

# El Salvador

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## VICENTE NAFRI MACHADO

Vicente Nafri Machado Arévalo, M.B.A. (Montemoleros University, Nuevo León, Mexico), has served the Adventist church in El Salvador for many years as an active church member and most recently as first elder. He provides special support to the production and information technology departments of El Salvador Union Mission and has assisted in the development of a center of influence in a church of Central El Salvador Conference. He is a dedicated lay evangelist committed to reaching the middle-class population of the country's capital. He also keeps busy mentoring master and doctorate students mainly in Adventist universities. He is married to Ana del Carmen Ramos and has two children.

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El Salvador is located on Central America's Pacific coast. It shares borders to the south with the Pacific Ocean, to the northwest with Guatemala, and to the northeast with Honduras. The Gulf of Fonseca separates it from Nicaragua on the southeast. The Seventh-day Adventist presence has been in this country since 1915.

The official name of El Salvador is the Republic of El Salvador. It has a total land area of 21,041 square kilometers. Its population is 6,825,935, with a density of 324.4 people per square kilometer and roughly 42 percent of them live in rural areas. The country's capital is San Salvador. The official language is Spanish, but the local vernacular is the informal *caliche*. Some indigenous people also speak their native tongues, such as *Nawat* and *Poqomam*. *Q'eqchi'* is another language spoken by immigrants of indigenous people originally from Guatemala and Belize. The currency used is the United States dollar (USD); the Salvadoran colón (SVC) has been out of circulation since 2001.<sup>1</sup>

As of 2017 the country's religious demographics were as follows: 44 percent Roman Catholic, 37.1 percent Protestant Christian, 2.1 percent other Christian, 0.7 percent from other religions, and 15.2 percent with no religion. El Salvador's government is a democratic and representative unitary presidential constitutional republic. Its three bodies of government are the executive branch, the legislative branch, and the judiciary. El Salvador is divided into 14 departments and 262 municipalities. These are divided into the zones of Western El Salvador, Central El Salvador, and Eastern El Salvador.<sup>2</sup>

## Overview

Before the Spaniards arrived in what is now El Salvador, two large cultural groups occupied the territory: the Pipil people of Aztec descent, and the Lenca people believed to be of Mayan descent, who were probably also the original people of El Salvador. The Pipil had arrived from the Mexican Altiplano and the Gulf Coastal Lowlands around 900 AD. The Pipil spoke *náhuatl*. By the time the Spaniards arrived, the Pipil dominated almost the entire western part of the territory and a great portion of the central zone, reaching as far as the Lempa River, and had created city-states called *señoríos*. Across from the Lempa River was the eastern area which was

mostly occupied by the Lenca people who had been displaced and dominated by the Pipil<sup>3</sup>

On May 31, 1522, Andrés Niño, the navigator for Conquistador Gil González Dávila, arrived in a gulf which he called Fonseca, disembarked at the island of Meanguera, and discovered the El Salvador territory. He did not try to conquer the locals, but, upon his return to Spain, he told stories that attracted many others to this new territory. Among them was Conquistador Pedro de Alvarado, who arrived to conquer El Salvador in June 1524.<sup>4</sup>

The people in the area now known as San Salvador launched El Salvador's first insurrection in the 1811 Independence Movement. It was not until 1821 that El Salvador obtained independence from Spain along with the rest of Central America. In 1822 the independent provinces of Central America voted on their annexation to Mexico. Only some of the 170 municipalities that responded refused to join; two of these were San Vicente and San Salvador. San Salvador was invaded twice in 1822 and 1823; but in 1823, Iturbide, an army official, lost power in Mexico, and the invading forces retreated. In 1824 El Salvador formed the Federal Republic of Central America with five other provinces. In April 1840, due to several conflicts among its nations, the republic was dissolved.<sup>5</sup>

By the early 1900s, El Salvador's economy was mostly based on the cultivation of coffee, and El Salvador became a coffee-growing republic. One part of the original Salvadoran land-owning oligarchy who had been among the first to adopt coffee-growing on a large scale were the Meléndez and Quiñónez families, who then created the governmental Meléndez-Quiñónez dynasty that lasted from 1913 to 1927. This dynasty ended when its successor announced free elections in 1930.<sup>6</sup>

