

Potential Adventist Church-WHO collaboration looks promising, leaders say

Partnering would give church 'larger goals, strategies'

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Ansel Oliver/ANN

As Seventh-day Adventist Church officials move toward official relations with the World Health Organization (WHO), a United Nations agency, many church members said they think such a partnership would benefit the denomination's network of schools, hospitals and clinics.

But at last week's international conference to explore the possible collaboration, some Adventists said they aren't sure about the proposed partnership, citing concerns of blending politics with faith and compromising the church's spiritual values.

Still, leaders of both organizations said that working relations between the two organizations would give each better access to networks and resources as they seek to improve the health of local communities. Adventist leaders said the church's international network could help WHO better implement the [U.N. Millennium Development Goals](#), including improving maternal health and fighting HIV/AIDS and malaria.

Last week's Global Conference on Health and Lifestyle in Geneva brought together representatives from WHO, the Pan American Health Organization and more than 600 leaders of the Adventist Church. While WHO has previously partnered with other faith-based organizations, this would be the first time it could extend official relations to a church denomination. The conference approved an action statement that will be submitted to the world church's Executive Committee, which is scheduled to meet in October.

Requests for official relations are considered after a petition of the board following two years of working relations. WHO could grant the Adventist Church official relations as early as 2012.

WHO - Ted Karpf.jpg

"What happens in relationships is that we actually learn how to work together, and ... learn to hear what the other is saying and respect the similarities and differences," said Ted Karpf, an officer at WHO's Office of Partnerships.

A partnership between the Adventist Church and the World Health Organization will depend on a mutual respect for "similarities and differences" as both organizations work toward healthier communities, said Ted Karpf, an officer at WHO's Office of Partnerships. [photos: Ansel Oliver/ANN]

Church leaders said they hoped the conference would help spread the church's health principles in a more coordinated fashion.

"The miniscule difference between the different kinds of vegetarian diets is not worth, in my opinion, the time and effort we devote to it," said Dr. Allan Handsides, director of the church's Health Ministries. "We need to have larger goals and larger strategies," he said.

"The most important way we can influence our communities is through lifestyle issues," Handsides said.

Such an influence would include getting back to church co-founder Ellen White's instruction from the 1860s to have each local church serve as a community health center, church leaders said.

"We have a lot of real estate that's not used six days a week," said Dr. Peter Landless, associate Health Ministries director for the Adventist Church.

The church's health principles -- including abstinence from alcohol, tobacco and, where appropriate, a largely vegetarian diet -- have been backed by health studies.

WHO - Handsides.jpg

"A healthy lifestyle is something the church has had a knowledge of since the 1860s and now has an evidence-based knowledge of," Landless said, speaking of the [Adventist Health Study 2](#), which is currently being conducted at the church's Loma Linda University in Loma Linda, California. The study is also partnering with the United States' National Institutes of Health.

Collaborating with WHO would give the Adventist Church "larger goals and strategies" as it seeks to impact communities with its message of healthy living, said Dr. Allan Handsides, director of the church's Health Ministries.

Last week's conference also revealed that many church institutions worldwide have already forged collaborative partnerships: Taiwan Adventist Hospital launched a WHO initiative of 40 hospitals dedicated to promoting healthy lifestyles among employees; in Zimbabwe, sexual health workshops for community parents and children have received national funding through USAID; and the South Korean government is partnering with the Adventist Church's smoking cessation programs.

The conference also gave an opportunity for Adventist Church officials to meet with WHO representatives at its Geneva Executive Meeting

Room, the first such meeting between WHO and a church denomination.

"Frankly, I didn't realize how historic it was until I was actually there," said Dr. Craig Jackson, dean of the School of Allied Health Professions at Loma Linda University.

Despite the potential opportunities, some conference attendees were unsure of the church's new direction.

"I'm going to pray about it," said Abigail Parchment, a nurse practitioner and Health Ministries director for the church in the Cayman Islands in the Caribbean. "I think it's excellent, but I would never want our message to be diluted in any way."

Still, Parchment said she applauds the world church's leadership for the conference, which she said rekindled her dedication to her position as Health Ministries director.

Others were more blunt, saying the Adventist Church should be more cautious. Florence Oyeleke, from Oyo State, Nigeria, said partnerships can be both positive and negative.

"We can be integrated so much that we can forget our faith," said Oyeleke, a parish nurse.

But the conference, Oyeleke said, offered her many new ideas on how to expand the church's health system to be more community oriented -- especially in fighting obesity, which, she said, is becoming rampant in Nigeria.

One attendee said she applauded the collaborative attempt, but that the Millennium Development Goals weren't attainable.

"The MDGs are completely political. They're not practical and they won't fulfill them by 2015," said Dr. Marta Sandoval, an Ear, Nose and Throat physician from Barcelona, Spain. "On the other hand, it's good that WHO knows us and can incorporate some of the tools, structures and skills we already have."

Most attendees seemed to favor a denominational partnership with WHO.

"I hope the results of the discussions will be implemented at the local churches," said Romeo J. Cruz Jr., a business owner in Manila, Philippines.

Ruthzaine López Bolaño, originally from Colombia, and now in medical school in Argentina, said she didn't think the partnership would cause any problems.

"It's a great opportunity any time you work with someone who doesn't share your faith," said López Bolaño. "It's important to be open."

<http://news.adventist.org/2009/07/potential-adventist.html>