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First conversation between Adventists, Mennonites affirms common ground

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Last month's formal conversation between leaders of the Mennonite World Conference and the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists offered the opportunity for both groups to share their beliefs and dispel misunderstandings in a receptive forum, leaders of both groups said.

The two denomination's focused on common beliefs and explored, though not yet officially, ways to possibly collaborate on issues of improving quality of life and religious freedom.

Both groups have a history of non-conformity and conscientious objection.

"By sitting down and talking with those of other faiths, we gain a deeper understanding of who they are," said John Graz, Public Affairs and Religious Liberty director for the Adventist Church, whose department organized the June 28 to July 1 event at its world headquarters.

In a joint statement, leaders from both faiths said each shares "a desire to recover the authenticity and passion of the New Testament church, a similar understanding of Christian history, and a strong commitment to be followers of Jesus in their personal lives and in their corporate witness to the world."

The Mennonite World Conference represents some 99 Mennonite and Brethren in Christ national churches worldwide, with a combined membership of some 1.6 million. Mennonites, who trace their roots to the Anabaptist branch of the 16th Century Reformation, are today recognized for their emphasis on peacemaking, their stance as conscientious objectors, and their involvement in dispute resolution, both at local and international levels.

The roughly 500-year-old communion faced some of the most severe persecution of Christians; last year the Lutheran World Federation even apologized for its persecution of Anabaptists, the root of both Adventists and Mennonites.

The Adventist Church rose following the Second Great Awakening in the United States in the 19th century, and it now has a world membership of some 17 million. Reverend Danisa Ndlovu, president of the Mennonite World Conference, expressed his thanks to the Adventist Church for hosting the conversation.

"When you see people from a distance you can't say that you know them," said Ndlovu, who also serves as bishop of the Brethren in Christ Church in Zimbabwe. "But it is different when you sit down with someone and exchange ideas -- now we can say 'We know you.'"

Still, further conversations will pick up were this meeting left off. Ongoing talks will explore Sabbath, its theology, and the Second Coming, said William Johnsson, director of the Adventist Church's inter-faith relations. "They believe in the Second Coming but it doesn't have the focus we put on it," Johnsson said.

Adventists hold their Sabbath day of worship from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown, as opposed to Mennonite and other Christian groups who worship on Sunday.