

Marical Serna: Diversifying the Seventh-Day Adventist Historical Record

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FITLS-SGP 2022-2023

April 2023

The Seventh-Day Adventist church has been named one of the most diverse Christian denominations in the world.¹ Although, the first two official Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedias published did not fully represent this diversity. The new Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists (ESDA) is on a mission to amend the discrepancy, featuring more pioneers, leaders, ministers, and workers of various races and ethnicities.² One such leader was Marcial Serna. This study argues that the history of Serna's ministry is important to diversifying the Seventh-Day Adventist historical record and informing future ministry in the Seventh-Day Adventist church.

This research is part of the larger ESDA project, which is directed by the General Conference Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research (ASTR), in Silver Spring, Maryland. It is "a new reference work: one that embodies the diverse Adventist Church of the twenty-first century, reflects the tremendous growth in the church in the last fifty years, the shifts in global membership, and the development of Adventist historical scholarship in the last quarter century."³ A key phrase in this string of objectives is "embodies the diverse Adventist Church." The ESDA has six official goals, which are to: Supply reliable and authoritative information on Adventist history, crucial events and themes, organizations, entities, institutions, and people; Strengthen Adventist identity in a fast-growing worldwide movement, heightening awareness of distinctive doctrinal and prophetic beliefs; Provide a reference work for those new to the Adventist faith and not of the Adventist faith, to learn about all aspects of Adventism; Bring out

¹ "A closer look at Seventh-day Adventists in America," Pew Research Center, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2015/11/03/a-closer-look-at-seventh-day-adventists-in-america/#:~:text=Seventh%2Dday%20Adventists%20are%20among,another%20race%20or%20mixed%20race.>

² "About ESDA," Encyclopedia of Seventh-Day Adventists, Accessed January 4, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/about-esda>.

³ "About ESDA," Encyclopedia of Seventh-Day Adventists, Accessed January 4, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/about-esda>.

the role of denominational organization in fulfilling the church's mission; Highlight the missional challenges still remaining in order to "reach the world"; and Reflect the nature of the world church today, both in subject matter and in those who write and edit the encyclopedia.

Serna was born in El Paso, Texas, in 1860, a year before the start of the Civil War.⁴ He was a mestizo man (Spanish and Indian mix), who spoke both English and Spanish.⁵ In 1881, Serna began working as a pastor for the Methodist Episcopal Church.⁶ He was active, serving the Spanish-speaking communities in Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, California, and Sonora, Mexico.⁷ On April 23, 1881 Serna married Victoriana Granado of New Mexico.⁸ Over the next fifteen years, the couple had three children: Marcial Jr. (born 1882), Rosa Clara (born 1884), and Ernesto (born 1889).⁹ Several years after Ernesto's birth Serna's first marriage ended, but he continued working as a minister. On March 5, 1898, Serna married Mariana Burrola, in Tucson, Arizona.¹⁰

In the Summer of 1898, Serna was living in Tucson and pastoring the Spanish Methodist Episcopal church there.¹¹ One day, two Anglo Seventh-day Adventist men, Walter Lawrence

⁴ "Arizona U.S. Death Records" s.v. "Marcial Serna" (1887-1968), Ancestry.com; 1910 United States Census, Graham County, Arizona, digital image s.v. "Marcial Serna," Ancestry.com.

⁵ 1930 United States Census, El Paso, Texas, digital image s.v. "Marcial Serna," Ancestry.com.; Manual Vasquez, "Sanchez Arizona: Cradle of Hispanic Adventism," in *The Untold Story: 100 Years of Hispanic Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 32.

⁶ Sustentation Fund Application, February 15, 1916, Page 2; Sustentation Fund Application, November 17, 1922, Page 5.

⁷ Sustentation Fund Application, February 15, 1916, Page 2; Sustentation Fund Application, November 17, 1922, Page 4; Manual Vasquez, "Sanchez Arizona: Cradle of Hispanic Adventism," in *The Untold Story: 100 Years of Hispanic Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 27.

⁸ Chihuahua, Mexico, Civil Registration of Marriages 1861-1967, 22.

⁹ 1885 U.S., Territorial Census, New Mexico, digital image s.v. "Marcial Serna," Ancestry.com.; "Texas, U.S., Death Certificates, 1903-1982," s.v. "Ernesto Serna" (1889-1949), Ancestry.com.

