Joint statement from Russian, Ukrainian Adventist leaders urges peacekeeping, prayer

[photo: Darko Vojinovic/copyright Associated Press]
A statement released by top Seventh-day Adventist Church leaders in Russia, Ukraine and other Eastern European countries invites church members and “all people of good will” to participate in the “ministry of reconciliation” as political turmoil in Ukraine deepens.

Pro-Russian separatists in Crimea voted last week to secede from Ukraine and join Russia, just days after thousands of Russian troops began patrolling the disputed Black Sea peninsula. A region-wide referendum for secession is set for March 16. A majority of Crimea’s 2.3 million people identify as ethnic Russians.

Unrest in the region began in November when former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych backed away from a planned trade deal with the European Union in favor of a loan from Russia. The decision spurred months of street protests in Kiev and violent clashes between demonstrators and police. Ukraine’s democratically elected parliament ousted Yanukovych last month.

In February, Viktor Alekseenko, president of the Adventist Church in Ukraine, asked Adventists to pray for their country and avoid provoking hostility—on the streets and on social media, where he urged church members not to leave inflammatory comments.

Alekseenko is among church leaders to sign this latest statement, calling on Adventists and community members to help “restore human dignity, equality and unity through the grace of God.”

Excerpts from the statement:

*We call on all members of the Seventh-day Church to refrain from participating in political statements and actions that could escalate tensions. We invite all people of good will to join us in peacekeeping, incessant prayer for peaceful resolution of all conflicts, as well as to create an atmosphere of fraternity and cooperation, contributing to the understanding of different cultures and ideological systems to build good relations between people of all races, nationalities, religions and political beliefs.*

*This is the official position of the church. Any other statement you may encounter outside the official church media should be seen as the views of private individuals.*

The statement was signed by leadership from the Adventist Church’s Euro-Asia Division, Belarus Union of Churches, Caucasus Union Mission, East Russian Union Mission, Far Eastern Union of Churches, Moldova Union of Churches, Southern Union Mission, Trans-Caucasus Union Mission, Ukrainian Union Conference and the West Russian Union Conference.

Meanwhile, the Adventist Church’s official television network in Ukraine is broadcasting a live daily prayer marathon. “God Save Ukraine” airs on Hope Channel Ukraine during prime time and highlights stories from across the country that demonstrate unity and forgiveness.

Hope Channel Ukraine is the only Christian television network in the country directly responding to the political crisis, Adventist media officials said.

Religious freedom festival in Haiti highlights peaceful coexistence
A festival of religious freedom in Haiti last month cements the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a leading proponent of free expression of belief in the country.

Organized by the church’s Haitian Union Mission and sponsored by the International Religious Liberty Association, the event drew more than 3,000 supporters to Port-au-Prince to celebrate freedom of belief and help raise the profile of religious liberty in the Caribbean.

The city of Port-au-Prince is still recovering from a devastating earthquake that in 2010 dealt $7.8 billion in damage to a nation already considered the poorest in the Western Hemisphere. Two hurricanes in 2012 complicated rebuilding efforts.

“The people of Haiti have shown great courage and an extraordinary capacity for survival. Religious freedom is a right that Haitians treasure, and are determined to keep,” said John Graz, IRLA secretary-general.

The festival was part of the first Congress of Religious Freedom in Haiti. Hundreds of lawyers, human rights activists, government leaders and faith representatives joined in two days of lectures and workshops that highlighted the largely peaceful coexistence of religious groups in Haiti and resulted in several recommendations.

The group pledged to organize the Haitian chapter of the International Religious Liberty Association and negotiate with the Haitian government to establish a National Day of Religious Freedom in the country.

Other recommendations:

The Congress calls on government to preserve separation of church and state.
The Congress condemns every act of intolerance, discrimination and violence directed in the past against individuals or groups because of their religion or belief.
The Congress expresses solidarity with all groups and individuals who are victims of violations of religious freedom worldwide.
Marie Carmelle Rose Ann Auguste, Minister of Human Rights for the Haitian government, called religious liberty an “essential” human right during her remarks.

“It is through the free exercise of conscience that the individual soul and the soul of the nation is strengthened,” she said.

François Clavairoly, president of the French Protestant Federation, and a group of faith leaders from Paris brought an “international dimension” to the event, Graz said. Haiti is the only predominantly French-speaking independent nation in the Americas.

Other Protestant denominations, the Catholic Church, Salvation Army and syncretic religions were also represented. Syncretic religions such as Voodoo are widely practiced in Haiti.

