Adventist Heritage Center

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‘Troubling times for religious freedom’
Religious freedom can’t be taken for granted. That was the blunt message delivered by Senator Orrin Hatch, senior Republican senator in the United States senate, to a group of religious liberty advocates, ambassadors and congressional representatives gathered April 29 for the 13th annual Religious Liberty Dinner in Washington, D.C.

“These are troubling times for religious freedom, both here in America and around the world,” said Hatch, a seven-term senator from Utah and keynote speaker for the evening. In a broad-ranging speech, he described the social, political and legal forces that are re-shaping religious freedom, once considered an inviolate, foundational human right, but now being cast as “just another” of many different competing rights within society.

Hatch also spoke about the recent rise in religious violence committed by groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, and the plight of religious minorities in places such as Tajikistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, China, and many other countries.

The focus of Hatch’s address, though, was on concerns closer to home. Citing a series of Supreme Court decisions and tracing recent legislative actions, Hatch said that the issue of religious freedom was becoming increasingly divisive within American politics and society. He recalled his experience, 20 years earlier, as one of the key sponsors of the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act, a law aimed at strengthening religious freedom rights. At the time, this legislation generated an almost unprecedented level of bipartisan support in Washington. But today, said Hatch, similar legislation would be almost impossible to pass.

Senator Hatch drew a standing ovation when he affirmed that, “Religious freedom is an inalienable right that comes not from government, but from God Himself. If ‘eternal vigilance is the price of liberty,’ then there is no liberty more worth the price.”

Senator Hatch’s words came less than 12 hours before the release of a new report from a United States advisory body that painted a somber picture of the state of religious freedom around the globe. The US Commission International Religious Freedom, known as USCIRF, released its annual report on the morning following the Religious Liberty Dinner. The report documents religious freedom abuses in 33 countries, revealing what it calls a “humanitarian crisis fueled by waves of terror, intimidation and violence.”

Elizabeth Cassidy, deputy director for policy and research at USCIRF, was one of the attendees at the Religious Liberty Dinner. When asked what trends the annual USCIRF report would highlight, she pointed to a disturbing increase in religious violence perpetrated by so-called “non-state actors” such as ISIS and Boko Haram. She also highlighted the vast movement of people fleeing zones of religious conflict. The newly released USCIRF report estimates that last year some 13 million people from countries ranging from Syria, to Central African Republic, Afghanistan and Burma, have been forced to leave their homes because of fear of religiously motivated violence.
Cassidy added that events such as the annual Religious Liberty Dinner play an important part in bringing together a broad range of people and organizations in support of religious freedom.

The annual Religious Liberty Dinner, held this year at the Willard Intercontinental Hotel in downtown Washington, D.C., has become a Washington tradition for advocacy groups, government representatives and the diplomatic community. It is sponsored jointly by Liberty magazine, the International Religious Liberty Association, the North American Religious Liberty Association, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Attorney Dwayne Leslie, director of legislative affairs for the Adventist world church, and Melissa Reid, executive director of the North American Religious Liberty Association, were two of the key organizers of the dinner. According to Leslie, the annual gathering has developed into one of Washington’s premier religious freedom events.

“It's become an invaluable way of bringing together thought leaders and policy makers,” said Leslie. “And this is especially important now, when the public discourse is increasingly filled with debate about the scope of religious freedom, and with tragic examples of religiously motivated violence.”

Reid agrees, saying that the dinner is an opportunity to highlight the importance of religious freedom for all people, everywhere, and to “reaffirm the Adventist Church's longstanding commitment to liberty of conscience.”

This year’s dinner marked the final time Dr. John Graz will attend the event as secretary-general of the International Religious Liberty Association. He plans to retire later this year. A number of speakers during the evening paid tribute to Graz’s many years of passionate, eloquent advocacy for religious freedom. For the past 15 years, he has served as both secretary-general of the IRLA and as director of Public and Affairs and Religious Liberty for the Seventh-day Adventist world church.

In a brief but moving speech, Graz said he believed “showing that we love and treasure religious freedom is the best answer we can give to religious fanaticism and intolerance.” Later in the evening, in a previously unannounced award, Liberty editor Lincoln Steed presented a plaque to Graz, listing many of his advocacy accomplishments and recognizing him as a “champion of religious freedom throughout the world.”

Three other people were also honored at the dinner: Tiffany Barrans, international legal director and senior legal counsel at the American Center for Law and Justice; Minhea Costoiu, senator of the Republic of Romania and Rector of the University Politehnica of Bucharest, one of southeastern Europe’s largest universities; and civil rights attorney Charles Kester, who passed away last year.

Barrans, who has defended a number of high-profile international victims of religious persecution, was recognized for her legal and advocacy work in the United States and around the world. She’s currently working on behalf of Christian Pastor Saeed Abedini, who has been held in an Iranian prison since 2012. In accepting her award, Barrans urged more grassroots action, saying that everyone can find ways to promote “respect for the diversity of religious thought and practice.”

