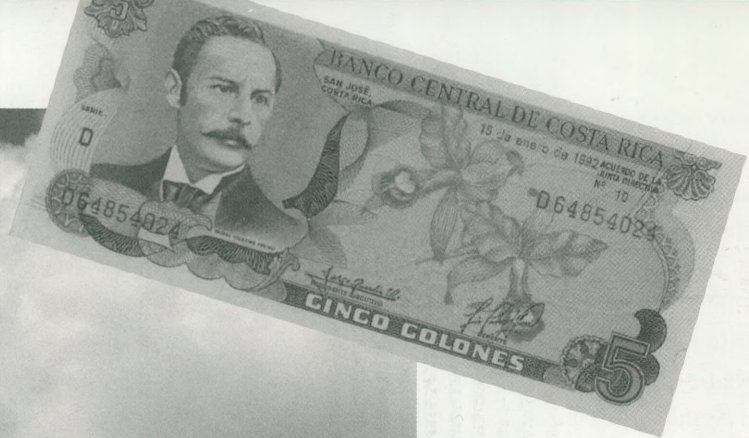
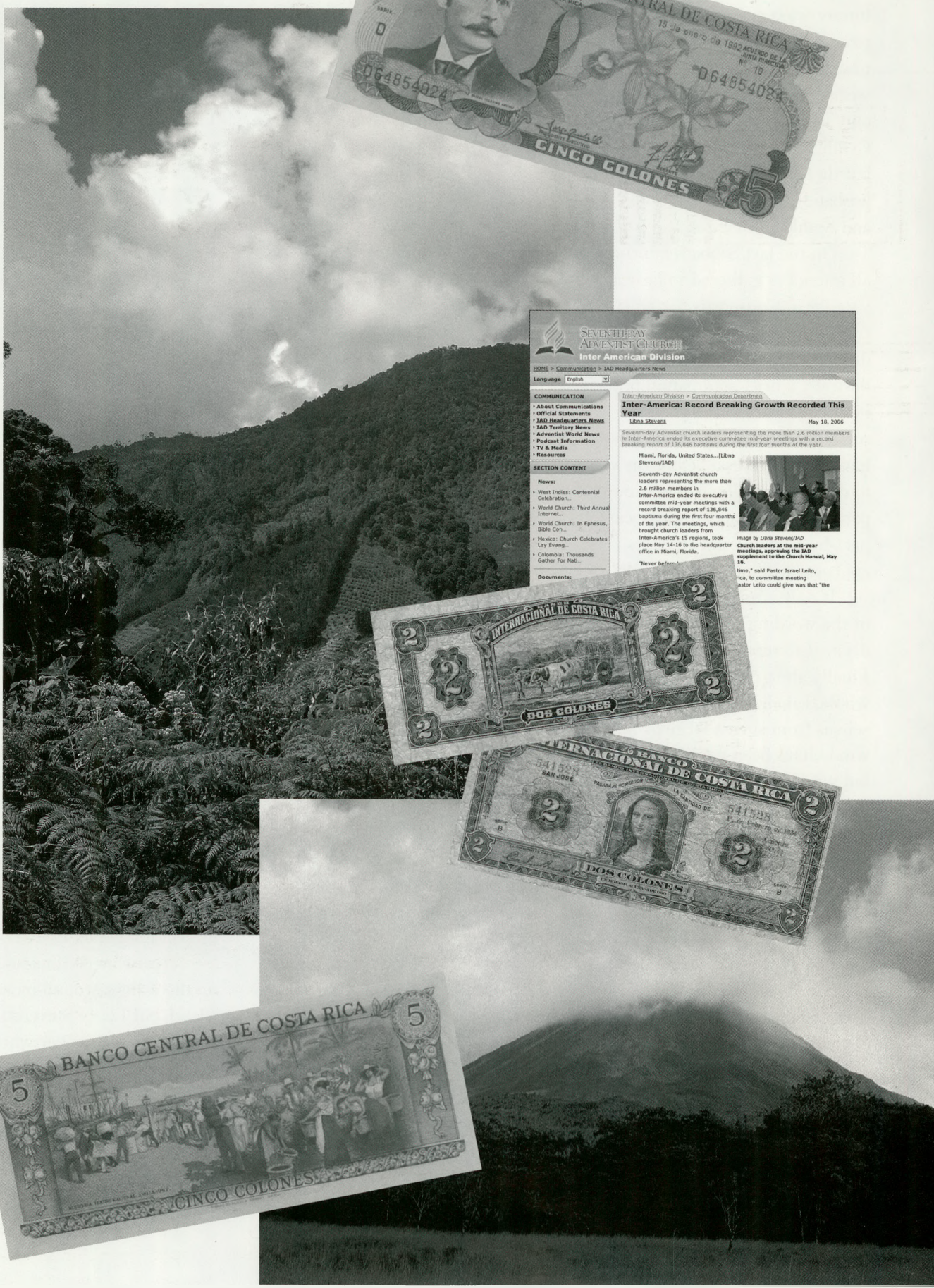


