

Let the community be the pulpit, Adventist Church president says

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Silver Spring, Maryland, United States ... [Elizabeth Lechleitner/ANN]



It's up to individual church members to shape how the Adventist Church is perceived, world church president Jan Paulsen told a group of church leaders yesterday. [ANN file photo]

Don't confine spirituality to the church pew, Seventh-day Adventist world church president Jan Paulsen told a group of church leaders yesterday during remarks meant to kindle more deliberate community involvement by Adventists, who -- despite recent marginal improvements -- still score low in ministry beyond the pulpit according to church officials.

The conduct of church members within the community is either a "confirmation or a denial of our faith," Paulsen said, adding that "silence can be as much a failure as speaking the wrong words."

Addressing members of the church's Council on Evangelism and Witness who were gathered at world church headquarters near Washington, D.C.

for one of the church's biannual business meetings, Paulsen said the Adventist faith shouldn't just exist in books or church archives.

"The faith we have is not best explained by academics or theologians. Our faith finds its most compelling expression in the everyday words and actions of Christians in their communities," Paulsen said.

During his comments, Paulsen referred to a pivotal question -- "Who are you Adventists, anyway?" -- asked by a reporter during his recent interview on Bloomberg television. Paulsen said Adventists must fill that knowledge gap by being "seen and heard. ... We want the public to know us," he said.

"There are moments when you must step back and consider how your life looks through the eyes of somebody who does not share your faith," Paulsen said. "What do you want them to see?" he asked, suggesting several traits he said Adventists would do well to embrace -- among them compassion, tolerance, respect and generosity.

"Am I talking about things that are at the core of Adventism?" he asked. "I hope they are." When community members meet Adventists, the attitudes and behavior of church members should illustrate those qualities, Paulsen said.

"Probably more than 99 percent" of the people Adventists meet have either never been invited to attend church meetings or consider such meetings a "waste of time. ... These people do not study Daniel and Revelation. They may even be strangers to basic Christian values. You have to ask yourself, 'What do I want them to know about my church?'"

Adventists should be known as "freedom fighters," Paulsen said -- "not the violent brand, but those who work not only for people who share our point of view, but for everyone, regardless of their beliefs." He cited the church's efforts to promote religious liberty around the world and added, "I want the public to think of Adventists as the strongest supporters of freedom -- freedom to think, freedom to hold convictions and freedom to communicate them."

Of the convictions held by Adventists, Paulsen said the church's commitment to education and healthy living are two ways Adventists can influence the public sphere by offering something

relevant rather than something divisive.

During discussion that followed Paulsen's comments, other church leaders made similar observations. "There have been times in the past when the only time the public saw us was when we were either asking for money or trying to convert them," said Gary Krause, director for the church's Office of Adventist Mission. "I think we should always have that ambition to lead people to Jesus, but unless people see that we care for them even if they never decide to become Seventh-day Adventists, we will never be seen as the caring church."

Allan Handysides, director of the church's department of Health Ministries, said church members must steer clear of a "culture of negativity" that leads to "killjoy religion" instead of a "ministry of healing."

"People are more concerned with who we are than with who we say we are," Handysides added during his comments on the role of health in church outreach. "Evangelism only lets them see what we want them to see. But witness, whether we like it or not, allows them to see who we truly are."

People should see Adventists as peacemakers, but not people who dodge defending the rights of others, Paulsen said, noting the church's failure to respond to the Rwandan genocide. "Silence in the face of evil is complicity in what is wrong," he said. "Let us speak from the pulpit and show from our actions that we oppose anything that instills hatred or inflames violence."

Paulsen then urged church leaders in particular to "avoid tainting the church" with so much as the "aroma of partisan politics." Adventists must be "people of integrity" in a time when "corruption of all kinds dominates headlines."

"I want Adventists to be known as honest people who teach and practice morality, people with the highest ethical standards, people who speak out against greed and against the self-serving attitudes that do so much damage to society," he said.