Guatemala: Hundreds join the church after baptisms in Lake Atitlan

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World religious freedom congress to help advocates identify emerging threats

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Organizers of this month’s 7th World Congress for Religious Freedom say they’re focused on helping religious liberty advocates stay ahead of the curve in recognizing new threats to religious freedom and responding effectively.
Thousands of Seventh-day Adventists gathered earlier this month at Lake Atitlan in northwest Guatemala to witness the baptism of hundreds of new members.

"You are leaving your past behind and will begin a new life, with new dreams and new desires," said Pastor Israel Leito, president of the church in Inter-America, to those in the baptismal robes gathered at the lakeshore. He also appealed to the friends and families of the baptismal candidates to seek a readiness for heaven.

"It's an amazing moment that we are experiencing today," said Pastor Abraham Tzic, field secretary of the 16,000-member Northwest Adventist Mission office in Totonicapan, Guatemala. "It's a real blessing how many are getting baptized just today." More than 320 new members were baptized in the lake.

"These aren't all who were scheduled to get baptized today, only about 80 percent are here," said Pastor Tzic. "Many could not come because of the distance and will be baptized in their churches."

The church in Guatemala has been evangelizing aggressively, holding more than 1,000 campaigns resulting in nearly 5,000 baptisms in the last three months, said Pastor Gustavo Menendez, personal ministries director for the church in Guatemala.

For years, all eight regions of the church in Guatemala have been holding massive baptisms at Lake Atitlan once a year on the last Sunday of every first quarter, according to Pastor Menendez.

"We decided to just hold the northwest mission region at Lake Atitlan because of the increasing efforts from laypeople who enrolled in Inter-America's Vision One Million discipleship program, and sharing the Gospel," said Pastor Menendez. Each region held its baptisms.

According to Pastor Menendez, 310 were baptized at the lake last year and that included the northwest region and the three fields in Guatemala City. So far 796 joined the church between all regions on that day.

Pastor Tzic, who oversees 28 churches and congregations in three districts, said there are 1,200 active church members registered in the discipleship program since October 2011, and plans are to have up to 3,000 by the end of this year, bringing a total of 7,500 active church members trained in 2012.

With a shortage of pastors, Vision 60,000, the name the church in Guatemala gave to its own discipleship enrollment program, has drawn more participation from church members and laypeople who have taken it upon themselves to dive into spiritual revival and taken the call of reaching others around them with the gospel very seriously, said Guenther Garcia, president of the church in Guatemala.

"So far, this has been a record breaking year for Guatemala," explained Garcia. Garcia has been closely leading evangelism efforts throughout the country. He added that the 120 pastors and 35,000 active church members have been doubling their efforts to offer hope and prepare people for the Second Coming of Jesus.

The fast growth of the church in Guatemala has local and top church leaders talking about

Pastor Israel Leito, IAD President, speaks to more than 3,500 gathered at the Lake Atitlan, in Panajachel, to witness the baptism of more than 300, held April 1, 2012 in northwest region in Guatemala.
Organizers of this month's 7th World Congress for Religious Freedom say they're focused on helping religious liberty advocates stay ahead of the curve in recognizing new threats to religious freedom and responding effectively.

The three-day conference, set to begin April 24 in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, is expected to draw more than 800 government officials, legal experts and religious liberty advocates from 60 countries to explore the impact of "radical secularism" and other forces that are thought to erode religious freedom protection around the world.

The event comes as research shows that global restrictions on religious freedom are on the rise. A Pew Research Center study last year reported that religious freedom restrictions increased for about a third of the world's population during the last decade. The limits were mainly due to government restrictions occurring in a few, but populous, countries.

The congress will focus on the theme "Secularism and Religious Freedom-Conflict or Partnership?" which highlights an area of increasing concern.

"For many people of faith, the word 'secularism' carries a host of negative connotations," said John Graz, Secretary General of the International Religious Liberty Association, which is sponsoring the event. "They may see it as a force that's hostile toward religion. But religious freedom has historically flourished under a secular government that doesn't play 'religious favorites.'"

Other issues to be addressed at the Congress include the political and religious fallout from the Arab Spring revolutions, and well as continuing fears around the world of religious extremism and religiously motivated violence.

According to Graz, another emerging threat to religious minorities is so-called "radical secularism," which casts religion as just another "special interest group" in society, and seeks to limit religious expression on the grounds of "protecting secularism." He cites the 2011 "burqa ban" for Muslim women in France as an example of this trend.

Among those attending the 7th World Congress are government officials and legal experts from the United States, the Caribbean and South and Central America, Europe, Russia and the Middle East, along with scholars and human rights activists from around the world.

The International Religious Liberty Association was chartered by Seventh-day Adventist leaders in 1893 and is dedicated to defending and promoting freedom of religion for people of all faiths. The IRLA has non-governmental organization consultative status at the United Nations, and affiliates and partner associations in 80 countries, and is the world's oldest association for defending religious freedom.

Daily news and video from the congress will be available at www.irla.org.