THE INTERNATIONAL CHURCH



SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH
Inter-American Division

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Inter-America: Record Breaking Growth Recorded This Year

Lina Stevens May 18, 2006

Seventh-day Adventist church leaders representing the more than 2.6 million members in Inter-America ended its executive committee mid-year meetings with a record breaking report of 136,846 baptisms during the first four months of the year.

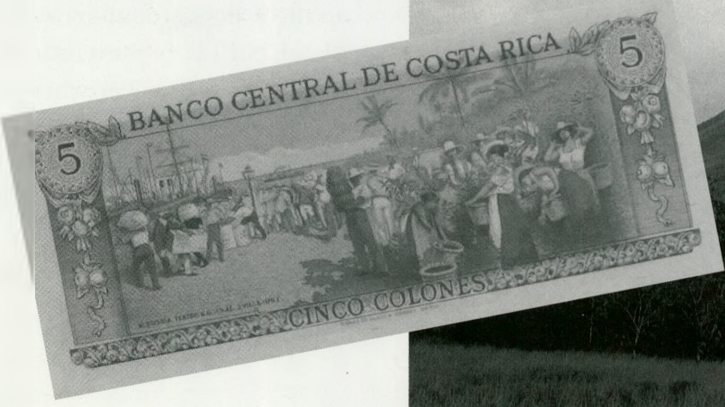
Miami, Florida, United States... [Lina Stevens/IAD]

Seventh-day Adventist church leaders representing the more than 2.6 million members in Inter-America ended its executive committee mid-year meetings with a record breaking report of 136,846 baptisms during the first four months of the year. The meetings, which brought church leaders from Inter-America's 15 regions, took place May 14-16 in the headquarters office in Miami, Florida.

"Never before..."

Image by Lina Stevens/IAD
Church leaders at the mid-year meetings, approving the IAD supplement to the Church Manual, May 16.

"...," said Pastor Israel Leito, IAD, to committee meeting pastor Leito could give was that "the



Discussed: baptismal goals, teenage girls, missions, conferences, Social Security payments, nepotism, accreditation, revolving funds, credibility

On Becoming a Conference: The Costa Rican Story

By Timothy Puko

Mario Thorp moves quickly up and down the center aisle of his church in Edison, N.J. He is almost shouting, trying to energize his sermon, told in Spanish, about the contrast between sin and grace. He stops and reaches out his long, slender arm to pat a man on the shoulder. Later he walks over to two teenage girls and talks with them directly as he tilts over the pew in front of them.

He asks them if they are sinners and of the devil. He is referencing 1 John 3:8. Their answers are uncertain and punctuated with giggles.

“Si practicas el pecado estás del Diablo,” he tells them plainly. Then his straight face gives way to a broad smile and he changes the mood. He holds out an open palm, his voice hushes accordingly, and he switches to English to make his point. “That’s what we’re talking about: grace.”

This is what members at the Edison Spanish Seventh-day Adventist Church say they like about their pastor, Thorp—that he’s energetic and can connect with the youth,

especially by speaking both of their languages. The church is full on Sabbath morning and growing, they say. When Elder Laz Rodriguez asked the New Jersey Conference for the best pastor available late last year, conference officials assured him Thorp was it, Rodriguez says after the service.

Yet it was only five years ago that Thorp left his home church in Costa Rica, he says, marked and unwanted by administrators there. The problem they had with him, the reason they tried to force him to other countries in the union, is that in 1995 he saw a high-ranking administrator cheating on his wife, he says.



