Annual report highlights worsening freedom of belief worldwide

U.S. commission tracks key offenders; some optimism over new ‘watch list’ countries

First European Health Conference sees renewed interest in health outreach

‘Health clubs’ build bridges in secular Eastern Europe

Danish Union suspends all ministerial ordination until 2015

Pending expected decision on theology of ordination at next General Conference session

Annual report highlights worsening freedom of belief worldwide

May 13, 2013
Silver Spring, Maryland, United States
Elizabeth Lechleitner/ANN

This year’s report by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has Seventh-day Adventist human rights experts concerned over growing state-sponsored or condoned intolerance toward minority faith groups worldwide.
“We are again reminded that for religious minorities, of which Seventh-day Adventists are in many regions, things can actually be very difficult and, in many places, are getting worse,” said Dwayne Leslie, director of Legislative Affairs for the Seventh-day Adventist world church.

The report from the independent commission categorizes offenders as tier 1, tier 2 or “watch list” countries. “Tier 1” nations are designated as “countries of particular concern” (CPCs), where religious liberty violations are defined as “systemic, ongoing and egregious,” and include torture, prolonged detention without charges, disappearances and “other flagrant denial[s] of life, liberty or the security of persons.” Countries re-designated as CPCs this year are Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Uzbekistan.

Newly categorized this year as “tier 1” nations are Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Vietnam. While not yet officially CPCs, these countries do “meet the threshold” for “tier 1” designation, the report states.

Countries designated as “tier 2” by the report are so listed for displaying “negative trends that could develop into severe violations of religious freedom.” These countries are Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Cuba, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Laos and Russia.

A small third group of nations comprise a watch list, and the commission is “monitoring” them for violations. Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belarus, Ethiopia, Turkey, Venezuela and Western Europe are on this list.

Western Europe has drawn criticism in recent years for curbing religious expression among minority faiths. Laws in France and Belgium now ban the burqa and other full-face veils. Switzerland has barred the construction of new minarets, or prayer towers atop Muslim mosques. And so-called defamation of religion laws—which religious freedom experts say could restrict religious speech worldwide—continue to emerge in the region.

In Iran, Leslie said, the government continues its oppression, arrest and, in some cases, torture of Christians, most recently American pastor Saeed Abedini, who was imprisoned in Iran in September ostensibly for his religious beliefs.

Pakistan, too, has made headlines in recent months for violence against Christians. In March, a mob torched the homes and businesses of a Christian community in response to alleged insults against Muhammad.

Nigeria is another increasingly troubling area, Leslie said. There, the extremist group Boko Haram has unleashed sectarian violence on Christian communities in recent years, regularly bombing churches and leaving hundreds of worshippers dead. Since January, Adventists in the country have reported
declining church attendance and some church closures amid the country’s worsening religious conflict.

Countries such as Iran, Pakistan and Nigeria, Leslie said, are deeply entrenched in intolerance, and the report is unlikely to change their behavior. But for newly watch-listed countries, “dialogue can hopefully lead to greater freedom of belief,” he said.

After reviewing religious freedom violations, USCIRF makes policy recommendations to the U.S. president, secretary of state and Congress. These recommendations can include arms embargos, restrictions on exports and, Leslie added, further talks with some offending nations.

Beyond that, Leslie said, the report “constantly keeps religious liberty in the public eye, reminding people why it’s important for us to continue to fight for freedom for all people of faith.”

First European Health Conference sees renewed interest in health outreach

True healing involves emotional and spiritual restoration, as well as physical recovery, said Dr. Viriato Ferreira, Health Ministries director for the church’s Inter-European Division, during his keynote address at the European Health Conference last month. The conference brought together Health Ministries leaders from the Adventist Church’s three divisions in Europe. [photo courtesy EUD]

May 13, 2013
Prague, Czech Republic
Stephen Chavez/ANN staff

Seventh-day Adventist medical experts and health advocates want to better understand and share the ministry of healing they say the church is called to embrace. Six hundred of them met in Prague last month for the first European Health Conference.

Lectures and workshops challenged participants to consider healing in the context of the biblical worldview and the Adventist philosophy of health. Organizers say the conference was meant to unite Adventist health leaders across Europe in promoting a message of hope and healing to the region’s increasingly secular population.

