

# FESTIVALS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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# THE TIME HAS COME TO SAY: THANK YOU FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY!

## THE TIME HAS COME TO MAKE HISTORY!

### THE FIRST STEP TO ACHIEVING THE DREAM

The Festival of Religious Freedom has been in my mind since 1995 when I was first elected the world director of the Public Affairs and Religious Liberty Department. When I heard that Wintley Phipps was elected to be my associate, I thought about the fabulous opportunity we had to change the traditional concept of promoting religious freedom. Wintley is well-known as a musician and a master of public relations. With his gifts it would be possible to organize large concerts to promote religious freedom in many capital cities around the world. As a youth leader for many years, I had organized international meetings and concerts. I know the power of music when it is used for a great cause. Religious freedom is not only a great cause, it is our prophetic mission. We have to promote, defend and protect religious freedom for all people everywhere.

This was my dream, but it was a realistic dream. I thought it would come true in a few years. I imagined great concerts in Paris, Moscow, London, and New York. In 1997, I coordinated my first IRLA World Congress. We chose Rio de Janeiro, Brazil as the venue. Our team did well, and more than 320 people attended the congress from Tuesday through Thursday. Wintley was in charge of supervising the first festival of religious freedom which was held in a church on the Saturday following the Congress. It is always an event when Wintley sings. The church was packed and young people took a prominent part in the program. About 800 people attended this program which focused on religious freedom through songs and skits. It was an excellent event! Tribute was given to the martyrs of freedom in Brazil. The Festival was the church's contribution to the religious freedom event which was begun by the IRLA World Congress.

The idea of saying thank you to a country which provides religious freedom for all came from my colleague in South America, Siloe de Almeida. He provided the money to cover Rio with big posters saying "Thank you, Brazil, for religious freedom." Supporting his initiative, we organized a letter-writing campaign. The President of the Republic of Brazil, according to what I heard, received about 40,000 letters of appreciation.

This first experience showed me that we are able to create an event with the purpose of thanking a country and a government by celebrating religious freedom. This was, in itself, a revolution for those who promote religious freedom. Most of them, including my religious family, are more inclined to protest, to speculate, or to fight rather than to express thanks. This first Festival showed me that we can attract more than a few hundred people in promoting religious freedom. I began to dream about stadiums and ordinary people celebrating the great gift of religious freedom, just expressing thanks. But it will take longer before the vision and the dream come true.

### JUST SAYING, THANK YOU!

Have you said thank you to your country, to those who gave you religious freedom, to those who died or were persecuted so you might be free to choose your religion? In more than 130 countries around the world, religious minorities have freedom to organize communities, to print books, to own churches or places of worships, to share their faith, and to educate their children according to their religion. We live in one of those countries!

Have we officially said thank you to God, to our country, and to all those who gave us religious freedom? We may have written articles or mentioned our appreciation in some of our public prayers or in a formal letter to the authorities; but what about doing it through a significant public event?

When we gather in our churches for worship in Brazil, Peru, the United States, Mexico, the Philippines, Tanzania, Angola, Romania, or wherever, do we think about the cost of our freedom? People gave their lives, their time, and their health for us. Most of them did not believe all the things that we believe, but they suffered that we might have freedom. Have we ever publicly said thank you?



Have we, in all the countries around the world where we are free to worship God, organized a public event, a celebration of religious freedom, just to say thank you? Do they deserve a big thank you—a sincere thank you without a hidden agenda? You probably agree with me, but you wonder how you could do it.

## **Festival of Religious Freedom concept**

My first goal in having a Festival of Religious Freedom is to celebrate freedom and to reach people who don't attend our congresses or symposiums or academic meetings. It is also to directly involve the local churches. Our work with experts, officials, and religious leaders is important; but when persecution strikes, everyone is affected, whether or not they are experts. A Festival is another way to promote and share the religious freedom principle with all.

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights begins with these words: "Everyone has the freedom of religion and belief." Everyone means, without distinction of category or race. Religious freedom is for all people, for everyone, and everyone should know what it means and support it.

A full-day program is what I envision. In the morning there should be a spiritual dimension to the program, with a good study on the biblical roots and principles of religious freedom. This should be followed by a sermon which will motivate everyone. My preference is to invite a speaker who is involved in the defense and promotion of religious freedom. Usually the organizers invite a well-known speaker and ask him to focus his sermon on religious freedom. The result is not always convincing. The sermon should attract attention to the theme of the Festival and not to the speaker. Priority should be given to the message, not to the messenger. I understand that there is a temptation to choose a well-known person who will attract more people.