Dr. Graz, who presented the award to Costoiu, called him a “symbol of the new generation of Romanian politicians who have dedicated their lives to defend and promote the democratic values of human dignity, human rights and religious freedom.” Through Costoiu’s many years of public
service, said Graz, he worked to foster a culture of “mutual respect, acceptance and equality” within Romanian society.

Todd McFarland, associate general counsel for the Adventist world church, delivered a fond and often humorous remembrance of attorney Charles Kester, who died last year of a pulmonary embolism at the age of 46. Kester, who worked closely with the Adventist Church’s legal counsel on many pivotal religious freedom cases across the United States, was not religiously or socially conservative, said McFarland, but he was passionately committed to the principle of religious freedom. McFarland paid tribute to Kester’s skill and dedication, calling him an “unyielding advocate for the underdog.” Kester’s life and work demonstrated a fundamental truth, said McFarland, that “religious liberty knows no political party and it knows no partisanship. It is a universal human right.”

Adventist Church in Hungary reconciles with breakaway group after 40 years

The two sides agree to mend fences after a split over Soviet-era differences

May 04, 2015 | Silver Spring, Maryland, USA | Andrew McChesney/Adventist Review

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Hungary and a breakaway group of hundreds of former Adventists has agreed to put aside past grievances and work toward healing a 40-year schism.

The Hungarian church split in 1975 amid a protest by young pastors and other members over local church leaders’ collaboration with the Council of Free Churches, a body formed to represent the common interests of small Protestant denominations that later become a tool of the communist state.

Tamás Ócsai, president of the Hungarian Union Conference, signed a document titled “Joint Declaration on Settling the Past and Building a Common Future” with János Cserbik, leader of KERAK, as the splinter group is known, at a ceremony late last week.

“I am very pleased that this 40-year rift is coming to an end for most of the people,” said Benjamin D. Schoun, a general vice president of the Adventist world church, who played a key role in bringing the two sides toward reconciliation.

“It is a testimony to the use of biblical methods for reconciliation and the willingness on the part of both sides to step out toward each other,” Schoun told the Adventist Review on Friday. “They still have many details to work out, and we should continue to pray for this initiative.”

The Adventist Church in Hungary has 4,629 members worshiping in 104 churches, while KERAK has 1,500 to 1,800 members, local church leaders said Friday. Church leaders anticipate that
around 600 members will return this summer, while 400 do not intend to come back and the rest are open to the idea.

**Long Road to Reconciliation**

The long-waited reconciliation document is seen as a first step toward reuniting the two sides. In reaching the agreement, the Adventist Church acknowledged that it had expelled the dissenting group of 518 believers largely without merit in 1975.

“After much turmoil, which rocked the church to the core, the group was disfellowshipped, mostly without a valid biblical reason,” the Adventist Church’s Trans-European Division, which includes Hungary, said in a statement.

The disfellowshipped believers initially organized themselves as an underground church in what was then a Soviet Bloc country, but the group later emerged as the official denomination KERAK, or Christian Adventist Community.

KERAK and the Adventist Church began to drift apart in spirituality, culture and organization structure over the years, a process that accelerated after the collapse of the communist regime in 1989. Adventist leaders from all levels of the church sought to reunite the Hungarian church, and several pastors and even congregations rejoined the Adventist Church.

Adventist leaders apologized four times between 1989 and 1995, but some KERAK members were not ready to accept them and others were unaware of them, local church leaders said Friday.

The unification discussions seemed to go nowhere, and serious talks ceased around 2000.

In 2011, a new generation of KERAK leaders initiated a series of talks with union and conference leadership. Upon hearing that the group might be interested in returning, Adventist world church president Ted N.C. Wilson asked Schoun to look into the situation. Arrangements were made for Schoun and the assistant to the president of the Trans-European Division, Raafat Kamal, to visit with KERAK and church leaders in Hungary.

“The first meeting was largely a listening and fact-finding event,” Schoun said.

Schoun traveled to Hungary several more times with Kamal, who is now the division president, as well as with former division president Bertil Wiklander. Each time he met with the local leaders, and he later organized public meetings.

“I apologized where the church had made mistakes, and we had long question-and-answer sessions with the KERAK people,” Schoun said. “Trust began to build, and each visit helped to move the groups toward each other.”

Schoun, who was traveling in Nigeria this week, was not present when the reconciliation document was finalized and released.

“I sought to establish a relationship between the leaders on both sides,” he said. “When that was established, they were able carry on the planning on their own.”

**A Turning Point in Hungary**
The April 23 agreement signals a significant turning point in the life of the Hungarian church, the Trans-European Division said.

“The document lists the biblical imperatives about unity and forgiving and it also contains mutual apologies,” it said. “Both sides commit themselves to build a future together in order to fulfill the mission God entrusted to His church.”

