

Church-State and Interfaith Relations in the Euro-Asia Division

OLEG GONCHAROV

Oleg Goncharov is the Public Affairs and Religious Liberty director for the Euro-Asia Division of Seventh-day Adventists.

The stance of Seventh-day Adventists toward the state and other denominations in the Euro-Asia Division (ESD) is outlined in “The Fundamentals of Social Teaching of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Russia.”⁴ Among other things, this document states that “the SDA Church recognizes the value of interfaith and interreligious dialogue and respects the religious convictions of others,”² “builds its relationships with representatives of other religions, as well as Christian denominations, on the basis of openness and tolerance,”³ and “actively participates in interdenominational and interchurch councils, cooperating with them in those matters of common interest that do not require doctrinal compromise, primarily in the protection of religious freedom and social ministries.”⁴

Since the Euro-Asia Division’s inception in 1990, the Adventist Church has been actively involved in interreligious dialogue. It is necessary to note the great contribution of Pastor Viktor P. Krushenitsky and Pastor Viktor V. Vitko, the ESD Public Affairs and Religious Liberty directors, to developing state-confessional relations. Thanks to their devoted ministry, the Church in the 1990s and 2000s actively interacted with representatives of other denominations at various public and state-confessional venues in the countries of the Euro-Asia Division.

Today, interreligious dialogue is conducted on the following platforms.

1. *Council for Cooperation with Religious Associations under the President of the Russian Federation* This Council is an advisory body that carries out preliminary consideration of issues and prepares proposals for the president of the Russian Federation relating to interaction between the president of the Russian Federation and religious associations and the enhancement of the spiritual culture of society.⁵ The Council was established by the Presidential Decree No. 192-rp on April 24, 1995.

From 1995 to 2012, Pastor Vasiliy D. Stolyar, president of the West Russian Union Conference, represented the Adventist Church on the said Council. Since 2012, the Adventist Church has been represented by Pastor Oleg Yu. Goncharov, the ESD Public Affairs and Religious Liberty director.

The Council consists of representatives from Russia’s traditional religion: Orthodox and Old Believers, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and Protestants. Council meetings are held twice a year. The Council is presided over by the Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office of the Russian Federation. At council meetings, issues of

interaction between religious associations and representatives of the authorities in the religious and social spheres are considered.⁶

There are four commissions under the Council, with the participation of the Adventist Church's representatives in Russia: (1) Commission for Harmonization of Interfaith Relations; (2) Commission for Improvement of Legislation and Law Enforcement Practice; (3) Commission on International Cooperation; (4) Commission for the Development of Theological, Religious, Spiritual and Moral Education. The last of the above commissions also includes the president of Zaoksky Adventist University, who has been the chair of the Protestant Education Development Council since 2021.

As part of the Council's work, there is active interaction between the Adventist Church's representatives with not only Christians but also believers of other faiths - Moslems, Jews, and Buddhists. Council members are invited to official receptions on public holidays in Russia, such as New Year's Day, Victory Day, Russia Day, and National Unity Day.

2. Representatives of the Adventist Church, along with representatives of other churches, participate in the meetings of the *Commission on Religious Associations under the Government of the Russian Federation* and the *State Duma Committee on the Development of Civil Society and the Affairs of Public and Religious Associations*. These platforms make it possible to discuss issues related to the property and activities of religious organizations, as well as the development of legislation in the field of state-confessional relations.

3. The Adventist Church is one of the founders of the *Christian Interconfessional Advisory Committee of the CIS Countries and Baltics* (CIAC).⁷ This body was established in 1993 to promote cooperation among Christians in the former Soviet Union. The purpose of the CIAC is to coordinate joint activities of Christian confessions in order to promote civil peace, prevent interethnic, interreligious and other conflicts, and ensure harmony and stability in society. The CIAC members are representatives of Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The CIAC annually holds councils, conferences, round tables, and forums that bring together leaders of Christian communities.