In his keynote address, Dr. Viriato Ferreira, Health Ministries director for the church’s Inter-European Division, explored the emotional and spiritual suffering that often accompanies physical illness. He noted that while some people experience relief from their physical symptoms—seemingly in answer to prayer—such intercession is often the exception rather than the rule, leaving many others to wonder whether a lack of faith or other spiritual deficiency is preventing God from acting on their behalf.
“We need healing from life—not just physically, but also spiritually and emotionally,” Ferreira told delegates from some 40 countries across Europe. He urged them to accept complicated realities and recognize that “suffering may be part of healing.”

A joint effort by the Health Ministries departments of the church’s Inter-European, Trans-European and Euro-Asian divisions, the European Health Conference also urged local leadership to engage in health evangelism. Already, leaders across the region are finding that health outreach resonates with their communities.

Bohomil Kern, Health Ministries director for the church’s Czecho-Slovakian Union, described a system of “health clubs” that for years has served to break down barriers and build relationships in communities across the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Meeting in community centers, schools, civic building and other neutral venues, the clubs offer support for local residents who want to stop smoking, learn to cook more healthfully, reduce health risks associated with obesity, treat addictions or receive counseling for mental health issues.

The ministry model has been so successful that it has been exported to many countries in Eastern Europe, Kern said. In the Czecho-Slovakian Union alone, more than 260 instructors in nearly 90 health clubs are promoting the Adventist lifestyle.

Through a partnership with Loma Linda University, based in the U.S. state of California, health club instructors twice a year receive intensive training in nutrition, physical therapy, addictions, counseling and other specialties.

Kern said the health clubs are followed up by small weeklong “camp meetings,” where participants enjoy outdoor activities and attend lectures on health and wellness, as well as evening spiritual programs. Many new Adventist believers in the region made first contact with the church through its health outreach, Kern said.

Also at the conference, delegates tackled two issues that can often divide Health Ministries leaders—where the ministry should be practiced, and what characteristics practitioners should demonstrate.

Advocates of small, lifestyle centers that focus on natural remedies and emphasize the importance of the spiritual realm in physical healing said they find it hard to imagine that large, institutional healthcare settings could preserve that environment. Others said that in some cases, Adventists who work in European healthcare centers are prohibited from sharing their faith on company time.

Europe is home to just two Adventist-owned and operated healthcare centers—La Lignière in Switzerland and Waldfriede Hospital in Germany.

Another topic that sparked discussion was whether Adventist health advocates should practice veganism and vegetarianism, or if the consumption of clean meat is permissible.

The issue becomes disruptive when, according to some delegates, the matter of diet becomes a test of faith. One Health Ministries director said he was concerned over how some vegetarians in his congregation treat newer members who eat meat, reminding everyone that theoretical discussions become real-life challenges when delegates travel home.
The Adventist Church has emphasized healthy living since it was established in the 1860s. The health ministry of the church includes a global network of hospitals, clinics and medical universities.

Danish Union suspends all ministerial ordination until 2015

May 14, 2013
Silver Spring, Maryland, United States
ANN staff

Seventh-day Adventist church officials in Denmark voted this week to halt the ordination of all new ministers until the General Conference Session in July 2015.

Going forward, the church’s Danish Union “will not distinguish between genders when appointing pastors, and wishes to see equality between genders in all areas of responsibility,” a statement voted at the union’s May 12 session said.

The statement turns to the Bible to build a theological foundation for the move, beginning with mention that God created mankind—both men and women—“in His image and therefore equal.” The statement also challenges the roots of the “special priesthood reserved for men” by explaining that Christ’s sacrifice negates any need for a human priest, or intercessor.

“All of Christ’s followers—both men and women—were lifted up to be a ‘chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people, to declare His praises,’” the statement said, referring to a passage in the New Testament book of 1 Peter.

Suspension of ordination is effective until 2015, when General Conference Session delegates could take action on the findings of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee. Established last year, the committee is tasked with delivering a report to the 2014 Annual Council, a business meeting of the church’s top governing body.

The committee is a direct response to a request during the 2010 General Conference Session for a church-conducted study of the Biblical theology behind ordination.

It first met shortly after independent actions taken by two of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s union conferences—Columbia and Pacific—both of which voted to ordain pastoral candidates without respect to gender. Top church leadership has since reiterated its request that unions await the conclusions of the committee.
Delegates to the 2014 Annual Council are widely expected to recommend any action on its findings to the 2015 General Conference Session in San Antonio, Texas.

There are slightly more than 2,500 Adventists in Denmark.

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