The afternoon program is not primarily for speaking, and it can be the most attractive part of the Festival. It should be a musical program with short breaks for skits or testimonies. It must be done in a professional way so it can be recorded for TV and video. It should be a two and a half to three hour program which captures the attention of thousand spectators and helps them celebrate their religious freedom. The first Festivals which were organized in Rio, Manila, Port-a-Prince, Kiev, and Georgetown followed this pattern. They were good programs involving young people and attracting thousands. The Festival in Trinidad stands out in my memory as excellent. It was composed of plays, musical numbers, testimonies, and short speeches from various religious leaders. There was great participation from the 3,000 people who attended. In the Caribbean, people make religious events warm, dynamic, and beautiful. Religion is not boring there.

These Festivals were church events focused on religious freedom. As we wanted the focus to be clear for all, we needed to make some visible commitments. This was done in Trinidad and one year later in Georgetown, Guyana. The Festival concluded with an appeal for each person to be a messenger of religious freedom and to join the Caribbean Religious Liberty Association (CARLA). It was done with the master leadership of CARLA's Secretary General, Clive Dottin. Such commitment helps to keep the focus on the purpose of the event. A Festival of Religious Freedom is not just a church meeting; it is a tool to serve a great cause.

## **Congresses and Festivals**

During the ten years from 1995 to 2005, Congresses were the events and Festivals were a complementary happy ending. Congresses were open to all and for all, but experts, officials, and religious leaders were the priority invitees. They were the target audience of the event. The Festival was planned to involve all church members. In 2005 I decided to give the Festival a life of its own. It could be organized even if there was no Congress. From a practical point of view, it is not easy to deal with two events planned primarily by the same team. Even when the Festival was organized by a local team, the same team was very often involved in the Congress. It was clear that most of the people interested in one event wanted to attend both—a Congress or Symposium held during the week or on Sunday and a Festival on Sabbath.

There is dynamism when both events take place the same week, and officials and religious leaders are more supportive. We want to make sure that the identity of the organizers is clearly distinct. Congresses and symposiums are organized by the IRLA or a national religious liberty association such as ABLIRC in Brazil, and the Festival is organized by the church. This plan is well accepted and our guests do not feel

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trapped into attending one or both events. The two events are kept separate. No direct publicity is done during the Congress to promote attendance at the Festival or to make it clear that we had organized both events.

A third, symbolic event could help to increase the visibility of our cause. When I was a youth leader in Europe, I and a team of youth leaders organized several international meetings. We always included a public symbolic event. The best one we had was in Barcelona in 1989. One day before the beginning of the International Youth Congress, we had a ceremony to plant trees and seal a plaque in a square of the city. Today, the trees are big and the plaque commemorating our event is still here. Probably more than a million people have seen it.

The same week a Festival is held, a symbolic event could take place in the city with the presence of the authorities. It could be the planting of a "religious freedom tree" or establishing a "religious freedom street" or a plaque commemorating a religious freedom activist who had links to the city or the country. Our church in St Petersburg dedicated a monument to religious freedom.

In almost every country in the world, apostles of religious freedom once made history. It is time to commemorate their actions. Time has come to show appreciation. What a great opportunity it is.

The second event should be the Congress or Symposium. The climax in terms of attendance should be the Festival. It has to be a big event for the church and the community and the country.

## **A big and open event**

Big does not necessarily mean 60,000. Big is relative to the location where the event is organized. It could be 700 or 4,000 or 10,000. But it will be seen by the community as a big public event. Imagine that the biggest meeting to take place in your city had an attendance of 700. If you have an attendance of 1,000 for the Festival, it will be a big public event. The church in Hawaii plans to aim for 1,000 attendees the first year, but many more three years later, and a really big meeting five years later. Attorney Alan Reinach and Pastor Walter Nelson see this as a possibility. Conference President, Ron Watts Jr, is very supportive. They planned to have their first festival in 2008. In March 2007, we met with the mayor and other officials. All of them encouraged us to do this. We have a very nice church building there that will be very good for the first Festival. The big Arena will come later.

