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Symposium on freedom of conscience highlights need for continued promotion

October 30, 2014 | Bucharest, Romania | Aurelian Horja and ANN staff

Top Romanian officials last week pledged their support for religious liberty in the Eastern European nation during a two-day symposium sponsored by the Conscience and Liberty Association.
Titus Corlatean, Romania’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, told attendees of the importance for religious denominations to be able to operate without restrictions on their traditions, beliefs or rituals.

“By supporting religious liberty and by condemning any attack against some religious communities, Romania has … gained a better social cohesion, proving that this is also thanks to this interreligious dialogue,” Corlatean said.

Corlatean delivered his remarks in the Human Rights Hall at the Palace of the Parliament on October 22. More than 120 dignitaries were in attendance, including government officials, religious leaders, and professors. Representatives included delegates from Harvard University in the United States, University of Montpellier in France, and from Complutense University of Madrid in Spain.

Conscience and Liberty Association President Nelu Burcea characterized the symposium as one that offered education and communication regarding religious freedom.

“The participation of our country’s officials showed Romania’s determination to move toward a total respect of religious liberty,” Burcea said. “It is important to transmit to future generations a message of peace and respect based on the values of human dignity.”

Burcea also serves as Public Affairs and Religious Liberty director of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Romania. The Adventist Church is a key sponsor of the Conscience and Liberty Association, a non-sectarian organization that promotes religious freedom.

Romania has a population of more than 21 million, of which more than 80 percent are Eastern Orthodox. Less than 7 percent are Protestant. There are 67,000 Adventists in the country.

Corlatean also highlighted the key educational role organizations and entities play in promoting religious freedom, including politicians, media professionals and clerics. Interreligious and interdenominational dialogue can ensure a climate based on mutual respect regardless of religious orientation, he said.

Victor Opaschi, Romania’s state secretary for religious affairs, said enforcing the law in order to protect religious liberty must be a “permanent concern” in maintaining democracy.

Mihnea Costoiu, Romania’s minister for Higher Education, Scientific Research and Technological Development, highlighted the need of “permanent education” for the benefits of “global and local religious pluralism.”

Costoiu also spoke on October 23 at a ceremony for the presentation of two honorary doctorates. Officials from Wallachia University in Targoviste presented the title of Doctor Honoris Causa to John Graz, secretary-general of the International Religious Liberty Association, and Ganoune Diop, associate Public Affairs and Religious Liberty director of the Adventist Church.

Costoiu described Graz as “a global visionary who inspires and builds suitable solutions for governments and international diplomacy.”

John Graz has visited Romanian churches and officials annually since 1987. In collaboration with “Conscience and Liberty” Association, he presented numerous seminars for local and regional
officials from more than 20 locations throughout the nation. Several of his books are also translated into Romanian.

Diop was also recognized for his interest in promoting human dignity as a foundation for all fundamental rights.

"His training sessions for officials and religious leaders has given us the perspective of continuing these endeavors and interests," Costoiu said.

In Jamaica, two Adventists receive national honors

Sewell, Marshall awarded during Presentation of National Honours & Awards

October 29, 2014 | Kingston, Jamaica | Fabia Phillips-Lawrence/JAMU/IAD

Two Seventh-day Adventists in Jamaica were conferred and awarded with national honors during a ceremony held on the lawn of Kings House on National Heroes Day on October 20.

Audrey Sewell, an elder at the North Street Adventist Church in Kingston, was conferred with the nation’s sixth highest honor, the Order of Distinction in the rank of Commander, for her outstanding contribution to public service in the areas of justice, education, transport, works and housing. She serves Jamaica as permanent secretary in the Ministry of Transport, Works and Housing.

Alfonso Marshall, an elder at the Trench Town Adventist Church, was awarded the Badge of Honor for Meritorious Service for his service in the field of road maintenance and construction. He works for the National Works Agency, the government’s road construction agency.

Adventist President in Jamaica Pastor Everett Brown commended both recipients on their achievements.

"I am always very happy when members of our church excel in service to our nation," Brown said. "Audrey Sewell and Alfonso Marshall are members who have for years served our church and the communities in which our church operates, with distinction. It is only fitting that their Christian values through their work with the government has impacted the nation. I commend and congratulate them on behalf of the membership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Jamaica."

Sewell said it was an “honor” for the country to recognize her service.
“I know that there are many outstanding Jamaicans in the past and in my group who have been so awarded, and I even deem it much more an honor to join the ranks of those very outstanding Jamaicans who have made contributions to national development,” Sewell said.

