



South Colombian Conference headquarters, May 2022.

Photo courtesy of Yerko Samuel Viana Moreno.

# South Colombian Conference

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César Augusto Fagua Preciado, M.A. in pastoral theology (SETAI, Miami), currently works as district pastor at the South Colombian Conference. He has served the Church for 32 years as chaplain, district pastor, and ministerial secretary. He is married to Nubia Fuentes. They have two sons and a granddaughter.

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The South Colombian Conference is part of the territory of the Inter-American Division of Seventh-day Adventists. Its headquarters are located in the city of Ibagué, Tolima. It has the peculiarity of having in its territory a varied climate, from warm and semi-arid, to perpetual snow and a volcanic area formed by the volcanoes Mount Machín and Cerro Bravo, and the snow-capped volcanoes of Tolima, El Ruiz, and Santa Isabel.

As of June 20, 2018, the territory of the conference covered a population of 2,296,402. It was composed of 129 churches and 31,805 members. The headquarters office is located at Carrera 3 No. 40-45, neighborhood La Castellana of the city of Ibagué.<sup>1</sup>

## Institutions

The Adventist College of Ibagué is located at Apple 41, Stage 1, Cita del Simon Bolivar, and was founded on February 1, 1968. The school offers preschool, elementary, and full high school. It has 423 students and a payroll of 32 employees.<sup>2</sup>

## Origins of the Seventh-day Adventist Work in the Territory of the Conference

In the late 1890s, self-supporting missionary Frank C. Kelly arrived in Colombia determined to introduce Adventism in the country. He was only able to stay there for three years because his wife became ill and they had to return home. His job was to sell photographic equipment and teach English. Unfortunately, after two decades there was no one to continue Kelly's pioneering work and no fruit was realized from the seed he had sown.<sup>3</sup>

This was the first attempt to preach the SDA message in Colombia. It was not until 1913 that missionary B. E. Connerly volunteered to try to break the proverbial ice of Colombia through Adventist publications. In 1915 he and his family settled in Barranquilla and the following year in Medellin. There he wrote, "This is the most delightful and hardest field I have ever worked in."<sup>4</sup>

"G. A. Schwerin took the work that Connerly had left unfinished in 1917, but for that time E. M. Trummer visited Colombia for the first time. Less than two years later, when he moved to Bogota, he put into operation his capacity as expert in the distribution of Adventist books as a canvasser to prepare Colombia for active evangelism. It was during his years of service that the Adventist work in Colombia began its true beginning."<sup>5</sup>

In 1921, Dr. Max Trummer arrived in Bogota to strengthen the missionary work already begun and contacted the Kelley and Cleves families to join forces in preaching the gospel in the country's capital.<sup>6</sup> From Bogotá began the task of preaching in the sectors near the capital, including the department of Tolima.

It is not possible to accurately trace the place and circumstances that gave rise to the Adventist Church in Ibagué, Tolima. It is presumed that it was from this place that the message would radiate to much of the Tolimense territory. In February 1948, the educational work began with a primary level institution located in Carrera 6 between streets 12 and 13 under the name of Liceo Bethel, and under the guidance and direction of Professor Irene Quiñones.<sup>7</sup>

In the town of Mariquita, north of Tolima, in 1952, he had already formed a small group in the Celemín family's house which included Rosalía and his daughters Herminda, Tulia, and Adelaide. It can be said that they were the pioneers of the work in this city. Other leaders such as the Lozano and Martínez families (Pompilio, Carlos, Susana, and Aura) were later converted thanks to the work of the Celemín and Lozano families and together joined forces to form the first church in this city. Shortly thereafter they acquired a property located in the 5#8-51 Race, where the Central Church of Mariquita currently operates. This group was visited periodically from Ibagué by Pastor Gregorio Laguna and also supported by young people from the Central Church of Bogotá and Pastor Gamboa from Armero.

Brother Cristóbal Ñanguma Barragán stated that in the time of Pastor Laguna in the years 1958-1960 a lot called *El Edén* was purchased in the city of Ibagué that would later become the first church to organize in this capital city, and that it is now called *Paradise*. The pioneers of that era were Hernando López, Roberto and Raúl Covalada, Ceferino Rocha, and Cristóbal Ñanguma Barragán.<sup>8</sup>

Around 1961 another group of believers emerged in the center of Ibagué, in Race 6 between 12th and 13th Streets. The Bethel Elementary School also operated there. At that time and place, as Ñanguma tells it, the Adventist work was being led by Pastor Manuel Martínez, a 65-year-old veteran, who acquired a lot for 10,000 pesos, located in Race 6, No 9-49. Construction soon began on what would be called the Central Adventist Church of Ibagué and which, together with the Paradise Church, would be established as the most prominent churches in the city of Ibagué, and today are the two most representative in the conference. The following year Pastor Severo Gelvis came, and he continued with the construction of the church until its inauguration in 1963.

Eliodoro Granobles pioneered the work in Chaparral, south of the Tolima, in the 1960s. The following year Saturnino Peralta and Cristóbal Ñanguma were baptized and gradually the Three Angels' Messages spread throughout the south of Tolima to the city of Rioblanco and other nearby locations.

The Adventist work to the north of Tolima also took root in the village of Armero, and from there it spread to Guayabal, Mariquita, La Dorada, and Puerto Boyacá.

In the city of Lebanon, in northern Tolima, the work began around 1961 with the formation of a group of brothers from which the Lebanese Adventist Church would eventually be established. Cristóbal Ñanguma went there to lease the location where the church would begin. Other pioneers who worked there are Campo Elías Castro, Nazareo Lombana, and Alfonso Vega, and the church in Tolima continues to grow.

