In Hungary, amended religion law recognizes Seventh-day Adventist Church
Decision caps months of uncertainty for country’s minority religions

Survey of Adventist ‘opinions, attitudes and spiritual life patterns’ coming to local churches
Major research project to guide church’s strategic planning; a farewell to operating on ‘hunches’

Remembrance: Soper edited temperance magazine Listen for 30 years
Interviewed first ladies, entertainers and athletes promoting temperate lifestyle

In Hungary, amended religion law recognizes Seventh-day Adventist Church
A difficult saga for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Hungary took a new turn this week when the nation’s lawmakers voted to restore the denomination’s official church status.

Hungary’s parliament amended the country’s controversial “Law on Churches” February 27 to expand the list of officially recognized churches from 14 to a total of 32. Among other faith groups added to the law were the Methodist Church, the Pentecostal Church, the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Hungarian Islamic Council.

Tamás Ócsai, president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Hungary, said the vote concludes months of uncertainty for both church leaders and members. Under the Law on Churches, first passed in July last year, 14 denominations retained their traditional legal status while some 300 minority religious groups, including the Seventh-day Adventist Church, were “de-registered” and invited to reapply for church status. The Hungarian government said the law is part of its broader efforts to shore up the country’s struggling economy, and is aimed at preventing sham religious groups from claiming rights and privileges extended to churches.

“The past six months have been challenging,” said Ócsai, speaking just minutes after parliament voted on the amendment. “But throughout it all, we haven’t felt alone. We’ve experienced a tremendous sense of support from our worldwide church family who’ve been praying, along with us, that God’s purpose will prevail.”

Bertil Wiklander, president of the Adventist Church’s Trans-European Division, welcomed the news, saying the vote allows the church in Hungary to look to the future with renewed purpose and energy. “The Hungarian Seventh-day Adventist Church has a long tradition of community service through its houses of worship, education programs, and welfare and public health initiatives,” he said. “We’re very pleased the government of Hungary has recognized this rich heritage, and that our church’s many fine ministries for the public good can continue.”

Wiklander also commended church leaders in Hungary for their “balanced, persistent approach in dealing with a complex political and legal situation.”

“Today, we join our brothers and sisters in Hungary in giving thanks to God for leading them through what has been a tremendously difficult time,” he said.

Raafat Kamal, Public Affairs and Religious Liberty director for the Trans-European Division, called passage of the amendment “an immense relief for all those who’ve been working tirelessly for this outcome.” But he also noted that the Law on Churches has stirred considerable international concern since it was passed last year, with some analysts saying it overtly politicizes the religious landscape in Hungary.

In response to criticisms, the Hungarian government has emphasized that even religious groups
without church status can continue to meet, worship, and evangelize -- rights which are protected under Hungary’s constitution.

John Graz, Public Affairs and Religious Liberty director for the Adventist world church, said Seventh-day Adventists in Hungary and around the world have reason to give thanks.

“My hope,” he added, “is that the government of Hungary will continue to reassess the way it deals with religious minorities. Religious freedom is best served when a government makes no legal distinction between religions, and extends the same protections and privileges to all.”

The Adventist Church in Hungary was first officially recognized by the government in 1957, and today has more than 100 congregations and 5,000 members. It also operates the Adventist Theological Seminary in Pécel, near Budapest, which serves 66 students.

Survey of Adventist ‘opinions, attitudes and spiritual life patterns’ coming to local churches

Church researchers say a major survey of the opinions, attitudes and spiritual life patterns of Adventists worldwide will help shape more effective ministry and mission. [photo: iStockphoto]
More than 60 percent of Seventh-day Adventists worldwide are women. Less than 40 percent of American Adventists study their Bible once a week.

Regularly cited at Adventist board meetings and business sessions, these and other so-called church statistics are not actually known to be factual. Many familiar “facts” might better be classified as “anecdotes, hunches and instincts,” says Adventist researcher David Trim.

Trim, who directs the world church’s Office of Archives, Statistics and Research, wants to see anecdotal evidence replaced by “actual data.” Beginning this year, his office will oversee a major research project to survey the opinions, attitudes and spiritual life patterns of Adventist pastors, church members, institutional employees and college and university professors worldwide.

“We need to know what is actually happening in the church, not just what we’d like to be happening,” Trim says. That knowledge can equip church leaders to use money and resources more judiciously and effectively, he says.

“We’re doing this because we want to do ministry and mission better. We want to be better stewards of what God has given to us, and we want to be more effective in discipling and winning souls,” Trim says.

