In Nigeria, escalating religious conflict impacts Adventist Church
Surge in small group evangelism as security threats thwart public outreach

Adventist world church marks 100 years of corporate communication
Celebration highlights history of denomination’s public relations; A continuing need for church communication professionals

Myanmar’s farming, fishing community benefits from region’s first Adventist health expo
Site of Cyclone Nargis now sees ADRA development projects, wellness education
The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Nigeria is seeing a drop in church attendance and some church closures amid worsening religious conflict in the country.

An upsurge of attacks against Christian churches by the extremist group Boko Haram beginning late last year has led to ongoing sectarian violence between Muslim and Christian groups in northeast Nigeria.

Adding to the tumult, the country’s government recently eliminated energy subsidies, doubling the price of gasoline and inciting nationwide strikes and demonstrations. News reports indicate that Nigerians are living in fear of continuing unrest.

Meanwhile, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie called on religious leaders in her country to speak out against the violence, the Guardian reported last week.

“Christian leaders must continue to preach peace and togetherness so that Christians do not retaliate,” Adichie told the Guardian. “Muslim leaders must strongly and repeatedly condemn the violence against Christians and make it clear that Boko Haram does not represent Nigerian Islam,” she said.

The Adventist Church in the country has devoted recent days to fasting and prayer for the ongoing situation. Church administration in the country is encouraging membership to work in small groups and avoid large public religious gatherings. Open air evangelism efforts have been put on hold due to a curfew and the fragile security situation, church officials said.

According to a report by Northeast Nigeria Conference President Bindas Stephen Haruna, the Adventist Church there has not suffered property damage or loss of life. However, some individual members have had their property looted or burned.

“The situation in Northern Nigeria shows how a lack of religious freedom can affect the life of churches, and why we must promote and strongly defend this essential freedom before it is too late,” said John Graz, director for the Adventist world church’s Public Affairs and Religious Liberty.

Church attendance in northeast Nigeria has dropped drastically, leading to church closures in some regions where most members are traveling business people who have returned to their homes. In other churches, pastors have left their congregations for fear of being killed.

The situation has produced a wave of small group evangelism, church leaders said. As Nigerian Adventists funnel their efforts to spread the Adventist hope on a smaller scale, church officials in the country are soliciting the prayers and support of the world church family.
The Seventh-day Adventist world church is celebrating the denomination’s 100 years of public relations ministry this month.

The century anniversary of the first public relations worker for the Adventist Church highlights the denomination’s continued need for journalists and public relations professionals in its administrative offices worldwide.

Church officials today remembered the denomination’s hiring of a Baltimore Sun reporter in 1912 to establish the church’s Press Bureau. The move made the Adventist Church the first Protestant church to organize a formal public relations program.

That reporter, Walter Burgan, served as director of the Press Bureau until his death in 1940. The Press Bureau later evolved into what is today’s Communication department, both at world church headquarters and in local administrative offices globally.

"Just like those church executives 100 years ago, we need to continue to be on the cutting edge of communication trends today," world church Communication Director Williams Costa told an audience of top church officials and world headquarters’ employees.

"In many parts of the world, we have qualified people getting our message into the news media. We can do even more at all levels of administration worldwide. When we conduct corporate communication effectively, we are better understood by the public and we are closer as a church community globally," Costa said.

During the January 19 ceremony, church historian David Trim traced the history of Adventist communication ministry. The church’s hiring of
Burgan put it at the forefront of religious public relations.

“Today, we would do well to reflect on this decision, examine why [Burgan] was needed, why he in particular was hired, and how reviving this tradition at all levels of the denomination can strengthen our unity and mission,” Trim said.

Throughout the 1940s and 50s, the Adventist Church remained at the helm of religious communication, Trim said. Communication Director J.R. Ferren “worked tirelessly” during the 1940s to convince church administrative offices to hire qualified professionals, and in 1956 Communication Director Howard B. Weeks wrote “Breakthrough: A Public Relations Guidebook for your Church.” A landmark book on religious public relations, it was widely used by Christian denominations at the time as they sought to boost their presence in the public spotlight.

The church’s early forays in public relations were successful largely because church leaders hired qualified professionals to shape the church’s message and image, Trim said.

“Similarly today, if you’re going to do outreach to a Hispanic community, you need to hire someone who speaks Spanish. And it’s the same with other types of outreach – if you’re going to do outreach to media, you need to hire someone who speaks that language and understands that culture,” he said.

Trim noted that even church co-founder Ellen G. White urged early Adventists to capitalize on the press and advertising agencies to “call attention to the work.”

“The character and importance of our work are judged by the efforts made to bring it before the public,” White wrote. “When these efforts are so limited, the impression is given that the message we present is not worthy of notice” (Evangelism, pg. 128).

World church General Vice President Ben Schoun, who offered prayer to close the ceremony, urged church leaders worldwide to integrate their efforts. An emphasis on global communication will strengthen the world church family and support the continued spread of the Adventist hope, he said.

Myanmar’s farming, fishing community benefits from region's first Adventist health expo
Members of southern Myanmar’s farming and fishing communities are learning to prevent and treat hypertension, diabetes and other disease.

A four-day health expo conducted by the church’s Health Ministries and the Adventist Development and Relief Agency in Myanmar recently drew more than 1,500 attendees and was a first for the Adventist Church in the Irrawaddy Delta region.

Church officials there report that efforts paid off and community members flocked to hear health lectures and receive free medical screenings and consultations. Staff discovered that while 60 percent of those screened had been diagnosed with hypertension, few understood what high blood pressure is or how to treat it.

Local authorities, who were at first reluctant to let the church host a health expo, changed their minds after observing community members leave with newfound health and lifestyle knowledge, church leaders said.

“[The authorities] started to understand the program,” said Dr. Htwe Lay, Adventist Health Ministries director for Myanmar. “Not only did they fully support the health program, they also asked us to conduct more of this in other neighboring areas in the future.”

Comprised of nearly 700 villages, Myanmar’s Labutta region was the country’s hardest hit region when Cyclone Nargis made landfall in 2008. ADRA Myanmar has been active in the region since then, implementing rehabilitation and development projects and addressing health, livelihoods, water hygiene, sanitation and food security concerns.

The region is largely Buddhist, but church leaders hope the health outreach finds traction in the community. Lay said he hopes “the Adventist message will be reached through the health message.”

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