Weekly News From Around the Columbia Union Conference

December 4, 2013

Chesapeake Members Shelter Neighbors From the Cold

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The mother didn’t want to share her name, but after looking around at the large open gym where there were pallets and blankets laid out on the floor, enough for 20 people, one could understand her hesitation.—Story and photos by Taashi Rowe

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WAU Alumni to Celebrate 70th Anniversary

This week Dick and Liz Harris of the Fletcher Park church in Hendersonville, N.C., will be celebrating their 70th wedding anniversary! The two met while attending what was then Washington Missionary College (now Washington Adventist University) in Takoma Park, Md., during the tail-end of the Great Depression and the height of World War II. During this time, Dick was studying for the ministry while Liz studied and taught music. They were married December 22, 1943, when Dick was only 19 and Liz 20. Dick went on to pastor churches in Virginia and Michigan with Liz by his side.

When asked what kept them happily married for seven decades, Dick didn’t have to think long. “Both of us love the Lord,” he explained. “The more you both love God, the closer you tend to stay together.” Each day they set aside time for morning and evening devotionals with each another, ensuring to keep God in the midst of their marriage. They will have their anniversary celebration this coming Sunday.—Story by Ivan Blake

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Columbia Union Members Win Communication Awards

David Franklin (pictured), co-host of Hope Channel’s Let’s Pray program and assistant pastor of Allegheny East Conference’s Berea Temple in Baltimore, recently received the Young Professional Award at the recent meeting of the Society of Adventist Communicators in Salt Lake City, Utah. The award is designed to recognize the achievements of communication professionals under the age of 35. Franklin is noted for his natural communication abilities and high standard of excellence.

The Reger Smith Cutting Edge Award was awarded to the Hope Channel team behind the promotional spot “Hopey to the Rescue.” The award is named in honor of the late Reger Smith Jr., who served the Seventh-day Adventist Church for 27 years in public relations, graphic design, photography and other areas of communication.

Chesapeake Members Share Spiritual Food With 5,000
On Thanksgiving day, when most of the country was focused on turkey, stuffing and pumpkin pies, members of Chesapeake Conference’s Dundalk Spanish church in Baltimore worried about spiritual hunger. Members met at the church for a special Thanksgiving service and meal. After hearing a message from Orlando Rosales (pictured), the conference’s associate for Multilingual Ministries, they donned T-shirts, which had the following message in English and Spanish: “JESUS says: Come to me, I come shortly, I come for you.”

They then traveled to five different areas in Baltimore with the goal of distributing 5,000 copies of Steps to Christ in Spanish and English and 100 missionary magazines. Some eight visitors joined them in outreach. They were able to distribute all the materials in three hours.

“As a people, we have been called to proclaim the gospel,” said Víctor Chuquillanqui, an associate pastor in the district who participated in the outreach. “Every day there are opportunities to share the message of Jesus’ soon return. We must not let one day go by without telling somebody.”

Únete a los 5,000, Baltimore para JESÚS
Con el lema “Únete a los 5,000, Baltimore para Jesús” los hermanos de la iglesia ASD de Dundalk Spanish, después de semanas de preparación con ayuno y oración, se dieron cita el jueves 28 de Nov, en la iglesia para celebrar el día de “Acción de Gracias”, después de testimonios y agradecimientos de varios de los asistentes, el Pr. Orlando Rosales, director asociado de los ministerios multilingües de la Conferencia de Chesapeake, tuvo un mensaje de inspiración, luego todos juntos participamos de un suculento desayuno y volvimos al santuario para entregar las camisetas con el siguiente mensaje de esperanza, tanto en Español y como en Ingles: “JESÚS hoy te dice: Ven a mí, Vengo en breve, Vengo por ti.” Finalmente fuimos desafiados con otro mensaje por el Pr. Rosales y con un llamado a pasar al altar hicimos una oración muy especial por 5,000 libros “el camino a Cristo” en español y en inglés junto con cientos de revistas misioneras a repartir, para que cumpliesen su cometido en las personas que se alcanzarían con ellos en ese día.

