Internet conference focuses on denominational integration, best practices
Networking in Hong Kong offers planning for future projects

At religious liberty dinner, Canadian foreign minister promotes ‘bedrock’ human right
Freedom of belief still too often ‘measured in lives lost,’ Baird says

Ahead of ‘World No Tobacco Day,’ a call to rekindle Adventist anti-smoking efforts
New enthusiasm could help curb 1 billion tobacco-related deaths this century
May. 25, 2012
Hong Kong, China
Ansel Oliver/ANN

For church Web professionals attending an annual Internet conference, the real work gets done at breakfast.

That's where advice is exchanged and conference speeches are dissected as attendees chat over tables, across aisles or while coming and going from the restaurant at the Royal Park Hotel’s buffet.

This year’s Global Adventist Internet Network forum offered several days of presentations on a mix of technology- and communication-related practices as the Seventh-day Adventist Church continues to bolster and further integrate its online presence. But amidst the programs and workshops, many attendees say that key learning happens at meals and other sidelines of the conference.

“That’s where the real networking gets done,” said Andrew King, Web manager for the Adventist world church’s Communication department, while leaving the buffet Friday morning.

King and colleagues in the Communication department will soon establish a team to revamp the denomination’s homepage, Adventist.org. The chance to have casual yet frank discussions with international experts helps them solicit input for upcoming projects.

About 160 participants from around the world gathered for the eighth such forum, held this year in Hong Kong. The forum is held in different world regions each year to better accommodate local church administrators and members. Compared to previous conferences, this year’s forum includes greater delegations from the denomination’s Northern Asia-Pacific and Southern Asia-Pacific divisions, based in Seoul and Manila respectively.

Presentations this year underscored the need for simplicity and focus in Web design and interaction. In separate speeches, both King and Adventist Risk Management Marketing and Communication Manager David Fournier outlined advantages of ridding a site of historical baggage.

“The more information you have the more careful you have to be about organizing it,” said Fournier, who was one of several participants urging a greater commitment to effective information architecture on denominational websites.
King said that new initiatives are notorious for making officials think that their organization needs a new website. “I can almost guarantee that the top stakeholders in the organization have not asked themselves, ‘Have market trends and the needs of our customers shifted, and should our current website be adjusted accordingly?’” King said, instead recommending that new initiatives be incorporated into an organization’s existing site.

Others offered tips on facilitating better user experiences on the Web. During a sideline discussion, Jesse Johnson, president of netAserve, which provides technology support to the Adventist Church, said links on a webpage don’t help the organization because it pushes away users.

“Instead, incorporate another organization’s content on your website, especially if it’s a local church website,” Johnson advised. “Users will enjoy the content and will feel stronger about your site and are more likely to visit your church.”

Daniel Jiao, Communication director of the church’s Chinese Union Mission, based in Hong Kong, said people are increasingly using mobile devices to access the Internet. Indeed, at the end of 2011 there were an estimated 6 billion mobile subscribers, representing 87 percent of the world’s population, according to a December report by the International Telecommunication Union.

Other leaders advocated for church communication and Web managers to design their websites for mobile usage. “It may end up being a more simple site,” said King, “but if you design for mobile first, you’re reaching all of who your audience might be.”

Several participants offered evening presentations highlighting mass Internet evangelism projects in their own territories.

The Adventist Church in Germany and Austria last year held the Faith.Simple project, an eight-week outreach series to post-moderns, with Internet broadcast discussions centering around the movie My Last Day Without You, created specifically for the project. The film features a young German businessman who travels to New York City on a difficult assignment, which forces him to examine his own life. Klaus Popa, who co-led the series, said hundreds of discussion groups were held in homes and churches throughout German-speaking areas of Europe.

Adventist leaders in South America continue to tweak mass media evangelism events, finding that interactive campaigns with interactive components have proven better online response rates compared to events that are just streamed. For an increasing number of outreach events, respondents sign up on the outreach website or on Facebook to complete a Bible study. The challenge is making sure local pastors or members can follow up with the 4,000 responses from a recent event, a media manager said.

“If pastors or church members don’t contact them, they are less likely to join the church,” said Rogerio Ferraz, a project manager for the South American Division, based in Brasilia, Brazil. “People need that personal contact.”

In the Trans-European Division, based outside of London, Communication department leaders have established LIFEconnect, an online community where people can meet, share their life experience and offer spiritual support.

