Inter-America: Theological seminary secures full ATS accreditation status

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August 31, 2011 - Miami, Florida, United States...Libna Stevens/IAD

Dr. Jaime Castrejon, president of the Inter-American Adventist Theological Seminary (IATS), smiles and sighs with relief as he holds a treasured possession he's waited for more than a decade to hold. It looks like an ordinary piece of paper, yet it signifies the end of arduous hours and endless energy to obtain. It's a document which states the full accreditation status granted to IATS by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS).

ATS is a membership organization for the United States and Canada that accredits schools and approves post-graduate professional and academic degrees in the practice of ministry and research in theological disciplines.

"This is such a milestone, almost like a miracle," says Dr. Castrejon as he struggles to find the words to express his joy and gratitude to God.

"Since 2000, IATS has existed for the purpose of offering graduate education for active Seventh-day Adventist ministers and workers, and to now have this prestigious accreditation is simply wonderful," he adds.

It all began with a need that sparked a dream back in 1986, he says.

Many of the ministers across the Inter-American Division (IAD) territory traveled to the United States to further their post-graduate degrees at Andrews University. This proved to be expensive for their employers in the short term, and costly in the long run as many graduates found jobs in the United States and didn't return to their fields in the IAD territory.

"We were facing a brain drain in our territory with this situation, as pastors would get their visa and just stayed in the United States," says Castrejon, who in 1986 worked as the ministerial secretary for the church in Inter-America.

There was a need for better trained pastors as the membership began to grow fast, so Dr. Castrejon and top church leaders at the time began studying ways to provide higher education to its budding ministers.

IATS began soon after with the help of Andrews University in 1996. Once the constitution and by-laws were written, IATS began offering graduate programs in theology to ministers in three initial sites: Montemorelos University in Mexico, Antillean Adventist University in Puerto Rico and Northern Caribbean University in Jamaica. Soon after that, two more sites were added: the University of Southern Caribbean in Trinidad and Colombia Adventist University in Colombia. Four additional sites were added in the 1990s, bringing the total to nine sites where ministers could take 48-credit summertime courses in the span of four years to pursue master degrees in pastoral theology through the direction of Andrews University.

It was an initial venture that was costing thousands of dollars every year. It soon became apparent to IAD leaders that the expenses were too high to continue with Andrews University.

It was then that IATS was declared a candidate for accreditation and parted ways. IATS