Religious freedom festival in Indonesia recognizes government, faith leaders
Second regional event held to thank religious liberty advocates

New Adventist distance-learning university expands education options in Inter-America
Herbert Fletcher University to operate through affiliation with Griggs, Andrews universities

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A recent festival of religious freedom cements the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Indonesia as a leading proponent of free expression of religion in the country.

Some 2,000 people gathered at the Aula Mapalus Kantor Gubernur Sulawesi Utara auditorium in Manado on May 5 to recognize the combined efforts of government and faith groups in preserving freedom of belief in the Southeast Asian country.

Interest in religious liberty has grown in Indonesia since the Adventist Church first held a festival of religious freedom in Jakarta two years ago, church religious liberty advocates said.

Faith representatives at this month's festival commended the Adventist Church for organizing a festival that offers appreciation to government and faith leaders who advocate free expression of religious belief.

“We thank the Seventh-day Adventist Church for leading out in expressing our thanks to God and to the government for the religious freedom that we are enjoying in Indonesia, particularly here in North Sulawesi,” said J. Pangaila, leader of the Pentecostal Church in Indonesia.

Deputy Governor of North Sulawesi Roy Roring echoed Pangaila's appreciation.

Muslim leader Tamzil Permata said, “We are committed to live peacefully together, Christians and non-Christians alike.”

Holding a public event organized by the Adventist Church demonstrated the positive relationship the church has promoted among faith groups in Manado, said East Indonesia Union Conference President Noldy Sakul, who organized the festival. Religious groups represented at the event included Hinduism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity.

Indonesia is a predominantly Muslim country with a Protestant Christian population of 6 percent. In 2006, reports of violence between faith communities surfaced, including the vandalism of church property and forcible closure of churches.

Since then, the Indonesian government has made “positive efforts to unite religious groups and foster and attitude of toleration and respect,” according to the Religious Freedom World Report. The publication, released by the Adventist world church’s department of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty, also notes that “fanaticism” and “deep-rooted violence” remain.

“You may not be affected today as you still enjoy [religious] freedom, but tomorrow it may not be the same story,” PARL director John Graz told the audience in Manado. He added that religious freedom is essential to “peace, unity and prosperity for the people of Indonesia and the government.”
New Adventist distance-learning university expands education options in Inter-America

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Miami, Florida, United States
Libna Stevens/ANN staff

A new Seventh-day Adventist distance-learning institution inaugurated this week in Inter-America expands the education options of students in the region, particularly for those whose work, family or financial situation put strains on further study.

Top church leaders and educators from the Inter-American Division’s 12 universities donned academic regalia to attend the official launch of Herbert Fletcher University in Miami, Florida.

The newly inaugurated distance-learning institution will offer undergraduate and graduate degrees online in church administration, leadership, instructional design, educational technology and Adventist teaching.

HFU began offering courses last year, available in English and Spanish, through an affiliation with Griggs University and Andrews University. Griggs, The church’s distance-learning hub, moved to the campus of church-run Andrews University in Michigan, United States in 2011 to benefit from a broader faculty base and increased resources for curriculum development.

HFU President David Siguelnitzky said the school will “build on the deep roots of our Seventh-day Adventist principles and excel in the knowledge for our students.”

The university is designed to serve the specific needs of students who must juggle work or family responsibilities with school or who cannot afford to move to another city or country to study, Siguelnitzky said in his keynote address.

“Mothers with children, fathers with full responsibilities … sometimes the economy of the family doesn’t allow people to leave their job and educate themselves,” Siguelnitzky said. “That is the public that HFU serves today and will continue serving in the future.”

HFU is not the Inter-American Division’s first foray into distance learning. Last year, the Inter-American Adventist Theological Seminary received full accreditation. The institution operates through a distributed campus, offering degrees taught in English, Spanish and French from 10 sites across the region. The arrangement allows pastors to study and work within their own territory and culture.

“I support distance education, so long as we make certain that students have access not only to lots of information at any time, but also to teachers who can help them sort through it and make sense of it,” said Andrews University President Niels-Erik Andreasen, who joined the HFU launch ceremony via videoconference.
Siguelnitzky said 64 percent of HFU professors have doctoral degrees, 21 percent are Ph.D. candidates and 14 percent hold a master’s degree. It’s a team “many universities would dream of having,” he said.

Andreasen affirmed the school’s partnership with Andrews University in developing the church’s educational infrastructure in Inter-America and worldwide.

“God bless this new initiative,” he said. “It promises to be a great blessing to the church and its members.”

Griggs University President Alayne Thorpe said during the ceremony, “With this partnership with Griggs and Andrews universities, we can reach out to every student, members and constituency no matter where they are.

John W. Taylor, associate director of the Adventist world church’s Education department, congratulated IAD leaders for their vision and tenacity in adding another institution to the global network of Adventist higher-learning. There are currently 1.6 million students studying at 111 accredited church-run colleges and universities worldwide, Taylor said.

Ella Simmons, the Adventist world church general vice president who oversees education, brought greetings from Adventist world church President Ted N. C. Wilson and spoke on the Adventist vision of education.

Herbert Fletcher University is named after the late Herbert L. Fletcher, who held executive educational posts in the region.

“Herbert Fletcher was the embodiment of what Adventist education is about,” said IAD President Israel Leito, who offered a tribute to Fletcher’s legacy during the ceremony. “His influence is still causing many men and women today to live up to the ideals of a true Christian.”

Fletcher’s family members were in attendance, including his widow Olive, his son, daughter and grandchildren.

Fletcher served the church for more than 44 years as a teacher, district pastor, youth director and education direction. He was also president of what is now Northern Caribbean University in Jamaica, and later held the position of Education director for Inter-America.

Herbert Fletcher University is based in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, and joins Inter-America’s 12 Adventist universities and one junior college across the region.

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