Así, animados y desafiados, salimos de la iglesia, con mas del 85% de la feligresía y con unas 8 visitas que se nos unieron, a cinco centros de distribución en el downtown de Baltimore. Para la Gloria del Señor todo este material precioso fue repartido como en el espacio de 3 horas.—Historia por Víctor Chuquillanqui

Allegheny East Church Acquires Historic Building
Yesterday marked a milestone in what has been a 25-year journey for Allegheny East Conference’s First church of Coatesville, Pa. Members of the church’s nonprofit arm signed the paper work making them full owners of the building (pictured) that houses the W.C. Atkinson Memorial Center. The center began with a five-days-a-week homeless shelter housed in the basement of the church where they held their Sabbath School classes. Today the church owns an historic hospital building, which houses up to 22 homeless men each night, 18 apartments for low-income families, two transitional houses for men and three permanent homes for disabled men. They also provide a series of social services to the community.

“We have an open-door policy, just like the heart of God,” says Minnie McNeil, the conference’s Adventist Community Services director and former chair of the nonprofit that runs the center. “We have had the privilege of ‘serving the poor, hurting and disillusioned in Christ’s name.’ We continue reaping the rewards of seeing lives transformed.”—Story by Taashi Rowe

Pennsylvania Church Requests Prayers
This month the 25 families attending Pennsylvania Conference's Philadelphia Youth Connect (PYC) church are praying for seven baptisms. The group, which had its inauguration in May, is already planning an evangelism series for this month, starting December 7. Gabriel Montalvo, the church's pastor, says the group is an English-language church focused on reaching second-generation Hispanics and encouraging them to become active disciples of Christ. Pray that God will use them to change more people's lives.

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**Pedidos de oración de PYC**

Este mes, las 25 familias que asisten a la iglesia Philadelphia Youth Connect (PYC) en Pennsylvania Conference están orando por siete bautismos. El grupo, que se creó en mayo, ya tiene planeada una campaña evangelística para este mes, que comenzará el 7 de diciembre. Gabriel Montalvo, pastor de la iglesia, dice que el grupo es una iglesia de habla inglesa cuyo objetivo es llegar a la segunda generación de hispanos e instarlos a que sean discípulos activos de Cristo.
U.S. Federal Judge Strikes Down Law Giving Clergy Tax-Free Housing Allowance

A United States federal judge recently ruled that the clergy exemption for paying taxes on income designated for housing is unconstitutional, a ruling that, if upheld, could affect the compensation package of tens of thousands of clergy in the country.

In her decision, U.S. District Court Judge Barbara Crabb said the law, known as the “parsonage exemption,” benefits “religious persons and no one else, even though doing so is not necessary to alleviate a special burden on religious exercise.” The exemption for clergy, she wrote, violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which prohibits Congress from making a law “respecting an establishment of religion.”

Visit our Facebook page and tell us what you think about the ruling.—Story by Ansel Oliver/Adventist News Network

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Book Release: Refreshed

Raj Attiken, who will retire at the end of the year as president of the Ohio Conference, recently wrote the monograph Refreshed: A New Paradigm for Church Leadership. For more than 10 years, Attiken and his team have been practicing the principles outlined in the monograph with intended outcomes and unintended consequences, he says.

Q: Tell us about this new leadership paradigm.

A: We believe that people and organizations thrive and flourish when they are in environments of love, trust and freedom. People rise to their highest levels of service, productivity and performance in environments that support creativity, innovation, risk-taking and have a high threshold for failure. The dominant model of leadership in the church requires that people be good followers—able to take
orders, follow instructions and implement the programs and campaigns launched by the denomination. The model we foster requires that people be leaders who are able to discern and discover what God wants them to be and become in their unique contexts, and pursue it with integrity.