¹⁰ Sustentation Fund Application, August 21 (No year), page 6; "The Arizona U.S County Marriage Records 1865-1972," s.v. "Marcial Serna," Ancestry.com.

¹¹ Sustentation Fund Application, February 15, 1916, Page 2; Sustentation Fund Application, August 21, 1930, Pages 6-8; Eighty-ninth Meeting of the General Conference Committee Minutes, South Lancaster, Mass., Feb. 7, 1899, page 66.

Black and Charles D. M. Williams, visited Serna's house.¹² Black had been selling Christian literature by Ellen G. White and Williams was doing Bible studies with those interested. Black introduced himself to Serna and was pleasantly surprised that he spoke English. Black then made his book pitch, but Serna graciously declined, noting that he already had a sufficient number of Christian books.

Black and Williams enjoyed their conversation with Serna and desired to reconnect. They deliberated and decided to ask Serna for Spanish lessons, which would help them both better engage with the community and build a friendship with the Methodist pastor. Serna happily accepted the request, and Spanish lessons began the following morning. Williams suggested they use the Bible as their textbook. Starting in Genesis, the men used both Spanish and English Bibles to compare words and strengthen their vocabulary. Eventually, they reached Genesis chapter two.

The chapter starts off saying "Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation."¹³ In the course of reading and translating this section, the topic of the Sabbath arose. Black and Williams believed that Saturday was the Sabbath, while Serna kept Sunday as the Sabbath. As the men went back

¹² Manual Vasquez, "Sanchez Arizona: Cradle of Hispanic Adventism," in *The Untold Story: 100 Years of Hispanic Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 15.

¹³ Genesis 2: 1-3 ESV

and forth, each committed to their perspective, Serna challenged the men to a public debate on the topic.¹⁴

The designated debate day arrived. Black began the debate with an argument founded on twelve Bible verses. Serna listened closely, to prepare for his counterargument. But part way through Black's speech, Serna was convinced by his opponent's argument. As Black finished, Serna rose to speak.

Rather than voicing a scathing rebuttal, Serna said, "I now see that my supposed opponents have brought out the truth from God's book. I was to show them where they were wrong, but I see the truth of the Bible. It is clear from God's word that the seventh day is the Sabbath, and I promise you and God that next Saturday I will rest on that day. With God's help, I will keep His Sabbath."¹⁵

On December 9, 1898, Serna was baptized in the Gila River by Elder R. M. Kilgore.¹⁶ Several months later, in the year 1899, the General Conference issued him a ministerial license.¹⁷ Thus, Marcial Serna became the first Hispanic Seventh-day Adventist pastor in the North American Division. The following year his wife Mariana was given a missionary credential, which surely aided the work.¹⁸ At this time, Serna was also placed on the Arizona Mission

¹⁴ Manual Vasquez, "Sanchez Arizona: Cradle of Hispanic Adventism," in *The Untold Story: 100 Years of Hispanic Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 32.

¹⁵ Manual Vasquez, "Sanchez Arizona: Cradle of Hispanic Adventism," in *The Untold Story: 100 Years of Hispanic Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 33.

¹⁶ Sustentation Fund Application, February 15, 1916, Page 2; Sustentation Fund Application, August 21, 1930, Pages 6-8; Eighty-ninth Meeting of the General Conference Committee Minutes, South Lancaster, Mass., Feb. 7, 1899, page 66; Manual Vasquez, "Sanchez Arizona: Cradle of Hispanic Adventism," in *The Untold Story: 100 Years of Hispanic Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 35.

¹⁷ Sustentation Fund Application, February 15, 1916, Page 2.

¹⁸ Sustentation Fund Application, August 21, 1930, Pages 7.

Executive Committee, bringing a Hispanic voice into the mission's leadership.¹⁹ Serna's linguistic skills, quick entry into licensed Adventist ministry, and multi-cultural competency made a unique impact.

Serna's ministry for the Adventist church began several months prior to his baptism and ordination as a Seventh-day Adventist minister. Around the same time period when Serna met Black and Williams, he received a letter from two of his parishioners, Adiel and Abel Sanchez.²⁰ The brothers wrote to Serna about having recently read Exodus 20:8-11 during their Bible study time. They were shocked to read that the Bible prescribed Saturday, the seventh day of the week, as the Lord's day of rest. They asked Serna, "Why do we keep Sunday," if "the Bible tells us to keep the seventh-day Sabbath?".²¹ Serna responded to their letter assuring the brothers that Sunday was the correct day of worship, because it was changed in the New Testament. He also mentioned his upcoming debate with Black and Williams.

