One year later, Adventist pastor still in Togo prison
Monteiro’s arbitrary detention must end, church leaders say

Community center highlights resurgence of Adventist university in Lebanon
Beirut outreach follows campus spiff-up after civil war; view of the sea

In the Netherlands, church growth hinges on community relevance
Service, church-planting yield results among native population

In Brazil’s capital, Adventist prayer walk brings thousands to congress building
Event also launches evangelism series for region

Historically black Adventist university in contention for $50,000 grant
Home Depot grant would fund campus improvements at Oakwood University

One year later, Adventist pastor still in Togo prison
A year after Seventh-day Adventist Pastor Antonio Monteiro was imprisoned in Togo on unsupported charges, church lawyers and human rights activists are redoubling efforts to secure his release.

Togolese government officials this week rejected the Adventist Church’s fifth request for Monteiro’s immediate release, according to a lawyer from the church’s Sahel Union Mission working closely on the case.

“Tomorrow is the sad anniversary of the unjust arrest of Pastor Monteiro. We are disappointed that our request has once again been refused, despite our ongoing efforts,” said Guy Roger, president of the Sahel Union Mission.

Roger, who met with Monteiro in prison on March 13, said the pastor is well and “by God’s grace, expecting a miracle.”

Monteiro was detained in March for conspiracy to commit murder after a Togolese man implicated him and two other Christians, one an Adventist, as conspirators in an alleged criminal ring that trafficked human blood. The witness had earlier confessed to the murder of some 20 young girls, claiming he was only carrying out orders.

However, the witness has a documented history of mental instability and his statement is widely considered unreliable, a representative from the National Commission of Human Rights in Togo said.

Evidence and testimony additionally suggest that the statement implicating Monteiro was obtained under duress.

Church leaders said the witness met Monteiro when the pastor previously ministered to him.

A native of Cape Verde, Monteiro had since 2009 served as the church’s Sabbath School and Personal Ministries director for the Sahel Union Mission, headquartered in Lomé. A police search of Monteiro’s home and local church headquarters shortly after his arrest failed to produce any evidence of his connection to the case.

Public pressure to solve the string of murders last year likely thwarted his release and exoneration, church officials said. Prior to Monteiro’s arrest, human rights groups and a local women’s coalition...
accused Togolese police of not doing enough to solve the crimes.

Adventist Church leaders said they are planning a major campaign for April focusing on collecting signatures for a petition and sending letters to officials in Togo demanding an end to Monteiro’s arbitrary detention and calling for the arrest of those guilty of the crimes.

Previous appeals coordinated by the church have included the mailing of hundreds of Christmas cards to Monteiro, a worldwide day of prayer and a press conference in Lomé. A second press conference is expected shortly, Roger said.

Adventist religious liberty leaders said they plan to actively involve young people in efforts to release Monteiro. At several recent petition-signing events in the U.S. state of California, college students stood in line to show their support for Monteiro.

John Graz, director of the Adventist world church’s department of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty, said public appeals will intensify in the coming months, a strategy to parallel behind-the-scenes diplomatic efforts to secure Monteiro’s release.

“We are asking all Adventists, all Christians and all people who believe in justice to join in this campaign,” Graz said.

Community center highlights resurgence of Adventist university in Lebanon

*Middle East University, home to 250 students, is located in Beirut, Lebanon. The Adventist institution was founded in 1939 and has a long and respected history in the country. [photos by Levon Kotanko]*
The Seventh-day Adventist Church’s Middle East University unveiled an off-campus community center last month, a move that underscores how school administrators are now offering services to their neighbors when for so long they struggled to maintain their own institution in the wake of Lebanon’s civil war.

The For Your Life Community Center, two kilometers away and down the hill from campus, offers classes in health, cooking, art, music and computers. Already, more than 600 people have participated in health classes sponsored by a visiting health group – the Weimar Center of Health and Education – from the United States.

“I’m absolutely thrilled about the new center,” said university President Leif Hongisto. “It wasn’t obvious that people would support it or that it would get such a warm acceptance. God is really blessing these endeavors to reconnect this community with its first settlers,” he said of the Adventist community who first inhabited the area in modern times in 1939.

The opening of the center – located on the ground-level, retail floor of a 10-story apartment building – drew dozens of supporters, including Antoine Kaysar Jbara, the mayor of Jdeidet-Bauchrieh-Sed Municipality. The opening also gained media coverage in newspapers, television and radio.

The center came about after Hongisto held a community 5k health walk last year. The outreach event corresponded with the country’s growing awareness of health issues, he said.

“People realize we were early adaptors,” he said of the Adventist Church’s long commitment to healthful living.