In December 1931, a *coup d'état* led by General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez was organized and, consequently, he was installed as the president. This began a brutal, fascist, military-styled government that lasted until a *coup d'état* in October 1979 brought the Revolutionary Government Junta of El Salvador to power.<sup>7</sup>

Toward the end of 1979, a civil war that had been brewing for a few years began, due to the actions of El Salvador's repressive military governments. After a military coup, the "Revolutionary Government Junta" was established and launched a series of reforms. However, it was unable to stop the progress of the guerrilla from the "Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front." The Revolutionary Government Junta created a Constituent Assembly, which wrote the current Constitution of El Salvador in 1983 and established democratic elections, resulting in the election of engineer José Napoleón Duarte as president in March 1984.<sup>8</sup>

In 1990, with the help of the United Nations, the guerrillas and the government started conversations for a peace treaty agreement that was finally signed on January 16, 1992, in Chapultepec, Mexico City. This ended a fratricidal war of 12 years that left more than 75,000 dead and great destruction to the infrastructure and economy of the country. Perhaps the treaty's major achievement was ending the country's military dictatorship. Since signing the peace treaty, El Salvador has been going through a process of growth. During this time, it has been hit by hurricanes and earthquakes, but the social crisis of gangs has become one of the greatest problems for Salvadorans.<sup>9</sup>

Armed conflicts and the current security and financial crises have caused Salvadorans to constantly migrate to the United States. In 2019 the number of Salvadorans living in the USA was around 2,311,574. This represents 0.7 percent of the total USA population.<sup>10</sup> The Salvadorans who live outside of El Salvador are important to the country's economy; in 2018 alone, El Salvador received US\$5,468,700 through family remittances from the USA.

<sup>11</sup> This was almost equivalent to El Salvador's US\$5,500,000 general budget.

## Origin of Adventism in the Country

In 1909 El Salvador was the only country in Central America with no Adventist presence. However, plans were made to evangelize the country. In 1911 the Central American Conference president, N. V. Willess, launched a challenge to send a colporteur group to El Salvador since he saw the opportunity to spread the message and develop the field with more people.<sup>12</sup>

West Indian Union Conference president, A. J. Haysmer, arrived in San Salvador in 1914 to analyze the existing opportunities to open new work in this country. As a result of his report, the General Conference voted in October to separate Guatemala and El Salvador from the rest of Central America and put them "under the direct supervision of the General Conference."<sup>13</sup> In December it was agreed that part of the offering from the 13<sup>th</sup> Sabbath of the second trimester in 1915 would be used for the work in El Salvador, among other countries.<sup>14</sup>

To start the evangelization work, the General Conference decided that John L. Brown would leave Spain and go to El Salvador to begin canvassing. Brown, his wife, and their little daughter arrived in El Salvador in October 1915, and it officially became the first Adventist work in this territory. One year later, Brown wrote: "Just one year ago this month Mrs. Brown and I arrived in the republic of Salvador. We found neither Adventists nor friends to greet us. Now we have just celebrated the first anniversary of our arrival by the baptism of fourteen believers, and the organization of our first church, with nineteen members."<sup>15</sup> Brother Brown was a selfless missionary who sold Adventist literature to important people in the country and gave door-to-door Bible studies. Among the first converts were an ex-bishop, a female Bible worker, and her daughter.<sup>16</sup>

On November 14, 1915, the General Conference voted to separate El Salvador from the Guatemala Mission and make El Salvador a new mission field under a superintendent.<sup>17</sup>

## Pioneers

Under the direction of the General Conference, El Salvador received many international missionaries who preached the gospel and helped evangelize the young field. Alongside the missionaries were local pioneers who dedicated their lives and were committed to the advancement and growth of the Church.

