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May 15, 2014 | Washington, D.C. | Ansel Oliver/ANN

The North American Religious Liberty Association (NARLA) presented its Congressional Award this week to a United States senator known for his advocacy of religious freedom, and who is urging fellow lawmakers to create a unique position to help protect religious minorities in Asia.

Roy Blunt, who represents the state of Missouri, is the lead sponsor of bill S. 653, which would establish a special envoy to promote religious freedom for minorities in the Middle East and Southern Asia.
NARLA has lobbied legislators on behalf of the bill during the past year. The U.S. House of Representatives passed a similar resolution in September.

The details of the bill and what’s preventing its passage in the Senate were outlined last month in an op-ed by Dwayne Leslie, the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s director of legislative affairs.

Leslie presented the Congressional Award to Blunt on Tuesday, along with Melissa Reid, NARLA’s executive director, and Shawn D’Abreu, a NARLA advocate from Blunt’s home state of Missouri.

“The world has gotten to be a dangerous place for standing up for your religious beliefs. … Thank you for what you do,” Blunt told the group during a visit in his Capitol Hill office.

The Congressional Award is typically presented during the annual Religious Liberty Dinner. A scheduling conflict prevented Blunt from being able to attend. Both NARLA and the Seventh-day Adventist Church are sponsors of the annual event.

“It was a privilege to honor Senator Blunt with our Congressional Award,” said Melissa Reid, NARLA’s executive director. “He has been a true ally in our quest to better protect the vulnerable religious freedom of all people everywhere.”

Blunt, who previously served as president of a Baptist university and as a member of the House of Representatives for 14 years, pledged to continue urging other areas of the federal government to promote freedom of conscience.

Both Blunt and Leslie stressed the need for the U.S. State Department to fill its position of ambassador of religious freedom, a role that has been vacant since October.

“I don’t think you can have too many voices on this issue,” Leslie said.

In Inter-America, Adventist leaders vow to promote more religious freedom

Advocacy for students and teachers is ongoing in Colombia, Honduras, Mexico

May 20, 2014 | Miami, Florida, United States | Libna Stevens/IAD/ANN

Seventh-day Adventist Church leaders throughout the Inter-American Division (IAD) territory want the Church to be known as one that strives, promotes, and defends religious freedom at all times.

This was the message that resonated during a two-day religious liberty forum that brought dozens of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty (PARL) directors and their legal advisers from across the division to its headquarters in Miami, Florida last week.
In recent years, the Adventist Church has made progress in regions that were difficult to establish ministry and outreach, but many cases involving students’ conflict with Sabbath observance still highlight the need for religious freedom advocacy.

“The church is in great need of lawyers—humble [Adventist] men and women who work with all honesty to help the church keep the law in all aspects,” said Israel Leito, president of the church in Inter-America, as he addressed the forum on opening day.

“We need lawyers to aid us in preaching the truth while speaking respectfully when dealing with social issues, assist in defending religious rights of our Church members and deal with legal issues that emerge in our countries,” Leito said.

The meeting challenged PARL leaders to enlist trained leaders and members to represent the Church as religious freedom advocates in each administrative unit, including conferences, local fields and congregations.

While the Adventist Church in Inter-America has enjoyed religious freedom for years, there are still common cases of employment requirements that cross with religious beliefs, said Roberto Herrera, PARL director for the church in Inter-America. The most frequent, he said, are issues of state or national examinations scheduled on Saturday, which Adventists observe as the biblical Sabbath.

Two weeks ago in Colombia, the Church won a case for a university student who did not take her final examination that was scheduled on Sabbath.

In Mexico, thousands of primary and secondary school teachers are required to take a national test scheduled on Saturdays in order to remain employed.

“We have been working with the office of the ministry of education to make provision for the testing to be done by our church members working in public school system on any other day during the week,” said Cesar Hernandez, legal affairs representative for the Adventist Church in Mexico.

Similarly in Honduras, teachers and students have been required to attend a civic event on Saturday, said Jorge Morazan, PARL director in Honduras.

“We have been working hard with the ministry of education to ensure that the religious freedom of our teachers and students are not affected because of this civic Saturday,” Morazan said. “It’s an [ongoing] situation we have to monitor to ensure religious rights are respected.”

John Graz, PARL director for the Adventist world church, emphasized the need for “quiet” diplomacy and explained the steps a leader or representative of the church must take to build bridges and relationships to accomplish the mission of the church.

“It is very important to have someone working closely with the pastor who will really become a Church ambassador,” Graz said. “I can assure you that this can change the vision in one country and open doors for the church.”

Dwayne Leslie, the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s director of legislative affairs, called on leaders to become well acquainted with local elected officials, engage members in religious liberty advocacy and organize special events to promote religious freedom.
“We do wonderful things as a Church, so we must never miss an opportunity to meet a country leader and promote the work of the Church,” Leslie said.

Plans are underway for a territory-wide religious liberty congress in Colombia next March.