The university itself is experiencing a resurgence after years of rebuilding. The campus was in shambles following the Lebanese Civil War from 1975 to 1990.

Homer Trecartin, president of the Adventist Church’s Middle East North Africa Union, says the campus has undergone a dramatic change since the time he served as the union’s secretary-treasurer.

“You should have seen [the campus] when I visited 12 years ago. Most of the houses were still bombed out and had birds and other animals living in them. There was one student in the dorm. Only
a few teachers were Adventist.”

Rebuilding got serious about a decade ago. “It’s now an exciting and a beautiful place,” Trecartin said of the campus, which overlooks Beirut and the Mediterranean Sea.

The school is now home to 250 students from 23 countries.

The university has a long and well-respected history in Lebanon. It’s located atop Sabtieh hill; “Sabtieh” an Arabic word meaning “Sabbath keepers,” after the Adventists who first established the campus in 1939 in of the foothills of Mount Lebanon. It was then a rural area.

In 1946, the cornerstone of the men’s dorm was laid by Lebanon’s President Sheikh Bechara El Khoury.

During the civil war, enrollment dropped to 40 students and classes were sometimes held in a bomb shelter. Still, it was the only tertiary institution in the country to continuously operate during the war, according to the Adventist world church’s department of Education.

The institution achieved university status in 2001.

Another turning point for improved enrollment occurred in 2007 when the union headquarters moved back to Lebanon after a 20-year relocation in Cyprus.

The university offers programs in business – including an MBA – philosophy & theology, education, graphic design, computer science and English. Its also offers the only Arabic language program in the Adventist world church’s education system. Last year the school accepted its first students through the Adventist Colleges Abroad program.

Trecartin said the university compound is again full of Adventist families and children. All of the university’s fulltime teachers are now Adventist.

“It’s been a passion of many people to do what it took to make this an Adventist school again,” Trecartin said.

In the Netherlands, church growth hinges on community relevance
Don’t bother with complex biblical passages or intricate Seventh-day Adventist doctrines. For most Dutch-born Europeans, it’s a challenge to have them even consider the possibility that God might exist.

So says Wim Altink of the struggle of conducting evangelism in the Netherlands.

Altink, the president of the Adventist Church’s Netherlands Union, says the denomination here in recent years has embarked on a deliberate church-planting program, one that serves crucial community needs for years before a church member shares the gospel to newcomers.

“It’s not by preaching or holding meetings that people are going to be convinced of the Adventist message,” Altink said. “In reaching secular people, we’ve found that you need to be a very practical church.”

This method of outreach was shared with Seventh-day Adventist world church President Ted N. C. Wilson, who visited the country last week. In a Sabbath sermon, Wilson affirmed members for their commitment to God in a society that is largely indifferent toward Christianity.

“Although you may feel isolated and surrounded by and living in a postmodern and secular society, you are a part of the Seventh-day Adventist world family,” Wilson told some 3,000 congregants at the Ijsselhallen conference center in Zwolle last Saturday.

During his first trip to the European country as the church’s president, Wilson also urged church members to seek “revival and reformation.”

“Revival and reformation is most important for our lives, but revival comes only through prayer. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is God’s remnant church with a unique message for unique times.”

And in the Netherlands, evangelism requires a unique, tailored approach, one that can take years to make inroads into communities.

“We can’t just preach,” Altink said. “We need communities that practice the work of God long before we can preach it.”
That’s why leaders look to Adventist congregations such as the one in the city of Delft, which was born out of several Antillean Adventist social workers serving the community, including a focused ministry to teenage mothers. The group formed the Alivio foundation – which caught the attention and endorsement of civil authorities – and a church later grew out of the effort. Leaders consider the congregation a model for church planting by serving the community first.

There are 5,600 Adventist Church members in the Netherlands, with a growth rate of about 4 percent each year. There are 60 churches; seven of them are new within the past eight years. There are a dozen congregations in the pipeline.

The Adventist Church here is culturally diverse. Fifty percent of members are native Dutch European. About one-third of members are of Dutch Caribbean descent, up to 10 percent are Indonesian, and much of the rest is African, especially Ghanaian.

“I’m very grateful to God for the great variety of cultures in the church,” Altink said. “There is a good relationship between them.”

Church growth in the Netherlands comes largely from immigrant populations. Among the native Dutch, it can take 10 years to start a small church of 15 to 20 people. A new convert through baptism comes no sooner than six years, church leaders say.

Conversely, a new Adventist church among immigrant populations can sprout within three years with a flock of nearly 100 in weekly attendance.

Secularism among native Dutch is different and more severe than secularism in Central Europe or the United States, said Rudy Dingjan, church-planting coordinator for the union.