John L. Brown, the first overseas missionary sent by the General Conference to work in El Salvador, wrote: "Most all the traveling has been done on mule back. As we follow the mountain trails to the little towns hidden among

the hills we meet all kinds of experiences. Convenience is a word unknown on such trips. Mosquitoes and fleas and other insects are everywhere to keep us company. It is on such trips that the missionary contracts the deadly tropical malaria fever."<sup>18</sup>

In December 1915, Brown was granted a ministerial license, and his wife, Esther, received missionary credentials.<sup>19</sup> In May 1916 the General Conference authorized Elder J. B. Stuyvesant to go from Guatemala to El Salvador to help the Browns in the organization of one or more churches, and at the same time he ordained John Brown as an elder.<sup>20</sup> In September 1917, the General Conference granted Elder John L. Brown ministerial credentials.<sup>21</sup> A week later, he was granted a furlough "to a northern clime" to recover from malaria.<sup>22</sup>

On June 8, 1917, San Salvador was shaken up by the eruption of the San Salvador Volcano (also known as Quezaltepeque), as well as multiple earthquakes caused by the volcano.<sup>23</sup> The Browns were on a temporary stay in the city of Santa Ana at the time of the earthquakes, after which they stayed in Santa Ana long enough to organize a mission church with R. W. Parmele, and four people were baptized.<sup>24</sup>

James Arthur Bodle and his wife opened an English school in Santa Ana around 1916 as a self-supporting missionary couple. However, duties regarding their home required them to return to the United States.<sup>25</sup> The Bodles intended to return to El Salvador.

In September 1918 Carl F. Staben and James A. Bodle were sent to the El Salvador field to serve as superintendent and treasurer, respectively. Both men and their wives arrived to support U. M. Cooke, who was at the time the only international worker in El Salvador.<sup>26</sup> In 1919 it was voted for U. M. Cooke to return to the United States.<sup>27</sup>

In November 1920 Carl Staben was sent to Honduras to support Professor Hardt in the Siguatepeque School. Meanwhile, James A. Bodle was asked to temporarily supervise the field work in El Salvador until a replacement for Carlos Staben arrived.<sup>28</sup> The Bodles returned to the United States at the end of 1924.<sup>29</sup>

U. M. Cooke and his wife were called by the General Conference near the end of 1916 to serve in El Salvador. Since Cooke had worked distributing books in the state of Texas, U.S.A., his responsibility was to lead in the distribution of books in El Salvador.<sup>30</sup> While working in El Salvador, the Cookes became the proud parents of a baby girl.<sup>31</sup> The Cooke family returned to the United States in 1919.

Carl Staben and his wife, Jessie, had been called as missionaries to begin work in El Salvador in mid-1918,<sup>32</sup> and he was to be the superintendent of the field.<sup>33</sup> The Stabens sailed from New Orleans to Honduras and then to Santa Ana, Salvador, to begin their mission work.<sup>34</sup> At the end of 1918, with help from Pastor R. W. Parmele, superintendent of the Northern Latin American Missions, a property for the El Salvador mission of "half a block of land" in Santa Ana was secured for "\$280 gold, plus expense of transfer of title." A cottage and a chapel would be built on that property later. Another plot of land in San Salvador was also purchased. This plot had a conveniently-located building that could be used for offices, a meeting hall, and living quarters for foreign

workers. The church acquired the plot of land for 6,400 pesos, which was equivalent to US\$2,600 at the time.<sup>35</sup> During Carl F. Staben's administration, the work in Santa Ana and San Salvador grew. At the end of 1920 he was called to work in Honduras.

W. W. Murray arrived in Santa Ana, El Salvador, as a self-supporting worker in early 1919. On the property that had been purchased in 1918, Murray built a house fitted with treatment rooms. He faced financial problems, but remained undaunted.<sup>36</sup> He and his wife attracted many interested people who wanted to learn about health principles through cooking classes. Several of the best families in the area became interested in these classes through W. W. Murray's teaching of English.<sup>37</sup> After almost four years of dedicated work, the Murrays moved to Guatemala in 1922.

José Ángel Hernández and his wife, Ursula, were among the first Salvadorans to accept the Adventist message and be baptized. They were faithful to their principles and showed a model Christian lifestyle. José Hernández was a great local missionary, conducting house-to-house visits to share the gospel. He had bought a Bible from John L. Brown and, because he could not read, he asked Brown to underline with different colors the most important verses "sustaining the third angel's message." Every time he met with his friends, he asked them to read the underlined texts and then explained its meaning to them. In this way, he presented the everlasting gospel persistently and became a powerful pioneer.<sup>38</sup>