There are places where it will be difficult to accommodate more than 1,000 people. Begin with the number you are comfortable and then seek to improve increase attendance. Never forget that you have an opportunity to make history. Don't miss a fabulous opportunity to have a religious freedom day!

If 800 people attend and you have an excellent program which is videotaped, the 800 will be multiplied by ten in less than one year as people watch the videos. Then you will be able to plan the next Festival with a goal of 4,000 people. You will make history because no one has ever held such a celebration before in your city or in your country.

You may wish to have both a Festival and a Congress but are not able to organize a Congress. This is not a problem. Organize a symposium or a panel of experts or a lecture given by one expert. It will bring an academic dimension to your actions. You can be sure that there are university professors and religious experts in your city who are ready to be part of such a program.

## **How to fill the seats**

Filling all the seats is often a major challenge when you organize a big meeting. I have seen meetings which are half filled or nearly empty, in spite of having a great program. I remember two events organized by our department at the General Conference. Our beautiful auditorium which could seat 700 was only 70 percent full. Why? The program was excellent. The themes were very appropriate. In both cases, we should have had a full auditorium. What about the speakers? They were the best.

The first meeting was the commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948-1998. We invited United States Ambassador Robert Seiple who was in charge of the

Office of International Religious Freedom in the US Department of State; Professor David Little, who was one of the best religious freedom experts; Mrs Karen Lord, from The Helsinki Commission; the United Nations representative in Washington DC; and General Conference President, Pastor Robert Folkenberg. Before they spoke, there was a 45-minute concert by the New England Youth Orchestra. It was a great program, and it was sad to see the room half full. We had everything: The theme—The Commemoration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its Article 18 on Religious Freedom; the program; the speakers; the beautiful auditorium; a great orchestra! What was the problem? Was it the weather?

It was a rainy Friday evening in November. Richard Lee Fenn, my associate, organized the meeting and did the best he could to get people to attend. He deserved a gold medal. Despite doing your best, you cannot be assured of having a full auditorium. There is always a risk that the room will be half empty.

The second meeting was the opening of the International Conference on Adventists in the Community. We suggested this conference and it became an interdepartmental activity. Dr Eugene Hsu chaired the organizing committee and I was the secretary. Our guest speaker was Tony Campolo. I have seen him speak before crowds, including crowds of young people. He is an outstanding speaker and one of the best I have ever heard. We all expected an overflow crowd of 1,000 people or more. That would have been a small attendance for Tony. As it was, only 70 percent of the seats were occupied. I spent time with Tony before the meeting, explaining that our attendees were religious leaders coming from all around the world. They were a highly selected group of people, yet the opening meeting was open to everyone. Yes, it is possible to have a fabulous speaker and still be unable to fill your auditorium. Imagine organizing a Festival in a 70,000 seat stadium and having only 5,000 people show up. Imagine renting a beautiful auditorium of 5,000 seats and having 500 occupied. Something has not worked well. What?

Fortunately, as of now, all ten of the Festivals we organized were successful in terms of attendance. Between 800 and 12,000 people attended each of these events. All of them had more people who wanted to attend than there were available seats. A full auditorium means success. A half empty room implies failure. Be sure you choose the right place to have your Festival. When the program was over at these Festivals, people did not want to leave. The organizers had the feeling they could have been more ambitious. This was the lesson we learned in Sao Paulo for our most successful Festival ever organized to date.

### **Why should we wait until 2009?**

Driving a car in Sao Paulo at 4:00 pm gives you some time to chat. It was in February 2006 when I returned from Porto Alegre to visit the gymnasium where our first Festival of Religious Freedom in Brazil would be held the following June. I explained to Williams Costa Jr, my counterpart in South America, my goal of having a Festival in 2009 with 10,000 people attending. He looked at me, and said: "Why should we wait until 2009?" I smiled as if he had not understood the figure I gave him: 10,000. My answer was, "Because it takes time to attract 10,000 people for a religious freedom meeting." He was not impressed at all and replied with assurance, "We can do that in three months. Why should we wait until 2009?"

I admired his optimism but stayed skeptical. My skepticism grew when I entered the gymnasium and saw its 12,000 seats. I said to Williams, "If you can bring 6,000 people here it will be a success." In fact, it would be the biggest gathering on religious freedom ever organized. Then I left Sao Paulo to go to Cape Town to prepare for the 6<sup>th</sup> IRLA World Congress. I promised to return in June to be part of the big event.

