Central Mexico: First communication summit emphasizes connecting more with the community

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Safe churches a priority for Adventist Risk Management

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Liliana Ramos wants her church to communicate its mission in the community more effectively. For three years, the 25-year-old has served as the communication director at the Villacoapa Adventist Church in Mexico City publishing bulletins, coordinating advertising for evangelistic outreach and delivering announcements from the platform Saturday mornings.

But Ramos said she thinks that public relations at the local church level should be much more.

"It's about sharing the Christian impact our church has in the community, not just talking to our members and letting them know what is going on," said Ramos, who holds a marketing degree and is earning a master's degree in communication and advertising.

To learn more about how to do just that, Ramos traveled to Bella Vista del Rio in northern central Mexico last month to participate in the church's first communication summit. About 80 local church communicators were in attendance. She found out that most of her peers who were recently appointed to the position of communication director for their church have no solid background in the area of communication but are willing to make a difference in reaching their respective communities.

Church leaders say the first goal of the summit was to understand what religious public relations is and dissolve misconceptions.

"Public relations is actually a secular craft to support spiritual work - just like people who cook in a church kitchen or deacons who move chairs. It needs to be done by people who know how to do it well," said Ansel Oliver, an assistant director in the Communication department at the Adventist Church world headquarters, who offered several workshops.

"The misconception is that we are 'sharing the gospel with the community' or 'proclaiming truth.' While we work to support an organization that does that, our goal as communication leaders is to share information in public forums so people are familiar with and have a positive impression of our brand as Seventh-day Adventists," Oliver said.

"That's a great way to support our ministers and members who do offer spiritual support for community members in our churches," he said.

For Ramos, it was a message that hasn't been preached much. She learned that most of her fellow communicators felt the same. What's more, she said, some of them had been considered mere announcers of upcoming events and activities.

"Sometimes it's about the culture in the church," says Ramos. "The challenge is, some church leaders and members don't understand the function or the positive impact communication can
have in the community and aren't as supportive."

She is thankful her pastor has been supportive in her role with projects like setting up a website for her church, but she still struggles to do more in a church where there are only 15 young people for which she can ask for help.

Understanding the role and responsibilities of the church communicator was a major reason for the summit, said Jorge Garcia, Communication director for the denomination's Central Mexican Union, and organizer of the event, which drew communicators from the four conferences and mission territories in the region.

The summit was held at Rancho Nuevo Adventist Church, situated in a rural area without Internet or mobile access.

"We wanted to ensure communicators understand their important role in the church and the community and become better communicators as well," said Garcia.

Developing more effective communicators is key to reaching the large urban areas, church leaders said. Mexico City has more than 24 million people and a church membership of about 67,000.

"The life of the church is becoming more and more professional, not only culturally but technologically," said Pastor Tomas Torres, president of the church in Central Mexico. "Mexico City has many challenges but great opportunities."

Pastor Torres said the Communication department is a ministry and has a specific purpose "to communicate the truth that we know," he added as he thanked the young local church communicator crowd for their interest as he reflected on the theme of "Building Bridges of Hope."

The event also featured consultants from the Inter-American Division (IAD) office in Miami, Florida. Seminar and training workshop topics covered the vision and challenges in communication, the duties of the communication director, crisis communication, news writing and reporting, media relations and netAdventist -- a content management software platform for church websites.

Days earlier, communication directors from throughout the four church conferences and missions in Central Mexico also met to strategize and network as they oversee communication throughout the 176 churches in the territory.

For Ramos, the summit gave her the tools to go back to her church and strive to implement new methods in her role as communication director. She also experienced hope.

"I was impressed with the impact church news could have in the community and even around the world church," said Ramos. She is driven to share with her church leaders and members how positive and influential communicating with the media and community can be.

Luis Miguel Flores of the Tenango del Valle Adventist Church in Toluca has understood his responsibilities during the summit. He was recently appointed as the communication director at his 150-member church. At 29 and nearly completing his studies in information technology, he goes back with the goal of setting up a website for his church.

"I want to motivate my church to jump on board and participate in and coordinate events to benefit the community," said Flores. He has a number of peers whom he wants to enlist to help him maintain the website.

Organized in 2008, the Central Mexican Union is one of four major church regions in Mexico. The church there oversees two conferences and two missions in the Federal District of Mexico, the states of Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Michoacan and Querétaro, as well as dozens of primary and secondary schools.