There were Salvadorans who believed in and accepted God's message and then took it upon themselves to spread the gospel in their communities. Juan Hernández began as a Bible worker in January 1919. He worked in Cojutepeque for three years, in San Salvador for one year, and in Santa Ana for some time. Miguel Rodríguez started work in December 1918 for two years. He did not work in 1921; but, realizing that this was a sacred calling, he began again in 1922, working in Santa Ana for two years and in Sonsonate for one year. Maria Valladares worked as a Bible worker for the year of 1920. Domingo Martínez began working while receiving half the regular salary of that time. He was contracted as a regular Bible worker beginning in December 1921. He left his job in December 1922, but rejoined in January 1926. Ladislao Arriaga worked as field missionary department secretary from December 1920 to December 1922. José M. Membreño worked as a pastor from January to December 1922.<sup>39</sup>

## Dissemination and Development of the Message

On October 21, 1916, the first church in El Salvador was organized in San Salvador with 19 members. The second church was organized in Santa Ana in August 1917. By 1918 the young Salvador Mission had 40 baptized members "and about ten more who are waiting for baptism."<sup>40</sup> The third church in Salvadoran territory was organized in Cojutepeque in 1919. There were 58 church members at the time. Mainly due to the diligence and commitment of local workers, "book sales have increased about double," with prospects to grow further.<sup>41</sup>

In 1922 the Inter-American Division was organized with the Caribbean Union Mission and Central American Mission, which included Salvador Mission in its territory. Pastor E. E. Beddoe was elected to direct the Salvador Mission.<sup>42</sup> He left the Nevada Conference and traveled to El Salvador with his wife and child. The first property that had been bought in San Salvador had to be sold due to financial reasons. Another property was bought for US\$2,000. The Salvador Mission headquarters was built on that plot of land and finished in December 1922.<sup>43</sup>

In August 1923 Pastor Ellis P. Howard was ordained and sent to direct the work in El Salvador.<sup>44</sup> By 1927 El Salvador had five churches and 220 members.<sup>45</sup>

Daniel Rodríguez moved to La Unión in mid-1926 and started work as a tailor. He was only able to rent a sewing machine because he was poor and was unable to buy one. However, since he was a believer, he took time to conduct missionary work in La Unión and surrounding areas. By 1928 he had helped convert 11 people to Adventism: eight in La Unión, including a lawyer, and three more in Conchagua.<sup>46</sup>

In 1925 Valentín Laro, a colporteur, took the message to San Vicente, which resulted in the first converts. These converts, two unnamed young men, then took the message to the Hasbun family, immigrants from "Bethlehem of Judea" and owners of "the largest [business] in the city." At this time the Adventist church in San Vicente, El Salvador, had 28 members who were "entirely the result of the missionary activity of lay members."<sup>47</sup> Pedro Larra, another colporteur, also took the Adventist message to San Vicente in 1925; the Rivas brothers, Adam and Juan, were converted.<sup>48</sup>

In 1930, under the management of President L. H. Olson of Salvador Mission, church members were encouraged to preach the gospel in El Salvador's eastern zone. Weather conditions and unkept roads had prevented the spreading of the message across the Lempa River, which separated the eastern zone of El Salvador from the rest of the provinces. It was made known in 1931 that five people in the city of San Miguel gathered on Saturdays under the direction of José N. Vanegas. He took the Adventist message to El Corozal and shared it with Lázaro Romero, who shared it with Juan de la Rosa Umaña, who would later become Romero's brother-in-law. In 1932 two colporteurs visited El Corozal, found a small Adventist group, and helped it organize the first Sabbath School in the east. They then reported this to President Olson, who visited the group and celebrated the first baptism in that area on May 31, 1932.<sup>49</sup> In 1934 determined workers arrived at Sesori in northern San Miguel, where Arístides Jerez became the first convert.<sup>50</sup>

President Peter Nygaard of Salvador Mission was an excellent missionary whose leadership was evident throughout different areas of the Adventist Church in El Salvador. By the end of the 1930s the Adventist message had reached many places in the country of El Salvador. In 1936, upon arrival in Santa Ana, President Nygaard helped support and promote the construction of a church to be built on a plot of land that had been bought years earlier. Nygaard had building experience and thus led the construction work. The church was dedicated in August 1937. "It is the purpose of Brother Nygaard to join with the local worker, Victor Printemps, in holding an evangelistic effort in the new building in the near future."<sup>51</sup>