"I was a lamb to the slaughter from day one when I saw that. They were just waiting to cut me out," Thorp says. In 2001, he accepted a transfer to the United States, but for those six years "I lived in hell," he adds.

Thorp's story is remarkable not because it is exceptional, but because it is common. Abuse by church administration forced at least thirty seasoned pastors out of Costa Rica in recent years, often without much of their earned retirement benefits, according to some of the workers now in the United States. Many of the expatriates have joined with church members in Costa Rica in making wide-sweeping accusations about

under probation since 2004. One of the major concerns of the Adventist Accreditation Association and the Costa Rican government's accreditation organization is the university's theology degree program, which was modified without authorization from the General Conference Education Department. Furthermore, the country's Supreme Court ruled the Social Security Administration and the university liable for quickly settling more than twelve years of unpaid Social Security payments to a former university professor.

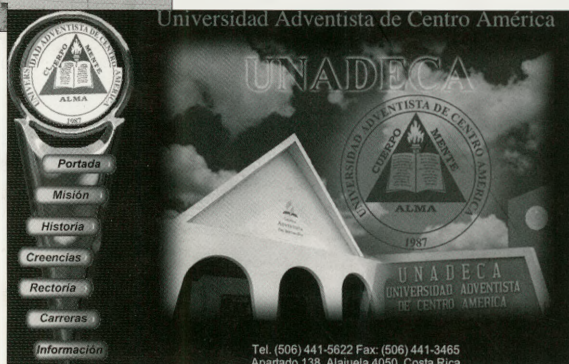
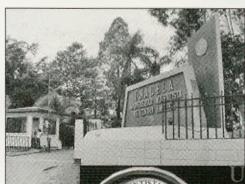
The Costa Rican media has also honed in on the university, producing reports about government inves-

The Costa Rican Supreme Court ruled the Social Security Administration and the university liable for quickly settling more than twelve years of unpaid Social Security payments to a former university professor.

unethical and illegal conduct among the leadership throughout the Inter-American Division and the Costa Rican church administration. These problems have allegedly festered for at least the past decade and their repercussions have rippled throughout the continent.

The situation in Costa Rica is very complicated and just as confusing. The division president says the problems are limited and in the process of being fixed. The dissidents say that recent changes in administration were offered as appeasements, but that corruption is still the culture of the county's Adventist administration. Even what is known for sure about recent years' events in Costa Rica seems constantly subject to polarized interpretations.

First, what is known: Central American Adventist University, in La Ceiba, Alajuela, Costa Rica (left, and Web site, below), has been



tigations into student allegations that the university falsely advertised its faculty's qualifications. Some congregations in the country had become so exasperated with the situation that they requested a switch in affiliation to U.S. conferences and have created a Web site to increase awareness of the "procedural irregularities that our church has been suffering."

Costa Rica has a population of slightly more than four million people, comparable in size to the state Kentucky. Today, there are 161 churches and 46,181 members. The Costa Rica Mission was first organized in 1927, the same year that Central American Adventist University was established. However, it was not until 2006 that conference status was granted to a portion of the membership.

This field promotion was one the biggest developments of an already tumultuous 2006. A year that brought a court decision against the Church, a meeting between General Conference and division officials about the university's status, and the forced resignation of a union president, it began with a meeting of delegates in late January. In what he says was a move inspired by a distressed letter from some Costa Rican pastors, Inter-American Division president Israel Leito brought delegates and pastors together from around the country for a meeting to discuss various problems.

As with any steps taken by Leito and the current administrators, this special session was met with harsh criticism, some claiming that a vast majority of delegates were selected because of their loyalty to the current administration. Nonetheless, the session resulted in the division's Executive Committee approving the

Central-South Costa Rica Mission for promotion to conference status, something for which Leito's critics had been clamoring.

"Let me put it this way: For us to organize a conference, we have strict guidelines," Leito says. "They must be in a growing mode, they must be stable and they must be mature enough to handle the Church's business."

January 2006 was not the first time Costa Rican delegates requested promotion for their missions. At an official session in 1998, when all of Costa Rica was still part of one field, delegates voted for promotion. Instead of approving, church leaders in 2003 divided the field into three separate missions.

