 subject areas taught by 91 teachers and staff. The student body consists of 39 to 42 percent Costa Ricans, demonstrating that the university is well supported by the national population.

Mission, Vision, and Values

The Adventist University of Central America is a religious educational institution committed to the values and practices of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It seeks to promote evangelism and the training and preparation of men and women who will contribute positively both to the church and to society as a whole.

Mission--Contribute to the restoration of the image of God in humanity by enhancing professional development and fostering the vocation of service to today's society through distinctive skills and a context of excellence.

Vision--To be a world-class university that leads to the formation of professionals who respond to the needs of today's society and promote Adventist Christian values by strengthening spirituality, ecology, and health.

Values--Communion with God, consecration, excellence, integrity, service, unity, and ecology.

Affiliations and Accreditations

In 1974, CADES signed an agreement with the National University of Costa Rica (UNA) so that its students who, studying education with emphasis on both primary and secondary, could graduate with degrees from both universities. In 1975, CADES graduated 36 teachers in the first and second cycles of basic general education with both the UNA and the CADES degree titles.

The board of directors of the Central American Union Mission, together with the board of directors of the institution, agreed to request a change of status from a college to a university for the institution. Deciding upon the name UNADECA, leadership applied for approval and accreditation with the Consejo Nacional de Enseñanza Superior Universitaria Privada (CONESUP). CONESUP approved UNADECA's application on July 9, 1986, by Article 3 of Session 81-86 of CONESUP. Also, CONESUP conferred Approval of Operation of UNADECA on July 22, 1987, by Article 3 of Session 97-87.

It was also important to obtain denominational accreditation from the Accrediting Agency for Seventh-day Adventist High School, Colleges, and Universities (AAA). The AAA also granted accreditation to UNADECA and has visited the campus in 1989, 1993, 1998, 2004, 2006, 2010, 2014, and 2019 to renew UNADECA's denominational accreditation.¹

Early Beginnings

In 1927, Glenn Stanley Ray, a graduate of Walla Walla College, accompanied by Mr. and Mrs. George W. Chapman and Pastor William E. Baxter, travelled to San José, Costa Rica, in search of a suitable place to establish a school for Central American youth. They found a house for rent in the north side of La Sabana. Although in its time had been a beautiful structure, the passing of time had left its marks. Nevertheless, the first Adventist secondary school of the region commenced in that rented house. Calling itself The Hispanic American Adventist Academy, it began with seven classrooms and 16 students. Glen Stanley Ray served as its director.²

This study center began with three teachers. Under the leadership of William E. Baxter, president of the Central American Union Mission, it set out to prepare workers for the union field.³ In 1932, the school acquired a farm property whose size was the equivalent of 34 city blocks at Dulce Nombre de Tres Ríos in the province of Cartago. The construction soon began on a food services build that also initially served as classrooms and chapel. In April 1932, though the campus was far from being finished, classes did start.⁴ Professor W. H. Wineland arrived as director, accompanied by his wife, and daughter. The academy enrolled 36 students, 17 of them at the secondary level. The girls' dormitory accommodated the girls in the rooms on one side, while the boys and teachers settled in the opposite side.

In 1945, under the direction of C. F. Montgomery, the school adopted a name that some today still remember and use to identify the institution: COVAC.⁵ By 1948, 85 percent of COVAC graduates had obtained denominational jobs, and with the school's growth, the need for more appropriate facilities became obvious.⁶ That same year the student association made its appearance along with its publication, the "Student Echo," which since then has almost been the only source of information about the school's history. In 1949, COVAC added two additional years to the high school level. The regional church needed better training for its teachers, pastors, and business managers.⁷

In 1949, under the direction of Pastor Andrés Riffel, the administration of the Central American Union Mission and COVAC, thought it would be good to change the institution's location. It found a site near the city of Alajuela at a place called La Ceiba. The academic level had increased in 1949, and in 1950 COVAC had begun to provide up to 14 years of education. It offered two years of professional studies in the basic careers of education, religion, secretarial science, and administration in addition to the previous secondary level programs.⁸

Five Decades of Constant Growth

1970-1980

In 1970, COVAC became Centro Adventista de Estudios Superiores (CADES) and the most popular center for higher studies for Central Americans and many other nationals since its theology course expanded to a four-year degree. However, the Higher Education Council of Costa Rica did not accept the new name because it did not address its secondary level. Section No. 90-72, Article XIII, point No. 3, of July 31, 1972, recommended the adoption of an institution's name according to the educational level offered. It led administration to look for a specific name for the institution's secondary level programs. They settled on Instituto Centroamericano Adventista (ICA) for the secondary level and kept Centro Adventista de Estudios Superiores (CADES) for the institution's higher programs.⁹

