Inter-America: Adventist Administrators focus on improving educational institutions

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Propelled by the focus on improving education throughout the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Inter-America, presidents and vice presidents of higher education institutions, as well as presidents of governing boards, met for a special summit to review governing functions, management and evaluation procedures for universities across for the 13 universities in the territory.

More than 70 education leaders met to renew their commitment to Christian education as they gathered on the campus of the Central American Adventist University in Alajuela, Costa Rica, Mar. 2-3, 2011.

"This meeting was the first step to establishing good management practices as identified by the administrators of our institutions," said Dr. Gamaliel Florez, education director for the church in Inter-America.

University administrators were able to clearly see the role and duty of each governing board or entity and the functions as managers of such institutions, explained Dr. Florez, who was joined by a team of speakers from the Inter-American Division (IAD) Headquarters office as well as the Adventist World Church.

"The boards should know that their role is to govern and not to manage closely," added Florez. "In the same way, administrators were reminded that their function is to exercise their administrative duties without touching the areas established for the governing boards to act."

Each of the Adventist institutions in the IAD is governed by the board or governing body of its respective union office. The only exception is Montemorelos University located in North Mexico, which is operated by the IAD.

University leaders also established parameters for evaluating institutions by identifying the most efficient administrative practices that can work in their Adventist institutions.

It was all part of a process to improve the Adventist education for the nearly 17,000 students that are enrolled in the 13 Adventist universities and 1 junior college in Inter-America, said Dr. Florez of the meeting.

Improving the management of institutions was not only a focus of the summit but an opportunity for leaders to recommit to shaping young people to grow spiritually so they can fulfill the plan that God has for them.

"You are not called to question the philosophy of the Adventist Christian education, but to warrant that the institutions that you have been called to manage can continue fulfilling its mission," said Dr. Florez. "Our institutions should safeguard against any negative influence that can undermine the student's beliefs or can distract them from being saved."

It's about providing an education that shapes the kind of professionals suitable to perform in their field of knowledge, explained Dr. Florez. "Are our universities centers of education for this world and for eternity? Are we helping our students cultivate a closer communion with God? These are the kind of questions that will be part of thorough evaluation of our institutions," he added.
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The Teaching Respect for Religions Symposium gathered scholars, political representatives and legal experts at the Amman College of Al-Balqa Applied University on March 1. The event marked just the second time the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA) has met in the Middle Eastern in its 119-year history.

Organized in 1893 by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the IRLA is the oldest association dedicated to freedom of conscience for people of all faiths and persuasions.

"This conference has opened up an extraordinary opportunity for meaningful conversation with key Islamic leaders and thinkers about what it means to respect different religious traditions, and to live in harmony with one another," said John Graz, IRLA secretary-general.

"Two of the most powerful forces we can use to fight religious prejudice are knowledge about each other and building personal relationships," Graz said in his address.

The symposium was co-sponsored by the Arab Bridge Center for Human Rights, a non-governmental organization founded by former Jordanian Judge Amjad B. Shammout. It brought together IRLA experts, Islamic scholars and Imams, Jordanian law-enforcement leaders, youth leaders and members of the diplomatic community. Jordan's Prime Minister Marouf Suleiman al-Bakhit lent his support to the event and was represented by Jiryis Samawy, secretary-general of Jordan's Ministry of Culture.

Delbert Baker, a vice president of the Adventist world church and vice president of the IRLA, spoke to the group about respect and freedom -- principles that he said are mutually valued by both the Islamic and Judeo-Christian worlds. Yet, he said, too often a gap appears between theory and practice. He challenged the audience to analyze whether these principles influence their interactions with people.

In presenting his paper "Beyond Tolerance," IRLA coordinator for Interfaith Relations, Bill Johnsson, defined the difference between respect and tolerance. "Respect" actively affirms an individual's right to religious freedom, while "tolerance" can imply a reluctance to grant people their religious views, he said.

According to Johnsson, Jordan provided an ideal location for the symposium, given its track record as "a moderate Islamic nation that models openness, tolerance and rejection of violence." Johnsson helped facilitate an earlier, smaller gathering of religious freedom experts in Amman last year, which he said helped pave the way for this month's more public event.