World religious freedom congress opens with call to avoid secular society’s lead
Nearly 900 delegates meet in Dominican Republic for seventh world event

Adventist leaders to begin shift in tithe-source formula
Plans start to reduce North American Division’s contribution in 2013

Mission to Cities, Revived by His Word initiatives highlight Spring Meeting opening
Executive Committee hears of plans for urban area outreach, Bible reading program
Addressing nearly 900 delegates and guests at the Seventh World Congress of the International Religious Liberty Association, Denton Lotz, a noted Baptist minister and IRLA president, summarized the purpose of this three-day event: "We're here today because we believe that freedom of religion is basic to all human rights."

That view, sadly, is not shared in many parts of the world, something Lotz said made holding the sessions even more important.

"It's incumbent upon us to work together that we live together in harmony and concord," Lotz said to an audience of leaders from Christian, Muslim, Jewish and other communities. "We don't need religious wars."

That violence against believers remains a problem was evident from a session-opening video presentation noting the death sentences pronounced – but not yet carried out – on Christians in Pakistan and Iran on charges of "blasphemy," and the assassinations of Pakistani officials Salman Tasser, governor of Punjab province and minorities minister, Shahbaz Bhatti. Also cited was the extreme religious repression found in North Korea.

While the main congress theme, "Secularism and Religious Freedom – Conflict or Partnership" may seem far removed from lands where persecution is active, Lotz took a different view.

"Most people worldwide suffer from a lack of religious freedom. Seventy percent of the world lives in places of religious repression," he said.

Speaking to an audience that included Seventh-day Adventists, Mennonites, Roman Catholics, Baptists, Mormons and Scientologists, among others, IRLA secretary-general John Graz noted the world congress is a multifaceted event.

"This congress is about religious freedom, but it is not a religious event," Graz said. "We are all here together. We represent different faiths, different religions and different churches. We are different, but we are respectful of each other."

With the theme of "Secularism and Religious Freedom -- Conflict or Partnership," speakers and delegates will attempt to negotiate the challenges of a world which is increasingly hostile to a variety of religious expression in the public square. While standing for separation of church and state, IRLA leader Lotz issued a call for religion to avoid following a secular society's lead.

"When religion becomes secular, I believe it is the greatest challenge to religious freedom, allowing secularism to define what a religion believes," Lotz told delegates. "When we allow the secularization of our faith to transcend the transcendent, it loses its meaning," he added.
According to Lotz, "Religion will die when it no longer focuses on God, but only on autonomous man. Religion will thrive when it focuses on God."

In a statement read to delegates, the country’s president, Leonel Fernandez Reyna, offered "a most cordial welcome to the Dominican Republic, a land of freedom. The Dominican Republic is a place of freedom for Christians, Muslims, Jews and people of other faiths."

Adventist leaders to begin shift in tithe-source formula

Apr. 19, 2012
Silver Spring, Maryland, United States
Mark Kellner/Adventist Review

The formula for contributions by world divisions to the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists will change in 2013, if suggestions recommended by global church leaders on the concluding day of the movement’s Spring Meeting are adopted later this year.

By 2020, the North American Division would annually contribute 6 percent of its gross tithe receipts to the General Conference budget, down from 8 percent today. Other world divisions – of which there are 12 – may see their annual contribution increase to 3 percent of gross tithe, although that is less certain. A commission is being formed to study the matter and report back to the 2014 Annual Council, said Robert E. Lemon, treasurer of the Adventist world church.

“This request will allow the North American Division to carry out its missional goals and the funds will be used to advance the work throughout the division,” said Tom Evans, treasurer of the North American Division, in a statement. “The North American Division has been blessed in being instrumental in the growth of the world church since its inception,” Evans added.

Because an adjustment in the contribution percentage is a matter of policy, leaders explained, it can be voted only at an Annual Council, next slated to take place in October 2012 at the world headquarters. For now, church leaders have authorized the General Conference’s Treasury
department “to prepare the budget based on these assumptions,” that the change would be made, said Ted N. C. Wilson, president of the General Conference.

In explaining the move, Lemon said the North American Division, or NAD, the region where Adventism was born, “needs to remain strong. … In addition to that, every part of the world considers NAD to be their territory and they come and raise funds in NAD. We have to understand the level of commitment NAD had given over the history of the church has given to mission.”

After the measure was approved, on a voice vote, Wilson said, “Let me underscore the appreciation on the part of the world field and the General Conference for the generosity on the part of the North American Division for decades. We do value it and appreciate it.”

In other actions at Spring Meeting, the Executive Committee voted to approve a “Client Identification and Cost-Sharing Action Plan” for the General Conference Auditing Service, or GCAS, which would shift some audit work to local, outside firms, and require church units to financially participate in the costs of audits conducted by the GC organization.

The 35-year-old GCAS operation is currently tasked with financial compliance audits of many church operations around the world, from divisions to remote clinics staffed by one or two people, said Lemon. While the North American Division pays for its audits, the General Conference pays for most of the rest, leaving an $8 million annual shortfall. In view of this, reorganization would ease the dollar drain, he said.

“This is a very comprehensive and needed action, but it's complicated,” Wilson noted during discussion of the measure. Passed on a voice vote, further plans are to be discussed at Annual Council.

In other financial news, Lemon reported the General Conference operated in 2011 at $10 million below budget caps, and received an additional $18.8 million in unexpected income due to foreign exchange rates and other considerations. The Spring Meeting leaders voted to allocate $15 million to a variety of outreach and development projects aimed at reaching non-Adventists and strengthening church members in their faith walk.