The program in June began with a meeting with the Governor of the State of Sao Paulo. It is the richest state in Brazil and probably in South America. We spent one hour with the Governor and with the President of Parliament and the Minister of Religious Affairs. All of them were supporters of religious freedom and, of course, interested in the Festival. They may have wondered if a Religious Freedom Festival could attract several thousand people. The State of Sao Paulo had just passed legislation protecting the right of Adventists and Jews to not work on Saturday. The Festival was a way of thanking them.

On Saturday afternoon as we approached the gymnasium, we found the roads were packed with buses and cars. Groups of people were walking fast as if they were late. I thought a soccer game was going to begin in a nearby stadium. I was wrong. These people were running to the gymnasium for the Festival of Religious Freedom. When we sat down, the gymnasium was already full and those on the ground floor were



asked to stand. People continued to flow into the gymnasium until the police closed the door. Later we heard that 20,000 people were outside trying to get in. It became a serious challenge for the police.

The program was excellent. There was a children's choir of 1,500; another choir with the same number; a large orchestra; 27 vocalists, including 15 professionals. About 70 percent of the attendance was young people. The three and a half hour program was so good that the time went by quickly.

Williams was right, and I learned that a mass meeting to celebrate religious freedom was possible. The 2009 goal was obsolete, and we changed it. Instead of 10,000 we changed the goal to 70,000. This will be a challenge, but God showed us that we should think big for His glory. Brazil hosted the first mega festival before 2009.

Angola will soon be the focus of our attention. Dr Paiva, who is a government official in Angola, has proposed a mega festival with 60,000. The union president, division PARL director, and division president, Paul Ratsara, take this goal very seriously. Angola has been torn for years by civil war. Now peace has returned, and it the right time to say thanks for religious freedom. A Congress will precede the Festival which will be held June 28, 2008. I will be there, and on my way back I will attend the first Festival in Russia which will be held in St Petersburg on July 5. Then, on July 12, I will be present at the first Festival to be held in the United States in Honolulu, Hawaii. More will be planned.

## **Don't attack others**

The spirit of the Festival of Religious Freedom is not exclusive. It is inclusive. The success of such an event will be measured by a spirit of openness and love. When more people join or support religious freedom, it is even better. Don't use the Festival, which is a celebration, to attack others. It is not the place and it is not the spirit of the Festival. When we remember the past, we have to remember those who suffered and gave their lives for this fundamental freedom. There are other events, such as symposiums and seminars, where we can, through serious study, denounce the error of the past. The Festival is not the place to attack; it is a place to celebrate and promote religious freedom with those who love it. History has shown that in every religion there are believers who defended religious freedom. They are our allies. Fortunately, I have not seen Religious Liberty Festivals attack other religious groups, even if the temptation may be real.

The message of the Festival is not: "We are right, you are wrong! You did bad things or your ancestors persecuted ours." Not at all! The message is: "Today in our country we have religious freedom, and it is time to say thank you!" Thank you to all who believed and suffered for our freedom. Thank you to the government which protects religious freedom. Thank you to God who gave us the freedom to choose.

## **An almost perfect program**

The program of the Festival will be an essential part of the event. Never forget that a program is in itself a message. A boring, disorganized, or chaotic program will destroy the message you have worked hard to communicate. A program without focus, even though it is perfectly presented, will leave people untouched by the religious freedom issue. The concert is what will attract people, but the concert must focus on the theme of religious freedom. Having the involvement of choirs and other musicians, just because they are good, is not enough. Our goal is not to promote artists or speakers, but to use their influence to promote a great cause. All of them should do their best to be in tune with the theme of religious freedom. There are so many artists who are ready to serve a great cause that we should not have any problem getting them to promote religious liberty. Of course, we have to respect them and their talent. They should be well treated like the other actors in this event.

The worst scenario would be to have great artists or speakers deliver a message which has nothing to do with the purpose of the event. Be sure that those who are invited know the purpose. The organizers need to choose appropriate people who will give a strong message about religious freedom.

