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In the U.S., ‘parsonage allowance’ upheld against challenge by atheist group
Federal Court overrules lower court decision that clergy tax-exempt housing allowance is unconstitutional

November 13, 2014 | Silver Spring, Maryland, United States | Ansel Oliver/ANN

A U.S. federal court confirmed today that clergy can continue to claim the tax benefit for housing allowance, upholding a Seventh-day Adventist Church-backed appeal against a lower court ruling that would have ended the so-called parsonage allowance.

The 7th Circuit Court of Appeals, located in Chicago, handed down its decision saying the plaintiffs—the Freedom From Religion Foundation—lacked standing to challenge the exemption, meaning that the group had not suffered damage personally.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church had joined an amicus brief—or “friend of the court” brief—for the case in April along with more than 30 other denominations and religious organizations.

The ruling stops what could have been hundreds of millions of dollars of tax increases on clergy and other individuals with tax-exempt status for housing.

Today’s decision was the latest step that began with a 2011 suit by Freedom From Religion Foundation, an atheist and agnostic group based in the state of Wisconsin.

Freedom From Religion had originally sued the top leaders of the U.S. Treasury and Internal Revenue Service over the exemption, which was passed by Congress in 1954. Section 107 of the Internal Revenue Code permits a “minister of the gospel” to designate some compensation as a housing allowance and exempt it from income tax.

A decision last year from a lower court said the parsonage exemption violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which prohibits Congress from making a law “respecting an establishment of religion.”

Adventist Church Associate General Counsel Todd McFarland said the Church was pleased with today’s decision.

“The Adventist Church has a long history of a commitment to separation of church and state; however, granting pastors this longstanding tax benefit does not violate the ‘Establishment Clause,’” McFarland said. “The government grants tax breaks for all kinds of people and businesses.”

Other exemptions, McFarland said, include teachers and professors working for educational institutions, military personnel, employee lodging for the convenience of the employer, as well as certain taxpayers living abroad.

Many religious organizations have long depended on the tax benefit for the compensation package for their clergy in the United States.
Ivan Williams, Ministerial Department director for the Adventist Church’s North American Division, said that the denomination’s pastors can make a decent living wage on a “base pay” basis, but depending on where they live, their cost of living adjustments are usually drastically behind and not commensurate. The parsonage exclusion gives them the ability to exempt their housing expenses from their taxable income.

Williams said the after-tax benefit to Adventist ministers is estimated between 5 and 10 percent of their total compensation package.

**In Egypt, proposed law draft would classify Adventists as non-Christian**

**Adventist leaders to address matter with government officials on Sunday**

*November 21, 2014 | Silver Spring, Maryland, United States | Ansel Oliver/ANN*

Seventh-day Adventist Church officials in Egypt are expressing concern over a proposed draft of the nation’s Personal Status Law that would classify the Adventist Church as a non-Christian denomination.

Local Adventist Church officials said the new classification would have a negative impact on the Church’s work and image among other Christians in Egypt.

Johnny N. Salib, Assistant Secretary of denomination’s Egypt-Sudan Field, said the current draft of article 112 of the proposed new civil law for non-Muslim minorities would put the Adventist Church in different category of religious denominations.

Salib said the current draft of the law was submitted to the Egyptian government more than three decades ago but was not adopted. Over the years, Adventists have made several attempts to meet with leaders of other Christian groups in Egypt to explain the denomination’s Protestant identity. Still, no steps have been taken to remove Adventists from the list of non-Christian churches.

Now, as Egypt is heading toward building a more democratic Constitution, the law proposed by the Christian minority is under serious discussion.

“I am saddened by the fact that some churches consider us as a non-Christian denomination, while the government recognizes us as Christians and gives us our full freedom to worship,” Salib said.

On Sunday, a delegation from the denomination’s Egypt-Sudan Field will meet with the Ministry of Transmitting Justice to discuss the matter. Church officials have already sent a letter to news agencies pointing out that the Adventist Church has existed in Egypt for more than 100 years and was officially registered in the early 1950s, Salib said.

Salib said Adventist leaders will attempt to defend the identity of the denomination without creating any animosity with other Christian denominations in Egypt. With news agencies reporting the
matter, he said leaders will focus on how to best use the situation with attention focused on the Church.

"This could be a chance for many Egyptians to know the truth about the Adventist Church and to learn more about our spiritual as well as social contributions in Egypt for many years," Salib said. "I trust that the prayers of dedicated Adventists in Egypt and around the world can turn the situation into a blessed testimony for our Church."

U.S. vice president’s wife praises ADRA's work in Ukraine

Jill Biden visits a shelter operated by the Adventist relief agency in Kiev

November 24, 2014 | Silver Spring, Maryland, United States | Andrew McChesney/Adventist Review

Jill Biden, wife of U.S. Vice President Joe Biden, expressed sympathy for a family with two children who fled fighting in eastern Ukraine, and she thanked ADRA for assisting the family and many other people displaced by the violence.

Biden visited a shelter at ADRA’s office in Kiev on Friday as her husband held talks with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko on measures to deal with the country’s sputtering economy.

Ukraine faces a grim winter after seven months of conflict between independence-minded separatists and government forces in eastern Ukraine. The violence has killed more than 4,300 people and caused more than 460,000 to flee to other parts of Ukraine and across the border to Russia, according to the United Nations.

