



WHY RELIGIOUS LIBERTY MATTERS

Case Study – Romania 2009-2015

The following case study focuses on religious liberty issues that were faced in Romania during 2009-2015 and the strategic initiatives applied in solving these difficulties.

This case study reflects the teamwork of the Romanian PARL Department in improving the perception of religious freedom in the country. It also illustrates the importance of involving the decision makers and public officials in the process of promoting and protecting religious freedom.

It is my hope that this case study will be a valuable tool, an inspiration for church leaders and Adventist members as they face difficulties, and an encouragement for those who are passionate about the PARL values and who want to promote and protect religious freedom in their area of activity. It is also a lesson about how God intervenes during crucial times, solving issues of religious freedom in unexpected ways.

We live in a constantly changing world where religious liberty is threatened and undermined every day around the globe. Promoting religious liberty requires faith, communication skills and the ability to establish relations of trust with public officials even when it seems impossible. It is the responsibility of each of us to know our rights, learn why religious liberty matters, speak out to raise awareness and know when and how to intervene in solving religious liberty issues. It is also our privilege to love and serve the omnipotent God who is our refuge and strength.

Pastor Nelu Burcea, PhD

I am deeply grateful for my Union colleagues, the PARL leaders of the six Romanian Conferences and other partners who have been involved in promoting and protecting religious liberty: Dragos Musat, Sergiu Macovei, Gabriel Isvan, Ionica Rotaru, Stefan Mateas, Stefan Ropotica, Cristi Purnea, Cristi Modan, Nita Petre, Miron Mihai, Marius Creta, Veress Jozsef, Aurelian Horja, Ionel Turturică, Erika Androne, Ioana-Dana Bordeianu. Together we went through hundreds of crises and experienced many hours of prayer.

Special thanks to our international guests Dr. Ganoune Diop, Dr. Liviu Olteanu, Dr. John Graz, Dr. Bert B. Beach, Greg Hamilton, Dr. Stefan Bratosin, Dr. Dudley Rose, Dr. Marian Simion, Dr. Thomas Harvey, Dr. Mihaela-Alexandra Tudor, and Dr. Bill Pevette.



ROMANIA

EUROPEAN Union

CAPITAL: Bucharest

NATIONAL LANGUAGE: Romanian

19.2 million Population

91,699 Square miles

Religions:

- 86,4% Orthodox
- 4,6% Roman Catholics
- 3,1% Reformed
- 1,9% Pentecostals
- 0,8% Greek Catholics
- 0,6% Baptists
- 0,4% Seventh-day Adventists
- 0,3% Musulman
- 0,2% Evangelical, and other

Last census 2011



In Romania, the Adventist movement began in 1869 and grew substantially over the subsequent years. The growth and development continued in spite of the dramatic persecution of all religious groups during the totalitarian regime that lasted from 1948 until the revolution of 1989.

Currently, the Romanian Seventh-day Adventist Church has 1,074 churches organized in six local conferences, which together form the Romanian Union Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Additionally, the Romanian Adventist Church operates the Adventus University in Cernica, five high schools, many middle schools and kindergartens, the publishing house "Viata si Sanatate," the Romanian branch of the humanitarian organization ADRA, the "Speranta TV" television station and the radio station "Radio Vocea Sperantei."

The country's constitution provides for freedom of religion, but there is still a discriminatory mentality present against religious minorities. Ever since the beginning of the PARL Department, the Adventist Church has dynamically protected and promoted religious freedom.

Interestingly, in the country's early history, on territory that is now Romania, in a small locality from Transylvania, the "Edict of Torda" was issued in 1568, stating that "all should keep the faith they believe in." This edict is considered by historians to be the first legal guarantee of religious freedom in the modern history of Europe. This happened 221 years before the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (France, 1789), and 380 years before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).

In recent decades, religious freedom has been increasingly challenged across the country. Between 2009 and 2012, Adventist members faced over 500 cases of discrimination annually. Such cases of discrimination were present in the media, in the national education system, in the workplace, and in other areas.

Between 2013 and 2015, there were positive developments regarding religious freedom. During those years we experienced a dramatic decrease from 500 cases of discrimination to less than 50 cases annually. How was this possible? This outcome occurred due to prayers, the promotion of religious liberty, the organization of awareness events and improving official relations with the country's administrative, political and religious leaders.