In 1974, CADES signed an agreement with the National University of Costa Rica (UNA) to allow CADES' students in the education program to graduate with degrees from both institutions. By 1975, CADES graduated 36 teachers in the first and second cycles of basic general education. The rector of UNA, Francisco Quesada Vargas,

conferred the degrees granted by both UNA and by CADES in collaboration with CADES' rector, Israel González Valdés, and other educators from both institutions. The CADES rector stated: "For our institution, it is a great event and for Costa Rica a great satisfaction, because these new educators come from all Central American countries ... where they will travel to fulfill their teaching tasks." The national newspaper *La República* featured the event on Monday, February 17, 1975.¹⁰

Atilio René Dupertuis was the CADES rector from 1975 to 1977. His leadership practically revolutionized the institution. In 1975, the four-year business administration program commenced along with a minor in religion. The construction of the men's dormitory began, and he developed plans for a school church.

One of the most remembered moments at CADES occurred in 1978 with the laying of the cornerstone of the campus church. On June 22 of that same year, the ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany laid the first stone of the new men's dormitory. On that same day, the leveling of the land began. The new dormitory building was built thanks to the financial contribution of the E. Z. E. Evangelische Zentralstelle FÜR Entwicklungshilfe E V Federal Republic of Germany and the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and was dedicated February 28, 1978.

The building cost approximately \$400,000.00 USD and had capacity for 208 students. Representatives of the United States and Central America attended the opening ceremony, including Josef Rusnak, counsel of the German Embassy; the governor of the province of Alajuela, Mr. Francisco Antonio Pacheco; Robert Folkenberg, president of the Adventist Church in Central America; B. L. Archbold, president of the Inter-American Division; and José H. Figueroa, secretary of the Inter-American Division.¹¹

In 1978, Hugo Visani followed Dupertuis as rector. However, a fatal accident led to his tragic death. In 1979, Francisco Ottati became rector. Cheerful, enthusiastic, and above all, hardworking, he served as rector until 1980.¹² In 1980, the school of education began to offer a program in secondary studies and elementary education, both four-year degrees, through a joint agreement with Union College of Lincoln, Nebraska, United States.

1980-1990

In 1981, Pastor Roberto H. Eubanks became rector of UNADECA until 1983. He became known as "the builder," because of the number of things constructed during his administration. In 1981, a four-year program in secretarial sciences began. The next year administration reorganized the academic area and established five higher education programs.

Héctor Jurado became rector from 1983 until 1985, and in 1985 he placed CADES and ICA at the forefront in regard to library facilities. Thanks to the generous contributions of the world Adventist Church, the government of the United States of America, the teaching and administrative staff of CADES, ICA, the Autumn Miller School, and the students and friends of the school, the library opened in July. Together with the Instituto Centroamericano de Administración de Empresas and the Public Library of Alajuela, it is the best in the

province, and one of the best in the country.¹³

In 1984, under the leadership of rector Jurado, a contest began to choose the name of the university. A committee comprised of a representative of the administration, three teachers, and two students evaluated the suggestions, and UNADECA won. A Guatemalan theology student, Cándido Natareno, had proposed it, and as a way to show the school's gratitude, he received a study grant for the school year's two semesters in 1985.¹⁴

On July 9, 1986, as confirmed in Article 3 of Session N 81-86, CONESUP reviewed and studied the requirements and documents presented for the new status. It agreed to recognize the institution known until then as CADES, now as UNADECA, which would begin to function under its new title in 1987.¹⁵ The Central American Union Mission's institution to offer higher education degrees became Universidad Adventista de Centro America (UNADECA).

CONESUP Act No. 024-86, signed by General Secretary Arnoldo Montero Martínez, arrived at UNADECA on July 16, 1986, stating that the Adventist University of Central America had met the requirements and regulations established in Article VI of Law 6693. It also suggested that UNADECA introduce a history course about Costa Rica to acquaint its students with the vision of the country in which they studied.

On July 10, 1987, under agreement No. 079-87, the government recognized the theology program. Then on August 6, 1987, agreement No. 097 certified the education program. At the same time the school received authorization to offer a number of administration courses, both bilingual and in Spanish.¹⁶

Dr. Eustacio Penniecook became UNADECA's rector 1986-1987. A Costa Rican, Penniecook had a highly regarded professional reputation, having worked both in the government and as a respected teacher at the Instituto Técnico de Administración de Empresas. His renown had facilitated the institution's name change from CADES to UNADECA as authorized by CONESUP agreement, number 074-86, of July 9, 1986. As a result, UNADECA became the second private university accredited in the country.¹⁷

In 1988, UNADECA's rector was Pablo Perla, who sought to achieve more recognition both within Costa Rica and internationally. Rector Perla worked hard to promote the university, and attract more students, create academic excellence in the teaching staff, and expand the course offerings.