If the Festival is held on Sabbath as the climax of a special week, I suggest the following schedule:

**Sabbath** (one week before the festival): Distribution of final information to churches, religious groups, and NGOs.

**Sunday:** Rehearsal for those involve in the program

**Monday:** Press Conference and contact with media

**Tuesday:** Visits to authorities and invitations extended

**Wednesday:** Symbolic event

**Thursday:** Symposium or Congress

**Friday:** Rehearsal and possible evening program in a church

**Sabbath:**

Morning

- Bible study on religious freedom
- Religious freedom around the world Testimonies
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- Sermon on religious freedom
- Appeal

Afternoon

- 14.00-15.00: Parade of Associations and Departments of the Church Freedom gives the possibility to serve others.
- 15.00-15.30: Welcome to officials, speeches, and tributes or awards
- 15.30-18.00: Concert
- 18.00-18.30: Closing, necessary information, commitment

The program should be managed and supervised by a professional and led by a Master of Ceremonies, both being under the general supervision of the organizers. It should be run like a television program with at least two "plateaus," avoiding the arrival and departure of groups. When one person is speaking, the next speaker is ready. When a group sings, the next group is ready on the other side of the platform, and the MC is ready to make the introduction. If the Festival is well organized, in many cases it will become a TV program and a video show. The work done will not conclude when the program is over, but will continue through TV and video. A good program will live a long time after the Festival.

## Sharing responsibilities

Sharing responsibilities is a key to success. None of us can do everything alone. This is true before the event and it is true during the event. Everyone has to know clearly his or her responsibilities. The best way to proceed is to list the responsibilities and to write a job description for each participant.

When the decision to organize a Festival has been made, a list of responsibilities and people in charge must be prepared. These include:

- Main areas of responsibility
- Job descriptions
- Objectives
- Names of those in charge

The key positions should be the manager and the general coordinator. The manager will deal with all practical issues but he may also be the general coordinator. It depends on the dimension of the event. The general coordinator will assign tasks and supervise the team. He will be the one who make sure the objectives are reached. He/She has to be a good organizer and to know how to work with a team under pressure and stress. He/She will set deadlines, correct mistakes, encourage the team, and make sure everything is running smoothly. This is not a job for a dilettante. It is a serious and key responsibility. It should not be taken lightly.



It is in the interest of all to select the best organizer to fill this position, not according to title but according to his/her efficiency. A distinction should be made between the chair of the organizing committee and the general coordinator or the manager. The highest ranking person in the group of organizers should be the chair. It would be appropriate if this person were a division, union, or conference president. The manager could be the department director, if possible, but this is not obligatory. The department director will bear the responsibility in any case because it is his/her field of activity.

The main areas of responsibility according to the program I suggested should be:

- General coordination
- Budget, finances, insurance
- Press and media
- Logistics and security
- Protocol and official visits
- Symposium or Congress
- Concert program
- Parade
- Promotion and public relations
- Commitment and outcome
- Symbolic event
- Information
- Sabbath morning program
- Volunteers

Those in charge of these responsibilities will be members of the Steering Committee. Each person will need to build his/her team and work with it. The general coordinator will be sure that the work is done in every area and should be ready to find an alternate if it is not being done on time.

If Festival attendance of 60,000 is expected, this organization will be very helpful. If a small meeting is planned, it will also be helpful, and it will prepare the team for a larger event. Problems can destroy the event if you are not well prepared. Solutions to potential problems should be carefully considered. These include the absence of the main speaker or singer or an accident in the stadium. What will happen if there is an accident? Is there a First Care Facility available? How does one call an ambulance or alert the hospital? How does one contact the police? What should be done if there are more people than seats?

In many parts of the world, the police will make sure you follow the rules, but you have to be sure they are present. Do you have nurses, doctors, and an emergency team if the city does not provide it? You need to sign official documents when you rent a stadium or auditorium, and contracts should be reviewed by an attorney.

Fortunately, those who plan mass Festivals have already had experience with big events. To be well organized takes time and many planning meetings, but what an education it is. What a testimony it is too. A lot of prejudice will disappear if such an event is well organized.

Good organization shows who you are. You are not assured of success when you work hard. So many things can happen which are not totally the result of your actions or decisions. But one thing is sure, if you don't work hard, you will fail! If you work, you will learn, and by God's grace you will develop your ability to succeed.