Victor Printemps and Rafael Sagatume conducted excellent evangelistic work in the western zone, specifically in the city of Santa Ana. In 1938 the San Salvador church was the largest. That same year the churches in Santa Tecla and Quezaltepeque were organized. In 1940 Pastor Nygaard conducted a baptism in the city of San Miguel. Pastor Nygaard and Printemps worked to build another church in Sonsonate in 1941. At the end of 1941 El Salvador had ten churches and 506 members.<sup>52</sup>

In 1945, after having served in South America and other Central American countries like Guatemala and Costa Rica, Pastor Orley Ford and his wife, Lilian, arrived in El Salvador. Pastor Ford was to be the president of Salvador Mission, a position he held for 14 years. The Fords worked closely with the youth of the Adventist Church's Missionary Volunteers (M.V.) Society. On August 10, 1949, President Ford wrote about the M.V. camp meeting, probably the first in the Central American Union Mission for Spanish-speaking youth, that had resulted in more believers being ready for baptism. He also wrote about planning a bigger camp meeting the next year:<sup>53</sup>

On January 18, 1957, a new church building in San Salvador was inaugurated, and a series of evangelistic meetings was held. The new building had four church school rooms, the mission offices, and an auditorium with capacity for 1,000 people. The church was built with reinforced bricks and concrete and, therefore, was resistant to fire and earthquakes.<sup>54</sup>

In 1960 Pastor Abel Orozco was assigned to a new district, the district of Usulután, to open new fields. A local man who had found a Voice of Prophecy advertisement offering Bible courses by mail from Cuba, sent in a request, and his name was forwarded to Salvador Mission. He began studies with much interest and asked others to enroll. This led to seven baptisms by Pastor Orozco in the year of his arrival. Among the first Adventist families in Usulután were the Sebastian Vanegas family, Miguel Cerna and his wife, Elva Vanegas, and the Cristales family.<sup>55</sup> In 1962 the Missionary Volunteer youth movement was key to spreading the gospel in the department of Usulután. Through this movement, the work was opened in Hacienda Moropala and Hacienda Nueva in the southern part of the department.<sup>56</sup>

In 1964 it was noted that "The mother [of] a new believer in San Salvador has donated a building site for a fourth church in that city. This lot is located near the university, in a suburb called Ayutuxtepeque. A second property in Hacienda Nueva, in the Usulután district, was also donated to the church."<sup>57</sup>

While Daniel Moncada was president of the mission of El Salvador, the nation faced two challenges. The earthquake of May 3, 1965, that killed more than 120 people and greatly weakened many buildings in the capital city was the first of these; and the second was the war with Honduras. These challenges provided the church with opportunities to share the Adventist message.

While Luis E. Leonor was president of El Salvador Mission, he instituted Brotherhood Day. During this celebration, El Salvador's lay members would gather to receive motivation and strength. This became one of the most beloved events held by the church members of El Salvador. The first Brotherhood Day was held Friday evening and Sabbath, November 17 and 18, 1972, for which "about 2,800 church members met.... Elder and Mrs.



Orley Ford received a standing ovation from the crowd when mission president Luis E. Leonor presented them with a plaque for their 27 years of service in that field. Elder Ford, being aware of his critical state of health, made a farewell speech in which he encouraged the members to be faithful to the end. Less than 24 hours later this man of God was called to his rest.<sup>58</sup> His last wish was to be buried in the *Cementerio General de Ayutuxtepeque* in San Salvador. The church was deeply saddened by this loss, since the church considered him a very valuable missionary in El Salvador.

"In mid-1978 the Evangelism Explosion Plan" of the Central American Union Mission issued a challenge to El Salvador's church members. This led to lay preachers, as well as pastors, administrators, departmental directors, office secretaries, and church school teachers, becoming involved in missionary work throughout 1979. On March 1, 1979, 12,000 church members and their guests attended the graduation of 5,003 students from the "When God Speaks" Voice of Prophecy-type lessons at the National Gymnasium at which Elder Milton Peverini, the Spanish Voice of Prophecy speaker, and the King's Heralds were featured. Those in attendance were invited to attend one of 229 simultaneous evangelistic crusades held across the country. On March 24, 1979, 501 people were baptized in a "first-fruits baptism." On May 12, 1979, under pouring rain and wind-whipped waves at Lake Ilopango, 15 ministers successfully baptized 1,325 people. President Robert Folkenberg of the Central American Union Mission, described this event as "the most productive evangelistic effort in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church!" By the end of May more than 2,000 people had been baptized in total, including those who had been baptized at other baptismal sites after political upheavals removed public transportation from highways.<sup>59</sup>