Leito says that explosive church growth in the region requires the regions to be divided, now a common practice within the division. Doing so creates more administrative positions to help manage the growing number of members. It also keeps the power away from the people because mission officers are appointed rather than elected.

The current Costa Rica missions, as listed in the most recent yearbook, range from about eleven thousand to nineteen thousand members, comparable in size to many small conferences in the United States. If Costa Rica were organized as one conference it would be more the size of the largest U.S. conference.

The January delegates are still requesting the union to investigate reorganizing the Costa Rican fields. In the meantime, the other two missions will be moved forward toward conference status, something Leito says could happen for the Caribbean Costa Rica Mission within the next year. But it will not happen, he says, until they are ready and their promotion would be in the best interest of the Church.

Again, as with anything in Costa Rica, that is just one interpretation. There is another.

Warner Richards grew up, studied, and became a pastor in Costa Rica. Now he is pastor at the Corona Seventh-day Adventist Church in Queens, N.Y., and in May he was sitting at a conference table in an upstairs room at the Northeastern Conference headquarters. On his left was his wife Norka Blackman-Richards, an adjunct English professor at Queens College of the City University of New York, whom he met when they were both students at Central American Adventist University. On his right was Anthony Usher, another former Costa Rican pastor and current senior pastor at Brooklyn's

Christian Fellowship church. Across the table were Mario Thorp, and two other former Costa Rican workers, Pastor Ricardo Morin and Eunice Senior-Baker, wife of the Northeastern Conference president.

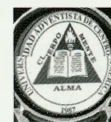
These are not people without credentials, yet their interpretation of the Costa Rica situation is very different from Leito's official stance. They all took time on a Friday morning specifically to meet with this reporter and discuss the Costa Rican problems, which they describe as surreal and threatening to the foundation of the Adventist Church.

They agree that a core of church administrators in the country and in its union have manipulated the church governing system in order to exploit it to build personal fortunes and artificially inflate baptismal numbers. They all have their personal testimonies of how administrators tried to intimidate workers, withhold their Social Security or other retirement benefits, encourage falsified baptismal certificates, and eventually force them out of their jobs.

"[Corruption] is no longer something that goes on now and then to cheat the process. It's become the norm," Richards says. "The reason there is so much aggression against workers [in Costa Rica] is because the system that has been set in place is one that requires absolute loyalty to the leaders." Richards says that at administrative meetings dissent among pastors was always unacceptable to administrators. "You're sitting there and seeing the injustice and, if you say something, your job is on the line. That's the type of loyalty they demand."

There are two well-connected groups that make these types of accusations against church leadership. There are the former workers, like those who met in New York, and there is a grassroots organization in Costa Rica. The group in Costa Rica is responsible for the Web site, <http://www.concerned-adv-members.org>, which alleges that church leaders in the country have violated church policy, ethics, and local laws. There is no information on the site explaining exactly who runs or supports it, and a request for that information sent to the site went unreturned.

One former university professor, Daniel Scarone, says delegates from almost forty churches formed the group known as the National Committee to Recover the Church in Costa Rica, in December 2004. Their primary goal at that point was to bring awareness to the issues before the 2005 General Conference Session



in Saint Louis. Using personal testimonies from named and unnamed church workers and correspondences between church officials and local media reports, the site details problems at the university and throughout the country's Adventist workforce.

Many of the grievances bubbling to the surface are connected to the desire of some administrators to create a rouge system, Richards and others say. In their interpretation, the fields were kept as missions, not

which pastors reported baptisms before the people were actually baptized, but adds that those pastors were fired. He says that he is not aware of any systemic practice to inflate baptismal numbers promoted by Gonzalez, but that Gonzalez is no longer the union president anyway.

The breaking point came after pastors met with Leito during preliminary investigations leading up to January's special session. Workers loyal to Gonzalez told him who the whistleblowers were in Leito's meet-

One of the Adventist Accreditation Association's issues with the university is that it created an unauthorized theology program.

because they were not ready for promotion, but because this allowed for consolidation of power by requiring field leaders to be appointed instead of being elected by the members. Those leaders then went about trying to consolidate their power further by putting intense pressure on pastors to fulfill high baptismal goals, often encouraging them to do so fraudulently. Those who met the goals were heavily rewarded professionally and financially. Those who did not, or who dared to speak out, as Richards describes, were threatened with the loss of benefits or work entirely.

