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The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Item Type	Article
Authors	Ross, Delmer G.
Publisher	Adventist Heritage
Rights	Creative Commons Copyright (CC 2.5)
Download date	2026-06-11 06:27:52
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/152463

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Latin America and the Caribbean

Delmer G. Ross

Greenleaf, Floyd. *A History of the Inter-American and South American Divisions*. 1: *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*. 2: *Bear the News to Every Land*. Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews UP 1992. Notes. Bibliography. Index. 1: iv, 470 pp. 2: ii, 542 pp.

Attempting to detail and analyze the growth of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Latin America and the Caribbean from its earliest beginnings in the mid-1880s to 1980 must have been a daunting task. In slightly less than a century the church there grew from no adherents at all to more than one million members. By 1980 approximately one-third of the world's Seventh-day Adventists lived in the Inter-American and South American divisions. In fact, the Inter-American Division was the church's largest.

Complicating the assignment was the fact that there were no scholarly general studies available. Up until now, most of the published work has consisted of mission stories stressing the unique, the colorful, and the miraculous. A few more serious authors have written attempts to prove the church's ecclesiastical legitimacy by postulating that Adventism in the region goes much further back than it really does by stressing the ideas of late eighteenth-century Catholic thinkers such as Manuel Lacunza and Manuel Belgrano. Such publications undoubtedly have their place, but they should never be confused with history. Given the paucity of reliable published material, Floyd Greenleaf, a Latin American history specialist who taught at Southern Adventist University for more than twenty years, should be commended for even trying to produce a serious general history; that he succeeds is truly praiseworthy.

Employing a topical-within-chronological approach, Greenleaf divides the

work into two fairly equal sections. Volume 1, subtitled *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, deals with the early years, from the 1880s to the early 1930s. Volume 2, *Bear the News to Every Land*, details the prodigious growth of the church from the 1920s to 1980. Both segments are based largely on primary sources available in church archives.

The first volume begins with a chapter giving a useful political perspective. It then details the rather haphazard nature of early church growth, which was brought about largely by itinerant colporteurs and evangelists. Often enough, the results of

their efforts were a significant number of baptisms, but the overall increase in membership remained low because the apostasy rate was appallingly high. Large congregations of believers could be raised by traveling workers, but their survival without permanent pastoral care was questionable. Over the years, as the church became better organized, such care became possible. The number of ordained ministers, however, has always remained insufficient.

Greenleaf writes also about the cost of building the church. While money was important, he notes that the most significant prices for overseas missions were paid in toil, tears,



health, and even the lives of the workers themselves. The toll was staggering. Death was too common, and too commonly it came suddenly (1: 212).

Other topics covered in Volume I include Indian missions, the disruptions and changes brought about by World War I, and the effects of the Great Depression. Although the growth of the church was fairly steady through the 1930s, it was not spectacular.

Major topics covered in Volume 2 include institutions such as hospitals and medical launches, publishing houses, educational facilities, food factories, and changes in evangelistic methods. Greenleaf credits much of the almost explosive growth of the church since the 1940s to lay evangelism. He deals with government relations and the church's "new humanitarianism," its present attempt to include long-term community development with its more traditional catastrophic relief programs. Throughout, the author details how foreign missionaries have been slowly but surely replaced with national workers, resulting in most cases in vigorous national Seventh-day Adventist churches. He acknowledges the existence of problems, too, from schism and legal limitations and demands to unfettered currency inflation and outright warfare.

One of the questions I had when I was asked to review Greenleaf's work was just how he could cram the tremendous volume of factual material, plus analysis, into slightly more than one thousand pages of text. Using my personal knowledge of my parents' thirteen years of mission service in three countries of the Inter-American Division as a guide, I investigated. Their pioneering efforts among the Indians of Guatemala is handled in some detail (2:439-40). Despite the fact that my father was president of the Nicaragua Mission, their assistance in Nicaragua is not mentioned, although two of the major events of their service there are: the relocation of the hospital (2:460-61) and placing in service a mission launch (2:466). Their work in Honduras is mentioned not at all. I show this, not to detract from Greenleaf's study, but to illustrate how he condenses, which is necessarily a major part of his task. Reasonably

enough, he gives more space to pioneer work and that which is different or even unique than he does to day-to-day operations. I believe he has acquitted himself very well in this area.

Although generally well researched and written, Greenleaf's study is not without its flaws. The index, for example, is of limited usefulness. Of the events mentioned in the previous paragraph, only the first dealing with the Indian work in Guatemala can be located easily by using the index. The relocation of the hospital can be found through the index providing the searcher has certain prior knowledge. The remainder is not mentioned.

The work contains the usual quota of minor errors such as the often tourist-inspired misspelling of Quezaltenango (2:177) or the more phonetic than accurate spelling of "Huichol" (2:432) that can mar any book. One such error, "Adventists . . . were . . . beating the sick," (2:i) even provides a bit of humor.

A more serious problem, though, is the consistent failure to use diacritical marks such as accents, tildes, and cedillas, resulting in the misspelling of many non-English proper names and other words. Referring to early denominational printing-press problems, Greenleaf explains, "Without these markings words could change meaning and sentences lose their coherence." (1: 70) Whether the author or the publisher is responsible for their omission in this work matters little; the failure to use them is distracting to the knowledgeable reader and possibly misleading to others.

A fine piece of pioneer investigation, *The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Latin America and the Caribbean* will appeal mainly to scholars. One might hope that it will stimulate similar studies of other regions. Certainly it will become the point of departure for many narrower works, scholarly and otherwise, dealing with the church in Latin America and the Caribbean. Greenleaf is to be commended for a work well done.

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Millerite faces, Josiah Litch is never identified, nor are the pictures of what I assume are early nineteenth century literati or perhaps Transcendentalists. Finally, Ellen White's visions did not, in fact, "continue to the end of her life"; instead, she experienced more night-time dreams than visions past middle age.

The dozens of individuals involved in the production of *The Midnight Cry* deserve commendations for a well-researched,

fast-paced, visual feast. Students will appreciate the subtitles as an outline showing the progression of Millerism from 1816 to 1845. Photography buffs will be thrilled at the aesthetic care devoted to framed shots, wide angle and zoom focus, and the stunning use of back country roads and autumn vistas. Despite its omissions, *The Midnight Cry* is still the best cinematic interpretation of the Millerite experience. For a more complete understanding in print, viewers would be well advised to read George Knight's recent *Millennial Fever and the End of the World* (1993).