After the debate and Serna's change of opinion on the Sabbath, he wrote a letter to the Sanchez brothers letting them know he would visit them later that week and bring the two men he had debated. Upon his arrival, Serna called a meeting in the local Methodist church he had been serving. There he asked the Adventist men to present on the seventh-day Sabbath, as he and Adiel translated. Subsequently, a number of the locals were convinced of the seventh-day Sabbath.²²

¹⁹ "Mission Fields." Pacific Union Recorder. August 15, 1901, 15; Manual Vasquez, "Sanchez Arizona: Cradle of Hispanic Adventism," in *The Untold Story: 100 Years of Hispanic Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 33.

²⁰ Manual Vasquez, "Sanchez Arizona: Cradle of Hispanic Adventism," in *The Untold Story: 100 Years of Hispanic Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 27.

²¹ Manual Vasquez, "Sanchez Arizona: Cradle of Hispanic Adventism," in *The Untold Story: 100 Years of Hispanic Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 28.

²² Manual Vasquez, "Sanchez Arizona: Cradle of Hispanic Adventism," in *The Untold Story: 100 Years of Hispanic Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 34.

After further study, fifteen people, including Serna and the Sanchez brothers chose to be baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist church. On December 9, 1898, Elder R. M. Kilgore arrived to officiate the baptisms. Several weeks later, on December 23, this group organized the Sanchez Seventh-day Adventist Church, the first Spanish Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America.²³

As an ordained Seventh-day Adventist minister, Serna did not abandon his former Methodist-Episcopal members in Tucson. After the debate and further study with Serna, many of them decided to join the Seventh-day Adventist Church. With 23 members, Serna developed the second Spanish Adventist church in North America in Tucson, Arizona. On December 31, 1898, the church was made official by Elder R. M. Kilgore. By the year 1900, there were 111 members in the Arizona Mission Field, and 41 of them were Hispanic.²⁴

In 1903 the Texico Conference sent Pastor Serna and Elder J. A. Leland to lead an evangelistic meeting in Martínez Town, New Mexico, just outside of Albuquerque. This effort led 20 people to choose baptism into the Seventh-day Adventist church. And this group then chartered the first Spanish-speaking Adventist church in New Mexico.²⁵

In 1904, Serna reached out to another of his former Methodist members in San Marcial, New Mexico. Serna was then invited to teach his former congregation about the Sabbath truth.

²³ Manual Vasquez, "Sanchez Arizona: Cradle of Hispanic Adventism," in *The Untold Story: 100 Years of Hispanic Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 35. Sustentation Fund Application, February 15, 1916, Page 2; Sustentation Fund Application, August 21, 1930, Pages 6-8; Eighty-ninth Meeting of the General Conference Committee Minutes, South Lancaster, Mass., Feb. 7, 1899, page 66.

²⁴ Manual Vasquez, "Sanchez Arizona: Cradle of Hispanic Adventism," in *The Untold Story: 100 Years of Hispanic Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 37.

²⁵ Marcial Serna and H.L. Hoover, "Albuquerque, N.M.," *Echoes from the Field*, June 10, 1903, 2-3; Manual Vasquez, "Sanchez Arizona: Cradle of Hispanic Adventism," in *The Untold Story: 100 Years of Hispanic Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 42, 44.

This effort led to the organization of the second Spanish Adventist Church in New Mexico, which had 28 charter members.²⁶

In addition to church planting and evangelistic meetings, Serna also pastored, colporteur, gave Bible studies, and visited with community members. His work made visible impacts and consistently led to baptisms.²⁷ This hands-on approach led Serna to bring people into the church who themselves made important impacts. Such was the case with Anastacio Salazar and his wife.²⁸ In 1910, Serna sold the book *El Conflicto de Los Siglos* (The Great Controversy) to Anastacio's father, which led the entire family to choose baptism into the Seventh-day Adventist church four years later. After baptism, Anastacio became a colporteur and later an active pastor in Texas and Mexico.