"Soul winning became solely a numbers game, and pastors who could not keep up with the game were made to feel unworthy of their calling," Richards wrote in a letter sent to General Conference officials.

Under the leadership of South Central American Union Conference president Luis Gonzalez in the late 1990s, Richards says that pastors were given yearly baptismal quotas to fill. If a pastor didn't fulfill the requirement, usually about 150 baptisms a year, whatever numbers were not achieved were added to the number required from that pastor during the next year. Failure to meet those numbers would result in loss of vacation time and public ridicule at worker's meetings, Richards says.

Furthermore, this system encouraged pastors to fabricate numbers, Morin says in Spanish as translated by Richards. Morin says it was common for pastors to give food and clothing to non-Adventist Costa Ricans, in exchange for their Social Security numbers to be used on baptismal certificates. Fundamental Adventist beliefs have also been watered down in an attempt to make transitions easier and provide more encouragement for people to join the Church, Morin says.

Leito says he has heard about one or two cases in

ings, Leito says. Those pastors were then subjected to "reprisals" by Gonzalez, and, because of this and other heavy-handed managerial tactics, Gonzalez was asked to resign after the special session. Many pastors in the country "were living in fear that anything they [did] or [said] could come and hurt them later," Leito says. But he believes the problem was limited and has been fixed, and he denounces Richards and other critics—especially the ones in the United States—as conspiracy theorists.

"Several of our pastors that came and are working there, they did not migrate because of problems with the Church. They migrated for economical reasons, for better pay, better working conditions," Leito says. "I have told people when a pastor moves to Haiti and has issues with the Church, then I will listen to him."

Again, the forced resignation of Gonzalez, though welcome, has been met with skepticism and claims that he is being used as a scapegoat. The problems allegedly remain, notably in connection with the Perlas, a well-connected family within the division. Some Perlas and their in-laws take up a number of high-ranking administrative positions within the division, including division secretary Juan O. Perla and university president Herminia Perla. The university has become a focal point for those trying to demonstrate how the need among administrators for staff loyalty has driven the creation of an unethical administrative system.

Daniel Scarone is now the Hispanic ministries coordinator for the Michigan Conference in the United States. Before that, from 1992 to 1996, he was a theology professor at the university in Costa Rica. It was during his last two years there that he says the situation in the country grew out

of control. He says Juan O. Perla, then president of the Central American Union Conference and one of two university board members, asked him to shorten the length of a General Conference-approved master's degree program he was in charge of. Scarone says he told him he couldn't go against General Conference guidelines.

"The president told me, 'OK, there is no problem,'" Scarone says. "'Do it as we are saying to, and if [General Conference officials] come back to you, just tell them what they want to listen [to], and then when they are gone, just go back to doing it the way we want you to.' He was suggesting to me to cheat."

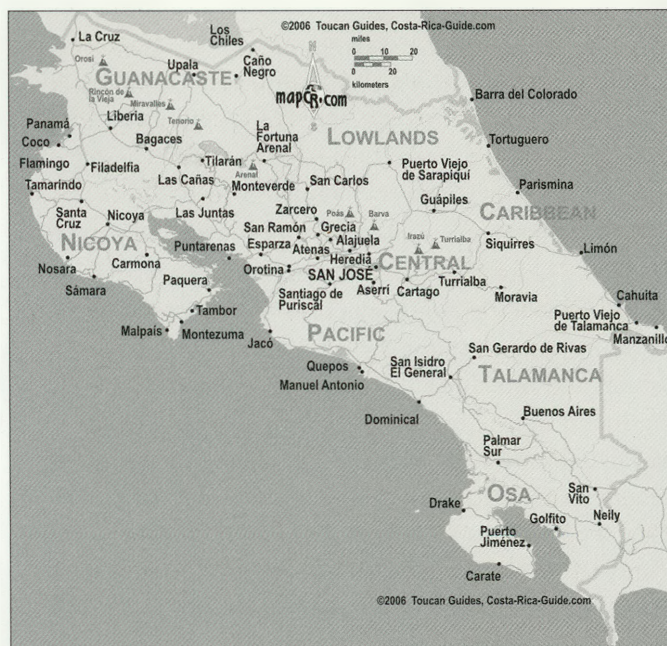
Perla did not respond to an e-mail about Scarone's version of events. Later in the evening during which Scarone says the men had this conversation, Scarone, then an interdivisional worker, decided to resign at the end of the school term. Two other faculty members, including the head of the Theology Department, left with him in one of the first exoduses of church workers in Costa Rica.