Another festival of religious freedom is planned for Port-au-Prince in 2015.
In North America, a return to Adventist Church’s traditional medical missionary outreach

Health professionals and outreach leaders from the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America say a new focus on comprehensive health ministry will rebrand the church’s traditional medical missionary work, bringing healing and wholeness to church and community members.

“God called us all to work together and we will only truly touch the lives of people as Jesus did once we work collaboratively for Him with one mission and one vision,” said Katia Reinert, director of Health Ministries for the church’s North American Division.

The call for blended ministry came last month at the North American Division Health Ministries Summit in Orlando, Florida, United States.

Summit organizers, in partnership with the church’s Loma Linda University, held a Health Professionals Conference at the event to define the role of health professionals in comprehensive health ministry, both in their clinical practices and their local churches.

“We need more involvement of our health professionals and our health institutions in health ministry,” Reinert said.

This year’s summit also outlined sample ministry roles for health professionals, pastors, educators, young people and Adventist Community Service volunteers. Comprehensive health ministry follows Christ’s method of meeting physical needs before spiritual ones.

“Collaboration is key,” Reinert said. “Having pastors, children’s ministries leaders, women’s ministries leaders, community services leaders and many others represented and involved in getting trained to meet people’s needs and demonstrate God’s love and compassion is essential.”

In recent months, top Adventist Church officials have called for a renewed emphasis on the comprehensive side of health ministry—the blending of physical and spiritual components that depends on close collaboration between health and ministerial leaders.

The new focus is meant to reboot the Adventist Church’s traditional approach to health outreach. The early church’s medical missionaries brought physical and spiritual healing to communities worldwide. A mission boat called “The Morning Star” launched medical missionary work along the Mississippi River. Later, another boat called the “Luzeiro” brought health outreach and a message of hope to communities along the banks of the Amazon River in South America.

Back at the health summit, Reinert and other Health Ministries leaders hope the renewed focus on comprehensive health ministry will continue that legacy. They envision every Adventist church serving as a center of hope and healing in the community.
“As churches begin building connections and partnerships in the community, they can place the church in a better space to minister and truly show that they want their communities to be whole,” Reinert said.

New Ellen White Encyclopedia highlights lifetime of ministry

A recently released encyclopedia on the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s co-founder Ellen G. White gives an overview of her stance on numerous topics and offers an opportunity to dispel misconceptions on the life and literary influence of the denomination’s most known figure, publishers said.

“The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia,” published by Review and Herald Publishing Association, includes articles on White, biographies and her writings on an array of topics—from salvation, psychology and politics to legalism, diet and makeup.

"The Ellen White Encyclopedia is undoubtedly the most important reference work produced by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in a half century," said Adventist Church historian George Knight.

The encyclopedia consists of 1,300 articles with descriptions of places White lived and the people in her life, rarely seen photographs and her position on hundreds of subjects she wrote about during her ministry.

Editors Denis Fortin, former dean of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States, and Jerry Moon, chair of the Church History Department of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, worked with 180 contributing authors over the course of 14 years to compile the encyclopedia. It was arranged so “both new and long-time readers [of White’s writings] will find reliable information, often presented from fresh new perspectives,” Fortin and Moon said.

The vision to create this encyclopedia began in the late 1990s with Knight, an Adventist historian and emeritus professor at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. In 2000, however, with an approaching retirement, Knight delegated the project to Fortin and Moon.

White, who died in 1915 at age 87, is credited with shaping the mission and vision of the Adventist Church, especially through her writings. During her ministry she wrote approximately 100,000 pages, and more than 100 books have been published from her writings. She is also the most translated American author, according to The Ellen G. White Estate. Her most translated book, “Steps to Christ,” a how-to guide on being a Christian, has been translated into more than 165 languages.

Controversy around White’s writings often stems from her work that has been taken out of context or wrongfully used to support controversial subjects. The encyclopedia was envisioned to be the standard reference work for anyone who has questions about White’s positions, Knight said.
“Ellen White has been the most influential person in Adventist history, and yet there is a lot of misinformation about what she wrote and why she wrote it,” Knight said. “Up until this time there has been no reference work that can answer most of our questions.”

Jim Nix, director of The Ellen G. White Estate, said he was pleased when he received early manuscripts of the encyclopedia.

“I am excited about the wealth of information regarding Ellen White and her ministry that is contained in this book,” Nix said. “I am impressed with the depth and scope of what is contained in it.”

Now, anyone who wants to learn more about White and her contribution to the Adventist Church will have the opportunity to expand their knowledge on White’s life and writings in the single resource.

“I cannot imagine anyone who is interested in Ellen White and her writings that will not want a copy of this book,” said Nix. “It’s that valuable.”