In 1902, while in Solomonville, Arizona, Serna encountered an Ellen G. White quote in a newspaper clipping used to package his recent purchase. Serna was surprised by his finding and contacted the author, Candelario Castillo, a Baptist minister and editor of the Spanish newspaper in El Paso, Texas. The men corresponded for a short time before losing contact.²⁹ But In 1910, Castillo was pastoring in Southern California and had a second encounter with Adventists. This encounter led to Bible studies, baptism, and a change in career from being a Baptist minister to a Seventh-day Adventist minister. The following year, Castillo and Serna met for the first time and planned a joint evangelistic series at the first Spanish church in Los Angeles.³⁰

²⁶ Manual Vasquez, "Sanchez Arizona: Cradle of Hispanic Adventism," in *The Untold Story: 100 Years of Hispanic Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 45.

²⁷ "Field Notes," *The Review and Herald*, February 1, 1906.

²⁸ Manual Vasquez, "Sanchez Arizona: Cradle of Hispanic Adventism," in *The Untold Story: 100 Years of Hispanic Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 54.

²⁹ Manual Vasquez, "Sanchez Arizona: Cradle of Hispanic Adventism," in *The Untold Story: 100 Years of Hispanic Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 46.

³⁰ Manual Vasquez, "Sanchez Arizona: Cradle of Hispanic Adventism," in *The Untold Story: 100 Years of Hispanic Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 50.

Serna also reached out to his former Methodist minister colleagues. As a result, Rafael Acosta and two other ministers joined the Seventh-day Adventist church as ministers.³¹

By 1916, Serna's wife had fallen ill, and he became her caretaker.³² He continued to serve, albeit in a more limited capacity. The couple lived in Southern California at the time, and records show Serna made himself available to give Bible studies and do visitations. By 1923, they moved to Safford, Arizona, where they attended the Los Pasos and Sánchez Spanish churches.³³ Despite poor health, Serna continued to give Bible studies.³⁴ Later that year, Serna was asked to spend time in El Paso, Texas to advance the Spanish work there.³⁵

In El Paso, Serna continued to do visitations, preach, and give Bible studies.³⁶ He only intended to stay for a few months but remained there until 1930.³⁷ At this time, E. Wilson, President of the Texico Conference, wrote that Serna was “a loyal faithful man, never taking part in controversies, and liberal in his gifts...his work has been fruitful from the standpoint of souls won to the truth.”³⁸ Serna himself wrote, “I never ceased to work to preach the gospel among [my] people... all the time in any time.”³⁹ A year or so later, Serna returned to Arizona. But even in 1935, at the age of 75, Serna was not done serving.⁴⁰ True to his word, Serna accepted a call to

³¹ Manual Vasquez, “Sanchez Arizona: Cradle of Hispanic Adventism,” in *The Untold Story: 100 Years of Hispanic Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 42.

³² Sustentation Fund Application, February 15, 1916, Page 2.

³³ Sustentation Fund Application, November 17, 1922, Page 4.

³⁴ Sustentation Fund Application, November 17, 1922, Page 4.

³⁵ Sustentation Fund Application, November 20, 1923, Page 22.

³⁶ Sustentation Fund Application, August 21, 1930, Page 7.

³⁷ Sustentation Fund Application, April 8, 1924, Page 27; Sustentation Fund Application, June 2, 1924, Page 30; Sustentation Fund Application, January 1, 1929, Page 35. Sustentation Fund Application, February 11, 1929, Page 44.

³⁸ Sustentation Fund Application, August 21, 1930, Page 8.

³⁹ Sustentation Fund Application, August 21, 1930, Page 6.

⁴⁰ Sustentation Fund Application, April 4, 1935, Page 57.

return to the work in El Paso, Texas. This work was only cut short by his wife's death in June, and his own death on August 7, 1935, in Sanchez Arizona.⁴¹

Before Serna became a Seventh-day Adventist, a handful of Spanish-speaking Adventists were scattered and isolated throughout the Southwest. After his baptism and ordination as an Adventist pastor, Serna led intentional efforts to connect Hispanics of the Southwest with Christ and the Adventist message. This led to the organization of the first four Spanish-speaking Seventh-day Adventist churches in North America, and much more.

This study argues that the history of Serna's ministry is important to diversifying the Seventh-Day Adventist historical record and informing future ministry in the Seventh-Day Adventist church. Serna's experience as a pastor, bilingual skills, cultural alignment, dedication to God's word, and connection to the Holy Spirit inspired monumental growth in the Adventist work with Hispanics in North America.

⁴¹ Hackman E.F. to Cobban H.H, March 24, 1936, Collection of Southeastern California Conference of Seventh Day Adventist (64); Sustentation Fund Application, March 24, 1936, page 64.

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