"What I detected is that they were trying to devise a system in which they might provide a cheap kind of leadership at the churches, [not] very knowledgeable people in charge of the churches," Scarone says. "That's the reason why the theological program was almost completely dismantled. As far as I know, they called this new guy 'pastorcitos,' what in English would be called 'little pastors.' When you go there, you cannot find any longer a pastor with history in service and in charge. They are all young people with not too much experience or knowledge."

One of the Adventist Accreditation Association's issues with the university is that it created an unauthorized theology program that gives bachelor's degrees to students who have not spent enough time in academic study. Critics say this is the administration's method for fast-tracking young, impressionable men into field work so that seasoned pastors willing to buck the system can be pushed out.

"Maybe it is correct, I don't know," says Enrique Becerra, a former associate director of education with the General Conference who led trips to the university with the accreditation team. "I have heard the explanation from several people, but I call it an interpretation."

The official interpretation of the problem's origins, one basically accepted by the Church's world director of education, C. Garland Dulán, is that the evangelistic needs of the country were so great that the adminis-



tration needed to get pastors in the field as quickly as possible. "The [membership] growth was outgrowing the pastors, not because of not having the funds to hire the pastors, but because there weren't enough pastors to hire," Leito says. The university responded by implementing a theology program that placed its students in the field as active pastors and brought them back to the university only once a year for a month of intensive courses, Leito says.

Dulán and Becerra say investigating the cause of the probation is not a responsibility of or standard protocol for the accreditation team. "Our concern was not so much, why they did what they did. Our concern was what the government requires and what the Church requires. In that instance, they didn't meet either," Dulán says. "We are not an investigative team, from the standpoint of anything other than looking to see whether the criteria that we specify are being met. Outside of that, we may have personal concerns."

Dulán did not say that he had other personal concerns stemming from his two visits to the university. Ignorance of Spanish kept him from getting a feel for the environment there except for what was discussed as part of the official investigation, he says. His most recent trip came in March and he says that, although the university did not have enough time to implement



fully the requested changes before the association's April meeting, it showed itself on track to have its probation lifted when the accreditation association meets this October.

There are people who agree with Dulan and Leito that the situation, not only at the university, but also across the country, is getting better. Edwin Lopez is Costa Rican, a pastor, and the Hispanic ministries coordinator with the Idaho Conference in the United States. He has worked closely with Scarone and others in the North American Division to push for change within Costa Rica. The pastors he knows and family members of his who still live there have been telling him that church administration is doing less micromanaging.

"Among membership in Costa Rica, pastors are not behaving with that heavy-handed [way] that they used to behave. Local congregations are being treated very different by many pastors," he says. "The Church has changed in the way that the Church is not being abused the way it used to be. But the situation is the same in that the same administration is at the top of church leadership."

Lopez continues: "Members, not only in the metropolitan areas, but members all across the country, don't trust leadership. Since the Church was hurt so deeply, getting that confidence back for the leadership and for the structure is kind of difficult. Members are there, they love their church, they're faithful to the doctrines of the Church, but that doesn't mean they have come back with confidence in leadership."

There are dark clouds still hanging over the leadership. Although some church representatives agreed to some reconciliation during the January session, the country's government did not. Two rulings in April make that clear. First, the government agency that oversees financial organizations told church officials that their revolving fund, used to self-insure church facilities and give loans to church employees to purchase homes, cars, and other items, is illegal.

The revolving fund is a touchstone for controversy within the Church as well, with many claiming that it has been used improperly to reward favored employees and funnel unearned money to church administrators. Leito says this is untrue, that the fund is modeled after similar programs run by U.S. church fields and that appropriate steps have been taken to register it with the

government. However, in the United States revolving funds are not used for loans to employees. Only churches and institutions can borrow from that fund. And loans are never given to the relatives of officers, because of conflict-of-interest implications. Leito's son was given a loan that has proven to be very controversial. So for some, Leito's assurances are not enough.