**You will make history**

At the beginning there is a mission, a vision, and God's promise. By faith we need to move forward and the dream will come true. Promoting religious freedom is part of the good news we have to proclaim to everyone. Our mission as religious freedom leaders is to promote, protect, and defend religious freedom for all people everywhere. This is the mission we are given by our church. We have to be serious about it. It is a vital mission and the promise is great. If our faith is real and our vision is inspired by God, our dream will be

big. You may be confident that in working with God the reality will be even bigger than your dream. With the concept of the Festival of Religious Freedom we can make history. You can make history in your country, in your region, in the world.

When the Religious Liberty Festival in Cape Town in 2007 had an attendance of more than 3,000 people, Busi Kumalo made history in his country and in all of Africa. This was the largest Festival of Religious Freedom ever organized in Africa. With 4,000 people present at the Festival in Bucharest, Viorel Dima made history in Romania and in Europe. With 3,000 people in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, in 2005, Clive Dottin and his team made history in the Caribbean Islands. History was or is being made in Venezuela, in Mexico, in Columbia, in Ukraine, in Seoul, South Korea, in Accra, Ghana, and in Honolulu, Hawaii. But this is just the beginning. Peru, Chile, Mexico, Brazil, Italy, and Russia are already planning great events. The world record belongs to Sao Paulo, Brazil, with 12,000 participants (another 20,000 were outside and wanted in). It initiated a new generation of Festivals of Religious Freedom. In all of history, a Religious Liberty Festival of that size had never before been organized. Williams Costa and his team made history. But in 2008 a new world record may be set in Africa. Angola and the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division are preparing a week-long event with a Congress and a Festival. They expect 60,000 people for the Festival. It will be the absolute record in all history. How long will the record last? I don't know but they will make history.

Mexico is planning several Festivals and Brazil will undoubtedly surprise us again. In 2008 there will be several Festivals and Congresses. Santiago de Chile is on the list, as is Lima, Peru. South America is the candidate for the world Festival in 2009. Lima, Peru has been chosen because for centuries Lima was the capital city of the Inquisition. What a fabulous place to say thank you for religious freedom.

Will they be able to gather more people than in Luanda? For now, only God knows. But what is sure is that they will make history. It will be a sign of time. We will lead the religious liberty promotion in the world. The prophecy will come true. The question for each of us is: Do we want to make history? Do we want to be part of this prophetic movement? Do we want to communicate this message of freedom to the world? Years are passing fast and in few years someone else will do your job. Don't miss the opportunity to make history in serving God and His church, your community and your country, human dignity, and human rights.

## **A day of celebration**

The Festival is located in a capital city and, if possible, in a stadium—the largest or the most convenient. But to give even more visibility to the day of celebration, every Adventist church in the country should celebrate religious freedom the same day or the same week. It could be done by a special program or a special prayer. Imagine a full stadium with 50,000 persons in the capital city in communion and supported by hundreds of thousands of church members in all cities of the country. A hundred thousand isn't a figure which can be easily ignored. But with God's grace we could have millions. It will make a difference. The big meeting will be the climax or the top of the iceberg. The Festival should be an outstanding opportunity to promote religious freedom in all the country.

## **Sing a freedom song**

There is often a song behind a great event. How many struggles have been symbolized by a hymn? Just think about the national anthems which have moved and united citizens through the centuries. Just think about religious songs which are still sung today after centuries. Protestants feel special and united in spite of their divisions when they sing Luther's hymn. French are very individualistic, and everyone wants to follow his or her own directions, but when they sing "The Marseillaise" something incredible happens. I remember when I was invited by big American churches to preach on religious freedom. It often happened that the pastor chose the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" to sing before I spoke. I was impressed and moved by such a moment. The power of a song is something we may not be able to explain, but it is a fact. It makes our convictions stronger and unites our hearts for a common belief or value. I cannot imagine a mass celebration of religious freedom which is not supported by a great hymn. It should be a song that is easy to remember and which reaffirms our faith and commitment and our gratefulness for religious freedom. We could adopt a traditional hymn or, a bit more challenging, create one. Who will create this masterpiece which will help generation after generation to express their faith and gratefulness to God and to their country for religious freedom, a song which excludes no one—rich, poor, Christian, non-Christian?




## **Do it, but do it well!**

God's promise, "I will make you the head, not the tail," can be understood in a qualitative way. It will be difficult to get 40,000 or 70,000 people. You may have 1,000 in some places and it will be a great event. Why? Because it will be the first time such a festival celebrating religious freedom is organized. Do the best you can, but do it well.