The book can be found at the Center for Creative Ministries.—Interview by Taashi Rowe

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Columbia Union Members in the News

Meaning of Christmas celebrated during Sabbath Sundown Serenade concert in Hagerstown

Silver Spring community organizations help families displaced by Forest Park fire

Some Seventh-day Adventists forge ahead on women clergy

UPCOMING EVENTS

MARYLAND

December 6: Washington Adventist University's (WAU) Music Department presents a Christmas concert featuring their Columbia Collegiate Chorale under the direction of James Bingham and New England Youth Ensemble under the direction of Preston Hawes. The concert takes place at nearby Sligo church in Takoma Park, Md., and starts at 7 p.m.

December 7: The “Songs for My Sisters” benefit concert will take place at 6 p.m., at the Capital Brazilian Temple located at 12420 Scaggsville Road in Highland, Md. The classical Christmas program is sponsored by the General Conference Women’s Ministries department and features instrumental, choral and vocal music. Proceeds will be used by the GC Women’s Scholarship Program to help talented and needy Adventist women obtain a college education. This scholarship fund has helped 2,104 women in 121 countries. To support this endeavor and learn more, visit AdventistWomensMinistries.org, or call (301) 680-6636.

December 7: The Maranatha Adventist Fellowship invites all to their holiday choral presentation featuring Tabitha Hill, Misterwey Achaks, Charlene Jenkins and the Ambassadors. The program, which begins at 5 p.m., will be held at the Southern Asian church, 2001 East Randolph Road in Silver Spring, Md. Tax-deductible donations will go toward their new church building. For more information, call (240) 389-4915 or visit supportmaf.org.

December 7: Baltimore First church hosts a free gospel concert "with Christmas trimmings" starting at 11 a.m. and featuring recording artists Steve Darmody and Jennifer LaMountain. The church is located at 3291 Saint Johns Lane in Ellicott City, Md. For more information call (410) 465-6864.
December 12: The students of Sligo Adventist School in Takoma Park, Md., presents their Christmas program with the theme "O Little Christmas Town." The program starts at 7 p.m., at 8300 Carroll Avenue.

December 13: The students of Takoma Academy's Fine Arts department present, "Great Joy," a musical and dramatic celebration of the birth of Christ. The program, under the direction of Lulu Mupfumbu, will feature the drama troupe, band, string ensemble, chorale and camerata. The program starts at 7 p.m. at 8120 Carroll Avenue in Takoma Park, Md.

December 15: The Sligo Adventist School in Takoma Park hosts their third annual Christmas Craft Fair and Small Business Showcase from 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Admission is $1. Vendors are welcome at $35 a table. Inquire about early bird specials and applications online at sligoadventistschool.org under parent resources. For more information, call Heather Lunsford at (301) 434-1417.

VIRGINIA

December 5-9: The New Market (Va.) church hosts its annual Journey to Bethlehem, where more than 100 actors help re-enact the night of Christ's birth, complemented by real livestock. With the work of more than 450 volunteers, the story of Bethlehem will unfold across several acres of the adjacent Shenandoah Valley Academy. Performances take place 5:30–9:30 p.m. Tickets and more information are available at J2BNewMarket.com.

