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Adventist Church files amicus brief for workplace religious freedom case at top U.S. court
Church hopes Supreme Court will take case of Muslim girl who was denied job

August 27, 2014 | Silver Spring, Maryland, United States | Ansel Oliver/ANN

The Seventh-day Adventist Church filed an amicus brief today urging the United States’ top court to accept the case of a Muslim girl who was denied a job because her hijab—a head-covering—violated a company’s policy.

The Adventist Church’s “friend-of-the-court” brief is joined by seven other faith groups for the case Equal Employment Opportunity Commission vs. Abercrombie & Fitch Stores, Inc. The U.S. Supreme Court will decide in October whether to accept the case.

The Church’s move follows a decision last year by a federal appeals court that ruled against the girl and created additional statutes that violate protections of the U.S. Civil Rights Act. That ruling, by the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals in Denver, said the religious observance or practice in question must be mandatory, not just encouraged by the employee’s religious beliefs.

The brief claims last year’s ruling also mandates undue responsibility on applicants to raise concerns over religious observance. Applicants might not always know the employer’s requirements.

Church legal counselors said the ruling then allows an employer’s ignorance to eliminate protections for religious-observant applicants, which violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.

“If this decision were to stand, employers would be able to avoid their obligation to provide reasonable accommodation for employees of faith,” said Todd McFarland, an associate general counsel for the Seventh-day Adventist Church headquarters. “It could mean that everyone from Sikhs who are wearing a turban to Seventh-day Adventists and Jews who need Sabbath off from work could be denied a reasonable accommodation.”

The case stems from a 2008 incident in which Samantha Elauf wore a hijab when applying for a sales position at an Abercrombie & Fitch store in Tulsa, Oklahoma. After a manager confirmed with a supervisor that Elauf’s headwear violated store policy, she was deemed ineligible for hire without discussion of religious accommodation.

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which filed a lawsuit on Elauf’s behalf, said the move defied Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. The title obligates employers to take steps to “reasonably accommodate” a prospective employee’s “religious observance or practice.”

While a federal judge sided with the EEOC in 2011, the 10th Circuit’s ruling last year upended that decision, claiming Elauf never told Abercrombie she needed a religious accommodation, even though she was wearing a hijab in the interview.
And that, Adventist legal counselors say, places undue responsibility on the applicant to determine whether her religious beliefs or practices conflict with company policy.

Today’s amicus brief points out that “Frequently, an applicant will be unaware of a work-religion conflict simply because of her inferior knowledge of the employer’s work requirements.”

Also, a hiring process can be technologically structured so that an employee can’t raise the issue of potential conflict, such as online applications asking applicants which days of the week they are available to work.

Religious clothing and the observance of Sabbath and other holy days are the most common areas of conflict in the workplace, McFarland said. Hijabs, turbans, yarmulkes and other head coverings frequently conflict with a company’s “look” policy, while Sabbath observance can clash with scheduling.

The Adventist Church is joined on the brief by the National Association of Evangelicals, Union of Reform Judaism, Christian Legal Society, The Sikh Coalition, American Jewish Committee, KARAMAH: Women Lawyers for Human Rights, and the American Islamic Congress.

Abercrombie & Fitch changed its policy on headwear approximately four years ago. The Ohio-based company has settled similar lawsuits in California, the Associated Press reported last year.

—additional reporting by Elizabeth Lechleitner

In India, Adventists seek inquiry after local members reconvert to Hinduism

Reconversion ceremony prompts fears that hardline Hindus are compelling people to switch faiths

September 02, 2014 | Silver Spring, Maryland, United States | Andrew McChesney/Adventist Review

Seventh-day Adventist Church leaders have appealed to Indian authorities to investigate the possible forced reconversion of Adventists to Hinduism in a northern Indian village.

Forced conversion is illegal in India, and a reconversion ceremony last week in Asroi, located about 110 miles (175 kilometers) south of India’s capital, New Delhi, raised fears in the wider Christian community that hard-line Hindus were compelling people to switch faiths in a part of the world that can be especially challenging for missionaries.
"We have made a petition to the local civic authority and to even higher levels for an inquiry," said T. P. Kurian, Communication director for the church’s Southern Asia Division.

He added: “May I urge you to keep this matter in prayer.”

The last members of the Asroi church switched to Hinduism at an August 26 ceremony, Church leaders said Sunday. The church, which opened with 33 members in 2005, had about six regular attendees left when the reconversion ceremony took place.

"It is obvious from sources that there are some Hindu fundamental groups behind this havoc who have forced these believers to go back to their previous faith," said Mohan Bhatti, communication director for the Northern India Union, citing a report from a four-member Adventist delegation that visited the village last week.

**Church Under Police Watch**

Indian media reported that dozens of active and non-active Adventists had reconverted at the ceremony, and that hardliners had turned the Asroi church into a temple to the Hindu god Siva, replacing its cross with an idol. The reports included a photo of two men hanging a poster of Siva on a church wall.

But the visiting delegation found no evidence that the church had been disturbed.

“The idol of Shiva was not found there, and the church has not been turned into a temple,” the delegation said in the report. “It seems that a poster of Shiva was brought and raised up there for a few moments with the purpose of filming and publishing.”

The report added: “The church building is kept under police surveillance by civil administration to avoid any untoward incident. We have the freedom to conduct our weekly worship service.”

Bhatti said an official inquiry was needed “into this very sensitive issue that may cause disharmony in the community.”

**History of Asroi Church**

The Asroi church’s history stretches back to 2001, when 33 villagers accepted the Adventist faith, according to local Adventist leaders. Land for the church was purchased in 2004, and Maranatha Volunteers International, a nonprofit organization, built the church the next year.