In October 1979 the Salvadoran Civil War began. The war continued for longer than a decade, but the evangelistic spirit of the church did not dwindle. The missionary zeal that Salvadorans had despite the political unrest in El Salvador was seen in 1980 when more than 3,500 people were baptized. This was largely due to the work of laymen such as Andrés Molina, whose efforts resulted in the conversion of 139 people that year.<sup>60</sup> The church grew in El Salvador, not only in terms of membership, but also in finances. "In spite of the political and economic crisis in the country, members have demonstrated their faithfulness. Tithe for the past year was 35 percent more than for [1980] and offerings for the development fund for new churches reached 60,000 colones (US\$24,000)."<sup>61</sup>

The Salvadoran missionary enthusiasm continued the next year. "On March 14 [1981], 926 persons were baptized in the El Salvador Mission, bringing the total to over 2,000 and surpassing the goal for the entire year. Due to the internal crisis in the country, public evangelism has been suspended, but laymen and pastors are doing personal work through house-to-house visitation. The church members are of good courage."<sup>62</sup>

The church continued working and growing in spite of the earthquake that destroyed the capital city in 1986 and the civil war that ended in 1992. El Salvador Conference grew so quickly that, in 1996, its territory was divided, and East El Salvador Mission was established with 102 churches and 29,142 members. After its restructuring, El



Salvador Conference was left with 122 churches and 37,258 members.<sup>63</sup> By 2019 the total membership in El Salvador almost tripled. Later territorial reorganizations resulted in a union with five fields, and the Adventist Church in El Salvador continues to grow.

## Institutions

*Escuela La Loma* was the first formal Adventist school founded in the country. It was founded in May 1924 and located 29 kilometers from San Salvador in El Paraíso in the San Pedro Perulapán province of Cuscatlán. Under Pastor Howard, director of the Salvador Mission, J. A. Bodle and his family moved and began work in El Paraíso.<sup>64</sup> By 1925, 16 people were baptized near the La Loma school, ten of whom were from the local community, with the rest living near San Vicente. At the beginning people were afraid of the Adventists, and the first school year concluded with 25 local students. However, there was the promise of “about fifty Indian boys and girls” for the following year.<sup>65</sup>

*Escuela de Capacitación Adventista Salvadoreña* (Adventist Training School) was the first full secondary-level Adventist boarding school in El Salvador. In 1981 the administration of El Salvador Mission bought 280 acres of land near San Juan Opico, La Libertad, to build this school. Robert Elden Ford would become the school's director and was developing plans to provide vocational training and work-study opportunities for its student body.<sup>66</sup> On March 19, 1982, the school's stone-laying ceremony was held with Director Elden Ford giving the history of the development of the boarding school.<sup>67</sup> On November 2 to 4, 1984, the Adventist Training School conducted graduation exercises for the first students that completed secondary studies at the school.<sup>68</sup>

*Radio Adventista 96.5 FM* was established in September 1989 when the Adventist Church had an offer to buy the 96.5 FM radio frequency. Before that, the church was only able to broadcast *La Voz de la Esperanza* program through radio broadcast space available for purchase. In the early beginnings of *Radio Adventista*, the program simply repeated certain prerecorded songs and programs. After a while, Ana María Alcaine donated 40 musical cassettes and 60 cassettes of sermons. More donations followed. Currently, *Radio Adventista* broadcasts its program 24 hours a day. A significant portion of its programming is produced nationally. *Radio Adventista* has conquered barriers, and its programming can be listened to internationally through its webpage.<sup>69</sup>