When I talked with Viorel Dima in Romania, I was sure he could gather 10,000 people in a stadium. But he decided to give priority to the content when he selected a 4,000-seat auditorium which fit perfectly with the classical music, soloists, and choir. The program was excellent. He did it and he did it well. I am sure the next festival organized in Romania will be bigger. But in any case, if you do it, do it well.

Why? Because organizing a big meeting which is open to the public is already in itself a testimony. If it works well, people will get a positive feeling about our seriousness and our capacity to accomplish our mission. If the organization is chaotic, and the meeting is poorly prepared, our mission and credibility will be damaged. Do it, but do it well for the glory of God.



## The World Largest Festival of Religious Freedom Luanda, Angola 2008

My trip to Luanda, Angola with Dr Eugene Hsu was an adventure. We thought we would never get there on time. Our flight Monday evening was postponed until Tuesday at 5:00 p.m., meaning we had to change our itinerary and airline. It was complicated and stressful. Finally we arrived on Thursday morning and found 300 Congress participants waiting for us. The number increased to 600 on Friday.

At 8:30 Sabbath morning we were driven to the largest stadium in the country. It has a capacity of 80,000 people, but the upper level was closed for renovation. When we arrived at 9:00 a.m. at least 20,000 people were already there. By the time I started preaching, more than 40,000 people were sitting in the stadium. Some had to drive several hours to get there. That was an accomplishment, since the traffic in Luanda is very congested and public transportation is not like that found in Europe. More than 10,000 women, young people, and children came in beautiful uniforms. Women wore blue and white, young men wore white and black, and children wore red and black. Early in the afternoon these 10,000 people took part in a religious freedom march through the streets which concluded in the stadium. It was so impressive. The program in the afternoon went well with speeches and music. In spite of the hot sun, the people stayed all day.

The Festival in Luanda was remarkable in its organization. Dr Paiva, the main organizer, did a fabulous work! He deserved the Gold World Festival Medal that we gave him, as did Pastor Teodoro Elias, the Union President. They established at least two world records: 1) the largest Festival of Religious Freedom in the world with more than 40,000 in attendance; and 2) the largest march for religious freedom with more than 10,000 uniformed marchers.

### **Festival in a stadium — the lessons:**

The organizers were not allowed to bring their own sound system and they were able to use only the tracks around the green field so they could not build a platform; but they did the best they could with what they had.

Lessons can be learned about the first meeting in a big stadium. The sound system will determine the program. We had an acceptable sound system, but only a few microphones. It was almost impossible to hear the choirs, but speakers could be heard. In this case, the visual is the most important, but a Master of Ceremonies should keep on explaining what is going on in the stadium. Have a good MC and a few speeches. Make sure that the audience is involved. They should sing, take a pledge for religious freedom, stand up, applaud, and pray. A backdrop can be made in giant characters, lifted up by young people, to form the slogan: "Thank God for Religious Freedom. Thank (name of country) for Religious Freedom." It would reinforce the message in a visual way.

## Festival of Religious Freedom in a Church St Petersburg Russian Federation 2008

From Luanda we flew to Geneva and then to St Petersburg. What a beautiful city it is, and it was unfortunate that we had no time to visit it. Victor Vitko was the organizer of the Festival and the Symposium which preceded it. Experts came from Moscow and from the universities in St Petersburg, and the Festival received strong support from the City Council. It was an excellent symposium with 80 participants coming from Russia, Ukraine, and Moldova. Several Union Presidents came and expressed their wishes to have a Festival in their region or country. One day we should have a big meeting in Ukraine.

The presence of representatives from the City Council of St Petersburg and the office of the President of Russia, several university professors, the former Ombudsman of the Russian Federation Parliament, and Prof Oleg Mironov gave to this meeting a high level of authority.

On Sabbath the Festival in the main Seventh-day Adventist Church in St Petersburg was excellent too. Choirs, singers, musicians, and speeches alternated. The church was full and the afternoon program gave us the privilege of hearing artists, musicians, and choirs for more than two hours. I was interviewed by an evangelical radio station, and a team from Hope Channel and Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) filmed the meetings.

Russia is not the number one country for religious freedom, but such a festival would have been impossible 20 years ago. It was a great opportunity to publicly say "Thank You for religious freedom."

