

Upper Magdalena Conference

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The Upper Magdalena Conference is part of the South Columbian Union Conference in the Inter-American Division of Seventh-day Adventists.

The Upper Magdalena Conference includes the following territories: the Northeast Zone, as well as Central and West Bogota; and the Central and North Departments of Cundinamarca. Its headquarters is located in the city of Santafe de Bogotá, capital of the republic of Colombia.

In 2019, the Upper Magdalena Conference has 88 churches, 24,586 members, 15 ordained pastors and 6 licensed pastors in a population of 5,850,019 inhabitants in its territory.¹

Institution of the Upper Magdalena Conference

North Adventist Secondary School located at 70 G, No 71–20, Barrio Palo Blanco, Bogota began in 1976 as an institution of the local church under the leadership of Pastor Jaime Suarez.² In 1992, its name was changed to the Northern Adventist College. It currently has 470 students and offers the preschool, elementary and full high school level.³

Origins of Work in the Territory

In the late 1890s, self-supporting missionary Frank C. Kelley arrived to Colombia, determined to introduce Adventism in Colombia. He was only able to stay in the country for three years because his wife became ill and he had to return to his country. He worked selling photographic equipment and teaching English. Unfortunately, “after two decades there was no one to continue Kelly's pioneering work” and the seed he had sown could not germinate and bear fruit.⁴

This was the first attempt to preach the Adventist message in Colombia, but it was not until 1913 that missionary B. E. Connerly volunteered to try to break the “proverbial ice of Colombia” through publications. In 1915, he and his family settled in Barranquilla, and the following year, 1916, in Medellin. There he wrote, “This is the most delightful and hardest field I have ever worked in.”⁵

"G. A. Schwerin took on the work that Connerly had left unfinished in 1917, and at that time E. M. Trummer visited Colombia for the first time. Less than two years later, when he moved to Bogota, he used his expertise as a canvasser to distribute Adventist books as a means of preparing Colombia for active evangelism. It was during his years of service that the Adventist work in Colombia had its true beginning."⁶

In 1921, Max Trummer arrived to Bogotá for strengthening the missionary work already begun. There he contacted the Kelley and Cleves family to join forces in preaching the gospel. They leased a building on Street 14 and on July 30, 1921 they met to organize the first Adventist church in Bogotá. Both colporteur and the preaching of the gospel, were used to share the faith in the capital city, and in 1923, the first Adventist believer in the capital was baptized.⁷

The pioneers continued to use these two methods to sow the seed of the gospel and today thanks to this work, there is a prosperous church in the capital of the country.

Events that Led to Organization of the Conference

The Colombia Mission was organized in 1922,⁸ and its first president was Pastor E. M. Trummer. The address of the mission office was Section 599, Bogota, Republic of Colombia. The members of the executive board were M. E. Trummer (chairman), L. V. Cleaves, Fred Brower, F. C. Kelley and Antonio Redondo.⁹ In 1926, it was reorganized into four missions: Antioqueña Mission based in Medellin, Atlantic Mission, based in Barranquilla, Pacific Mission based in Cali and Central Mission based in Bogota with pastor G.C. Nickle as president. The Central Mission comprised the provinces of Arauca, Boyacá, Caquetá, Cundinamarca, Huila, Meta, Norte de Santander, Santander, Tolima, Vaupés and Vichada.¹⁰

In 1927, the provinces of Norte de Santander and Santander were assigned to the Antioqueña Mission and the territory comprising the Pacific Mission (the provinces of Chocó, Valle del Cauca, Cauca, Nariño and Putumayo) were assigned to the Central Mission, with change of headquarters from the city of Bogotá to the city of Cali.¹¹ In 1929, the territory of the Central Colombia Mission was divided and was made up of the provinces of Arauca, Boyacá, Cundinamarca, Huila, Meta, Tolima and Vichada. The Pacific Colombia Mission with the territories of Chocó, Valle del Cauca, Cauca, Nariño and Putumayo was reconstituted.¹² In 1930, the name of the Antioqueña Mission was changed to Central Mission and the territory previously administered by the Central Mission was renamed the Upper Magdalena Mission. This new mission was led by N. H. Kinzer.¹³ In 1938, the northern part of Caquetá and the province of Vaupés and Amazonas were attached to it,¹⁴ and in 1939, the territory of Caquetá and Amazonas were ceded to the Pacific Mission.¹⁵

In 1941, the territory was reorganized and assigned the departments of Santander del Norte, Santander del Sur, Caquetá and Amazonas. The Central Mission was dissolved leaving only three missions in Colombia.¹⁶ Vote 1346 of the union executive committee taken on January 17, 1941 read: "Recommend to the Inter-American Division the reorganization of the missions in Colombia. The territory now comprised of four missions is requesting to be

reorganized into three missions - Upper Magdalena Mission, Colombia Atlantic Mission and Colombia Pacific Mission."¹⁷ This configuration remained until 1985.

