

# The Evangelical Pentecostal Union of Venezuela

## History

The Evangelical Pentecostal Union of Venezuela is an independent, autonomous, “grass-roots” church, expressing its faith in the popular culture of Venezuela. Like other Pentecostal churches, it believes in and practices the gifts of the spirit as they are manifested in its members. It is strongly committed to ecumenicity and social justice.

The American missionary Federico Bender, who had an ecumenical vision of a Pentecostalism free from foreign influence, concerned for the poor and centered in Biblical education, founded the movement in 1914. In 1940, it became affiliated with the Assemblies of God, but soon a number of local pastors, led by the Rev. Exeario Sosa, strongly disagreed with the flood of new U.S. missionaries sent by that church. Their commitment to ecumenism, social justice and a indigenous Venezuelan Pentecostalism led them to break with the Assemblies of God, and in 1957 they formed the Evangelical Pentecostal Union of Venezuela (UEPV).

In 1965, the UEPV entered into a partnership with the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ which over the years has sent a number of missionaries to work in Venezuela. With the merger of the global boards of the DOC and the United Church of Christ, the UCC also became a UEPV partner. In 1978, the UEPV joined the Latin American Council of Churches, an affiliate of the World Council of Churches. It has also been instrumental in organizing a Latin American commission of Pentecostal churches. Bishop Gamaliel Lugo of the UEPV currently serves as president of this group.

## Government and Demography

The UEPV is headquartered in Maracaibo and its churches are all in the western part of Venezuela. There are no churches in Caracas or the Oriental region. There are about 60 congregations, half of them in rural areas. Ten churches are in the Wayuu indigenous area, close to the Columbian border. There are 170 ordained pastors in several categories. About a third of these are women.

The church is governed by a Bishop-President elected every three years who is responsible to an administrative board which meets annually. An Executive Committee carries out the board’s policies. A women’s and a youth organization function semi-autonomously and are an important part of the church.

## The Life of the UEPV

Worship is at the heart of the UEPV experience. Worship is spontaneous, enthusiastic and joyful. Services are a “feast of the spirit” and are not limited to an hour. They can last as long as the spirit moves. Music is very important. It has a Latin American rhythm and always invites congregational participation. There are many instrumental and singing groups. Preaching is central, but prayers, especially for healing and reconciliation. Pentecostal prophecy and speaking in tongues is also practiced, though apparently infrequently since it has not been experience by out visitors.

The UEPV is a church of and for the poor. None of its members or clergy are even upper middle class. It minister to the poorest in Venezuela, and is called to openly denounce injustice. It has a strong commitment to social justice and to the betterment of the lives of poor people. The UEPV has had and continues to have many projects such as schools, health and environmental programs and economic cooperatives. It is currently developing a farm (finca), conference center and a center for women and children in Ospino. The church is also working with the Wayuu indigenous people.

The UEPV believes in an educated clergy and lay leadership. Although some of its pastors are highly trained theologically, most have little schooling. In order to train their leadership, the church has developed PACTO, an alternative theological school that has grown to become an ecumenical institution in Maracaibo.

Finally, the UEPV is committed to the ecumenical vision of the unity of Christ’s church. Its desire for a partnership with the Rocky Mountain Region DOC and the Rocky Mountain Conference UCC is built upon this search for unity. In the words of Bishop Gamaliel Lugo, the “challenge faced by this partnership is the maintenance of an ecumenism of the Spirit that implies the solidarity of all people and the active participation of each one...”