Church leaders cautioned that challenges remain in building a strong spiritual and emotional unity after 40 years of misunderstanding and enmity.

“But we have a hope, that God, who 'in Christ was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting people's trespasses against them,' will lead this process as we have seen Him working up until now,” the division statement said, citing 2 Corinthians 5:19.

Kamal, the division president, said he has big hopes for the Hungarian church.

“I praise God for His grace in bringing both communities to the foot of the cross where Christ-like forgiveness, healing, and love have taken over minds and hearts,” Kamal said.

“Over the past two years I personally witnessed first-hand genuine expressions of reconciliation by members and leaders alike,” he said. “Christ is coming soon, and He is uniting our Adventist believers in Hungary to be of one mind in focusing on the mission to be the salt and light.”

**Miracle on Everest: Adventist climber escapes death from avalanche after earthquake in Nepal**

“Amid the flood, God took my hand,” recounts the survivor

April 30, 2015 | Brasilia, Brazil | Carolyn Azo, ASN / ANN staff

Ernesto Olivares Miranda, a Seventh-day Adventist from Chile, is a member of a team of mountaineers who were on Mount Everest when the 7.8 magnitude earthquake rocked Nepal on Saturday, April 25.

“We were at the base camp when it began to tremble. The glacier sounded with movement and cracking. The clouds that covered the surrounding mountains did not allow us to see much. Suddenly, the noise began to get louder, echoing through the mountains, and it sounded like something was coming closer, but we couldn’t see anything,” Olivares Miranda said.

Olivares and his team were at a base camp located 17,585 feet (5,360 meters) above sea level.
“There were eternal seconds of uncertainty. We looked back and saw a cloud of snow approaching at a high speed. We decided to wait a few seconds to see if it was going to hit us. It was in that moment when we decided to throw ourselves onto the ice next to a pile of rocks,” Olivares said. “For a few seconds we felt a strong wind pass over us and snow began to fall.”

Olivares also told the South American News Agency (ASN) of the bleak scene from the aftermath. “We helped to rescue the injured, and just covered the dead. Those were very sad days. The majority of those killed were chefs and their assistants,” he said.

Olivares and his team were 50 meters from where the avalanche passed.

“In that moment I asked God to allow me to hug my family one more time. I remembered Psalm 91, ‘for he will command his angels concerning you…so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’” Olivares told the Adventist University of Chile Radio, “in that moment I clung to that promise.”

Hours later, personnel from the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) made contact with Olivares via WhatsApp and received a report of Olivares’ location and condition.

On Wednesday, April 29, Landerson Serpa, director of ADRA Bangladesh, and friend of the Chilean, informed ASN that the team Olivares was leading is still on the mountain waiting for help. “He is awaiting rescue at the Everest basecamp together with hundreds of isolated mountain climbers, they are well, but sad for the 20 people who died in the avalanche,” Serpa reported.

Chilean media disclosed that since the quake, Oliveras and his team have been assisting rescue workers. Olivares told the Chile Adventist University Radio that his team will also descend Everest to visit more basecamps “with the hope of being able to help.”

Church leaders call for peace in West Baltimore

Leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America express condolences, and advocate for change

April 28, 2015 | Silver Spring, Maryland, USA | NAD News Staff

The Administration of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America, issued the following statement on April 28, 2015, in response to the growing number of demonstrations following the funeral of Freddie Gray who died tragically in Baltimore, MD:
The Seventh-day Adventist church in North America is deeply saddened by the tragic death of Freddy Gray and the heartache it has caused his family and the Baltimore community. We extend our deepest condolences and continue to pray for his family.

In order to bring about change, we must engage in open, honest, civil, and productive conversation about the rights and equality of every member of our community. We pray that peace will prevail, for violence will only begat violence. To bring a lasting peace we, as a Church Community, must also descend on Baltimore with the love and compassion that Jesus modeled for us, not just now, during this time of turmoil, but in the years to come.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church stands ready to provide any and all resources necessary to help transform an oppressed, hopeless people into a vibrant, thriving community filled with hope.

We pray for the many citizens and clergy from various denominations including Adventist members that are participating in non-violent marches, encouraging peace. Pastor David Franklin, Miracle Temple Adventist Church; Pastor Reginald Exum, Edmonton Heights Adventist Church; and Pastor DuWayne Privette, Sharon Seventh-day Adventist Church have embodied love and compassion, taking to the streets to call for a non-violent solution.

The North American Division Adventist Community Services, the Columbia Union of Seventh-day Adventists, and the Allegheny East, and Chesapeake Conferences of Seventh-day Adventists, will lead a group of volunteers that will join the West Baltimore community in cleanup efforts, tentatively scheduled for tomorrow morning. Pray for these volunteers.

We admonish that those on either side of this conversation will strive to speak with peace, love, and grace.

We once again pray for the day when all of God’s children will treat each other without suspicion, bias, and hatred. As the Apostle Paul reminds us: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."