4. From 1992 to 2014, the Adventist Church was active in the *International Religious Liberty Association* (IRLA) chapters in the countries of the Euro-Asia Division. Pastor Viktor P. Krushenitsky was the first Secretary General of the Russian IRLA Branch. His ministry was then succeeded by Pastor Viktor V. Vitko. In those years, major conferences devoted to protection of religious freedom were annually held and attended by representatives of various denominations, including the Russian Orthodox Church. The conferences resulted in the publication of collections of reports and presentations, which today constitute solid research material.

Today, the Adventist Church is one of the founders of an all-Russian public organization *Russian Association for the Protection of Religious Freedom* (RAPRF).⁸ Pastor Oleg Yu. Goncharov, a representative of the Adventist Church, is the RAPRF Secretary General. Since 2014, the Russian Association for the Protection of Religious Freedom has united representatives of all traditional confessions as one of the main public platforms for

interreligious dialogue and the development of a joint position on topical issues of the activities of religious organizations. During joint activities within the framework of RAPRF, religious organizations of Russia, with the participation of representatives of state authorities and civil society institutions, reconcile approaches to a wide range of issues and participate in the preparation of recommendations for their practical implementation.

Among the RAPRF founders and members are representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Old-Rite Church, the Roman Catholic Church, Muslim religious organizations, the Buddhist Traditional Sangha of Russia, the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, the New Nakhichevan and Russian Diocese of Armenian Apostolic Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Russian United Union of Evangelical Christians, the Russian Church of Christians of Evangelical Faith, and religious scholars and human rights activists. The RAPRF is a confessional and politically neutral organization. All decisions and recommendations, according to the RAPRF constitution, are made on a consensus basis. The main thing that unites the different religious and secular representatives in RAPRF is the preservation and support of traditional spiritual values and priorities and the protection of the rights of believers.

5. The Adventist Church is the founder and co-chair of the *Advisory Council of the Heads of Protestant Churches in Russia* (ACHPCR).⁹ This Council has been operating in Russia since 2002 as the main advisory board of Protestant churches in Russia. Its main tasks are coordinating joint activities for the establishment of civil peace and harmony in society, developing a unified position in relations with the State and other religious associations, and protecting the rights and freedoms of believers.

The ACHPCR meets four times a year on the platforms of co-chairs. This format allows the leaders of Protestant evangelical churches in Russia to learn about each other's traditions and teachings and support one another.

6. The ACHPCR is the initiator of the *National Spiritual Meal Foundation*,¹⁰ with the Adventist Church being a regular member of the foundation's Board of Trustees. "National Spiritual Meal" is a spiritual and moral event on a national scale, demonstrating the unity of all people of faith, honor and duty, and incorporating the best forms of conservatism. This annual event brings together representatives of the authorities, society, and religious communities of Russia. The foundation also coordinates similar events at the regional level and cooperates with regional foundations responsible for holding prayer breakfasts (spiritual meals).

In other countries of the Euro-Asia Division, the Adventist Church builds its relationships with state and denominational representatives through similar platforms of interaction, both formal and informal. For example, Kyrgyzstan has a State Commission on Religious Affairs, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have a Committee on Religious Affairs, and Turkmenistan has a Working Group on Interaction with Religious Associations.

SOURCES

Osnovy sotsialnogo ucheniya Tserkvi Khristian Adventistov Sed'mogo Dnia [The Fundamentals of Social Teaching of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Russia]. Moscow: Euro-Asia Division of Seventh-day Adventists, 2017.

NOTES

1. *Osnovy sotsialnogo ucheniya Tserkvi Khristian Adventistov Sed'mogo Dnia* [The Fundamentals of Social Teaching of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Russia] (Moscow: Euro-Asia Division of Seventh-day Adventists, 2017), 189-199.
2. Ibid., 189.
3. Ibid., 190-191.
4. Ibid., 192.
5. https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Совет_по_взаимодействию_с_религиозными_объединениями_при_Президенте_Российской_Федерации.
6. <http://www.kremlin.ru/structure/councils#institution-17>.
7. <https://www.xmkk.org/>.
8. <https://religsvoboda.ru/>.
9. <https://всепротестанты.рф/>.
10. <https://fondndt.ru>.

encyclopedia.adventist.org is an official website of the [Seventh-day Adventist World Church](#)

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000