“I attribute my success in life to the leading of the Lord, and consider my work to be a Ministry so wherever the Lord places me I give of my best,” Sewell added.

In his response on being recognized nationally, Marshall said, “I feel gratified, humbled and very good in my mind knowing that the government and people of Jamaica have seen it fit to award me.”

Lowell Cooper, an Adventist world church vice president, commended the work of Adventists in government.

“There is a subtle temptation for the followers of Jesus to retreat from the world since the spiritual life is in such contrast to worldly values and behaviors,” said Cooper, “but society and its structures can be transformed by the influence of people who bring spiritual values to their roles in public life. The Bible stories of Joseph and Daniel illustrate how devotion to God can have an enormous impact for the good of a community and a nation.”

A total of 233 Jamaicans were recognized for their outstanding contribution to nation-building through services in various fields. The awards ranged from the Order of Jamaica to the Medal of Honor. The ceremony was presided over by Governor General Sir Patrick Allen, a Seventh-day Adventist, who presented each of the honors and awards.

**Adventist University is named Argentina’s first ‘Healthy University’**

Government officials commend school’s comprehensive approach to health

October 28, 2014 | Libertador San Martín, Entre Ríos, Argentina | Marcos Paseggi/ANN

River Plate Adventist University, a Seventh-day Adventist school in Argentina’s state of Entre Ríos, was recently awarded an official certification as the first “Healthy University” in the country. The school is now the first of its kind to receive such a title by government health officials in the South American nation of 42 million.

In an October 16 ceremony at the School of Health Sciences on campus, university leaders and top regional health officials signed a document attesting the school’s official new designation. University leaders said the move was another milestone for this 116-year-old
institution and its longstanding advocacy of a comprehensive and proactive Seventh-day Adventist approach to health.

During the ceremony, the Department of Health of Argentina was represented by, among others, Dr. Maria Cristina Cipolla, the regional coordinator of Health Projects for the Office of Health Promotion and Non-Communicable Diseases Prevention; and by Dr. Hugo Cettour, secretary of Health of the Province of Entre Ríos.

“This is a very important moment, being the first university in the country to be awarded this recognition,” said Cipolla, just before signing the documents. “What we are about to do here is just a symbol, because we know that the work you accomplish in this school is well beyond any formality.”

Cettour said he felt “doubly honored” to be involved in the ceremony both as a citizen and government official.

“For many years we have been stressing the need of working on healthy individuals so as to prevent them from getting sick,” Cettour said. “This university is well known for the quality health services provided by its students and graduates in the region and beyond.

While university officials said they felt the new status was a landmark, Academic Vice President Victor Armenteros made it clear the designation is also a great responsibility.

“This new status provides us with a higher benchmark, which we will strive to keep,” Armenteros said. At the same time, he acknowledged that the achievement doesn’t take place in a vacuum, but is another step for the school and the Church to promote a comprehensive approach to healthful living.

Milton Mesa, dean of the university’s School of Health Sciences, concurred with Armenteros’ assessment.

“The school is not isolated in its endeavors; it is part of a system which makes the best efforts to do good to people, which strives to move forward in an environment that fosters a desire to serve.”

The new designation cements the school campus reputation as a place where not only formal but also informal health education takes place. As in most Seventh-day Adventist schools, a significant percentage of students, faculty and staff devote part of their time to physical, service, and devotional activities. The alcohol- and tobacco-free campus provides students with green and open spaces that motivate reflection and prayer opportunities.

Dr. Horacio Gimenez, coordinator of Non-Communicable Diseases Control in Entre Ríos, said his goal was for other universities to reach the same status. “We would like them to start promoting a healthy lifestyle not only in their campuses, but also in the communities around them,” he said.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has long advocated for a healthful lifestyle, and for using a comprehensive health ministry as a way of sharing God’s love with people of every social and religious background.

River Plate Adventist University is a coed educational institution founded in 1898 by Seventh-day Adventist European immigrants in the hills of Entre Ríos, a few hours north of the capital city of Buenos Aires. For decades, the school has been known as a seedbed of service-driven professionals and missionaries, many of whom continue to serve on six continents. The university
has more than 2,500 students from 50 countries and offers 30 undergraduate and graduate degrees in health sciences, business, education and theology.

—Oscar Gonzalez contributed to this story.