## Effects of Political Developments on Church Work

In the early 1900s the presidency of the Republic of El Salvador was controlled by economically powerful families. The Adventist Church arrived in El Salvador in that time and found much poverty among the country's population, in spite of economic prosperity due to coffee cultivation as the third highest coffee producer in the world. Pastor Brown described the socio-demographics of the population in 1915, saying that the people had very low moral standards, ignorance and superstitions abounded, and more than one half of Salvadoran children were illegitimate. “It costs so much money to secure a civil license and the priest charges so large a sum

for performing the marriage ceremony that the poor natives cannot meet these expenses.<sup>70</sup> The church was established under these circumstances, and its growth was slow. In 1930 only 218 members and six churches existed in the country.<sup>71</sup>

In the 1970s the Salvadorans began socio-political movements against their military government. However, the church in El Salvador experienced one of its greatest periods of growth during this time. In 1970 the country of El Salvador had 34 Adventist churches and 4,819 members.<sup>72</sup> In 1980 El Salvador had 62 churches and 16,158 members.<sup>73</sup>

The Salvadoran government did not directly threaten religious freedom, and socio-political events that could have stalled the Adventist Church's spreading of the gospel in El Salvador did not. War and post-war events seem to have helped the church's growth. In 1990 El Salvador had 177 churches and 45,079 members.<sup>74</sup> In 2010 El Salvador had 641 churches and more than 200,000 members.<sup>75</sup>

## The Place of Adventism in the Country

There are nine Adventists per square kilometer in El Salvador, representing three Adventists per 100 residents. The church has a presence in Salvadoran society with two radio stations that cover 80 percent of the country and have a large non-Adventist audience.

The 25 elementary and secondary schools throughout the country, with a total enrollment of more than 4,000 students, represent the Adventist educational system in Salvadoran society. The church's health department has impacted the country over the past several years with the *Quiero Vivir Sano* program. This specific program has been lauded by governmental authorities in the education and health areas. One of these was Violeta Menjívar, the Minister of Health and Social Welfare, who said in 2015: "Consider us allies to the program, and what could be better than to implement it in the public educational system?"<sup>76</sup>

ADRA has positioned itself as a non-governmental organization that collaborates with the government in its program to eradicate illiteracy. An average of 2,500 people learned to read each year through ADRA's literacy program with the support of El Salvador's Ministry of Education.<sup>77</sup> ADRA also helps implement agricultural projects in alliance with other non-governmental organizations and has provided health clinics and donated equipment and furniture to low-income families and educational institutions. ADRA's goal is to change one life at a time in El Salvador.

The church's *Viva Mejor* project graduated 176 students. The students received training from the *Instituto Salvadoreño de Formación Profesional*, which had developed the project with the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Advent-Stiftung Foundation.<sup>78</sup>

The Advent-Stiftung Foundation and the Adventist Church provided work equipment to 290 low-income families all over El Salvador in 2018. Starting in 1992, under the *Viva Mejor* project, the church and the foundation have

benefited families who otherwise had no profession to create personal income.<sup>79</sup>

Another project that has had an impact on the community and gives the Adventist Church a presence among Salvadorans is the *Albergue Adventista Miramonte* (also called the Miramonte Adventist Shelter), an initiative started by local church members living in Miramonte regarding a house donated by a special family.<sup>80</sup> It was inaugurated on July 28, 2018.<sup>81</sup> As such, it is one of the youngest projects of the church. It provides a temporary, secure, and clean place for those parents with kids admitted to the pediatric Benjamin Bloom National Children's Hospital, along with food and daily evangelistic programs, among other activities.<sup>82</sup>

## Challenges

Up to the present, little has been done to spread the message to the professional class and the upper class of Salvadoran society. The upper-class part of the capital, in which more than 100,000 people live, has only two churches. Currently, a center of influence is being opened to offer services, reach these people, and establish more churches in the area. Adventists made up less than three percent of the Salvadoran population as of 2020. The message has not reached many municipalities and cities.

In education, in spite of a significant Adventist youth population and 11 high school level institutions, El Salvador does not have an Adventist university that would help prepare future Adventist professionals to serve society, the Church, and its institutions.

El Salvador's gang-related violence situation has affected the preaching of the gospel and impedes the church's ability to reach new territories. It has also affected established churches due to member migration to other places, both within and outside the country. Young pastors risk their lives in gang territory. In many places, evangelistic campaigns are impossible to conduct, and so the strengthening of the small groups program is essential to conquering present and future difficulties. Even though the challenges are great, the gospel continues to advance in El Salvador.

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