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June 24, 2014 | Geneva, Switzerland | Andreas Mazza/Adventist Review staff

The Adventist-affiliated group AIDLR got a welcomed boost in visibility this month by organizing its first event at the United Nations office in Geneva, organizers said.
AIDLR, or International Association for the Defense of Religious Liberty, co-sponsored a panel discussion on the sidelines of the 26th session of the UN Human Rights Council on June 10.

"The big miracle is that we could organize our event at the UN level [and] in the most important place in the world regarding human rights: the 26th session of the Human Rights Council," said Liviu Olteanu, secretary-general of AIDLR. "We praise the Lord for it and for the participation of so many UN delegations."

"One of the biggest results is the international visibility of AIDLR and a growing UN interest for religious liberty and religious minorities," Olteanu said.

Panelists at the June 10 event, titled "Worldwide Human Rights, Religious Liberty and Religious Minorities," cautioned that religious freedoms risked being curbed if efforts weren't made to better coordinate the work of the UN, European Union and other entities that have various approaches to human rights.

Participating UN delegations included Algeria, Austria, Denmark, Hungary, Malta, Russia, Serbia and the Vatican. People of various faiths also were represented: Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox believers and Muslims.

The other co-sponsors of the event were the permanent delegations to the UN of Canada, Norway, Spain, Uruguay and the Council of Europe.

John Graz, secretary-general of the Adventist-founded International Religious Liberty Association, which assisted with the event, expressed satisfaction with the results.

"It was the first meeting we have ever organized at the UN Geneva," he said. "It was excellent!"

At the panel, AIDLR presented a new book, "Worldwide Human Rights and Religious Liberty: A New Equilibrium or New Challenges," a collection of writings from four UN secretaries-general and religious leaders.

"I am very honored to be here and to support the presentation of this great book that talks about dignity and love," former Romanian Prime Minister Petre Roman said.

AIDLR is a UN-recognized nongovernmental organization founded in 1946 by the French Adventist physician Jean Nussbaum. The first two presidents of the association’s Honorary Committee were former U.S. first lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Nobel Peace Prize holder Dr. Albert Schweitzer. The current president of the Honorary Committee is Mary Robinson, former president of the Republic of Ireland.

A division territory’s self-evaluation comes amid other changes
Why the Adventist Church’s oldest division territory is actually one of the newest

June 19, 2014 | Silver Spring, Maryland, United States | Ansel Oliver/ANN

Officials of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s North American Division (NAD) held a large meeting last month to examine ways of doing mission more effectively in their territory, the biggest self-evaluation of the Church region in more than 80 years.

The meeting included the top three officers from each of the division’s 59 conferences and nine unions, as well as representatives from hospitals, colleges and universities. More than 230 people attended the meeting in Chantilly, Virginia.

From small-group discussions, three themes emerged to become the division’s top goals: building stronger branding, streamlining operations and exploring alternative methods for funding mission.

The meeting comes at a time of changes within the division territory, as NAD officials and officers of the General Conference world headquarters are overhauling operations of two publishing houses in the United States.

But the changes serve to underscore how last month’s self-assessment came earlier in the division’s history than most people might realize. NAD officials are exploring the further development of mission methods largely because of one little-known fact: NAD is actually one of the newest of the Adventist Church’s 13 world divisions.

What’s not widely known these days is that although the global Protestant denomination was established in North America in 1863, NAD itself is less than 30 years old. Prior to 1985, NAD and the General Conference were effectively one in the same. Now, nearly three decades later, the separation of the two entities is still unfolding.

“It’s kind of a paradox in a way. [NAD] was in existence for so many decades before, but it didn’t have any identity,” says Juan Prestol, undertreasurer of the General Conference and who served as NAD treasurer from 1998 to 2007.

In a sense, NAD is still in early stages of development. For decades it had a “unique relationship” with the General Conference, according to meeting minutes from the 1980s. It has not yet evolved with its own operation of a magazine, TV channel and various other institutions. Many of the well-known organizations in its territory are owned and operated by the General Conference. These include the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary and Andrews University in the state of Michigan, Adventist Review magazine, Hope Channel, Loma Linda University in California and Oakwood University in Alabama. This week, NAD was given ownership of Pacific Press Publishing Association in Idaho. The Adventist colleges and universities in North America have been operated by the union administrative units.

Strong physical locale and administrative links also remain between NAD and the General Conference. The NAD office is located in the General Conference building in the city of Silver Spring in the U.S. state of Maryland, a suburb of Washington, D.C. Additionally, the NAD
secretary and treasurer are also General Conference associate secretary and associate treasurer, in accordance with the General Conference Bylaws.

“In ways you don’t even think about there is an interconnectedness of the General Conference and North America being one,” says Kermit Netteburg, who served as NAD assistant to the president for Communication from 1996 to 2004. “Maybe that’s good, maybe that’s bad, maybe that’s totally indifferent, but North America is different than any other world division.”

The process of separating the two entities is still playing out. Several church leaders say it’s a natural progression as the rest of the worldwide denomination develops. Stronger Church growth often occurs when local leaders are empowered to implement goals best suited for their territory, an Adventist researcher said.

