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13 Dec 2011, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States

Bettina Krause/PARL/ANN

Religious liberty leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church this week met the Hungarian ambassador to the United States in an effort to help officials from that country better understand the potential effects of a looming deregistration of churches.

The Law of Churches, set for implementation on January 1, would deregister all but 14 religious denominations in Hungary, including the Adventist Church. It could also potentially affect the church's theological seminary.
Hungarian Ambassador to the United States, Gyorgy Szapary, met with officials from the Adventist Church's Public Affairs and Religious Liberty department on December 12 at the Hungarian embassy in Washington, D.C. While the law is still set for implementation, Adventist representatives later described the meeting as "cordial" and "productive."

"We expressed our deep concerns to Ambassador Szapary about Hungary's recently passed 'Law on Churches' and its impact, not just on the Adventist Church, but on many other minority religions as well," said Dwayne Leslie, the Adventist Church's director of legislative affairs. Leslie represented the Adventist Church at the meeting along with Ganoune Diop, the church's representative to the United Nations.

Diop and Leslie provided the ambassador with an overview of the international denomination and the history and scope of the Adventist presence in Hungary. They also explained the potential impact on the Adventist Theological Seminary in Pécel, near Budapest, which serves 66 students.

Adventist Education officials have previously said the seminary is key for providing theological and counseling education in the Hungarian language and cultural context. "Although it's small, the seminary meets the needs of the church in Hungary for pastors and theologians, as well as for life style and family life counselors," said Mike Lekic, an associate Education director for the Adventist Church.

Following Monday's meeting, Diop said the ambassador was gracious and receptive to the issues presented by the Adventist Church. "The meeting provided an excellent opportunity for dialogue -- we stated our concerns clearly, and heard the perspective of the Hungarian government," he said.

When the new law, voted in July, goes into effect next month, it will strip all but 14 "historic" religions of their legal status. Minority religions must then apply to the Hungarian parliament for re-registration.

Since the legislation was passed, Hungary has maintained that the move was not "anti-religion," but rather a legislative means to root out fraudulent organizations operating behind the protection of religion.

Religious liberty advocates worldwide, however, have decried the law, calling it unnecessary state interference with religion and a setback for human rights in Hungary. More than 300 groups are set to lose their registration, including Hungary's Methodists, Unitarians, a number of Islamic communities, and many smaller Protestant and evangelical churches.
In November, Diop and John Graz, PARL director for the Adventist world church, met in New York with Hungary's ambassador to the United Nations to express the church's concerns about the potential plight not just of Adventists, but of other religious groups in Hungary that will be affected by the new law.

Leslie and Diop said the Public Affairs and Religious Liberty department will continue to monitor the situation in Hungary and will provide any assistance requested by local church leaders.

Church Chat: Where did London's majority white church population go?

Church's president in Britain on reaching all races; how to measure success

12 Dec 2011, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States
Ansel Oliver/ANN

Ian Sweeney says that within the more than 11,000 Seventh-day Adventist Church members in the London area there are probably less than 200 white British.

Like several world regions of the denomination, church growth there is mainly among immigrant communities.

That's causing Sweeney, the president of the Adventist Church in Britain, to assess how Adventists are ministering to the 70 percent majority white population in London, as well as throughout the British Isles. His advice is for Adventists to find better ways of impacting communities surrounding its congregations.

He plans to identify people who excel at conducting ministry across cultural barriers in un-entered areas, which may require financial support for those regions without an Adventist presence.

Sweeney, 46, a black British national, was appointed president of the Adventist Church's British Union Conference in July.

He spoke with ANN by phone from his office in Watford the week before a quarterly meeting with his five local field presidents. He discussed issues involved in creating a plan to grow membership across the board, regardless of race or culture. He also discussed his influences and which biblical character might offer the most relevant example for his situation. Some interview excerpts have been edited for length:
Adventist News Network: What's the demographic makeup of the Adventist Church in the British Isles?

Ian Sweeney: We're about 45 percent West Indian, and then slightly less than that is African and some from Asia. About 10 percent at most is white English, and I think I'm being generous with that.

ANN: What's your plan to build membership across the board, regardless of race and culture?

Sweeney: To start, we need to have the discussion, and we have begun that. My Communication director has started a blog on our website about this. It's also gone into the union paper, which comes out on a fortnightly basis.

