Andrews University grants honorary doctorate degree to Montemorelos University president

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IRLA: First-day reflections Why are we here?

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Libna Stevens  >  Communication Department

May 7, 2012

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May 7, 2012 - Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States...Benjamin Garcia/IAD

Andrews University (AU), one of the most prestigious educational institutions of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, granted an honorary Doctorate in Pedagogy to Ismael Castillo Osuna, president of Montemorelos University in Mexico, for "his influence in the development of Adventist education."

The honorary doctorate award was granted yesterday during the university's commencement exercises in Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States.

"I receive this in the name of all my colleagues who throughout the years have manifested a great commitment to the Adventist model of education," said Castillo upon hearing of the award. "It is a recognition to the efforts to carrying forward an Adventist model in our institution."

Originally from the northeast coast of Mexico, Castillo graduated in 1969 with a teaching degree in elementary education. He later pursued a degree in theology in 1973 and a master's degree in religion by Andrews University through Montemorelos University.

He has served the Seventh-day Adventist Church for nearly 40 years as a pastor, departmental director, and school principal. Since 1987, Castillo has served as president of Montemorelos University.

Under his leadership, Montemorelos University has expanded various graduate programs and has extended services to numerous national and international institutions in the Americas, Africa, and Europe.

During his 25 years as president of Montemorelos, the institution has signed agreements with numerous entities, received numerous important accreditations, and prepared hundreds of students and workers for the mission fields around the world.

Castillo has given dozens of conferences and classes on leadership and the philosophy of Adventist education, subjects about which he is most passionate.

He authored a devotional book for young people in 2010.

He has been a tireless promoter of student and employee participation in community service in the region and in other cities throughout Mexico and abroad.

In 2009, The Inter-American Division granted Castillo a Medal of Distinction for his contribution to Adventist education, during the church's first division-wide Teacher Congress held in Cancun, Mexico.

He has been married to his wife Norka for 39 years. They have three children and six grandchildren.

For more information about Ismael Castillo and Montemorelos University, visit www.um.edu.mx
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Apr 25, 2012

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April 24, 2012 - Punta Cana, Dominican Republic...Nigel Coke/IRLA

Since arriving in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, at the Barcelo Bavaro Hotel and Resort, I can't help but say that this is a beautiful place in the Caribbean.

But amid the beautiful Caribbean sea, bright sunshine and service-oriented staff in a well-constructed and designed building are government officials, church leaders and religious liberty experts from as far away as Russia, Jordan, Spain, Zambia, Australia and Korea, who are among over 800 attendees who have gathered for the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA) 7th World Congress.

So, the question that jumps out at me on the first of this three-day congress is: Why are we here?

The March release of the annual report by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (known as USCIRF) named 16 nations as "countries of particular concern" in its recommendations to the United States State Department regarding which countries fail to protect the religious freedom rights of their citizens. And, according to Dwayne Leslie, IRLA's deputy secretary general, "this year's report paints a grim picture for religious freedom globally."

In his address on Tuesday to the largest-ever gathering for a World Congress for Religious Freedom, IRLA President and noted Baptist minister Denton Lotz said "We're here today because we believe that freedom of religion is basic to all human rights."

'Why we are here' hits me forcefully when, according to Lotz, freedom of religion is now being reduced to freedom of worship.

He said "freedom of religion is the institutional expression of religion beyond the church building. Freedom of religion allows seminaries, colleges, universities, orphanages, publishing houses, hospitals and access to radio and television. On the other hand, freedom of worship privatizes religion, allowing for worship services on certain days of the week with generally little public expression of faith. This narrowing definition of 'freedom of religion' into 'freedom of worship' will eventually limit and restrict religion."

In essence, what Lotz has described is a practical scenario of a non-effective church if it cannot utilize its various institutions and tools for reaching people.

The question of why we are here becomes filled with grave concern when we consider the fact that 70 percent of the world's population live in places with religious subjugation.

Conflict or Partnership

The theme of the congress "Secularism and Religious Freedom - Conflict or Partnership" was brought into focus by former Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom in the US State Department. Robert Seiple posited that the church has, in many respects, led the secularization of the West.
"It has been changed more by culture than the church has changed culture," he said. "And we end up with an insidious counterfeit that puts us on a slippery slope where we lose our ability to be relevant, to speak truth to power, and we lose our seat at the table."

Dr. John Graz, Secretary General of the IRLA sums up the reason 'why we are here' this way. "We are here to affirm and further reaffirm the cause of religious freedom. This congress is about religious freedom, but it is not a religious event. We are all here together. We represent different faiths, different religions and different churches. We are different, but we are respectful of each other. We are here because we believe in human dignity."

So...we are here because in January 2011 the influential governor of Pakistan's Punjab Province, Salman Taseer, was killed by one of his body guards because he opposed Pakistan's blasphemy law and many were angered by his defense of a Christian woman sentenced to death.

We are here because in March 2011, Shabazz Bhatti, a Catholic Christian and the only Christian in the Pakistan Cabinet was killed because he also opposed his country's blasphemy law.

And, we are here because Yousef Nadarkhani, a Christian pastor in Iran is awaiting execution. His crimes? He is an apostate who abandoned Islam. He was convicted of practicing Christianity and questioned the mandatory Islamic religious education of his children. He was given an option to recant his faith and live, or refuse and die. He has not recanted and he is condemned to be lynched.

The Congress, which is being held from April 24 to 26, will not provide all the answers to the religious injustices that exist in the world. But it will provide a catalyst by which each one present can become a voice of freedom and promote and protect the God-given gift of religious freedom for all.

This is 'why we are here!'