In Czech Republic, Adventist Church to receive US$45 million in communism reparations
Over 30 years, government will repay denomination for theft of property

IRLA joins call for pastor’s release from Iranian prison
Move came a day after letter from U.S. Congress to State Department

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Inter-America connects with elders; South America promotes creation belief

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In Czech Republic, Adventist Church to receive US$45 million in communism reparations
Feb. 26, 2013
Silver Spring, Maryland, United States
Mark Kellner, Adventist Review

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Czech Republic will receive US$1.5 million annually for the next 30 years, a total of $45 million, under a pact signed by church leaders and Prime Minister Petr Necas on February 22, 2013, in Prague.

Seventh-day Adventist pastor Mikulás Pavlík, Czecho-Slovakian Union Conference president, was one of several officials of religious organizations that signed an individual agreement with Necas.

"Signing the Treaty Settlement means the legal process is complete, and we now have redressed the property damage committed by the Communist regime against the Seventh-day Adventist Church," Pavlík said.

The payments are meant to compensate the Church for property seized by the former Communist regime in 1948. That regime collapsed in the famous “Velvet Revolution” of 1989.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is among 16 religious organizations – including Jewish, Protestant and Roman Catholic communities – that are sharing in a $3.1 billion settlement from the government.

Prime Minister Necas, according to media reports, called the settlement “an act of justice” following a restitution plan approved by the Czech parliament in 2012.

"By signing these agreements, we complete steps to remedy the property damage the Communists caused," Necas said at the ceremony. "In the early nineties we as a state came to restitution as the most efficient and just means to achieve the transformation of our economy. The church had been excluded, but today we have completed this act of justice."

Necas, who also leads the nation’s Civic Democratic Party, said the deal “laid new, modern ground” for relations between state and church. Under Communist rule, for example, Roman Catholic priests’ salaries were paid by the state, which maintained strict control over that church’s operations. The Seventh-day Adventist Church refused state payments until 2008, when accepting such money for overall purposes, but not salaries, became a prerequisite for receiving property settlements.

Adventist officials in Prague said the church lost property worth $52.1 million when the Communist regime seized its holdings in 1952. The Czech republic, church officials said, is the last formerly Communist nation to reach a settlement of this kind with religious organizations.

Opposition Social Democrats tried to block the arrangement, seeking a court injunction hours before
the individual agreements were signed. Though not granting an injunction, the state constitutional court is expected to issue a ruling on the Social Democrats’ complaint, media reports indicate.

J. P. Lorenz, a pastor, organized the first Seventh-day Adventist congregation in Prague in 1902. A union conference was organized in the area in 1919, according to the Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia.

“In 1993, after the split of former Czechoslovakia into two independent states – the Czech Republic and Slovakia – the union was renamed the Czech-Slovak Union Conference and was granted complete freedom of operation,” the Encyclopedia noted.

—with reporting from Tomáš Kábřt of the Czech-Slovak Union in Prague

IRLA joins call for pastor’s release from Iranian prison

Feb. 26, 2013
Silver Spring, Maryland, United States
Ansel Oliver/ANN

The International Religious Liberty Association has joined more than a dozen religious groups and human rights advocates calling for the release of American pastor Saeed Abedini, who was imprisoned in Iran in September for his religious beliefs.

Abedini, who periodically traveled to his native Iran to establish and manage an orphanage, was arrested and convicted of endangering national security. The Christian Post last week reported he was helping Christians in underground churches. He is now being tortured and forced to recant his Christian faith, the Post reported.

“It appears Abedini is being held and persecuted solely because of his faith, and we join others in calling for his immediate release,” said IRLA Secretary-General John Graz, who also serves as director for the Public Affairs and Religious Liberty department of the Seventh-day Adventist world church.

“Arresting someone because he changes his religion should not be accepted by those whose believe in human dignity,” Graz said. "We hope the Iranian authorities will release Pastor Abedini as soon as possible."

In a February 13 letter to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, an informal group of NGOs and activists requested the secretary to “exhaust every possible option” to ensure Abedini’s release and call on
Iran to meet its commitment of upholding human rights.

“Iran is a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which clearly recognizes the fundamental human right to choose one’s own religion and freedom from arbitrary detention,” the letter stated.

Other signatory groups include the American Islamic Congress, Christian Solidary International, and World Relief.

The group’s letter came a day following a similar letter to Secretary Kerry from 12 members of the U.S. Senate and 37 members of the U.S. House of Representatives.