Mission to Cities, Revived by His Word initiatives highlight Spring Meeting opening
Presidents of each of the 13 world divisions read Genesis chapter 1 to launch the Revived by His Word initiative, a program to motivate church members to read the entire Bible between now and General Conference Session in 2015. Delegates of the denomination’s Executive Committee met for the first day of Spring Meeting on April 17 at the church’s world headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland, United States. [photos by Ansel Oliver]

Adventist Church President Ted N. C. Wilson holds a Bible at the launch of the Revived by His Word initiative, saying he would also commit to more reading of the Bible. The initiative features a website – revivedbyhisword.org – with daily blogging and other resources to promote Bible study.

Apr. 17, 2012
Silver Spring, Maryland, United States
Ansel Oliver/ANN

Top regional Seventh-day Adventist Church leaders today identified 24 cities that will receive targeted outreach efforts, the next step of a plan voted by church officials last year to focus on urban area ministry worldwide.

During today’s opening of Spring Meeting – one of two annual meetings of the global Executive Committee – leaders stated plans for renewed outreach in a mega city in each of the denomination’s 13 world divisions. Some divisions identified several cities.

In Moscow, Russia, and Kiev, Ukraine, the church will hold a total of more than 30 simultaneous outreach campaigns, each following previous work building and training small groups of those interested in joining the church. Church leaders will plant churches in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and in Lagos, Nigeria. And alumni of Hiroshima Adventist Academy will be recruited to take part in outreach to Tokyo, Japan.

The worldwide urban ministry focus will start next year in New York City, with a representative from each division attending part of the four-week initial outreach.

“IT’s not just an event, it’s God’s comprehensive plan for reaching big cities,” said Adventist Church President Ted N. C. Wilson. “New York will be a symbolic launch.”

A full list of the selected cities appears below.

Meeting at the church’s world headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland, leaders reminded Spring Meeting delegates of the world’s changing demographics, which led to the voted plan last year. “For the first time in history, more than 50 percent of the world’s population live in cities,” said Mark Finley, an assistant to the president. “About 70,000 people every day move from rural areas into cities.”

Many divisions are prioritizing the initiative by starting a unique fund. Leaders in South America have built a several-million-dollar fund for reaching Buenos Aires.

“Our priorities need to be [reflected] in our budgets,” said Erton Kohler, president of the South American Division. “We are planting seeds and preparing our people for something big.”

World church officials today also unveiled the Revived by His Word initiative, a plan urging members to read through the Bible between now and General Conference Session in 2015. The initiative includes a website, www.revivedbyhisword.org, which features daily blogs and other resources to
promote Bible study.

Leaders said research suggests that 47 percent of world membership regularly reads the Bible.

“Our goal is to have at least half of the church membership involved in some aspect of Revived by His Word in systematic daily Bible study,” Finley told delegates.

Leaders kicked off the program with each division president reading a portion of Genesis 1. Backed by top world leaders on the platform, Wilson held up a small Bible and urged members worldwide to join the program.

“Unfortunately … thousands of Seventh-day Adventists are not reading His Word and even some of our own schedules are demanding. I’m going to commit myself today to spending more time in the word of God,” Wilson said.

Delegates also received a report on the newly formed Greater Middle East Union, where church leaders are establishing community centers to serve local neighborhoods.

Homer Trecartin, the union’s president, said the "centers of influence" would offer numerous services: everything from job, language and computer training to libraries, Internet cafes and counseling services. Five are in initial stages of being established and plans call for 25 set up by the end of the year, with 100 by the end of 2013, Trecartin said.

“This has created excitement among both local and expat workers,” Trecartin said. “It’s part of our goal to mingle with people and meet needs.”

The Greater Middle East Union was created last October and leaders classified the territory as a “world priority.”

—Cities identified for urban ministry emphasis by division:

East-Central Africa Division: Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo.

Euro-Asia Division: Kiev, Ukraine; and Moscow, Russia.

Euro-Africa Division: Prague, Czech Republic; Geneva, Switzerland; Hamburg and Munich, Germany; and Vienna, Austria.

Inter-American Division: Mexico City; Caracas, Venezuela; and Bogotá, Colombia.

North American Division: New York City.

Northern Asia-Pacific Division: Tokyo, Japan.

South American Division: Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division: Luanda, Angola.

South Pacific Division: Sydney, Australia; Christchurch, New Zealand.
Southern Asia-Pacific Division: Manila, Philippines.

Southern Asia Division: Mumbai, India.

Trans-European Division: London, United Kingdom.

West-Central Africa Division: Lagos, Nigeria.

The ANN news bulletin is a weekly recap of news and information from the Communication department of the Seventh-day Adventist world church headquarters and is distributed by Adventist News Network.

Reproduction requirements: ANN encourages the republication of its news stories and accompanying editorial photos. Stories may be reproduced in full, in shortened form, or as one of several sources used to construct a news story. Please note that ANN's material is copyrighted. When reproducing ANN stories, the words "Adventist News Network" must appear either under the headline or immediately following the article. When reproducing photos that appear on ANN, please credit the photographer and ANN.

ANN staff: Williams Costa Jr., director; Ansel Oliver, assistant director; Elizabeth Lechleitner, editorial coordinator. Portuguese translations by Azenilto Brito, Spanish translations by Marcos Paseggi and French translations by Wenda Ozone-Mourandee.