1

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY matters

Ganoune Diop, PhD

PARL Director, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

“Freedom is an attribute of God. It is also an entitlement from God. Freedom is a gift of God for love to be possible. It is an act of the Son to liberate those entangled in the grip of death and grace them with an eternal life of love. It is the presence of the Holy Spirit who pours out the love of God into our hearts and makes our character imbued with all the fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.”

Since its beginnings, Adventists have always considered freedom of conscience and religion as fundamental human rights. The freedom to think and believe is the core of all human rights. Most human rights presume freedom of religion, whether it be freedom of assembly, of thought, of speech, or otherwise. All these freedoms stand together in the Bible’s teaching that we are all born free and equal, with abilities to think and act that mirror our Creator (Genesis 1:27; Acts 17:26).

Freedom of choice is the central theme of the controversy constantly raging between good and evil. Its general principle is that God, in His love, grants everyone the freedom of personal decision. When we examine His rules of engagement—the Ten Commandments—we see the concept of freedom flowing through them all, starting with the reminder of their liberation from Egypt; continuing with the release from false worship; and culminating with the Sabbath as a symbol of freedom. When properly living the Ten Commandments, Christians celebrate freedom, pray for those who persecute them, and invite everyone to be ready for the return of Christ.

Religious freedom matters because it creates an important context for the development of the church’s mission. Throughout the history of Christianity, we see that the church has advanced in its mission even in times of persecution. On the other hand, in times of freedom, the church must develop new and innovative programs for the spreading of the gospel. Of such we are glad to have, in many countries, hospitals, radio and television stations, educational institutions, publishing houses, etc.

In Romania, during the period of the totalitarian regime when religious freedom was heavily restricted, the church remained strong even though its capabilities to continue the mission were limited. In the early years after the fall of the oppressive regime and after regaining freedom, the Adventist Church engaged in a mission of unprecedented proportions with almost all members involved. The Romanian Adventist Media Center owns and operates 45 radio frequency networks in many cities in Romania and a television station that extends beyond the country’s borders. It would be hard to imagine that these programs could have existed 30-40 years earlier due to the lack of religious freedom in the country.

2

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY issues

Ellen G. White

The Acts of the Apostles, 68

“We are to recognize human government as an ordinance of divine appointment, and teach obedience to it as a sacred duty, within its legitimate sphere. But when its claims conflict with the claims of God, we must obey God rather than men. God’s word must be recognized as above all human legislation. The crown of Christ is to be lifted above the diadems of earthly potentates.”

According to the Research Report, RCR 2011 “Religion and Religious Behavior,” 39% of Romanians did not want to have as neighbors “sectarians” or people belonging to other religions. The percentage was exceeded only in the case of homosexuals who were unwanted as neighbors by 51% of Romanians. It is worrying that one of the most intolerant groups was young orthodox people under 30 or atheists, which may indicate a long-term problem.

THE ROMANIAN RELIGIOUS LIBERTY SITUATION STARTING WITH 2009

DISCRIMINATION IN THE NATIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

- Several school exams were scheduled to take place on Saturdays without providing the option for Seventh-day Adventist students to take the exam on another day.
- Adventist students were not given equal opportunities to participate in school National Olympics because they were scheduled on the weekend, including on Saturdays.
- Adventist students faced the possibility of not graduating from university because graduation exams in most universities were scheduled on Saturdays.
- Although by law, students have the right to attend religion classes in their faith, Adventist students were forced to attend Orthodox religious classes.

DISCRIMINATORY NEWS IN THE MEDIA

- There were many news reports in which criminals were associated with minority religions in order to negatively portray these denominations. Media personnel did not check to see whether the accused persons actually belonged to these minority religions.
- Public media was not accessible to religious minority groups. Their exclusion from the state-owned media landscape revealed the preconception that only the majority Church had the legitimacy to appear on public channels.
- Mass-media used derogatory language when discussing minority religious communities and, in many cases, refused them the right to reply.
- Political leaders avoided public appearances alongside representatives of minority religions.