“You have to start with the very basics of Christianity in this country,” Dingjan said. “For example, a group of school kids in a museum will be shown a display of three crosses and told that Jesus is on the one in the center. They didn’t even know that or know what the reference was. This is because their grandparents stopped going to church, their parents never went, and they are being raised with no knowledge of these kinds of things.”

Altink said the union recently appointed a pastor to serve as a part-time director of Stewardship Ministries to improve giving. But a 2010 survey of church members was “an eye opener,” he said. About 15 percent of survey respondents said they regularly returned tithe because of biblical instruction, while more than 70 percent indicated their giving was strongly correlated with their involvement in their local church.

“So we need to involve young people,” Altink said. “Stewardship is fruit of a healthy church.”

In Brazil’s capital, Adventist prayer walk brings thousands to congress building
Moving – literally – to bring hope to the big cities of the South American Division, a group of 7,000 Seventh-day Adventists and friends gathered in the Brazilian capital for a March 10 prayer walk. Gathering in front of the Cathedral of Brasília, the group walked approximately 600 meters to reach the National Congress building.

Seventh-day Adventists from the 220 churches in and around the Federal District traveled to the area known as Plano Piloto in approximately 30 buses to intercede for the city.

The event is part of the Adventist Church’s initiative to bring hope to the big cities, and completed a period of 10 days of prayer and 10 hours of fasting that began on February 28 in South America. Understanding the commitment to pray for the people who live in the city, the group met for special times of prayer and praise.

For 40 minutes, the group participated in prayers addressed and also prayed especially for the families of the community. The meeting also inaugurated a series of evangelistic programs for the region.

Pastor Erton Köhler, president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church for eight countries in South America, who was present at the Brasilia event, said efforts such as these can produce positive effects for both the church and the capital’s residents.

"I believe this prayer walk had an impact on our Adventist Church members, who joined and discovered it's a great family who gathered for a noble cause. I think the walk also impacted the community of Brasilia," the church leader said.

Pastor Charles Brittis said this was one of the first initiatives in the direction to pray and work for the evangelization of the national capital. The pastor also said Sunday's effort demonstrates Adventists’ concern not only for the spiritual health of governments, but also of its citizens.

For young Raisa Santos, praying near national monuments reinforces the mission and social responsibility that has the Adventist Church to the country. "Without doubt, this event has had an influence on my spiritual life and the lives of everyone involved. From now on, I feel more responsible for bringing hope to people who live in this city," she said.

At the end of the event, the entire group went to the park of the National Congress for the final prayer
a rally of Pathfinders. Messias de Souza, Brasilia’s regional administrator, who accompanied the prayer walkers, recognized the social importance the event signified.

"I hope the Adventist Church’s work continues to bring hope to Brasília and Brazil, creating a work that raises the spiritual, moral and civility for our people," he said.

Historically black Adventist university in contention for $50,000 grant

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The Seventh-day Adventist Church’s only historically black university is in the running for a US$50,000 grant from an online contest sponsored by a chain of home improvement stores in the United States.

Huntsville, Alabama-based Oakwood University is one of the smallest and the only Adventist school participating in Home Depot’s “Retool Your School” contest for Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

Home Depot Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the company, will award 12 Tier II $10,000 grants, one $50,000 Tier I Grant and a $25,000 Campus Pride Grant based on social media activity.

Oakwood is currently in first place out of 75 schools with 163,463 votes, followed closely by the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, which has 161,289 votes.

A press release from the university said votes and social media activity for UMES tends to spike Friday night and Saturday, but that Oakwood supporters consistently recapture the top spot after sunset on Saturdays. The Adventist-run university is encouraging voters to observe the seventh-day Sabbath when showing support.

“We’re planning to win this contest—not solely for the money and campus improvements, but even more importantly for the witnessing opportunity of Sabbath observance it gives us, not only with The Home Depot, but with all onlookers,” said Kisha Norris, executive director for Advancement & Development at Oakwood.

Oakwood University is directly affiliated with the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s world headquarters and has a current enrollment of 1,939 students.
University officials said the Tier I Grant would fund an outdoor pavilion equipped with outdoor kitchen appliances, grills and fireplaces. If the school snags a Tier II Grant instead, plans are in place to insulate the sprinkler system for the softball and football fields and re-seed those fields.

Supporters can vote online once per day until April 15, but can use the hashtag #OakwoodRYS2013 on Twitter and Instagram without limit. Contest winners will be announced in early May, according to the Hope Depot website.

Home Depot Foundation has contributed more than $200 million to charities such as Habitat for Humanity and causes that include medical research, emergency preparedness and playground construction.

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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.