It wasn’t until last year that top church officials first voted to establish an ongoing budget for Adventist research meant to inform the church’s strategic plan. Previously, Adventist research was conducted sporadically, with limited focus and funding, and almost exclusively in North America, Trim says.

This time around, the plan is for a “rigorous” survey carried out in each of the church’s 13 world divisions, Trim says. Using the new research budget, his office has contracted with research teams at Adventist universities in North America, Europe, Africa, Southeast Asia and Australia. Each team has demonstrated research “expertise and experience,” Trim says. While much of the anonymous polling will take place this year, some surveys may continue into early 2013, with full results due back at world church headquarters by June of 2013.

Survey questions will go beyond age, gender, ethnicity and other statistics-based research to ask about attitudes and opinions on spiritual life, fundamental beliefs and values, church leadership, Adventist institutions and fellow members, among other topics.
“The Adventist Church is committed to a strategic planning process that provides direction based on a body of evidence,” says Michael L. Ryan, a world church general vice president and vice-chair of the church’s Strategic Planning and Budgeting Committee.

“All strategic planning is really only for one reason: How do we better advance the mission?” Ryan says.

How beneficial the results are depends largely upon whether Adventists worldwide fully engage in the survey, Trim says. There’s no way to track survey results back to individual respondents, so researchers are hoping members will feel confident in giving honest answers -- “not what you think we’d like to hear,” he says.

“We understand that people will not always be doing what we wish they were doing. We understand that people are not necessarily believing what we want them to believe. And we understand that often they won’t be feeling very happy with us,” Trim says. “There’s going to be what will be perceived as bad news. But we want to know this so we can do a better job.”

In some cases, survey results might spur church leaders to launch programs that would “modify our behavior and practices,” Trim says. Other results may prompt better communication between leaders and members.

“If people are unhappy with an area that’s fundamental to our faith, then we can educate and explain to members why this is essential,” Trim says.

While he expects that much of the research will be published by Adventist scholars, Trim says some of it will remain confidential.

“My hope is that in fact we would not only get answers to really important questions, but -- as a side product -- we would also increase the research capacity of the church,” Trim says.

Many Adventist researchers have demonstrated that they can produce “good, rigorous research,” and Trim is keen to see them given “time and space” to benefit the church.

“I think at times we have made decisions based on who can give the best speech at a [church business meeting]. Somebody who gets up and has a burden on his heart and says, ‘Brethren, I feel we should do thus and so,’ and he’s eloquent, he’s impassioned, and he uses all the right Adventist buzzwords and everybody says, ‘Amen, vote the money.’ And often nobody asks, ‘Is this really reflecting a need wider than this one person’s perception?’” Trim says.

More and better Adventist research will equip leadership to use church money and resources in the best possible way rather than the most immediately appealing way, Trim says.

He also hopes the church’s growing commitment to research will help boost member confidence in Adventist leadership. They’ll know that research is steering leadership toward better informed decision-making and, ultimately, better methods of spreading the Adventist hope.

Church leaders expect the first wave of surveys to begin by the end of April.
Soper, who died January 17 at age 93, edited the magazine for 30 years, the longest-serving editor in the magazine’s history. As editor from 1954 to 1984, he interviewed and featured celebrity entertainers and athletes – from singer Johnny Cash to Olympic figure skater Peggy Flemming. He also landed interviews with United States first

The magazine, which launched in 1948 and ceased publication last year, was the church’s public voice of drug and alcohol prevention in the community and published in an era before cigarette packets carried warning labels. Listen included teaching materials and was used in high school classrooms around the U.S.

As editor, Soper later held the title of Associate Director of what was then known as the Temperance department at the Adventist Church’s world headquarters.

Colleagues described Soper as a gentle personality but firm in his editorial requirements.

“He was iconic editor. Listen was Soper and Soper was Listen,” said Stoy Proctor, former associate director of the Adventist world church’s Health Ministries department. “He was dogged in trying to make it the best magazine.”

Soper grew up in Minnesota and graduated from Pacific Union College in Angwin, California. In 1942 he landed a job as a copy editor with the denomination’s Pacific Press Publishing Association, then located in Mountain View, California. He later became an assistant editor of several publications before becoming associate editor of Listen in 1952 and editor two years later.

“He really loved getting to know these professionals in music and sports who made a real effort to be an example to the teenage generation they were performing for,” said his daughter Lois Ford.

Soper was preceded in death by his daughter Lori in 2007 and his wife Eunice in 2009. Survivors include Lois Ford and grandsons Timothy and David Ford.
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