The early church

The Adventist Church sent its first official missionary to Europe in 1874, and Church leaders were strongly urging a commitment to mission by the 1890s. As part of that commitment, the first divisions were created in 1909: the North American, European, and Asiatic divisions. But initially, these were geographic distinctions rather than organizational or administrative units, according to David Trim, director of the denomination’s Office of Archives, Statistics and Research.

In 1913, the “North American Division Conference” was formed, but was later disbanded in 1918. It wasn’t until 1950 that General Conference officers formed the “North American Division Committee on Administration.”

Meanwhile, as Church structure developed overseas with the creation of divisions, the newly formed administrative units functioned more as branches of the home territory. Even until the early 1980s, the General Conference held an annual committee meeting titled, “Home and Overseas Officers.”

“There was a sense that North America was the ‘homeland,’ and divisions overseas were ‘foreign attachments,’” says Monte Sahlin, a researcher and retired church leader who worked at NAD from 1987 to 1998.

Even until the early 1980s, the Church in North America was administered by General Conference personnel. Its leader Charles E. Bradford, elected in 1979, had the title, “General Conference Vice President for North America.”

A new division

The major change came at the 1985 General Conference Session, when delegates voted to remove from the General Conference Bylaws all special language referring to North America, Sahlin said. At the end of Session, there was only language about “divisions.” There were 11 at the time.

When Sahlin arrived at the General Conference building at its location in Takoma Park in 1987, office space for the new division was still being hashed out.

“We literally had some people with desks in the hallway at that point because we were still identifying space that was available,” Sahlin recalls.
In 1989, the General Conference moved into its new building, and NAD came with it. In 1990, NAD implemented its own separate accounting structure. In 1991, the Adventist Review reported that NAD had its first Year-End Meeting as a wholly separate entity, just like the 10 other divisions at the time.

In 1996, the General Conference gave the NAD ownership and operating control of the Adventist Media Center in Southern California. In developing a comprehensive media plan, NAD closed the center last year and urged the television and radio ministries to move to areas of the U.S. that have lower costs of living.

Today, NAD is comprised of the United States, Canada, Bermuda, the French possession of Saint Pierre and Miquelon, the U.S. territories of Guam and Wake Island, Johnson Island, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Midway Islands, Northern Mariana Islands and Palau.

Funding mission

Though the division has developed more autonomy over its own programs, policies and administration, NAD officials say they are committed to mission in their own region and to the funding of other divisions. NAD provides nearly half of the denomination’s overseas missionaries. It also provides nearly half of the General Conference World Budget, a significant portion of which is appropriated to the 12 other divisions. Appropriations to each division range from $1.3 million to $4.9 million.

While NAD currently provides nearly half of the World Budget, that percentage is down from 90 percent in 1990, said Gary Patterson, who served as assistant to the NAD president from 1987 to 1994.

Part of the reason for the declining percentage of NAD’s contribution to the overall World Budget is that Church membership has increased in other countries over the years. Also, incomes have increased among members in many emerging market countries, which in decades past had a scant middle class—including India, Brazil and South Korea.

Yet much of NAD’s large contribution to the World Budget stems from the Church’s current funding structure, in which NAD contributes a higher percentage of its tithe than any other division—7 percent. That percentage is a voted policy of the General Conference Executive Committee and is slowly being reduced. That percentage has dropped from 10 percent in 2000, according to General Conference Treasury officials. By 2020, that figure will be reduced to 6 percent.

In contrast, the denomination’s 12 other divisions contribute 2 percent of their tithe to the General Conference World Budget. That figure has increased from 1 percent in 2000.

NAD Treasurer Tom Evans said the division is still committed to helping fund mission and Church structure worldwide, but the percentages could be adjusted again in the future.

“North America may always contribute more tithe [to the World Budget]. I’d be the first to say I don’t want to take apart the structure, but it’s a matter of how much NAD should contribute,” Evans said. He said leaders from both NAD and the General Conference are committed to examining the best ways to conduct mission in the division and around the world.
“It’s a growing experience for both of us as NAD is coming into its own and then figuring out the direction to make that happen,” he said.

**Moving forward**

Last month’s NAD meeting on self-evaluation was designed to help identify that direction and set key goals. The division in previous years has held similar meetings on a smaller scale to discuss matters such as tithing percentages and retirement benefits.

NAD President Dan Jackson affirmed delegates for attending the meeting with “open hearts and open minds.”

“This selfless spirit demonstrates a real desire to honestly examine our current organizational and missional delivery systems and how they need to be adapted to make the Adventist Church more relevant in our communities in the 21st century,” Jackson said, according to a release following the meeting.

A division spokesman said delegates wanted to identify challenges facing the region and make necessary adjustments. The first question posed to delegates was, “Would you be willing to sacrifice your position if it meant more effective mission in the territory.” Ninety-five percent of attendees agreed, a vote tally that was met with applause.

“Once they had that commitment, that drove the rest of the conversation,” said Dan Weber, NAD Communication director.

Challenges to mission in the region include declining rates of youth attending church, declining membership among the native-born population, and only 30 percent of eligible Adventist elementary and secondary students attending Adventist schools.

A committee will be tasked with exploring the new three goals and will report ideas for implementation to the division’s Year-End Meeting in November.

“Change is scary,” said Weber, “but if you look at it through the eyes of the healthiness of the organization for mission, then you have to do it.”

—additional reporting by Rowena J. Moore and Ethel L. Bradford
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