December 7: The Courthouse Road church is hosting a musical/choir concert to benefit victims in the Philippines of Typhoon Haiyan. The concert begins at 7 p.m. The church is located at 30 Courthouse Road in Richmond, Va.
As the 22-year-old mother of two tried to get her friendly, rambunctious, four-year-old daughter to sit still at the dinner table, her five-year-old son sat counting. He was doing pretty well. He almost made it to 100, when Luritz Parker, a member of Chesapeake Conference’s Atholton church in Columbia, Md., interrupted to hand them three clear sandwich bags filled with soap, toothbrushes, toothpaste and wash cloths. “Do you need anything else?” He asked kindly. “No, this is fine,” the mother replied softly. “Thank you.” “Do you think you’ll need lunch tomorrow?” “No, we’ll be okay,” she responded. When Parker departed, she and the children resume eating their meal—chili and cornbread with all the fixings—perfect for a cold, rainy Thursday. The mother didn’t want to share her name, but looking around at the large, open gym where there were pallets and blankets laid out on the floor, enough for 20 people, one could understand her hesitation. “Our lights got turned off a few days ago,” she explained how she and her children ended up seeking shelter at the church. “This happened a few days ago and we’ve been going to hotels and family members’ houses. One family member started acting like they didn’t want us there anymore.” She added that although she has a job at a Macy’s in Virginia, which she somehow makes it to without a car, they had been living with her mother to save on costs. But when the power got cut off, it was too cold to keep the children at the house. Shawn Paris, senior pastor of the Atholton church, was one of the hosts who welcomed the young mother and some seven other people who had nowhere else to stay on a cold November night. Paris is fairly new to the 600-member church and to the program, which members have participated in for eight years. Each year, when the temperatures drop, some 15 congregations in Howard County, Maryland, work with an organization called Grassroots Crisis Intervention Center to offer shelter to those who need it. Each church hosts the shelter for a week. They also cook three meals a day and drive their “guests” to a day center where they can take showers and look for jobs. And because Atholton’s week fell during Thanksgiving, the church cooked a special meal to celebrate.

“Between the cooking, driving and hosting, we have some 40 to 50 members involved in this ministry,” Paris said. Members like Tim Belton, the church’s community services leader. “I believe that the church should help our community through service and the gospel,” he said. “We are called to help our fellow man. If we can’t do for our brothers, then Christianity is just a useless exercise.” Roosevelt Marsden, associate pastor, agrees that this is a critical ministry. “You can’t make impact without contact, and I think that is one of the areas in which we as a church really make a difference.” Bonnie Bensink, a deaconess who stopped in to make sure there are enough items in stock for breakfast, added, “We just want to give them a warm place to sleep and show a little bit of the love of Jesus. My heart just goes out to them.” Doug Carl, manager of emergency and outreach homeless services at Grassroots, helps to coordinate the cold weather shelter. The organization has a 51-bed shelter in nearby Jessup, Md., that he says is always full. They also have a resource center where
folks can do their laundry, pick mail and look for jobs. “We do coordination with the county and the church does everything else. The state is getting a really big bang for their buck,” he said. “I really believe in the separation of church and state but to me this is a wonderful public-private partnership.” “People are surprised to hear there are homeless people in Howard County,” he continued. “The school system says there are 200 homeless children in the county. This is a new phenomenon in my lifetime—watching people fall from the middle class. People never had a problem finding a job before and paying the bills, but now by the time they realize they have to take anything that comes along even though it comes with a pay cut, they need help.” That night one of those people receiving help is 26-year-old Neal Conrad who runs a video arcade business. “This is a lot better than sleeping in the streets in the rain,” he said gesturing to his pallet on the floor. After being homeless last year, he found a room for rent in the Oakland Mills area of Columbia. He left two weeks ago when he realized that he couldn’t continue living in a place where there was physical and drug abuse. He has family living nearby but they can’t take him in. “I’m trying to save money so I can get back on my feet,” he said. He seems confident that he won’t stay in a shelter for very long.

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U.S. federal judge strikes down law giving clergy tax-free housing allowance

A U.S. federal judge in Wisconsin ruled that the "parsonage exemption" for clergy is unconstitutional. Her decision is pending appeal. Above, the parsonage of the First Methodist Church in Monroe, Wisconsin. [photo: James Steakley/Wikimedia Commons]

Rule pending appeal—Adventist Church will likely file friend of court brief

November 26, 2013 | Silver Spring, Maryland, United States | Author: Ansel Oliver/ANN

A United States federal judge last week ruled that the clergy exemption for paying taxes on income designated for housing is unconstitutional, a ruling that if upheld could affect the compensation package of tens of thousands of clergy in the country.