Reports indicate Abedini is subject to solitary confinement, beatings and aggressive interrogations at Evin Prison, known for holding many political prisoners. Abedini was sentenced to eight years in prison at a trial last month, which numerous human rights groups said was a sham.

On January 25, a State Department spokesperson called for Abedini’s release, condemning Iran’s violation of human rights and freedom of religion. White House spokesman Jay Carney on January 28 issued a similar appeal.

Abedini, a 32-year-old father of two, converted from Islam to Christianity in 2000. He since traveled to Iran to manage an orphanage in the northern city of Rasht.

The American Center for Law and Justice has established a petition for Abedini’s release and will meet with UN Human Rights officials next month.

Videoconferences gaining popularity in the Americas

The Adventist Church’s Inter-American Division hosted a virtual council this month for thousands of church elders throughout the region. Church administrators say conferencing technology can help eliminate barriers between leaders and members, unifying the church’s ministry and mission. [photo:}
In a move signaling growing commitment to conferencing technology, Seventh-day Adventist leaders at the church’s Inter-American Division headquarters last week connected with thousands of church elders during the region’s largest virtual council.

The two-hour live webcast was meant to support a continued partnership between church elders and pastors. There are currently more than 30,000 church elders serving alongside 3,000 pastors in Inter-America, which includes Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean and the five northernmost countries in South America.

With many pastors in the region overseeing multiple churches, church elders play a significant role in supporting congregations. Many pastors rely on elders to handle member visitation, small groups leadership, community outreach and other aspects of day-to-day spiritual care.

“Nothing really happens without the joint efforts of the pastor and the elder,” said Hector Sanchez, ministerial secretary for the church in Inter-America and webcast organizer. “[Elders] are like the nerve center of the church, and that is why we wanted to connect with them directly today through technology.”

The council was presented in English, Spanish and French, and is now available as an online resource. Division-wide, organizers said more than 7,000 online viewers connected and interacted during the meeting.

Adventist Church administrators in Inter-America and worldwide are increasingly looking for ways to use conferencing technology to curtail travel costs and broaden participation at meetings. Virtual meetings also allow church leaders to further unite the 17 million member global denomination in mission and ministry.

Church leaders in Inter-America held a similar virtual council in 2011, when they connected with the region’s 3,000 Adventist ministers.

Church leaders in South America, too, have in recent years embraced the benefits of using conferencing technology. Last year, weekend training seminars and a Web forum hosted by the Communication department of the church’s South American Division reached thousands of Communication secretaries at local Adventist congregations.

Adventist world church Communication director Williams Costa Jr. applauded the effort to level boundaries between church leaders and lay members. Since then, Costa has reiterated a call for more virtual Communication advisories.

“We need to take every opportunity to come together, whether through videoconference, satellite or Skype,” Costa said. “This is important for the unity of our church. When we regularly connect to share ideas and collaborate, we strengthen our ministry.”

Earlier this month, the church’s South American Division hosted a live video lecture and chat on creationism from its headquarters in Brasilia, Brazil. The event included experts in the fields of genetics, geology, and archaeology, who presented evidence of intelligent design, the biblical flood
and the validity of the Bible.

Event organizers said an estimated 15,500 people worldwide watched the video lecture, and hundreds of viewers responded to a feedback questionnaire afterward.

“[It was] very good to be able to send in questions,” said Margareth Marques, who participated from Sao Luis, Brazil.

In September, the church’s North American Division will host a virtual Festival of the Laity, which organizers said offers training and resources for member ministry and outreach.

“It’s going to increase the level of our participation and save participants money, said Al Johnson, Adult Ministries director for the church in North America. “It’s actually coming to them at no cost via the Internet.”

Back in Inter-America, Juan Antonio Pinedo, head elder of the Juarito Adventist Church in Chiapas, Mexico, said he was excited to see the church move toward a more collaborative style of ministry.

“I’m so overjoyed to see the interest that the church leadership has in promoting such unity among pastors, elders and church members in one single mission,” Pinedo said.

Pinedo works as a public school teacher, but for more than a decade, he has dedicated his free time to visiting members, leading a small group ministry, Bible studies, leading a group of lay people, serving on the church board and assisting the pastor.

Church leaders in Inter-America believe technology can help them better connect with Pinedo and thousands of other church elders who comprise the backbone of ministry in the region.

“This is the largest virtual council ever organized throughout our [region] and one that shows us that the church is prepared for greater things,” Sanchez, the ministerial secretary, said. “We are closer and closer to our local churches and continue to work on being more united.”

Plans are underway for more virtual councils in the future, Sanchez added.

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.

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