## First Festival in the United States and First Challenge Honolulu, Hawaii 2008

From St Petersburg we flew to Washington DC; then on Thursday I flew to Honolulu. I was able to attend Festivals three Sabbaths in a row: Luanda, St Petersburg, and Honolulu. Last year Alan Reinach and I explored the possibility of having a Festival in Honolulu. The concept was received so well by the state and city authorities and by the pastor of the Central Church and the Conference President that Alan decided to take the risk. Why was it risky? Because it is very difficult to attract our members in the United States to attend a program about religious freedom.

In Honolulu we thought the beautiful Central Church with its seating capacity of 1,000 would be the best venue. It was not easy for the organizers to prepare the program and arrange for choirs and musicians, but they did! Officials and experts of religious freedom came. Most of the religions of Hawaii were represented. We had excellent panels and a globally good program. The Royal Band came, the ecumenical choir, and the mass choir. General Conference Vice President, Ted Wilson, preached on Sabbath morning and he did well. But the church was not full and we became nervous about Sunday's program.

On Sunday the mayor of Honolulu, six members of the state congress, a representative of the governor, Muslims, Jews, and Christians were there. Guest speakers came from Washington DC. All were very good, but this excellent program was performed before a very small audience. It is not easy to introduce officials when the rows are nearly empty. What happened? Is America not interested in religious freedom? Why did Adventist members not give a few hours of their time to thank God and their country for religious freedom? Alan and his team and the team of the Honolulu Central Church did their best and the public aspect of the Festival was successful. They attracted officials, but we had problems with our members. Officials were so interested in the Festival that two members of the State Congress proposed a law in favor of an annual day for religious freedom. The festival was mentioned in the proposal. What encouragement it would have been for them if the church had been full.

The lessons we could learn from Honolulu: 1) Think twice before planning a Festival on Sunday. As long as Adventists are the main supporters, it is far less risky to keep the program on Saturday. 2) Don't think the Adventists will come because it is organized by Adventists. You have to strongly promote the Festival with the church membership. Be sure you have the support of local pastors and communities. Be sure no other programs will be organized the same day.

### **The Williams Costa Principle**

Since we had the Festival in Sao Paulo, Williams Costa's advice about the program has been successfully tested. Williams advised us to include in the program a mass choir, a children's choir, and performing artists who attract people. In Sao Paulo, Williams invited a choir of 1,500 children. He said "Every child will bring at least three or four people—parents and grandparents. Do the math.  $1,500 \times 2 = 3,000$  family members + 1,500 children = 4,500 people." Without the choirs, the church in Honolulu would have been half empty on Saturday and almost totally empty on Sunday.



## First Festival of Religious Freedom Tour Mexico, August 19-23, 2008

I never thought we would have a Festival of Religious Freedom Tour. Max Oviedo Calles, Religious Liberty Leader for the Inter-Oceanic Mexican Union, was the first to come up with the idea, and he planned a successful tour. During the week we visited three cities and the program began at 4:00 p.m. each day—just in the middle of the afternoon. Churches were full and officials from the state and city came. Religious leaders came too. This shows that in some parts of the world meetings can be held during the week.

On Sabbath we had Festivals in two cities. The morning meeting was attended by 1,000 pastors, elders, and their families. In the afternoon we went to another city. The room was full again with attendance of more than 600. Max built the same kind of program—speakers alternated with musicians and singers. As guest speaker, I was given 35 minutes. Roberto Herrera, the Public Affairs and Religious Liberty Director for the Inter-American Division, was given 20-25 minutes. Other speakers were given five minutes. After the Religious Affairs Director spoke, questions were asked. This was very useful for all. The program lasted three hours and participants were not tired. In the city of Cautla we had a fabulous group of professional musicians.

All the meetings began with a flag ceremony. Five or six Pathfinder girls brought the Mexican flag to the platform. Participants saluted the national flag and sang the national anthem. It was in keeping with the spirit of the Festival which is to say “Thank God and the country for religious freedom!”

The presence of government Religious Affairs Directors provided a great opportunity for the church leaders to become acquainted with them. Other religious leaders were impressed by this initiative in favor of religious freedom.

Max Oviedo Calles proved that a Religious Freedom Festival Tour is not only possible, but it can be very successful when it is well planned.