1990-2000

From 1990 to 1994 UNADECA's rector was Pastor Tevni Grajales, who had been for many years the union's director of education. During those years UNADECA reached the highest enrollment in its entire history.¹⁸ Pastor Grajales was also president of AUPRICA (Association of Private Universities of Central America).

During his administration, Grajales established good relations with Costa Rican president Rafael Ángel Calderón Fournier as well as with deputies, journalists, ambassadors from neighboring countries, and rectors of other private universities. Many called this period in the history of the institution "the glory years of UNADECA" since God greatly blessed the university through the government recognition it obtained.¹⁹

The administration and board of directors decided to offer a nursing program and submitted a request to CONESUP. CONESUP's agreement 156-93 stated that once all documents had been submitted and analyzed, the council would approve the Adventist University of Central America (UNADECA) secondary school and bachelor's degree in nursing according to the proposed curriculums carried out in San José, Costa Rica, on April 29, 1993. Costa Rican nursing professional circles welcomed the new program. The opening ceremony and inauguration took place on May 13, 1993, with the attendance of Irma Sandoval Bonilla, who at that time was considered the mother of Costa Rican nurses.

From 1995 to 2001, UNADECA Ada Maribel Barrientos, previously education director of a conference in El Salvador, served as rector. Her leadership saw the creation of the UNADECA Foundation. It encouraged alumni to contribute financially and promote the institution.

In May 1998, governmental authorities officially recognized the baccalaureate in computer systems engineering degree. The school established student support programs such as a language center to help students learn English and the music conservatory to teach students how to play musical instruments.²⁰ In May 1999, the master's in business administration received accreditation, and in July 1999 the secondary school and bachelors in engineering computer systems degrees obtained their formal approval.²¹

In its earliest years, the university had a two semesters a year academic calendar (1987-1999), but in 2000 it changed to a trimester system.²²

2000-2010

From 2001 to 2004, UNADECA's rector was Pastor René Armando Martínez Ramírez. He stressed strengthening the university's finances. Also during his tenure the institution purchased computers and began the use of the Internet. It can be said that he was the father of UNADECA's technology. People will always remember him for his charisma with young people. Pastor Martínez was a music lover, leading him to create the university orchestra.

In 2004, Dr. Rosa Herminia Perla Perla became UNADECA's rector and remained in the position until 2014. During Dr. Perla's administration, the accreditation standards of AAA and CONESUP became more rigorous, resulting in the growth of the university in such areas as academic excellence, investment in the professional preparation of teachers, and a plan for teachers with bachelor's degrees to obtain master's degrees, processes all recognized by CONESUP. In addition, the school modified academic programs with the exception of theology, and gained accreditation for all bachelor's degrees. On April 28, 2004, CONESUP approved the bachelor of psychology in Session No. 503-2004, Article 3.²³

Dr. Perla also invested in the school's infrastructure by remodeling its dining room. Her administration changed the university logo, and the library received the highest financial percentage for its development. It invested much money in the purchase of bibliographic collections and equipment. Additionally, it made inter-loan

agreements with other libraries such as: Instituto Centroamericano de Administración de Empresas, Universidad Técnica Nacional, Universidad de Costa Rica, and Universidad Autónoma de Centro América.

UNADECA's academic dream came true in 2006, when it began offering the masters and doctorate degree in theology through an affiliation with the Inter-American Adventist Theological Seminary.²⁴

2010-2020

Under the leadership of Dr. Perla, in 2011 the university created an Ellen G. White Center along with a museum, a vault with copies of her writings, and a replica of her house for touring. A specialized theology library opened June 13, 2014, with approximately 5,400 books.²⁵ Also, the school built the new "Rodolfo Hein" classroom building at the recommendation of CONESUP. On December 15, 2014, as a tribute Dr. Manuel Wong, the institution named its library after him, a much deserved honor. Also, during those years, UNADECA affiliated with AUPRICA (Association of Private Universities of Central America) and UNIRE (Union of Rectors).

In 2015, Dr. Oscar Camacho Solano became rector of UNADECA, and under his leadership a number of changes occurred on campus. On November 6, 2018, the school established the office of academic quality and institutional effectiveness and launched the project "Live Healthy--eight secrets to live healthy." The university once again changed its logo and added the values "unity and ecology" as part of the UNADECA's mission's values.