In her decision, U.S. District Court Judge Barbara Crabb said the law, known as the "parsonage exemption," benefits "religious persons and no one else, even though doing so is not necessary to alleviate a special burden on religious exercise."

The exemption for clergy, she wrote, violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which prohibits Congress from making a law "respecting an establishment of religion."

Crabb said her ruling would not be enforced pending appeal.

Her decision is the result of a suit brought by the Wisconsin-based Freedom From Religion Foundation, which advocates for the separation of church and state. The foundation sued the U.S. Treasury secretary and Internal Revenue Service commissioner over the exemption, which was passed by Congress in 1954. Section 107 of the Internal Revenue Code permits a “minister of the gospel” to designate some compensation as a housing allowance and exempt it from income tax.

“This ruling is a huge deal because it would have a dramatic impact in how the church compensates its ministers,” said Tom Wetmore, associate general counsel for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. “We have long depended on this tax benefit for the compensation package for our clergy in North America.”

The after-tax benefit to Adventist ministers is estimated between 5 and 10 percent of their total compensation package, he said.

Wetmore said the ruling also raises questions about other aspects of the tax status of ministers and other unique tax rules for churches, such as exemptions from reporting revenue activities and church benefit plans.

The case is expected to be appealed to the 7th U.S Circuit Court of Appeals in Chicago. If so, Wetmore said the Adventist Church would likely file an amicus brief (friend of the court) or join an amicus brief brought by other groups.
Just like an after church fellowship lunch, **Potluck** is where members of the Columbia Union Conference can share what they've cooked up in terms of spiritually-based music, literature and arts. Have a book, recording or project to share? Email us at visitor@columbiaunion.net.

**Book Release: Refreshed**

**Interview by Taashi Rowe Published 12/4/13**

Raj Attiken, who will retire at the end of the year as president of the Ohio Conference, recently wrote the monograph *Refreshed: A New Paradigm for Church Leadership*. For more than 10 years, Attiken and his team have practiced the principles outlined in the monograph with “intended outcomes and unintended consequences,” he says. He put pen to paper at the urging of fellow leaders in North America who noticed those results.

**Q: What has kept you involved in Adventist ministry for 40 years?**
**A:** The abundant grace of God! God kept opening doors into futures that I could not have orchestrated or imagined. I have enjoyed the freedom of learning and growing and the privilege of exercising ministry in creative ways.

**Q: Tell us about this new leadership paradigm.**
**A:** We believe that people and organizations thrive and flourish when they are in environments of love, trust and freedom. People rise to their highest levels of service, productivity and performance in environments that support creativity, innovation, risk-taking and have a high threshold for failure. The dominant model of leadership in the church requires that people be good followers—able to take orders, follow instructions and implement the programs and campaigns launched by the denomination. The model we foster requires that people be leaders who are able to discern and discover what God wants them to be and become in their unique contexts, and pursue it with integrity.

**Q: What inspired you and your team to take a new approach to leadership in the Adventist Church?**
**A:** We recognized that the church has not adapted its leadership and organizational paradigms to the rapid pace of evolving needs and opportunities. The church has, in fact, been left far behind by change. Our leadership models have been locked up for decades. We also discovered the relevance for our time of the principles by which God governs the universe. We wanted to explore what it might look like if we modeled our leadership after these principles.

**Q: Does this sort of leadership style really work?**
**A:** Along with the change in paradigm, we also established a new set of metrics to assess progress and success. (We list these in the book!) One of these metrics is whether we are hearing an increasing number of stories of lives transformed by the power of the gospel. We hear these stories in churches across the conference.

**Q: Who is this monograph written for?**
A: It was written for current and future leaders who may wish to examine a paradigm of leadership that is different than what is commonly seen within the Adventist Church.

The book, which has been translated into Japanese and will also be translated into Russian, can be found at the Center for Creative Ministries.

