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California bill requires companies to accommodate religious employees’ beliefs, practices

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Program shows reduction in birth complications, infant death

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California Governor Jerry Brown signs AB 1964
Seventh-day Adventist religious liberty advocates say a new bill banning workplace religious discrimination in the U.S. state of California offers more protection for church members whose jobs are jeopardized by Sabbath observance.

The bill, signed into law last week by California Governor Jerry Brown, clarifies an employer’s responsibility to accommodate the religious beliefs and practices of employees under the state’s Fair Employment and Housing Act. Religious dress and grooming – such as turbans, hijabs and beards – now fall under protections granted by the legislation.

The bill, called AB 1964, also prevents employers from keeping visibly religious employees in back offices or basements.

“No longer will it be legal to segregate a worker from public view because their appearance did not fit a corporate image,” California Assemblywoman Mariko Yamada (D-Davis) said in a press release from the 8th District she represents.

Yamada said her bill responds to changing demographics in California. Growing Sikh and Muslim communities in the state and nationwide have contributed to a recent uptick in workplace discrimination cases, the press release said. Last year alone, California employers faced more than 500 such cases.

For Adventist supporters, the bill also extends rights to employees whose religious expression, while perhaps less tangible, is no less intrinsic.

The bill sends a “clear signal” to companies regarding their obligations to religious employees, said Alan J. Reinach, director of the Church State Council, a religious liberty ministry of the Adventist Church’s Pacific Union Conference, based in Westlake Village, California.

“Hopefully, fewer Californians will lose their jobs, and Seventh-day Adventists will be more secure in their right to keep holy the Sabbath day,” Reinach said.

Passage of AB 1964, an homage to the federal Civil Rights Act, makes California the third state in the union to legislate so-called workplace religious freedom. Previously, New York and Oregon passed laws granting similar provisions.

Adventist religious liberty advocates have worked for years with an interfaith coalition to secure a workplace religious freedom act at the national level, but waning Congressional interest and disagreement over the scope of such legislation has tempered enthusiasm.

Dwayne Leslie, director of Legislative Affairs for the Seventh-day Adventist world church, says the California bill signals a grassroots approach to finding traction for workplace religious liberty protections.

“This is a big step forward for all people of faith,” Leslie said.
“I commend them for pushing for this to get it done in California, and I’m hopeful that this will happen in other states,” he added.

AB 1964 goes into effect on January 1, 2013.

**ADRA providing maternal care, healthcare training in China’s Tibetan Plateau**

*A Community Health Worker in Western China’s Tibetan Plateau meets with local villagers to conduct basic health screenings. [photos courtesy ADRA International]*
The Adventist Development and Relief Agency International is helping to improve prenatal and infant health across the Tibetan Plateau in Western China through its training of volunteer health workers.

ADRA introduced the Community Health Worker program in the Zaduo prefecture three years ago, and agency officials say they’ve noticed pregnant women are now more open to receiving health examinations.

Previously, an elder woman in the village would inform the health worker of the women who were pregnant, which was thought of as a private issue. Now that villagers have seen a decrease in birth complications and infant death, expectant mothers now seek out health workers for exams.

“We’ve seen a change in the mindset of women and their husbands in seeking out the Community Health Worker, asking them to be present at the birth and invite them post-birth,” said Christina Hudgins, ADRA’s director of constituency development.

Healthcare in the Tibetan Plateau is otherwise limited. Nearly all villagers are yak-herding nomads living in one-room homes throughout the winter in sub-zero temperatures. From May to August, most head into the mountains where their yaks can graze.

Community Health Workers, all of whom are female volunteers, continually receive training and visit expectant mothers in their homes each month.

Officials from ADRA China said they plan to triple the number of women and newborns receiving services over the next five years. ADRA has worked in the region since 2004.

For more information, visit ADRA.org.

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