On November 7, 2018, the remodeling of the women's dormitory began, adding 25 more rooms. The remodeling included installation of tiles on all floors, inside and outside paint, bathrooms and laundry area completely redone, ceilings replaced, and doors and windows replaced or installed.

On July 5, 2019, the school celebrated the International Environment Day by planting more than 300 trees with the participation of the Adventist University of Central America, the Central American Adventist Institute, the Autumn Miller School, and teachers and parents. Mr. Alonso Luna, first vice-mayor of Alajuela and the environmental manager of the municipality of Alajuela, Engineer Félix Angulo Márquez, attended the event. The school also placed exercise machines around the campus.

Community Involvement

UNADECA has gained a reputation for providing services in different areas to adjacent communities and beyond. The university's community work program provides all its schools the opportunity to offer their services to public entities. Some of the activities in which UNADECA participates are:

Health fairs in the Alajuela central park and at other places

Counseling and pastoral and psychological guidance to parents, etc.

Educational and psychological seminars

Breakfasts for homeless people

Individual pastoral assistance

Christmas gifts to children in shelters, orphanages, etc.

Repair computer equipment for the community

Sharing technological knowledge

Courses and seminars on administration and finance

Challenges University Faces

Although UNADECA throughout its history has experienced financial and legal challenges among others, the hand of the Almighty has sustained the institution, and it has emerged successfully from such adverse situations. While administration has sought to equip the university with advanced technology, much remains to be done in this regard. UNADECA also needs to venture into other career areas whose market demand is evident in today's society. The university also needs to expand in the realm of research, as well as in the preparation of teachers able to do research. Finally, UNADECA needs to increase its enrollment and reach more Adventist students.

List of Directors and Rectors

Directors

Secondary School--Centro Educativo La Sabana

W. N. Wineland (1928-1935); W. A. Wild (1936-1937); Braulio Pérez Marcio (1938); W. A. Wild (1939-1941); C. G. Gordon (1942-1943); C. F. Montgomery (1944)

Rectors

COVAC--Colegio Vocacional Adventista de America Central

C. F. Montgomery (1945); Donald J. Thomann (1946-1948); Andrés Riffel (1949-1950); Harold A. Habenicht (1951-1952); Clayton V. Henríquez (1952); L. L. Cook (1953); Manuel Carballal (1953-1957); Therlow J. Harper (1958-1963, 1965); Ira M. Nation (1965); Carlos Ayala (1966-1969)

CADES--Centro Adventista de Estudios Superiores

James W. Zackrison (1970); Israel González (1971-1975); Atilio Dupertuis (1975-1977); Hugo Visani (1978);

Francisco Otatti (1979-1980); Roberto H. Eubanks (1981-1983); Héctor M. Jurado (1983-1985)

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Eustacio Arnoldo Penniecook R. (1986-1988); Pablo Perla Perla (1988-1989); Tevni Grajales (1990-1995); Ada Maribel Barrientos Chávez (1995-2001); René Armando Martínez Ramírez (2001-2004); Rosa Herminia Perla Perla (2004-2014); Oscar Mario Camacho Solano (2015-).

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UNADECA Presidential Report. August 12, 2019. Alajuela, Costa Rica.

UNADECA Registrar Office archives. Alajuela, Costa Rica.

NOTES

1. UNADECA Presidential Report, August 12, 2019.
2. Luis Rubio Montalbán, *Los adventistas en Costa Rica...un siglo de avance* (Costa Rica: self-published, 2002), 142.
3. Floyd Greenleaf, *The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 1992), 80.
4. Rubio Montalbán, *Los adventistas in Costa Rica*, 142.
5. *Ibid.*, 144, 145.
6. Greenleaf, *The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Latin America*, 244.
7. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*. Second rev. ed. (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996), 254.

8. Rubio Montalbán, *Los Adventistas in Costa Rico*, 147.
9. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*. Second rev. ed. (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996), 149.
10. *La República* (national newspaper), February 17, 1975.
11. *La República* (national newspaper), March 1, 1978.
12. Rubio Montalbán, *Los Adventistas en Costa Rico*, 151.
13. Ibid.
14. UNADECA Registrar Office archives, Alajuela, Costa Rica, August 21, 2019.
15. Rubio Montalbán, *Los Adventistas en Costa Rico*, 150.
16. Ibid., 153, 154.
17. Ibid., 152.
18. Ibid., 153.
19. Ibid., 152.
20. Ibid., 153.
21. Ibid., 154.
22. UNADECA Registrar Office archives, Alajuela, Costa Rica, August 20, 2019.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Franz Ríos, Report of the White Center, Alajuela, Costa Rica, August 1, 2019.

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