Within the church there are people who can minister cross-culturally and cross racially. I look at Peter and Paul. Peter was a great guy, but God had to give him a whole vision of sheep and unclean things just to get him to do one Bible study. Paul, however, had an ability to minister to the gentiles. It's not without significance that Paul was the major contributor to the New Testament. So my call to the pastors is, let's identify the Pauls who can minister outside their own cultural context.

ANN: What role does leadership play in reaching all cultures?

Sweeney: What we have to do is really support the pastors and conference presidents who are prepared to make the bold steps and say, "We see that things need changing. This is how we're going to try to reach our host community." It may evolve into placing pastors into un-entered territories and saying to them, "What do you need, how can we support you?" Then again, we put a person into an un-entered territory and there's no tithe to pay his wage. But I think it's about the stronger supporting that which is not so strong. We're going to have to be pioneers and send people into those un-entered territories.

ANN: Why is outreach a big part of this plan?

Sweeney: I suspect -- and I can tell by some of the comments on the blog -- that sometimes the church is so internalized looking at our own issues that our board meetings, for example, haven't spent the time as our church manual says for our primary focus of evangelism.

In my previous church, instead of praying that people come in, we prayed about going out and we saw results. The figures weren't brilliant in context of big numbers, but the impact for me is not simply about how many accessions we bring, but about whether or not people know. Noah for example, was a useless evangelist if we look at him only by number of accessions. He reported zero baptisms for a century. But when the rain began to fall, everybody knew. Impact for me is about "Did somebody hear?"

ANN: How open are we to talking about race and racism in the church?

Sweeney: I think we're moving into a stage where we can speak more openly and honestly about issues that really face us. I'm not fully conversant on the history of the church here in Britain. I think there is [pain] and I'm sort of hesitant to speak of that era of the 50s and the 60s. I was raised here but that all predates me. I don't want to open too much of the old wounds. When we have those discussions, I want it in the context of, "I hear where you came from, but this is where I think we all need to going." I know for some folk who are black they may say, what about the [historical] struggle? I'm not decrying the struggle. I'm simply saying let's never lose sight of what God has called us to do. I really want us to place our focus on the bigger picture, which is the 65 million or so in Britain who don't know Christ.
ANN: Where might repentance fit into how Revival and Reformation is expressed in UK?

Sweeney: I'm really glad for the whole emphasis that Elder Wilson is putting on Revival and Reformation and the Great Controversy Project, because to me it's about remembering our Adventist roots. One of the great challenges Britain has is that it isn't as God-friendly as the United States. Sure the queen is the head of the church in England, but believe me, this is not a Christian-welcoming society. Christians are often in the media under attack. Having said that, there is also in Britain a search for some sense of spirituality. There are churches that among the host community outside of Adventism that are growing. A lot of times Adventists think it's about the worship service and that you have to bring a band in. It's not about that. You have to be relevant to people's lives where they're at. Most of these growing churches do things that impact their community, whether it be childcare, mentoring, youth clubs, they are there visibly in the community saying, "We're! here, we see your needs, how can we help you?" I think that's what we are to do as a church.

ANN: Who are your mentors and models of success?

Sweeney: One of the church leaders who has been an inspiration to me is Freddie Russell [president of Allegheny West Conference based in Ohio, United States]. He has a principle, "Hang around people who are successful." And anyone who I see is doing something [I admire] I'll call them so I can sit at their feet. I'm reading Ted Engstrom, The Making of a Christian Leader, I'm sharing that with our staff. I'm also looking at a book by Nigel Rooms, Faith of the English, which talks about integrating Christ with Culture. And Ellen White of course. Right now my biblical inspiration is Jeremiah. It's a difficult example -- God tells him to go preach and says "No one's going to listen, but do it anyhow." That's [caused] me to re-evaluate success. Do we need people to listen, or is it a success that we do what God asks us to do? He asks us to preach to those people because He loves them, not because He's trying to waste our time. I really want folk to go and witness because they love Christ.

ANN: How are you going to integrate faith and prayer into an action plan?

Sweeney: Coming back to Jeremiah, he cried for the people, cried over Jerusalem. The one thing we as Adventist are not seen to do well, when last have we cried over the lost? And I ask that starting with myself. We cry for money, for jobs, for this, for that, but what [Jeremiah] was doing was crying for the people who have been lost. One of the things we're emphasizing for 2012 is that if you're not crying in prayer for the lost, you're certainly not going to be interested in seeing them saved and working for their salvation.