DIFFICULTY IN ACCESSING BURIAL PERMITS

- Although the law entitled all religious communities to bury, without restriction, there were cases in which some Romanian Orthodox clergy showed hostility toward non-Orthodox church members, opposing the burial of believers of other religious groups in confessional or even public cemeteries.
- The authorities failed to implement a provision of the religion law requiring them to allocate burial land to all people, no matter their religious affiliation. Non-Orthodox religious groups faced difficulty in accessing cemeteries and in obtaining land to establish cemeteries.

RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION IN THE WORKPLACE

- Some Seventh-day Adventists members faced humiliation, harassment and discrimination in the workplace due to their religious beliefs and practices. Others faced retaliation when they asserted their rights to be free of religious discrimination.
- Often times, job competitions were set “traditionally” on Saturdays. Private employers frequently refused to hire or promote Seventh-day Adventists members because of their religious affiliation.

OTHER TYPES OF DISCRIMINATION

- Authorities would not rent public spaces for public events sponsored by minority religions for any social, medical or religious activities.
- Authorities generally allowed only the Romanian Orthodox Church an active role in official ceremonies at schools and other community events and excluded all other religious groups from participating in such events.
- While Adventist religious programs were being held in public spaces, representatives of the majority church tried on countless occasions to stop the events, inciting the population and the police against the Adventist evangelistic programs.

3

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY strategic initiatives

Ellen G. White
5T 713

“Let none sit in calm expectation of the evil, comforting themselves with the belief that this work must go on because prophecy has foretold it, and that the Lord will shelter His people. We are not doing the will of God if we sit in quietude, doing nothing to preserve liberty of conscience.”

After monitoring the situation of religious freedom in Romania and noticing how these violations affect the Adventist Church, we created the following strategic initiatives to solve and prevent these religious freedom infringements. Through these we hoped to develop a culture of human rights, making Romanian society aware of the necessity and importance of religious freedom and non-discrimination.

THE STRATEGIC INITIATIVES OF THE PARL DEPARTMENT INCLUDED:

- Creating a crisis committee to analyze the real situation regarding religious freedom in Romania
- Developing a plan to promote the concepts of Religious Freedom through radio, magazines, the internet, and television
- Encouraging Adventist pastors and church members to report all cases of religious violations
- Organizing the Caravan of Freedom - an event meant to promote religious freedom for a month across all major Romanian cities
- Mediating on behalf of discriminated Adventist members
- Initiating the “Open Doors” program in partnership with local public administrations
- Appointing a religious freedom representative to each local Adventist church committee in Romania
- Organizing the religious freedom exhibition in public spaces to present the principles of religious freedom
- Creating a prayer support group for the religious freedom situations we faced
- Organizing religious freedom seminars in schools/universities to familiarize students with the philosophy of religious freedom

Developing official relations with other religious leaders for collaboration in the promotion of religious freedom

Creating TV and radio programs on "Speranta TV" and "Radio Vocea Sperantei" on topics of religious liberty

Signing a protocol with the Ministry of Education for teaching the Adventist religion to Adventist children in public schools

Providing religious liberty resources/sermons to pastors and local church leaders for Religious Liberty Sabbath

Publishing the Manual for local pastors and religious freedom leaders for training in order to establish a relationship of trust with local officials

Presenting the "Celebrity & Character" seminar designed to inspire adventist youth to develop their potential and to use it for God

Letters for communicating with public officials to congratulate a politician's appointment or end of a term for the official ceremonies of administrative institutions

Informing members about the importance of the PARL Department and about ways to react to the violation of religious freedom

Organizing a National Festival of Religious Freedom

Organizing the "Conscience and Liberty" Concert to promote religious freedom

Creating a Guide to help pastor deal with officials and authorities

Guiding members who have lost their job due to discrimination in their search of a new job

Initiating diplomatic dinners and luncheons organized in partnership with embassies or state institutions

Launching books/journals on religious freedom in places such as universities and other important institutions

Organising an annual International Scientific Conference held at the Romanian Palace of Parliament for debate regarding religion and freedom

Organizing week-long religious freedom symposiums in different parts of the country, inviting decision makers, religious leaders and human rights experts

Organizing the "Conscience and Liberty" Awards offered to personalities who contributed to the promotion and defense of religious freedom

Establishing the "Conscience and Liberty" Library to provide books in the field of religious freedom useful for students and researchers in this field

Signing a Protocol with School Inspectorates to guarantee religious freedom for adventist students

