Share the Vision of Hope Amidst Challenges

First Report from the North American Division 2014 Year-end Meetings

By Julio C. Muñoz

Silver Spring, Md. — "The ultimate goal for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America (also called the North American Division) is Jesus and His soon return," said Daniel R. Jackson, President of the Division, in his report that kicked off the first full day of the 2014 North American Division Year-end Meetings. His report was addressed to 325 members of the Executive Committee gathered at the Division’s headquarters.
“Jesus is everything! He is the reason for our existence and our focal point,” said Pastor Jackson who then reminded everyone that “It is not a crime to preach about Jesus in our churches.”

Jackson began by reiterating the mission statement of the Division, “To Reach the North American territory and the world with the distinctive message of Hope and Wholeness.” Delegates received the statement with resounding “Amen’s!”

Jackson pointed out that the North American Division “is a division where the sun never sets. The division where the fun never sets,” Jackson said to laughs from the attendees.

While Jackson’s report began with a hopeful message of the vision to share hope and wholeness across the territory, the Secretary’s report painted a picture of the real challenges that have kept the growth of the Church relatively stagnant in North America.

The Adventist Church in North America added fewer new members in 2013 continuing a gradual decline for the fourth year, while the net growth rate increased minimally according to data presented during the Secretary’s report.

G. Alex Bryant, Executive Secretary for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America, cited sobering figures from the Seventh-day Adventist World Church during his report. While the Adventist Church has baptized nearly 32 million people in the last 30 years, more than 11 million of them have left the Church. The church of the North America Division is not immune to this trend.

In a survey of Adventist members who have left the church, 25 percent cited a lack of compassion as the reason for leaving. Another 32 percent cited “not fitting in” and “too much focus on minor issues.”

“Former members were more concerned with hypocrisy in the Church than they were about worship style and theology,” Bryant said. “When was the last time we argued about that?”

Recent discussions about the ordination of women to the ministry have caused debates at various levels of the church, Jackson said to delegates. But as Christians, he continued, we are called to discuss issues with the understanding and compassion modeled by Christ.

“I don’t think it’s part of our mission to start attacking each other just because we don’t agree,” Jackson said. “I’m not saying for a moment that we don’t have the right to disagree, but God has given us the responsibility to share His love.”

Jackson asked that the North American church members seek “higher ground” during these challenging times while the discussion about ordination builds up as General Conference Session in San Antonio, Texas in July 2015 approaches.
Quickly, Jackson transitioned to the impending move of the North American Division’s headquarters from the Adventist World Headquarter’s building. He stated that the NAD was beginning plans for a relocation because the division needs to “grow up.”

“[The NAD will move] because that’s the natural progression for an organization that has been tied by the apron strings to Mommy and Daddy for too long,” said Jackson. He was referring to the fact that North America, while called a division since 1910, was not “an organizational unit” until much later. Jackson also gave examples of other territories of the world church that have relocated in the last 20 years.

Jackson also highlighted a recently launched campaign called “Pray One Million,” asking church members to pray for one person for one minute each day. Thus, each four-month period leading up to the General Conference Session, members of the Church in North America will have prayed 1 million hours. Watch the video.

“The time has come, Brethren, that we rise above. That we reach out to higher ground. That, while we have our conversations, we not lose sight of what God really wants us to be focusing on. I want to urge you to participate with me in the Pray One Million Initiative.” said Jackson.

Elden Ramirez, director for Volunteer Ministries, was the highlight of the Secretary’s Report. He shared that 52 percent of missionaries worldwide came from the North American Division and that nearly 52,000 volunteers have been sent from North America in the first three quarters of this year.

“What’s exciting is that there were 10,000 more volunteers than last year. That’s 10,000 more people making a difference in this world,” Ramirez said. “But we’re not done yet. There are still positions that need to be filled, and we are hopeful that, by the end of this year, we will be able to fill every volunteer position around the world.”

One of the high points of the morning business session was when Jackson welcomed the student association president’s from NAD Adventist colleges and universities who were attending the session as new delegates with full voting rights. He urged them to speak up and voice their opinions.

“If I paid $1,500 to attend a meeting, I would make sure my voice was heard,” he said with a chuckle.

During his presentation Jackson highlighted several items of interest that would be discussed during the business meetings including:

• Reports on the six Building Blocks of the NAD Strategic Plan
• A statement on human sexuality
• A “Mission to the Cities” update
• A report on the North American Division headquarters relocation
• A conversation on the ordination of women to the ministry in the context of the upcoming General Conference Session vote
• Oakwood University joining the North American Division
• The transition of media ministries in the Division

Jackson concluded by reminding delegates that throughout all of the challenges, we must rely upon the understanding of God’s Word.

“Jesus ought to be at the center of every doctrine. Our only hope for the Seventh-day Adventist Church is Jesus,” Jackson said. “Jesus is our Hope yesterday, today and forever!”