Moscow conference focuses on upswing in persecution of Christians worldwide

Uncertainty in Middle East; 'Arab Spring' becoming winter for religious minorities?

8 Dec 2011, Moscow
Bettina Krause/ANN

Participants of a high-level religious freedom meeting in Moscow last week vowed to keep the plight of persecuted religious minorities in the Middle East and Africa in the international community spotlight.
About 100 million Christians worldwide -- mainly in the Middle East and parts of Africa -- are suffering persecution or are caught up in violent religious conflict, according to conference organizers.

The three-day International Conference on the Freedom of Religion and Discrimination against Christians began November 30 and brought together a diverse group of leaders from the Orthodox, Protestant, Jewish, Catholic and Islamic communities. Topping the agenda was the growth of what some have called "Christianophobia" in many countries where dominant religions or ideologies exert significant political and social power.

Vasily Stolyar, Public Affairs and Religious Liberty director for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Euro-Asia, said conference participants were united in their resolve to do more to alleviate the plight of religious minorities suffering persecution worldwide.

"Are we are our brother's keeper? Yes! We have a responsibility to speak out on behalf of our brothers and sisters who cannot speak for themselves," Stolyar said.

Discussions at the conference also focused on the impact of the so-called "Arab Spring" on the rights of religious minorities in countries that have experienced dramatic political change.

John Graz, secretary-general of the International Religious Liberty Association, described the issues raised at the conference as a "significant and growing concern for religious liberty advocates."

"The fate of religious minorities in a number of countries of the Middle East is still uncertain," Graz said. "It's a developing political situation, and we don't know yet what the long term stance of new governments in places such as Tunisia or Egypt will be toward Christians and other non-Islamic religious groups."

Graz added that the IRLA has been tracking an upswing in social harassment and attacks against religious minorities in the region over the past year, including a rise in anti-Christian sentiment. He pointed, also, to United Nations reports that have tracked a steady exodus of Christians from Iraq and, more recently, from Libya -- a trend that indicates a significant sense of unease among minority religious groups.

Graz said it was vital to keep these concerns constantly before the eyes of the international community as new governments determine whether to recognize religious minorities.

"We urge governments around the world, along with international bodies such as the United Nations, to do everything in their power to ensure that religious freedom, as a fundamental human right, is both recognized and protected in these countries," Graz said.
Remembrance: Murrill, 85, was an Adventist Church undertreasurer

Served as president of church's operations in Myanmar, Rangoon Adventist Hospital business manager

8 Dec 2011, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States
ANN staff

Former Seventh-day Adventist world church Undertreasurer William L. Murrill, who helped support the denomination's presence in Myanmar, died December 5 in Shawnee, Kansas. He was 85.

William Murrill served the Adventist Church as undertreasurer. He also helped expand the church's mission in Myanmar in the 1950s and 60s. [photo courtesy Adventist Review]

Murrill held several church leadership positions in the Southeast Asian nation before returning to the United States to hold administrative posts for the church in Washington and the Lake Union region.

Shortly after his marriage to Ruth Elvira Wilson -- aunt of current world church President Ted N. C. Wilson -- the couple moved to Burma to serve the church's burgeoning Rangoon Adventist Hospital. William served as the hospital's business manager from 1951 to 1956. Ruth, who had trained as a nurse at Washington Sanitarium and Hospital, joined the medical staff. While in Burma, William oversaw fundraising for a new extension of Rangoon Adventist Hospital. The hospital was nationalized in 1965.

While on furlough from mission service, Murrill in 1961 earned a master's degree in Theology from the Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan.

William Lawrence Murrill was born in Ripley, West Virginia in 1926 and graduated from Washington Missionary College -- now Washington Adventist University -- in 1949 with a bachelor's degree in Business Administration.

Murrill served as secretary-treasurer of Burma Union Mission from 1956 until 1962, when he was appointed president of the church's work in Burma. In 1966, Murrill accepted a call to return to the United States and serve as secretary-treasurer of the Washington Conference, headquartered in Seattle.

Murrill later served as president of the Washington Conference. In 1972, he accepted the position of treasurer for the church's Lake Union Conference. While there, he received a call to serve the world church in the
capacity of assistant treasurer, a post he held until 1980. Murrill was the world church's undertreasurer from 1980 until his retirement in 1991.

A service is planned for 3:30 p.m., Saturday, December 10 at New Haven Seventh-day Adventist Church in Overland Park, Kansas.