Creating an Adventist Legal Advisory Committee for legislative monitorization and for legal interventions in times of crisis

Publishing the academic Journal for Freedom of Conscience

Translating books, magazines and articles on religious freedom

Counseling for discriminated or persecuted Adventists at school or work

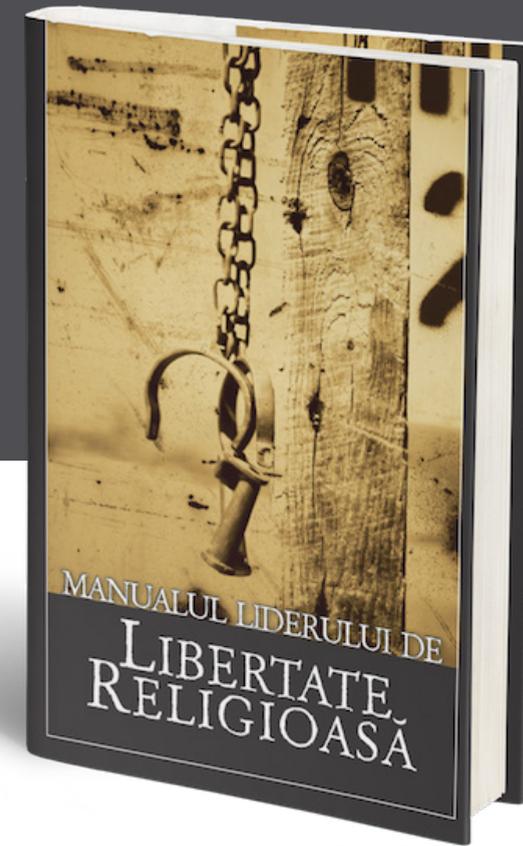
Using a press dossier for presenting the Adventist church in the public space

4

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY manual

Ellen G. White
Education, 17

“Every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power like that of the Creator-individuality, power to think and do. It is the work of true education to develop this power, to train youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men’s thoughts.”



The Manual of the Leader of the Religious Freedom Department contains the explanation of human rights legislation, action strategies for promoting and protecting religious freedom, sample letters for the most common cases of religious freedom violations, spiritual resources on religious freedom, a presentation of international human rights institutions, as well as the official statements of the Church on human rights topics.

The manual written by attorneys Erika Androne and Daniela Ioana Bordeianu, and Dr. Nelu Burcea was offered to every pastor and local leader in the Romanian Adventist Church.

5

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY month

Ellen G. White
5T 714

“When the National Reformers began to urge measures to restrict religious liberty, our leading men should have been alive to the situation and should have labored earnestly to counteract these efforts.”

The Freedom Caravan was a national program for the promotion of religious freedom. It was probably the largest promotion of religious freedom carried out over a period of 30 consecutive days all across the country.

The main guest at the first edition in February 2013 was Greg Hamilton, President of the Northwest Religious Liberty Association, USA. He gave distinguished lectures on religious freedom in universities, local councils, churches, and other public spaces in more than 20 cities.

Local authorities, deputies, senators, representatives of religious denominations and educational institutions, specialists in law and political science were all invited to the events. The purpose of these events was to promote greater understanding of the need for freedom of conscience. The impact was extraordinary and prepared the ground for other religious liberty events.