For more information on the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Central Mexico, visit www.unionmexicanacentral.org
Communication Summit participants pose for a group picture during the historic event held at the Rancho Nuevo Adventist Church in Buena Vista del Río, Queretaro, Mexico, last month. More than 80 communicators met for the region's first communication summit.

To view photos of Central Mexico's Communication Summit, click here.
A new child protection program from the Seventh-day Adventist Church's risk management organization is galvanizing the church’s ongoing efforts to shield minors from abuse and misconduct.

"It's part of our mission to help protect the ministries of the Seventh-day Adventist Church," says Blinci, citing Children's Ministries, Youth Ministries, Pathfinders and Adventurers as a "core component" of that mission. "Faith-based communities have a moral, ethical and legal responsibility to protect children from harm when they're in our care," he says.

The church has made significant strides toward achieving that goal. In North America, many church employees and volunteers are mandated reporters, Blinci says. This means they have a legal obligation to report abuse or allegations of abuse that occur within the church setting. By 2003, the church's North American Division had drafted protocol for dealing with sexual misconduct and child abuse. Late last year, the division voted a new child protection policy mandating that every level of church administration implement a training and screening program for volunteers.

The Adventist world church has also been proactive about writing guidelines and voting policies to protect minors. Indeed, at the church's General Conference Session in 2010, delegates voted to add to the Church Manual specific language guiding the appointment of church employees and volunteers who work closely with minors. They agreed that adults leading out in Pathfinders, Vacation Bible School, Children's Ministries and Sabbath School programs "must meet church and legal standards and requirements, such as background checks or certification."

Still, Blinci says that policies, guidelines and good intentions only go so far. Adventist Risk Management routinely handles a couple dozen cases of child abuse every year and has spent some $30 million on indemnity cases over the past two decades. Many U.S. states have open statutes of limitations, allowing older claims of abuse to be raised and litigated.

What the church needs are tools and resources to put in the hands of local church administrators and leaders, he says.

"We've heard for so many years from church members, 'How do we do it?' Blinci says.

Now Adventist Risk Management is providing an answer. Through a partnership with Shield The Vulnerable, the organization's new Child Protection Plan offers online training for adults on addressing abuse, neglect, predators, bullying, boundaries and respect. It also provides age-appropriate information for children on recognizing and reporting abuse.

Shield The Vulnerable -- a California-based service provider that frequently works with faith-
ARM Vice President and Chief Risk Management Officer Arthur Blinci wants to put tools and resources in the hands of local church leaders. A partnership with Shield The Vulnerable equips them to better protect children, he says.

So often, especially on the volunteer side, there's typically no screening. You want to volunteer for Children's Ministries? Great, come on, we can use you," he says. "Now, when potential volunteers know before they even apply that you're going to run a criminal background check, if they have a propensity, they're not even going to volunteer."

While creating the Child Protection Plan, ARM discovered that the church's Lake Union Conference had already partnered with Shield The Vulnerable and piloted its training and screening programs in the U.S. states of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin and a portion of Minnesota.

Blinci expects all 59 of the North American Division's conferences will follow suit in the coming months. Through Shield The Vulnerable, a conference or other administrative unit creates an account that tracks progress as they train volunteers and perform background screenings. "It goes all the way down to the local church and school level," he says.

ARM resource kits for local churches include PowerPoint presentations, a video clip, a sample child protection policy and reference information.

While North American Division policy doesn't mandate the use of Shield The Vulnerable, it does require some type of training and screening. "There are other ways a conference may choose to do their own training and orientation, but they have to do something," Blinci says.

"Abuse of children is not only prevalent in society, but is also occurring within our churches," says Phyllis Washington, Children's Ministries director for the North American Division. "By recognizing that the problem exists in our congregations, we are taking a crucial step toward providing a safe environment, restoring trust, promoting healing and ultimately preventing child abuse."

While the Shield The Vulnerable program may not fully apply to the world church due to differences in reporting laws, some of its elements are universally relevant and can be tailored to fit local needs, Blinci says.

"The goal is to protect our kids, which are the greatest resources we have. Hopefully now there are no excuses."

Click [here](http://www.interamerica.org/users/index.php?type=news&id=1999&lan... of 2 2/22/2012 3:10 PM) to download Child Protection Plan resources and references from Adventist Risk Management.