"We observe that the attitude of denominational leadership here and up the ladder to the [Inter-American Division] level is that the rules established and manipulated by these leaders take precedence over national law," former university professor Mike Lynch (*photo above*) said in an e-mail from Costa Rica. "This is not and certainly should not be the position of our world church."

Lynch's personal case is the other looming dark cloud. The second ruling in April, coming from the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court, requires the country's Social Security Administration to resolve issues quickly with Social Security funds owed by the university to Lynch. Lynch's case has been working its way through the country's court system for the past two years. He alleges that the university underreported his Social Security payments and that it unjustly fired him when he pursued corrections for this and other problems at the university.

American-born Lynch worked in the Inter-American Division as a professor and teacher for thirty-five years, mostly at the university, and as a national employee in Costa Rica. Shortly after becoming an interdivisional worker in 2000, he began investigating his Costa Rican Social Security savings to ensure that enough funds were available for his retirement.

"Soon I discovered that there was a serious shortage of reported payments from the university on my [Social Security] account," he says. "I requested administratively that this problem be resolved. There was little interest in dealing with the problem from the university administration."

After further investigations into the matter, Lynch says he began to realize that Social Security payments were underreported, not only for him, but throughout the university. Pastors Thorp, Richards, Usher, and others say they found their retirement savings similarly underfunded when they left the country. Leito agrees

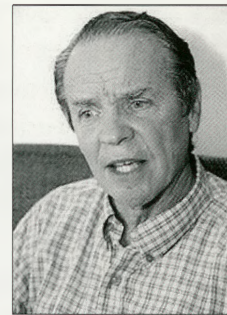


PHOTO BY FLANDER ALAN/LA NACION

that this was a problem at the university, but disagrees with the assertion from some former workers that the practice was part of an intentional attempt to move money inappropriately. The problem, he says, was more a misunderstanding of the law. According to him, university officials are now eager to hear from the government about what exactly is owed so it can be paid.

"It's not that we have corrupt leaders," Leito says. "This is my problem that people need to understand. I'm not defending anyone by saying people did not make mistakes. I don't believe they intentionally went out to deceive or cheat anybody. Even the president of the university right now, her Social Security is woefully underpaid. All through the years they have not contributed what was to be contributed, even for her."

One of the issues in verifying which interpretations are correct—or which parts are correct—is the wealth of information available. Lynch has become famous for e-mails he has sent to friends, allies, and church administrators. Within a day of receiving a request for documents in June, Lynch responded with more than fifty thousand words of personal e-mails and correspondences with church and government officials, much of it in Spanish.

The joke has been made numerous times that an

cating that something is really wrong."

Rajmund Dabrowski, communication director for the General Conference, says the Inter-American Division is in charge of handling all such inquiries and potential investigations. When asked if he or other General Conference officials had seen Scarone's document, he said he had not and did not know who had. For his part, Leito describes Scarone as "the most unethical minister that I know in my life," and says that when Scarone visited Costa Rican churches last year, his work resulted in deep divisions between local church members and local administration.

There is at least one former General Conference official, however, who finds Scarone's document impressive. Humberto M. Rasi is semi-retired now, but still in charge of special projects for the General Conference's Department of Education. He was a director of the department for twelve years, stepping down in 2002, which, by coincidence, was the same year the department first took action against the Central American Adventist University. Scarone consulted with Rasi when compiling the documentation he later sent to Paulsen's office. "I think the dossier of Scarone raises valid questions about church administrative decisions and actions," Rasi says.

He is careful not to suggest that Scarone and the other critics are right, especially in matters outside of

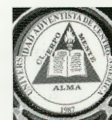
The problem was a misunderstanding of the law. . . . [I]t's not that we have corrupt leaders. This is my problem that people need to understand. I'm not defending anyone by saying that people did not make mistakes." — Israel Leito

entire book could be written about church issues in Costa Rica. But a book-length packet of documents has already been prepared and was sent in March to General Conference president Jan Paulsen and other world church administrators. Scarone collected 418 pages of witness testimony, archived letters and e-mails, financial documents, and news reports to send to Paulsen's office.