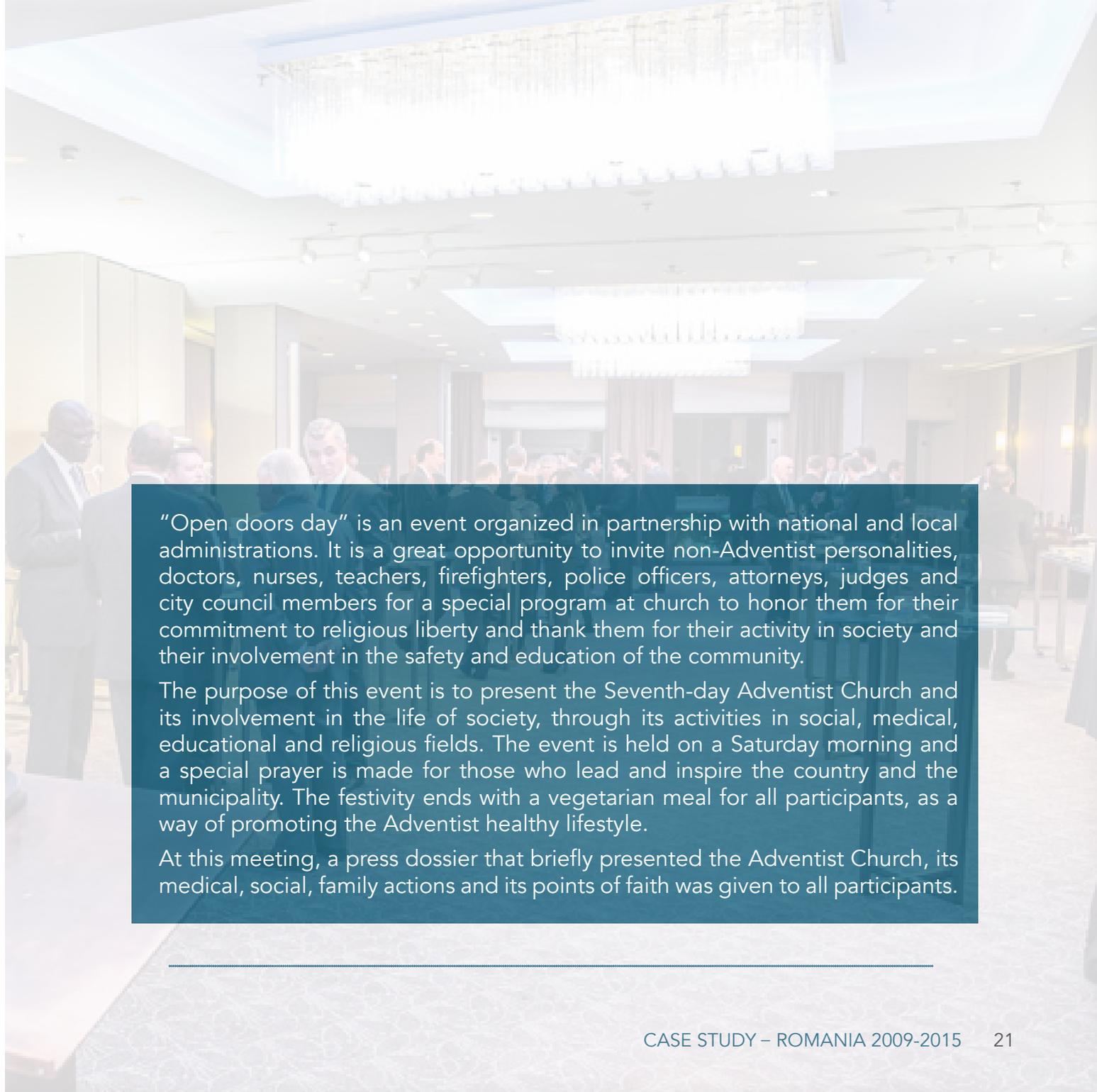
6

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY open doors day

Ellen G. White

The Acts of the Apostles, 69

“We are not required to defy authorities. Our words, whether spoken or written, should be carefully considered, lest we place ourselves on record as uttering that which would make us appear antagonistic to law and order. We are not to say or do anything that would unnecessarily close up our way. We are to go forward in Christ’s name, advocating the truths committed to us.”



“Open doors day” is an event organized in partnership with national and local administrations. It is a great opportunity to invite non-Adventist personalities, doctors, nurses, teachers, firefighters, police officers, attorneys, judges and city council members for a special program at church to honor them for their commitment to religious liberty and thank them for their activity in society and their involvement in the safety and education of the community.

The purpose of this event is to present the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its involvement in the life of society, through its activities in social, medical, educational and religious fields. The event is held on a Saturday morning and a special prayer is made for those who lead and inspire the country and the municipality. The festivity ends with a vegetarian meal for all participants, as a way of promoting the Adventist healthy lifestyle.

At this meeting, a press dossier that briefly presented the Adventist Church, its medical, social, family actions and its points of faith was given to all participants.

7

CONSCIENCE AND LIBERTY awards

The “Conscience and Freedom” Awards Gala is an annual event organized in partnership with the “Committee for Human Rights, Religious Affairs and National Minorities Issues” of the Romanian Parliament.