Williams Costa Jr., the Adventist Church’s Communication director and forum organizer, affirmed Adventist technologists, saying, “You are not just dealing with websites and platforms, you’re an
important part of the church. Today, making easy content, stories and testimonies, this can be used by the Holy Spirit.”

Videos of the forum’s presentations will be posted within a week on its website, gain.adventist.org. More information is available on the convention’s Facebook page, facebook.com/groups/giencon, and on Twitter at twitter.com/#!/gaincon.

—additional reporting by Penny Brink and Darryl Thompson

At religious liberty dinner, Canadian foreign minister promotes 'bedrock' human right

Canada’s Minister of Foreign Affairs John Baird speaks at the 10th annual Religious Liberty Dinner on May 24 at his country's embassy in Washington, D.C. Baird said that Canada is a dedicated partner in promoting human rights. [photo: Keegan Bursaw/Embassy of Canada]

May. 29, 2012
Washington, D.C.
Bettina Krause/IRLA

Canada’s Minister of Foreign Affairs was the keynote speaker May 24 at the 10th annual Religious Liberty Dinner, which brought together leaders and officials from Washington D.C’s diplomatic community, government agencies, faith groups, and advocacy organizations to affirm religious freedom as a “bedrock” human right.

In a wide-ranging, often moving speech, Minister John Baird touched on Canada’s commitment to promoting human rights through its foreign policy, as well as his personal conviction that defending freedom requires a willingness to act with integrity, no matter what the cost.

Baird also spoke passionately about the plight of religious minorities worldwide, saying religious freedom is still too often “measured in blood spilled and lives lost.”

The dinner, recognized as one of Washington’s premier annual religious liberty events, was hosted by the Canadian Embassy and was jointly sponsored by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the International Religious Liberty Association, the North American Religious Liberty Association and Liberty magazine. The event celebrates religious freedom and honors those around the world who work to protect and promote this basic human right.

More than 150 people attended this year’s dinner, including ambassadors representing 17 nations and representatives from the White House’s Office of Public Engagement and the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom. Dan Jackson, president of the Adventist Church in North America, gave the invocation, saying that Adventists have an unwavering commitment to defend the religious freedom of all people, no matter what their faith tradition.
In his speech, Baird warned that the fight to protect religious freedom is “not an abstract debate.” He cited the recent murder of hundreds of Christians in northern Nigeria at the hands of the religious extremist group Boko Haram and the impact of so-called “blasphemy laws” in some countries, including Pakistan and Iran, that restrict the activities of religious minorities. He also drew attention to the struggles of Baha’is, Ahmadiyya Muslims, Coptic Christians, Roman Catholics, Buddhists, and others, who experience discrimination or worse at the hands of their own governments.

Baird received a standing ovation as he pledged that Canada will not only be a dedicated partner in promoting human rights, but one that will “lead by example.”

Baird is currently working to establish a Canadian Office of International Religious Freedom that will “promote and protect freedom of religion and belief, consistent with core Canadian values such as freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.”

Two religious freedom advocates were honored at the dinner. Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, received the National Award for his many years as a spokesperson on religious freedom issues to the United States Congress and the media. Canadian lawyer Gerald Chipeur received the International Award for his efforts in promoting religious freedom through his writing, and his work with the Canadian Bar Association and the International Academy for Freedom of Religious and Belief. Chipeur frequently appears in the Supreme Court of Canada and other Canadian courts to litigate cases focused on constitutional issues and human rights.

Speaking after the event, Dwayne Leslie, director of Legislative Affairs for the Adventist Church, described the dinner as “one of our most successful yet” in terms of reaching out to the diplomatic community, Washington’s thought leaders, and forging new and valuable relationships.

Leslie, along with Melissa Reid, executive director of NARLA, was one of the main organizers of the event.

“This year’s dinner provided us with an invaluable opportunity to raise awareness about the Adventist Church’s strong commitment to freedom of conscience,” he said.

John Graz, secretary general of the International Religious Liberty Association, and director of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty for the Adventist Church, spoke at the beginning of the evening, describing the work of his organization around the world in generating support for religious freedom through congresses, symposiums, training events and festivals.

He spoke about the need to support the principle of religious freedom—not just for our own religious tradition, but for all people. “I can affirm,” Graz said, “that when religious freedom is protected, it is good for religions, good for people, and good for the nations in which they live.”