"The main purpose of sending this and the hope involved was that the General Conference pay attention to this documentation and start to convene an impartial committee to go down to Costa Rica," Scarone says. "I think that it's something clear, at least, not, what I would say, as an accusation, but, to say, 'Look there are irregularities.' We don't know if this is right or wrong, but there are evidences that are indi-

education, with which Rasi is less familiar. But he is also unwilling to dismiss the claims immediately. Some of the witness testimony and the financial documents may indicate that some administrators were acting improperly, especially in relation to the revolving fund and the Social Security payments, he says.

"I think Scarone has acted in a pastoral way in addressing issues," Rasi says. "He has prepared a dossier, trying to help the leadership of the Church beyond the Inter-American Division to see these matters and to seek a solution. Of course, some top division administrators



are very uncomfortable with that because they would prefer it to remain under the division jurisdiction.”

Paulsen sent a letter in response to Scarone saying that the division is addressing the situation, the same type of response Lynch and others say they have seen before. Dabrowski says that, according to church policy, church members and fields can take grievances beyond the division president’s office and to the General Conference, but that they would have to follow formal procedure

would implicate division leaders in unethical conduct. Critics say the lack of wide-sweeping action in the face of those extreme scenarios has added to the credibility hit Adventist leadership has taken in the country.

“The Church has become irrelevant, but boy we are not going to change that protocol for nothing,” Anthony Usher says in frustration. “Apparently we’d rather let [members] go than change.”

There is also the issue of the Church’s relationship

“The Church has become irrelevant, but boy we are not going to change that protocol for nothing.” —Anthony Usher

and contact lower levels of church administration first. When asked if people involved in the Costa Rican situation have taken those steps, he said he did not know and referred the question to Leito. Letio says he has never received any direct contact from Scarone or Lynch.

Dabrowski deflected to Leito any questions about specific actions taken by the critics of Costa Rican and Inter-American Division administrators and any responses to those actions. The Inter-American Division “has full jurisdiction over church affairs within its territory,” he said in an e-mailed statement. “As a church, we are a member/constituent-based organization.... Our Church looks to the entities involved at the level of activity, in this case the union, and to the division as its next level of administration for this region, to oversee issues and activities within respective territories.”

Speaking on the theme of unity at a Bible conference in Turkey in July, Paulsen said rapid growth has forced the Church to be more decentralized in its management. “Rapid growth [and] expansion, numerically and territorially, means that the kind of control and guidance which in the past may have come from one central headquarters...is not sustainable or effective,” he said according to Adventist News Network. “There may be technical reasons or political reasons or reasons of government regulations which severely limit the extent of involvement which may come from an international headquarters in another part of the world.”

For many affected by the situation, this position is unacceptable. For them, the need for General Conference involvement—involvement from an impartial group—is clear because all the worst-case scenarios

with its individual members. Some of the church workers interviewed for this story said they feel let down by the Church. They have trouble understanding, considering all the stories they have and the evidence they have compiled, how General Conference officials can rationalize any decision to let the division handle everything.

“If that’s what people feel, that’s what people feel,” Dabrowski says in a phone interview. “I’m not pleased when people feel badly. But it seems that any problem-solving ought to be based on facts. There are many people who don’t like a particular government or a decision of a government. I believe in a democracy and a democratic process within the Church.”

Those facts themselves, again, can be overwhelming. After two years, the Lynch court cases have not been completely decided. Church education officials have made three visits to the university in two years but will have to wait until October to make a decision on possibly removing its probation. There are the countless e-mails from Lynch, and the four hundred-plus page packet from Scarone. And there are the forty-six thousand church members in Costa Rica—the majority without power to elect their field leaders—spread across three administrative fields. The amount of research it would take to find conclusive answers to all the issues is daunting.

“And it would be good for the General Conference, for the sake of faithful Adventists in Central America and the sake of the good name of the world Church, to look into the matter,” Rasi says. “If the documents are found to be fake, if the information is invalid, then the air would be cleared. If the opposite occurs, then issues would be clear—and matters would be taken care of.”

Timothy Puko writes for the *Press*, of Atlantic City, New Jersey.