In Rwanda, Adventist president highlights unity, reconciliation and lifting up Jesus

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Seventh-day Adventists in Rwanda are committed to bolstering society and bringing unity and reconciliation to the East African nation, world church President Ted N. C. Wilson said during an official visit last week.

Wilson, currently on a tour of the region, spoke for Sabbath worship service on March 3 at Rwanda's Amahoro National Stadium in Kigali.

Wilson commended the spirit of camaraderie he observed. The nation continues to heal after genocide claimed the lives of as many as 800,000 people in 1994. The region has experienced intermittent war for decades between Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups.

"God is blessing Rwanda," Wilson said, adding that he is grateful for the "great respect" Rwandans have for "God's church."

Several government officials, including the country's prime minister and the mayor of Kigali, were present for worship services, which drew an audience of more than 30,000 people.

Wilson reminded government representatives that the Adventist Church is committed to supporting Rwandan society through education, health and spiritual programs. The church leader also took the opportunity to thank national officials for protecting religious liberty in the country.

"May it always be said that the country of Rwanda provides religious freedom for all its people," Wilson said, citing the government's policy to allow Seventh-day Adventists to complete their national community service on Sunday rather than Saturday.

"We do thank you for that special provision," Wilson said, adding that Adventists "respect, foster and nurture religious freedom for all people."

Earlier in the week, Prime Minister Pierre Habumuremyi joined Wilson in laying the foundation stone for an expansion of the Adventist University of Central Africa. The new School of Science and Technology in Kigali will "help advance God's work," Wilson said, adding that the extension campus will support many Rwandans in the community, not just Adventists.

"The government of Rwanda appreciates all the Adventist Church programs in the country, especially those in the education sector, health [and] preparing hearts of people to be good citizens," Habumuremyi said, according to The New Times.

The church operates Voice of Hope in Rwanda, a radio station that covers 75 percent of the country. Radio is still a primary news source in Rwanda -- Africa's most densely populated country -- where few people have television or Internet access.

In his stadium address, Wilson's message focused on sharing Jesus.

"Is it sometimes easier to participate in the religious activities of the church than to talk about Jesus? For sure, these activities testify of Jesus. But are you willing personally to talk to somebody and tell them about your precious relationship with Jesus? Wilson asked.

"I want to urge every Seventh-day Adventist in Rwanda to lift up Jesus in Rwanda," he said. Part of that witness involves sharing the church's foundation in Scripture and the Spirit of Prophecy, Wilson added, referring to the Bible and the writings of church co-founder Ellen G. White.

"Let the people know that you believe in God's Holy Word," he said. Wilson also encouraged Adventists in East-Central Africa to join in the world church's initiative to distribute White's book The Great Controversy.

The church in East-Central Africa has committed to sharing 15 million copies of the book, which traces God's leading throughout history and provides spiritual answers for today's unsettled world.

As he often does during official visits, Wilson also reminded church members in Rwanda to embrace their identity as Seventh-day Adventists.

"When people ask what religion you are, don't be hesitant or tentative. Don't just say, 'Well, I'm an Adventist.' Say, 'I am a Seventh-day Adventist,' Wilson said.

Adventists preach a sermon "every time you say it," he said, explaining that "Seventh-day Adventist" embodies the church's distinct beliefs -- observance of the seventh-day Sabbath and hope in Christ's soon return.

Wilson also urged pastors and lay people in Rwanda to "work together in a dynamic way" to share the church's message of spiritual revival and reformation.