In 1965, the status of the mission was changed to conference. Pastor Florez wrote in the mission newspaper: "With the words, 'On behalf of the Inter-American Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, I declare the Upper Magdalena Conference constituted,' spoken by Pastor Fernon Retzer on January 29, 1965 in Bogota, Colombia, on the occasion of the second Biennial Congress and in the presence of the secretary of the local district's First Notary, Dr. Medina, and 125 delegates, the first conference of the Colombian-Venezuelan Union was inaugurated. This was the fulfillment of the desire in the hearts of those of us who had seen the progress of the Great Cause of the Lord in this privileged field for the Gospel."¹⁸

In 1985, the Upper Magdalena conference ceded the territories of Arauca, Guainia, Norte de Santander, Santander, northeast section of Boyacá and the east section of Casanare and Vichada, to create a new field. It remained with the territories of Amazonas, Boyacá, Caqueta, Casanare, Cundinamarca, Huila, Meta, Putumayo, Tolima, and Vaupes.¹⁹ In 2006, the territories of Caqueta, Huila, Tolima, and portions of Boyaca, Caldas and Cundinamarca were ceded by the conference to form the Southern Colombian Mission.²⁰ The territories of Boyacá (except northeast section), Casanare (except east section), Guainia, Guaviare, Meta, and Vaupes were ceded in 2009, to form the Llanos and Boyacá Mission.²¹ In 2013, the south-east part of Bogota was ceded to create the South Bogota Mission,²² and in 2016, the territories of the northwestern sector of the city of Bogota, the western provinces of Cundinamarca and the departments of Boyaca were ceded to create the Northwestern Bogota and Boyaca Mission.²³ Currently the Upper Magdalena Conference is comprised of the Northeast Zone, as well as central and west Bogota, and the central and north departments of Cundinamarca.²⁴

Fulfilling the Mission

Fulfilling the mission of Christ is the reason why the Upper Magdalena Conference exists, and the conference has set out to involve and mobilize all the members in its territory. One strategy is establishing representative churches in strategic places in Bogotá. The media is very important and the conference has made a significant investment in the use of television, radio, and digital spaces with strong evangelistic and social content.

Recent Events in the Conference.

The Upper Magdalena Conference has been greatly blessed throughout its history. During the quadrennium a coliseum was constructed for the Northern Adventist College. This serves for general meetings and convocations of the church of Bogotá. A church in Chía, on the outskirts of Bogotá, is being constructed, and from there a center of influence will operate.

Perspectives for the Future

The conference continues to make great efforts to keep the mission in the minds of its parishioners. Therefore, one of the roadmaps of the field is "Homes of Hope;" these are small groups that are used for the advancement of preaching in a society that is becoming increasingly closed. Along with this strategy is a program of motivation for soul winning called "My First Star." This is especially targeted to those members who have never won souls for the Lord. There are also initiatives such as "Worth the Return" to reach out to former Adventists.

Administrators, pastors, and laity have a goal of raising up new churches. Thus, each year new preaching centers are chosen with the aim of starting new congregations and eventually erecting new churches.

Realizing that using the media is an effective way of preaching, the conference has a television space on a private channel, "Channel El tiempo" in the city of Santafé de Bogotá, where the Adventist message is preached nationally.

Challenges

Bogota is a metropolis where the population is becoming increasingly dense and insecurity makes the population more hermetic and less willing to be contacted. Additionally, the land use plans that the city legislates limit the construction of churches in the city, making it difficult for the churches to progress.

List of Presidents

Noel H. Kinzer (1930); G. E. Westpall (1931–1934); J. B. Ross (1936); W. E. Baxter, Jr. (1937–1943); L. H. Olson (1943–1945); W.E. Bergherm (1945); W. E. Baxter, Jr. (1945); G. Bustamante (1945); L. H. Olson (1946–1947); W. E. Baxter, Jr. (1947–1949); G. C. Nickle (1949); A. Ray Norcliffe, (1949–1953); Charles R. Beeler, (Interim) (1953); F. H. McNiel (1953–1954); Roy R. Henneberg (1955–1956); J. K. Griwell, (interim) (1956); Luis A. Bolivar (interim) (1956–1957); Roy R. Henneberg (1957–1958); B. L. Roberts (1958–1959); Tirso Escandón June (1960–1962); Henry Fuss, (interim) (1962–1963); Luis Flórez (1963–1969); J. G. Nikkels (1969–1971); Henry Nieman (1971–1981); Fidel Merchán (Interim) (1977); Henry Anaya (1981–1982); Raúl Rodríguez (1982–1985); Henry Anaya (1985); Arthur Wheisheim (1985–1993); José Benigno Nova (1994–1999); Jaime Penna (2000–2001); Héctor Julio Arias (2002–2009); Henry Beltran (2010–).

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NOTES

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5. Floyd Greenleaf, *The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Latin American and the Caribbean* (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 1992), 173.
6. Ibid., 173-174.
7. Viana, 27, 28.
8. Greenleaf, 134.
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