Church attendance dipped in the following years. Two families stopped attending in 2007, leaving 20 people at Sabbath services. Only five to seven people were attending regularly when the reconversion ceremony took place.

It was unclear how many former Adventists reconverted. Indian news media, citing Hindu activists at the ceremony, put the figure at 72, although this could not be reconciled with the lower membership figure offered by Church leaders.

The loss of the last church members surprised the pastor, said S.P. Singh, a local Adventist leader who was on the delegation that visited the church.
“The local pastor, Vikas Paswan, has been taking care of the church for 10 years,” he said. “He conducted Sabbath worship regularly. He didn’t have any idea that this could happen in the future.”

He called on church members to pray for the pastor and the Asroi church.

“Our pastor needs our fervent prayers in this unfavorable situation,” he said. “Let’s encourage them with our prayers and support.”

The Adventist Church has opened its own inquiry into the situation.

Hindus Call Reconversion Voluntary

Khem Chandra, who attended the reconversion ceremony and is a member of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a nationalist Hindu group, said it was quite clear what had happened.

“They left by choice, and today they have realized their mistake and want to come back,” he told The Times of India in remarks published Thursday. “We welcome them.”

Chandra said had met with eight local Adventist families repeatedly over the years and urged them to rethink their faith.

The notion that the reconversions were voluntary was greeted with skepticism.

“It is the right of an individual to convert to any religion of his choice, but such mass conversions imply political, social and physical coercion and threat of violence,” said John Dayal, a member of the National Integration Council, a group of top politicians and public figures formed 50 years ago to find ways to resolve problems that divide Indian society. Dayal spoke to UCAnews.com, an independent Catholic news site.

Former Adventists Speak Out

One former Adventist interviewed by the Times of India said that disenchantment with India’s caste system had led him to Adventism and then back to Hinduism.

“As Hindus we had no status and were restricted to doing menial jobs, but even after remaining a Christian for 19 years, we saw that no one came to us from their community,” villager Anil Gaur said. “There was no celebration of Bada Din [Christmas]. The missionaries just built a church for us in the vicinity where some of the villagers got married. That was all.”

Singh, the delegation member who visited the church last week, said in the report to the Northern Indian Union that he had made three previous trips to the church and that during one of them, in 2012, he had overseen its repairs and made sure it received carpets, songbooks, New Testaments, and materials for a pulpit.

Another former Church member, Rajendra Singh, 70, told the newspaper that a physical scare outside the village’s church had convinced him to leave.
"While sleeping outside the church one day I suffered a paralytic attack," he said. "I found myself unable to move. It happened last year, and since then I have been thinking that it may have been Mata Devi’s punishment for abandoning my faith."

Chandra, the Hindu activist, expressed hope that a first Hindu temple would soon be opened in the village, perhaps even in the Adventist church.

"We will think about the church building. It belongs to the missionaries, but the ground on which it stands belongs to Hindustan," he said. "We will not compromise on our dharti [earth]. We will meet the villagers and decide about the temple."

**In the U.S., California earthquake devastates Adventist school**

**Napa Christian Campus of Education launches drive to raise $200,000 for reconstruction**

*August 27, 2014 | Silver Spring, Maryland, United States | Stephanie Leal/NCC, Dan Weber/NAD, and Andrew McChesney/Adventist Review*

A powerful earthquake that struck the U.S. state of California last weekend badly damaged a Seventh-day Adventist school, forcing it to close just four days into the school year and to launch a drive to raise $200,000 for repairs.

The school, Napa Christian Campus of Education, appeared to be the only Adventist facility to sustain major damage in the 6.0 quake that rocked Napa County at 3:20 a.m. on Sunday, August 24. Pacific Union College, located nearly miles from the school, emerged unscathed.

The quake, California's largest in 25 years, injured more than 200 people. It was not immediately clear whether any Adventists were among those injured. Early estimates put the total cost of quake damages at more than $1 billion.

The principal of the devastated school, Justine Leonie, said she was stunned to see the jumble of furniture, books, and other equipment when she first visited the classrooms after the quake. But she thanked God that the quake struck at night when none of her 130 students were on the premises.

"I was overwhelmed emotionally with the responsibility of the due diligence of an educator," Leonie said in an interview Thursday. "We must make sure our kids are safe. We must never skimp on safety for our kids."

Leonie said she was touched by an outpouring of compassion from high school and college students who have volunteered to assist in the school's cleanup. On Thursday, 29 second-year high school students and five adults drove the 65 miles (100 kilometers) from Lodi Academy to help sort through the mess. 
“They were wonderful!” Leonie said.

The volunteers' work even made the pages of a local newspaper.

The cleanup effort continued Friday with the arrival of students from Pacific Union College as well as members of the Napa church.

Marvin Wray, the senior pastor of the Napa Community Adventist Church, also encouraged prayers for members in the community who experienced damage in their homes.

The church itself has been in cleanup mode this week. The violence of the earthquake swung the chandeliers into the ceiling and rained glass down on the pews below. It also left the kitchen and the Adventist Community Services center a mess, and the church’s organ with bent pipes. All the equipment in the TV control room, where Napa streams its services live, fell to the floor.

"We are all just thankful that this was not any worse. God is good," Wray said on a quake-related blog maintained by the Northern California Conference.

Wray also said his church has extended use of its premises at no cost to the local First United Methodist Church, whose early 20th-century building was severely damaged by the tremors and was expected to remain closed for at least a year. He was present to officially welcome the Methodist believers when they meet in the church for the first time on Sunday.