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Meaning of Christmas celebrated during Sabbath Sundown Serenade in Hagerstown

Black Friday was all about shopping for Christmas, but at the Hagerstown Seventh-day Adventist Church on Saturday, thoughts and sounds turned to the meaning of Christmas.

Saturday’s Sabbath Sundown Serenade concert featured soprano Karla Rivera Bucklew, accompanied by pianist Ingrid Forss and Bucklew’s sister-in-law, Brandi Rivera, in a mixture of traditional and newer religious holiday fare, starting with “Silent Night” and ending with “Mary Did You Know?”

There also was a reading of the Christmas story from Luke Chapter 2 in a concert that focused on the sacred, rather than the secular aspects of the holidays.

Bucklew reached back into medieval music, singing what was probably an unfamiliar tune to most ears, an English version of an 12th-century Irish carol, “The Wexford Carol.”

In addition to accompanying Bucklew, Forss performed a number of piano solos, including “Let There Be Peace on Earth” and renditions of traditional English carols.

Rivera and Bucklew performed a duet on “Angels We Have Heard on High,” and Rivera soloed on “Rose of Bethlehem.”

“This was excellent. This was my first Christmas concert of the year and what a great way to start the season,” church member Charlie Eklund said.

“Tonight, it helped shift our thinking from Thanksgiving to Christmas,” one woman said after the concert. She said it also was a nice change of pace from the emphasis on post-Thanksgiving sales.

“I would like it to be my living, but singing doesn’t always pay the bills,” said Bucklew, who has a master’s degree in performance from the University of Maryland. She recently moved from Hagerstown to College Park, Md., while Forss is from Woodbine, N.J., and Rivera from Woodbine, N.J.

Rivera said her sister-in-law performs in about a dozen concerts a year. Each May, Bucklew and Forss perform at the Family Aid Benefit Concert at the Parkway South Seventh-day Adventist Church in Marmora, N.J.

Ginger Sayles, the church’s music director, said the Sabbath Sundown Serenade concerts are held every other week or so, although plans are not set for the next one.

Getting closer to Christmas, the church is hosting a performance of “Oratorio de Noël,” also known as “A Christmas Oratorio,” an 1858 composition by Camille Saint-Saëns. The performance is scheduled for 10:45 a.m. on Saturday, Dec. 14.

The performance will feature the choirs of both the church and Highland View Academy, a Seventh-day Adventist boarding high school in Hagerstown, Sayles said.

For more information about upcoming events at the church, go to its website at hagerstownadventist.org.

Don Aines

is a reporter for The Herald-Mail. He can be reached via email at dona@herald-mail.com.
Silver Spring community organizations help families displaced by Forest Park fire

Thanksgiving fixings given to 1,100 families

by Aline Barros

Staff Writer

Flor Ventura Pacheco, whose family was displaced by a fire at their Silver Spring apartment complex, wasn’t sure how she was going to pay her family’s rent this month and she wasn’t planning on much of a Thanksgiving dinner. That was until Pacheco got some much needed help from her own community.

The Adventist Community Services of Greater Washington hosted a holiday program on Nov. 26 giving out Thanksgiving dinner packages for more than 1,100 families and distributing $700 checks to 27 families displaced from the Aug. 26 Forest Park Apartments fire in Silver Spring.

The checks were the result of a joint fundraising effort with Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church and Takoma Park City Councilmember Terry Seamens.

They were able to raise $21,000.

The holiday food distribution is part of the Montgomery County Holiday Giving Project that provided turkeys, canned goods, potatoes, onions, and typical Thanksgiving fixings to low-income families.

Sheila Schlisner Hendricks, executive director at the Adventist Community Services of Greater Washington, explained the center works with families and individuals in need of assistance in the Silver Spring and Takoma Park community with the main goal of providing basic human needs regardless of race, ethnicity or religious background.

“We try very hard not to have a client leave without being served in some way,” Hendricks said.

