Seventh-day Adventist Church world headquarters
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In This Issue:

Step forward for church-state relations in Azerbaijan
Meeting between Adventist, government representatives holds promise for church's recognition, religious liberty advocate says

Parchment, man of laughs, helps Adventist president with 'big picture' details
Assistant to prez: 'I'm like a filter'; e-mail from a prophet

In Côte d'Ivoire, ADRA assisting families displaced by post-election violence
Food assistance part of initial response

Step forward for church-state relations in Azerbaijan

Meeting between Adventist, government representatives holds promise for church's recognition, religious liberty advocate says

8 Feb 2011, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States
Bettina Krause/IRLA/ANN

Seventh-day Adventists in Azerbaijan hope a recent meeting between church leaders and state officials will ease tensions and help the church gain official recognition for its congregations under Azerbaijani law.

The January 31 meeting with representatives of the Azerbaijan State Committee on Religious Associations came a month after reports that government officials disrupted an Adventist worship service in the city of Sumgait, questioning worshipers and confiscating DVDs and literature.

The tone of last week's meeting was both positive and professional, said Vasilii Stolyar, vice president of the Adventist Church's Euro-Asia Division, who attended along with three other local church leaders.

Stolyar said the state representatives "confirmed their belief that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a law-abiding religious organization," and offered their support in helping the church work through the process of gaining registration for its congregations under Azerbaijani law.
Religious freedom is constitutionally protected in Azerbaijan, but only for groups that are accorded legal recognition. For the past eight years, local Adventists have been unsuccessful in their efforts to register the Sumgait congregation, church leaders there said.

The meeting represents a step forward in the ongoing struggle for substantive religious freedom in Azerbaijan, said John Graz, secretary-general of the International Religious Liberty Association.

"This is a positive development," said Graz, who also serves as director of the Adventist world church's department of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty.

"We're hopeful it will signal a greater commitment on the part of the Azerbaijan government to protect the freedoms of all its citizens to practice their faith, no matter what their religious tradition," he said.

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**Parchment, man of laughs, helps Adventist president with 'big picture' details**

*Assistant to prez: 'I'm like a filter'; e-mail from a prophet*

8 Feb 2011, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States

Ansel Oliver/ANN

It's not rare to hear Orville Parchment's laugh echoing over the cubicles.

Even though many think the assistant to the world church president is one of the jolliest employees in the building, Parchment can transition to serious when the job demands it, as anyone who has watched a stoic Parchment helm a crisis management committee could tell you.

He delivers sermons in Asia, welcomes ambassadors at the denomination's headquarters and speaks to groups about the president's emphasis on Revival and Reformation.

Usually though, Parchment is plowing through e-mails in his office, which overlooks Highway 29 in Montgomery County in Maryland. As the assistant to Ted N. C. Wilson, president of the Adventist world church, Parchment acts as an extension of the president's office, speaking on behalf of Wilson and fielding requests as varied by subject as they are by locale.

"I'm here to lighten his [Wilson's] load so he can look at the bigger picture and cast a vision for the church. When he's in town he has very little time," Parchment said one recent morning in his office.

Wilson, currently visiting denominational leaders and institutions in the South Pacific, will be in the office less than 30 business days from January 1 through the end of September, said Marilyn Perez, Wilson's scheduler and
executive administrative assistant.

Parchment, 63, originally from Jamaica, served as president of the church in Canada and the U.S. state of Arizona before then-President Jan Paulsen asked him to serve as his assistant in 2003. He said Paulsen valued his "grass roots" experience leading conferences and a union, two of the local mid-level administrative units comprising the denomination's structure.

Wilson requested that Parchment continue his service following the administration changeover last summer, Parchment said. He continues to serve as chair of International Crisis Management Committee, which monitors major international crises and advises local church administrations on the safety of missionaries. Most of the committee's actions go unreported because of safety issues for employees in some world regions.

Parchment also chairs the world headquarters' Human Resources Committee, which can sometimes involve his least favorite part of the job: disciplinary actions.

"We rarely have problems, but remember: we're staffed by Christians, not angels," he said.

Around the office he handles requests from the undersecretary regarding meeting agendas, assisting the nine vice presidents with the president's requests and field's questions from employees and members worldwide, some of them revealing frustrations.

A local church pastor has just been fired and is appealing the decision to the president of the denomination. "We have to tell them this is a local issue and we refer it back to local administration," Parchment said.

The requests can often pour in.

A person in North America wanted to fly in and talk with the president about a "confidential" matter. No deal, Parchment said. Two people in Asia wanted Wilson to come and encourage people to read their Bibles every day. More information needed, Parchment told them. Independent pastors and groups regularly request a video greeting from Wilson. Get aligned with the church, Parchment tells them, and then we'll see.

Six months ago a person claiming to be a prophet wanted to share something with Wilson. Another person wanted to tell Wilson some reoccurring dreams they had.

"I say to myself, if I were living in [church co-founder] Ellen White's day and she wrote a letter like that to me, would I respond to her," Parchment said. "It does cross my mind. I hope I'm not putting off God by politely turning these people down."

Though he handles most requests of the president himself -- "I'm like a filter in many ways," he said -- he lets Wilson handle some directly.
One country, with church structure organized by a union, wanted to turn each of their five conferences into a union. Parchment met with them for two hours explaining the position of world church leaders.

"Finally Elder Wilson wrote a letter... and put everything to rest," Parchment said with a wink.

When traveling, Parchment said he seldom engages in question-and-answer sessions or offers his own opinion during speaking engagements. Often, he discusses voted initiatives of the world church and the president's emphasis on *Revival and Reformation*.

His explanation of the initiative: "It's two things, making sure we are living the life we ought to live and be involved in mission. It's not going out to convert people -- that's the work of the Holy Spirit -- but to share the love of God with all the people we come in contact with."

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**In Côte d'Ivoire, ADRA assisting families displaced by post-election violence**

*Food assistance part of initial response*

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Christina Zaiback/ADRA International

The recent post-election violence in the West African nation of Côte d'Ivoire has prompted the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) to begin delivering food aid to hundreds of displaced families. The violence has left more than 250 dead and forced thousands to flee their homes to escape the political crisis and inter-ethnic clashes.

Coordinating with local partners, ADRA will distribute food rations to newly displaced persons in the western town of Duékoué, an area where fighting erupted recently after the shooting death of a local businesswoman. This incident triggered fatal inter-ethnic clashes that resulted in the deaths of 34 people, the looting and burning of more than 400 houses and shops, and the significant increase of displaced persons.

ADRA's operation will target 250 families directly affected by the recent crisis. Each household will receive a 14-day food ration for five people.

According to local sources, more than two-thirds of the 9,500 people currently displaced in the area are women, children and elderly people.