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11 Jul 2011, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States
Bettina Krause and Ansel Oliver/ANN

This month's formal conversation between leaders of the Mennonite World Conference and the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists offered the opportunity for both groups to share their beliefs and dispel misunderstandings in a receptive forum, leaders of both groups said.
"By sitting down and talking with those of other faiths, we gain a deeper understanding of who they are," said John Graz, Public Affairs and Religious Liberty director for the Adventist Church, whose department organized the June 28 to July 1 event at its world headquarters.

In a joint statement, leaders from both faiths said each shares "a desire to recover the authenticity and passion of the New Testament church, a similar understanding of Christian history, and a strong commitment to be followers of Jesus in their personal lives and in their corporate witness to the world."

The Mennonite World Conference represents some 99 Mennonite and Brethren in Christ national churches worldwide, with a combined membership of some 1.6 million. Mennonites, who trace their roots to the Anabaptist branch of the 16th Century Reformation, are today recognized for their emphasis on peacemaking, their stance as conscientious objectors, and their involvement in dispute resolution, both at local and international levels.

The roughly 500-year-old communion faced some of the most severe persecution of Christians; last year the Lutheran World Federation even apologized for its persecution of Anabaptists, the root of the Mennonites.

The Adventist Church rose following the Second Great Awakening in the United States in the 19th century, and it now has a world membership of some 17 million.

Danisa Ndlovu, president of the Mennonite World Conference, expressed his thanks to the Adventist Church for hosting the conversation.

"When you see people from a distance you can't say that you know them," said Ndlovu, who also serves as bishop of the Brethren in Christ Church in Zimbabwe. "But it is different when you sit down with someone and exchange ideas -- now we can say 'We know you.'"

Still, further conversations will pick up were this meeting left off. Future talks would explore Sabbath, its theology, and the Second Coming, said William Johnsson, director of the Adventist Church's inter-faith relations. "They believe in the Second Coming but it doesn't have the focus we put on it," Johnsson said.

Adventists hold their Sabbath day of worship from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown, as opposed to Mennonite and other Christian groups who worship on Sunday. The Mennonite delegation requested an opportunity to experience how Adventists keep Sabbath, and they stayed an extra day to attend a Friday evening supper and a church service on Saturday, Johnsson said.

Mennonite leaders at the meeting said they were interested to learn of the Adventist Church's focus and commitment of resources to issues of healthful living and religious freedom. The Adventist Church incorporates health as part of its faith and operates the largest integrated network of Protestant hospitals worldwide. The Adventist Church also launched in 1893 what is now the International Religious Liberty Association, a non-sectarian organization dedicated to promoting freedom of conscience.

Mennonite leaders also identified the structure of their global communion as inverted compared to the Adventist Church. Though based in Strasbourg, France, Mennonites congregations are autonomous, which generates more diversity, said Robert Suderman, former general secretary of the Mennonite Church Canada, who co-chaired the meeting.

Suderman said structures of both communions "have their pros and cons." In the Adventist Church, theology and direction is offered at the General Conference world headquarters and then trickles down through the rest of
its five levels of administration: divisions, unions, conferences and local congregations.

The administrative structure may have been responsible for some of the Adventist Church's success, Suderman said.

"Adventists have grown very quickly in 150 years and we haven't," he said. "That's probably an issue we want to investigate in the next round of conversations."

The two faiths are planning another conversation next year in Switzerland.

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**Adventists welcome new vegetarian-friendly USDA food guidelines**

*Mypate* confirms research of church health pioneer

8 Jul 2011, Loma Linda, California, United States
LLU staff/ANN

New dietary guidelines in the United States are confirming what a Seventh-day Adventist health pioneer demonstrated to the scientific community 50 years ago -- a vegetarian diet adequately meets a person's nutritional needs.

New USDA food guidelines organize food groups into portions on a simulated dinner plate. The "protein" category accommodates a vegetarian diet, unlike the previous food pyramid, which suggested meat was integral to a healthy diet.

Dr. Mervyn Hardinge, along with his Harvard colleague Dr. Frederick Stare, researched the benefits of vegetarianism when the diet was rare. While more people choose a vegetarian lifestyle today, the notion that meat is necessary for health often prevails.

However, The United States Department of Agriculture's MyPlate nutritional guide, introduced last month, is open to a vegetarian interpretation, unlike the decades-old food pyramid it replaced.

"The changes to this educational instrument make it much more amenable to a vegetarian audience than the previous [food pyramid] and suggest that the Seventh-day Adventist call to a vegetarian lifestyle may be getting through," said Joan Sabaté, chair of the department of Nutrition at Adventist-run Loma Linda University School of Public Health.

Whereas the former food guide pyramid specifically listed meat as integral to a healthy diet, MyPlate instead
encourages consuming adequate amounts of protein. While protein sources are generally thought of as animal products, this change does leave the door open to a vegetarian interpretation: legumes, including soy products, and nuts are excellent sources of protein, Sabaté said.

The MyPlate guide emphasizes that vegetables and grains should make up the greatest part of the diet, followed by generous amounts of fruit and protein. Dairy is given the least consideration.

"The plate is a more appropriate model for an eating guideline tool," Sabaté said.

"School-age children -- those who are most exposed to the USDA nutrition icon -- will easily be able to grasp the importance of fruits and vegetables from the new image," he added. "When we sit down to eat we can now simply look at our own plate and evaluate if it is half filled with fruits and vegetables, as recommended by the new tool."

Sabaté was the principal architect of Loma Linda University's Vegetarian Food Pyramid, an eating guideline for vegetarians introduced in 1997. He now plans to revise the pyramid into the friendlier format of a plate, which makes visualizing portion sizes much easier.

"While we applaud the USDA's new icon and appreciate that it is more inclusive of a fast-growing vegetarian population, it is not amenable for strict vegans," he said.

Click here to view the current Loma Linda University Vegetarian Food Pyramid. For information on the pyramid or LLU’s International Congress on Vegetarian Nutrition, visit www.vegetariannutrition.org.