The director said the remaining $10,000 from funds provided by the county’s Giving Project will be used to serve 800 families during the Christmas holiday.

“The government can only do so much. We are proud to do what we did do and the help we brought. But it was this community and the faith community, and the nonprofit sector ... [that] really came to the forefront,” said John J. Kenney of the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services.

Pacheco was one of the residents who received a $700 check and the Thanksgiving package. Pacheco was inside her apartment with her four children during the fire at the Forest Park Apartments.

Pacheco said when she saw smoke all around her apartment she covered her four children with a blanket to save them.

“I saw fire in the bedroom’s window ... All of a sudden, smoke was coming from the floor ... I covered my children, and my older one helped me to take them outside,” said Pacheco.

Pacheco and her four children, ages 14, 9, 4, and 2, were taken to the Washington Adventist Hospital for medical care. Her husband had a stroke a month before the fire and was also being treated in the same hospital.

And because Pacheco is unable to work so she can take care of the children and her husband, the financial help could not come at a more needed time.

“Now I can’t work ... and I am really happy [because] this check is a big help. It is going to pay this month’s rent,” said Pacheco.

The Silver Spring resident said the Adventist Community Services is a place that has helped her family and other families throughout the
fire tragedy.

“When the fire happened, we came here to get clothes because we were left with nothing,” added Pacheco.

Anyone looking to participate in the Adventist Community programs, must make an appointment and show proof of income, picture ID and proof of residence to qualify.

The service center has a 30-day food program, housing assistance with workshops about foreclosure prevention and buying a home, English classes for speakers of other languages, GED preparation, computer classes, and other program certifications.

To find out more about Adventist Community Services call 301-585-6556 or online at www.acsgw.org.

abarros@gazette.net
Some Seventh-day Adventists forge ahead on women clergy

Adelle M. Banks

(RNS) First, three U.S. regional groups of the Seventh-day Adventist Church voted in 2012 for women to be ordained.

Then, the church’s Southeastern California Conference elected its first female president, a historic move for the global church.

Now, four of the church’s 13 worldwide divisions have approved theological reviews suggesting that women’s ordination should be widely accepted; one has said it should not.

As one of the fastest-growing religious groups in the U.S. and across the world, Seventh-day Adventists could potentially influence other denominations — particularly conservative Christians — on the issue of women in leadership.

For now, statements from church headquarters in Silver Spring, Md., focus less on gender and more on concern that regional church bodies have forged ahead with their own decisions without consensus from the wider denomination.

“It’s a controversy that has been brewing in Adventism for decades that church administrators can’t ignore and haven’t ignored,” said Laura Vance, a sociologist at Warren Wilson College in Asheville, N.C., who has studied women within Adventism.

“What’s coming to a head now is that some Adventists are moving ahead and ordaining women in violation of church policy.”

Despite what appears to be a steady move toward affirming women’s ordination, leaders on both sides of the debate say the jury is still out on a final verdict. World leaders of the church, which is best known for its Saturday observance of the Sabbath, will review the 13 division recommendations, possibly at the church’s 2015 General Conference.

Sandra Roberts, the newly elected president of the Southeastern California Conference, said she is “cautiously optimistic” after the church’s North American Division signaled approval of female clergy.

But she adds: “I don’t know where it will all lead.”

Executive officers of the worldwide church, which was co-founded by a woman, Ellen White, issued a statement after Roberts’ Oct. 27 election, calling it “troubling” that “personal convictions” were placed ahead of “collective policy.”

“It deeply concerns the world leadership of the church that recently a local conference constituency elected as a conference president an individual who is not recognized by the world church as an ordained minister,” the officers said.

Holding a Bible in his left hand, SDA President Ted N.C. Wilson cautioned against “worldly influences” and “the danger of disunity” in a recent “State of the Church” video.

“To discard or ignore these mutual agreements violates a sacred trust and creates unnecessary discord,” he said.