After meeting with the displaced Ukrainian family, Biden thanked ADRA and its partners, U.S. government agency USAID and the United Nations Development Program, for their work in Ukraine.

"My heart is broken after this meeting," she said, according to a Ukrainian translation of her remarks provided by the Adventist Church’s Ukrainian Union Conference.

"Many displaced people do not even have temporary housing. In a situation where winter is approaching, this tragedy could turn into a crisis if we do not act together," Biden said. "Governments and civil society, Ukrainians and their friends from all over the world must act as a team, as one humanitarian mission."

Biden asked the displaced family—Oleg and Svetlana, and their two children, Katerina, 13, and Andrei, 12—about their lives in Donetsk and how they have coped since they fled, according to an account of the visit provided by Viktor Alyeksyeyenko, president of the Ukrainian Union Conference.
Svetlana said she had held two jobs in Donetsk, teaching psychology at Donetsk National Technical University and offering music classes to gifted children at a college. Oleg said he held a degree in classical music, like his wife, but had worked in the furniture business.

Both Svetlana and Oleg thanked the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which operates ADRA, for helping them resettle in Kiev, and they said they were getting back on their feet with church members’ help.

These days, Svetlana teaches private music lessons and Oleg is back in the furniture business. The couple regularly organizes music concerts to raise money for other people who have fled eastern Ukraine.

Jonathan Duffy, the visiting president of ADRA International, told Biden that he was struck by the willingness of ordinary Ukrainians to help one another. But he said their needs far outweighed their resources.

“Unfortunately, the agency still has a lot of work in Ukraine,” he said.

Offering financial support, a senior USAID official, E. Jed Barton, announced at the ADRA office that his agency would contribute $3 million to the United Nations’ World Food Program to assist an estimated 120,000 displaced people in Ukraine.

Vladimir Tkachuk, ADRA director for the church’s Euro-Asia Division, which includes Ukraine, said Biden’s visit placed a welcome spotlight on ADRA that should help it step up its efforts.

“This kind of meeting is very important to everyone,” Tkachuk said in an interview. “ADRA’s Ukraine office showed that it is a serious organization capable of doing its job well. ADRA International had the opportunity to showcase the advantages of having a united, international family. But the most important thing is that many people who have fallen on difficult times are receiving and will receive help.”

In recent months, ADRA, the Adventist Church, and the church’s Hope Channel have collected and distributed 200 tons of humanitarian aid under a charity project called Eastern Angel. The project also has gathered about 505,000 Ukrainian hryvnia (about $35,000) in financial assistance for displaced people.

ADRA currently hosts five families at its Kiev shelter but has room for up to 20. Over the past six months, it has sheltered about 400 families for periods of one day to four months.

Guillermo Biaggi, president of the Euro-Asia Division, thanked donors who have supported ADRA and said he and other church leaders were praying for ADRA and Ukraine.

“We pray for God to provide peace in eastern Ukraine and to give wisdom to the authorities of all the countries involved,” Biaggi said by e-mail. “We also pray for the ADRA project.”

He added: “We are grateful to the generous and supportive donors who have joined ADRA in helping the internally displaced people from this area. In this way, we are following Christ’s wonderful promise in Matt. 25:40: ‘And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.’”
In U.S., Adventist volleyball team gifted trophy after honoring Sabbath

Forest Lake Academy athletic director calls the exchange a ‘witnessing opportunity’

November 24, 2014 | Silver Spring, Maryland, United States | ANN staff

A Seventh-day Adventist Academy girls’ volleyball team in the United States was given the top trophy from a tournament’s winning team because of their commitment not to participate in the final match on a Friday night, which Adventists observe as Sabbath.

Forest Lake Academy, from Apopka, Florida, was gifted the National Association of Christian Athletes volleyball tournament’s trophy on October 31 from Victory Christian Academy (VCA), a non-denominational school in Valparaiso, Indiana.

Forest Lake forfeited playing in the final match of the tournament—held in Dayton, Tennessee—because it would have been held after sundown.

Adventists observe the Sabbath from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown.

Both teams faced an elimination final match on Friday afternoon, but after receiving word of Forest Lake’s intent to forfeit, VCA team members and coaches noticed Forest Lake players looking down, and a few were wiping away tears. VCA was given the champion’s trophy and banner at the awards ceremony. VCA team members then realized the reason for the forfeit, and all 13 players agreed to give Forest Lake the trophy.

Forest Lake responded by giving VCA the tournament’s sportsmanship trophy. The Times of Northwest Indiana called VCA’s move a “selfless display of sportsmanship.”

“We didn't want to win that way,” Victory Christian Volleyball coach Megan Huber told ANN. “We were just glad we had the opportunity to show God’s love for them in that way.”

Nestor Osorio, athletic director for Forest Lake Academy, said the exchange was the “biggest and greatest sports-related spiritual moment” of his life.

“I've seen God's blessings in many ways in the past for our young people through sports, that's why I'm a minister in this area, but this has been probably the biggest witnessing opportunity I've personally was a part of,” Osorio said.

NACA responded by declaring both schools co-champions, the Times reported.
"It was the best way to end our season, our last game," Victory Christian senior Gabby Carlson told The Times. "It was even better than being able to win."