-- Melissa Reid contributed to this report

Ahead of ‘World No Tobacco Day,’ a call to rekindle Adventist anti-smoking efforts
Seventh-day Adventists need to reprioritize their historic anti-tobacco message, church health officials say.

At the forefront of the smoking-cessation movement for decades, the church's efforts have lately lost their edge, says Adventist world church Health Ministries Associate Director Dr. Peter Landless.

The challenge to regroup comes as anti-smoking advocates gear up for this year's World No Tobacco Day. The annual emphasis day, observed May 31 and sponsored by the World Health Organization (WHO), is meant to educate policymakers and the public about the tobacco industry's tactics.

This year, WHO organizers will focus on ways to counter tobacco advertising. The tobacco industry continues to fight a U.S. policy that would require cigarette manufacturers to display large, graphic warning labels over 50 percent of each cigarette pack. Adventist health officials welcomed the plan last year and continue to advocate for its enforcement through petitions and by enlisting the support of opinion leaders and policymakers.

In recent years, enthusiasm for the anti-smoking movement among local Adventists has dwindled. But "member fatigue," as Landless puts it, is only partly to blame. Responsible too are the challenges brought by a new strain of smokers. Those likely to quit already have, leaving a comparatively small but tenacious population of smokers in the United States, he says. Other countries, such as Australia, have seen a similar decrease in smokers.

Elsewhere, smoking remains endemic. Most worrisome are low and middle income countries, many of which Landless says lack the public health education initiatives, healthcare infrastructure and government inclination to mount a compelling anti-tobacco message. Still, the "smoking cessation banner has not been dropped," he says. The church's stop-smoking program continues to work in numerous countries, including The Philippines and South Korea.

Landless hopes a revamped Breathe Free smoking-cessation program and a pledge to turn churches into community health centers will inject the Adventist anti-smoking movement with new energy. Revised curriculum and materials for Breathe Free are expected by the end of the year, he said.

Breathe Free grew out of the church's touchstone smoking-cessation program, the 5-Day Plan to Stop Smoking. Today, Landless would like to see Breathe Free include an online, interactive approach designed for a modern audience that may find attending nightly meetings difficult. Landless also wants Breathe Free to embrace the pharmacological side of quitting.

"I think it's always been thought that with enough faith and enough support, anyone can stop smoking," he says. "Honest appraisal of the facts has led us to understand that this is not the case. It is unfair for those of us who are not shackled by nicotine addiction to infer and state that willpower will
always triumph."

Pharmacological support doesn’t discount trust in God, Landless says, but evidence-based tools, such as temporary nicotine replacement therapy, can significantly increase a smoker’s chance of quitting.

“Another component that we haven’t adequately embraced in the past is the need to network with healthcare providers in facilitating stop-smoking intervention,” he says.

For example, Landless says, if a smoker who also struggles with depression quits, the consequences could be deadly. It’s crucial that smokers who plan to quit notify their doctors beforehand and obtain the necessary clearance and pharmacological support where appropriate, he says.

Turning every Adventist Church into a community health center is one way to promote communication between Breathe Free leaders and healthcare providers, Landless says. He and other Adventist health officials envision local churches serving as neighborhood hubs for smoking-cessation and other health information, education and support. The church's recent partnership with the Pan American Health Organization further urges congregations to work with local governments and health organizations in supporting public health.

But potential quitters must know that Adventist care comes free of ulterior motives, Landless says.

“Our efforts to assist people with smoking cessation must reflect the gracious love of Christ as opposed to a veiled hook. We’ve had scores of people who have related their relationship to God -- not an immediate impact, but years down the line -- to Adventists because they felt they were helped by people who cared. We really need to do this as a ‘no strings attached’ service to the community," he says.

The outcome could help reverse statistics that say tobacco will claim an estimated 1 billion lives this century, Landless says. Already, he adds, 5 million people die per year from tobacco-related health complications. And in China alone, there are some 350 million smokers.

“You’re looking at a huge problem," Landless says.

“We’ve got to help. Every church must be actively involved in offering smoking prevention education and supporting cessation,” he adds. “The health leadership of the church must also take responsibility and continue to promote and model innovative leadership in stop-smoking initiatives and anti-tobacco advocacy.

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