Vance, author of a forthcoming book on women in new religious movements that includes a chapter on Adventists, said Adventists have, for now, struck a kind of compromise: “The position of the church leadership has been to allow women to move in the direction of doing
everything that ordained ministers do without allowing them to be ordained."

Ordained in January in the California-based Pacific Union Conference, Pastor Courtney Ray is an interim senior pastor of a church in Compton, Calif. She previously chose not to take the “commissioned” credential, which women pastors have held without being ordained.

“The Adventist Church is a worldwide church and I think that if you wait for everyone to feel comfortable doing … everything at the same time, that slows down progress in every aspect,” she said. “I think that unity is important, but I think that unity does not mean uniformity.”

Finding that balance is key for a faith group that has studied this issue for decades and previously concluded “the time is not right or opportune” for ordaining women.

“The challenge right now is how to do this in a way that respects the conscience of other cultures and just provide unity with maybe not uniformity,” said Beverly Beem, an English professor at Adventist-related Walla Walla University who has written on women and Adventism.

Some wonder if the church’s British-based Trans-European Division, which recommended inclusive ministry “where it is culturally appropriate,” might be an example to follow.

In the U.S., 19 female pastors have been ordained or had their credentials updated in the SDA’s mid-Atlantic Columbia Union Conference since that regional group approved women’s ordination in July 2012. The Pacific Union Conference estimates it has 25 to 30 ordained women.

The SDA’s Nebraska-based Mid-America Union Conference also approved women’s ordination in 2012, but no women in its nine-state territory have been recommended for ordination.

Despite the advances by some women, critics say the Bible remains clear on women in leadership, and the church should, too.

“I feel like the Bible hasn’t changed while our culture has, and so if I’m going to be a Bible Christian, then the traditional understanding that there’s a distinction between men and women is still unchanged,” said Pastor Doug Batchelor, who leads a church in Sacramento, Calif., and is a member of the worldwide church’s Theology of Ordination Study Committee.

Duke Divinity School scholar Mark Chaves sees a link between women’s ordination and broader embracing of modernity.

“Acceptance of women’s leadership is continuing to increase in American Christianity, even among conservatives,” said Chaves, who is working on the third wave of the National Congregations Study and has seen a slight increase in congregations’ allowance of women leaders between 2006 and 2012.

Garrett Caldwell, spokesman for the world church, said the deliberative process will come down to a single question: “Does the Bible have a theology of ordination that says yes or no about this issue?”

He said the Trans-European Division’s “culturally appropriate” compromise could be one answer, as well as either blanket permission or a continued churchwide ban on ordained women.

“I hope that there will be a good resolution to this one way or another,” said Roberts, the denomination’s only woman conference president.

“Even if it’s that each division is allowed to do what the division wishes to do. That may be the best possible outcome.”

Editor’s Note: An earlier version of this story incorrectly stated that women in the Seventh-day Adventist Church may not serve as senior pastors.

KRE/MG END BANKS
Seventh-day Adventist Church President Ted N.C. Wilson cautioned against “worldly influences” and “the danger of disunity” in a recent “State of the Church” video. RNS photo courtesy Pacific Union Recorder/Jim Paliungus

This image is available for Web and print publication. For questions, contact Sally Morrow.
Pastor Courtney Ray, who serves as an interim senior pastor of a Seventh-day Adventist congregation in Compton, Calif., chose not to be “commissioned” and now is ordained. Photo courtesy of Courtney Ray

This image is available for Web and print publication. For questions, contact Sally Morrow.
Pastor Doug Batchelor leads a church in Sacramento, Calif., and is a member of the worldwide church’s Theology of Ordination Study Committee. Photo courtesy Teri Fode Photography

The Pacific Union Conference, which includes California and four other Western states, voted 79 percent to 21 percent at a special session on Aug. 19 to “approve ordinations to the gospel ministry without regard to gender.” Photo courtesy Pacific Union Recorder/Jim Paliungus

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