## Training Events that Led to the Organization of the South Colombian Conference

The Colombia Mission was organized in 1922,<sup>9</sup> and its first president was Pastor E. M. Trummer. The mission office was located at Section 599, Bogota, Republic of Colombia. The members of the executive board were E. M.

Trummer (chair), L. V. Cleaves, Fred Brower, F. C. Kelley, and Antonio Redondo.<sup>10</sup> In 1926 it was reorganized into four missions: Antioqueña Mission based in Medellín, Atlantic Mission based in Barranquilla, Pacific Mission based in Cali, and the Central Mission based in Bogotá, with Pastor G. C. Nickle as its president. The Central Mission comprised the provinces of Arauca, Boyacá, Caquetá, Cundinamarca, Huila, Meta, Norte de Santander, Santander, Tolima, Vaupés, and Vichada.<sup>11</sup> In 1927 the provinces of Norte de Santander and Santander were assigned to the Antioqueña Mission, and the territory comprising the Pacific Mission (provinces of Chocó, Valle del Cauca, Cauca, Nariño, and Putumayo) was assigned to the Central Mission, which changed its headquarters from Bogotá to the city of Cali.<sup>12</sup>

In 1929 the territory of the Central Mission was divided. The Central Mission kept the provinces of Arauca, Boyacá, Cundinamarca, Huila, Meta, Tolima, and Vichada, while the new Pacific Mission took the territories of Chocó, Valle del Cauca, Cauca, Nariño, and Putumayo.<sup>13</sup> In 1930 the Antioqueña Mission was renamed the Central Mission, and the territory administered by the Central Mission was called Upper Magdalene Mission. The new mission was led by N. H. Kinner.<sup>14</sup> In 1938 the northern part of Caquetá and the provinces of Vaupés and Amazonas were annexed to it.<sup>15</sup> In 1939 the territories of Caquetá and Amazonas were transferred to the Pacific Mission.<sup>16</sup>

In 1941 the territory was reorganized and assigned the departments of Santander del Norte, Santander del Sur, Caquetá, and Amazonas. The Central Mission no longer existed and only three missions were left in Colombia.<sup>17</sup> The 1941 vote of the union board taken on January 17, 1941, said: "Recommend to the Inter-American Division... the reorganization of the Missions in Colombia." The territory now covered by four missions was to be reorganized into three missions. The territory consisted of "Mission of the Upper Magdalene, Mission of the Colombian Atlantic, and Mission of the Colombian Pacific."<sup>18</sup> The territory remained so until 1985.

In 1985 the Upper Magdalena Conference ceded the territories of Arauca, Guainia, Norte de Santander, Santander, a section northeast of Boyaca, and the east section of Casanare and Vichada, to create a new field. The Colombian East Mission was also given the territories of Amazonas, Boyacá, Casanare, Cundinamarca, Meta, Putumayo, Vaupés, Tolima, Huila, and Caqueta.<sup>19</sup>

In view of the positive growth of the work in the departments of Tolima, Huila, and Caquetá, on December 9, 2002, the Upper Magdalene Conference in the constituency meeting voted "to cede the territories of Tolima, Huila and Caquetá to the formation of a new territorial section, which would enable further development and attention to the brotherhood of this sector of the country."<sup>20</sup> December 13, 2002, in the city of Ibagué, the South-Colombian Region arose and Tor Argenil Vega Rodríguez was appointed as coordinator and Oscar Amado Mateus as secretary-treasurer.<sup>21</sup>

On July 16 and 17, 2016, a meeting was held in Ibagué to effect the change of status from region to mission. In this assembly, Pastor Edilso Barrera Visbal was appointed as president, Pastor Juan Emerson Hernández as secretary, and Arnaldo Diaz as treasurer. In 2016 the Upper Magdalene Conference officially ceded the

territories of Caqueta, Huila, and Tolima, and portions of Boyaca, Caldas, and Cundinamarca, to form the South Colombian Mission.<sup>22</sup>

Subsequently, the executive committee of the South Colombian Mission submitted an application to the Colombian Union to change its status.<sup>23</sup> In response to this request, at the meeting of the Southern Colombian Union Executive Committee held November 14-15, 2007, in Medellin, they voted to change the status of the mission to conference. This recommendation would be formalized with the holding of a constituency meeting.<sup>24</sup>

## The South Colombian Conference Seeks to Fulfill Its Mission

There are three strategic means through which the conference strives to fulfill its evangelizing task:

*Communion.* The year begins with prayer and visitation to parishioners. In the model called “Holy Call,” small groups are trained and the elderly and women’s ministries are empowered through training and prayer to provide effective means to reach the unreached.

*Relationship.* During the second quarter, stakeholders are recruited through the program “I want to live healthy,” groups (with emphasis on female small groups), Expo-Health, and sowing campaigns with evangelism by the members of the church.

*Mission.* In this third and final stage, which usually occurs in the last two quarters, ministerial exchange harvest campaigns are carried out as well as campaigns led by each pastor and elder in each district. This operating cycle is restarted with some variants each year.

These are the three central means that appropriately and succinctly point out the strategic plan of the South Colombian Conference, described below in three interconnected phases: “I get close to God,” “We get close to God,” and “We get them close to God.”

The conference recently acquired a building in the neighborhood La Castellana, where the conference office operates. It also purchased a farm for church meetings and activities and for building and adapting SDA churches.

## List of Presidents

Edilso Visbal Barrier (2005-2011); Juan Emerson Hernandez (2012-2015); Joel Archila (2016-2018); Yuri Leon Duarte (2018-present).

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## NOTES

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