Adventist world church marks 100 years of corporate communication

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The century anniversary of the first public relations worker for the Adventist Church highlights the denomination's continued need for journalists and public relations professionals in its administrative offices worldwide.

Church officials today remembered the denomination's hiring of a Baltimore Sun reporter in 1912 to establish the church's Press Bureau. The move made the Adventist Church the first Protestant church to organize a formal public relations program.

That reporter, Walter Burgan, served as director of the Press Bureau until his death in 1940. The Press Bureau later evolved into what is today's Communication department, both at world church headquarters and in local administrative offices globally.

"Just like those church executives 100 years ago, we need to continue to be on the cutting edge of communication trends today," world church Communication Director Williams Costa told an audience of top church officials and world headquarters' employees.

"In many parts of the world, we have qualified people getting our message into the news media. We can do even more at all levels of administration worldwide. When we conduct corporate communication effectively, we are better understood by the public and we are closer as a church community globally," Costa said.

During the January 19 ceremony, church historian David Trim traced the history of Adventist communication ministry. The church's hiring of Burgan put it at the forefront of religious public relations.

"Today, we would do well to reflect on this decision, examine why [Burgan] was needed, why he in particular was hired, and how reviving this tradition at all levels of the denomination can strengthen our unity and mission," Trim said.

Throughout the 1940s and 50s, the Adventist Church remained at the helm of religious communication, Trim said. Communication Director J.R. Ferren "worked tirelessly" during the 1940s to convince church administrative offices to hire qualified professionals, and in 1956 Communication Director Howard B. Weeks wrote "Breakthrough: A Public Relations Guidebook for your Church." A landmark book on religious public relations, it was widely used by Christian denominations at the time as they sought to boost their presence in the public spotlight.

The church's early forays in public relations were successful largely because church leaders hired qualified professionals to shape the church's message and image, Trim said.

"Similarly today, if you're going to do Hispanic outreach, you need to hire someone who speaks Spanish. And it's the same with other types of outreach - if you're going to do media outreach,
you need to hire someone who speaks that language and understands that culture," he said.

Trim noted that even church co-founder Ellen G. White urged early Adventists to capitalize on the press and advertising agencies to "call attention to the work."

"The character and importance of our work are judged by the efforts made to bring it before the public," White wrote. "When these efforts are so limited, the impression is given that the message we present is not worthy of notice" (Evangelism, pg. 128).

World church General Vice President Ben Schoun, who offered prayer to close the ceremony, urged church leaders worldwide to integrate their efforts. An emphasis on global communication will strengthen the world church family and support the continued spread of the Adventist hope, he said.