The gala aimed at publicly appreciating those involved in promoting and protecting the freedom of religion through legislative initiatives and other important activities.

The event enjoyed the presence of parliamentarians and top personalities from the diplomatic, political, administrative, media, academic and religious spheres.



ADRIAN LEMENI, Secretary of State in the Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs, 2011



RAMONA MANESCU
Europarlamentar



VIRGIL ACHIHAI
President of the Evangelical Alliance in Romania



The Bell Orchestra of the Adventist Theological Institute



MARK GITENSTEIN
US Ambassador



KAREL NOVAK
Secretar General AIDLR



CRISTIAN DUGULESCU
Deputy Parliament House



MIHAELA MIROIU
Professor PhD, SNSPA



BARRY BUSSEY
SDA, UN Liaison

8

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY camp meeting

Ellen G. White
Education, 57

“The greatest want of the world is the want of men - men who will not be bought or sold; Men who in their inmost souls are true and honest; Men who do not fear to call sin by its right name; Men whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the field; Men who will stand for the right though the heavens fall.”

The Religious Liberty Camp Meeting aimed to inform and prepare pastors and leaders from local Adventist churches on how to best engage in the development of effective official relations at the national, regional, and local levels. This was done in order to facilitate an authentic image of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, its beliefs and values as well as to increase its reputation in the region. Participants were encouraged to get involved in organizing religious freedom symposiums in order to allow regional public and religious officials to become familiar with religious liberty concepts, thus reducing prejudice towards religious minorities and increasing social acceptability.

Throughout the years, these seminars were presented by Dr. Ganoune Diop, Secretary General of the International Religious Liberty Association, Dr. Liviu Olteanu, Director of the Department of Official Relations and Religious Freedom at the Inter-European Division, Greg Hamilton, President of the Northwest Religious Liberty Association, Dr. Bert B. Beach, Vice President of the International Religious Liberty Association.



9

CELEBRITY AND CHARACTER seminar

Ellen G. White
CG 497

“It is right for the youth to feel that they must reach the highest development of their mental powers. We would not restrict the education to which God has set no limit. But our attainments will avail nothing if not put to use for the honor of God and the good of humanity.”

The “Celebrity and Character” seminar was designed to address and motivate young Adventists to develop their God-given talents, to not be afraid to achieve great heights in their careers and contribute to the development of society through correct decisions, as well as having a moral and spiritual influence on those around them.

During the seminar, the main points would go through the positive influence of current celebrities as well as Bible characters. However, the main emphasis was placed on the example of Jesus Christ and the way he responded to the greatest challenges in His life.

Constantin Brancusi, a renowned Romanian artist, considered one of the most influential sculptors of the 20th century, once said that “You have to climb as high as you can to see as far as possible.”

The seminar was presented in Romania, the United States, Spain, Moldova, Austria, Serbia, Italy, and France.

Paradoxurile celebrității
În criză de celebritate
Printre celebrități
Adorare și blestem
Fals sau autentic
Libertate și caracter
Test de caracter
Celebritate și caracter

Prezintă pastor **Nelu Burcea**
Vineri 28 Aprilie orele 19-21
Sâmbătă 29 Aprilie orele 18-20
Vineri 5 Mai orele 19-21
Sâmbătă 6 Mai orele 18-20
Biserica Adventistă, Portland, Oregon

PREZINTĂ: Pastor **Nelu Burcea**, director al Departamentelor de Relații Oficiale și Libertate Religioasă din cadrul Bisericii Adventiste de Ziua a Șaptea din România, realizator al emisiunii „Dreptul la opinie”, din cadrul televiziunii *SperanțaTV*.

În fiecare seară vor fi prezentate două teme. În pauza dintre prezentări, veți avea ocazia să degustați preparate sănătoase, special pregătite pentru această ocazie, și, totodată, să cunoașteți personal atât prezentatorul, cât și pe ceilalți participanți.

Seminarul poate fi accesat și pe site-urile: www.celebritiescharacter.ro www.roadvent.org

seminar
interactiv

celebrity & character
presented in
romanian & english

celebritate
caracter și

10

CONSCIENCE AND LIBERTY concert

Ellen G. White
5T 452

“It is our duty to do all in our power to avert the threatened danger. We should endeavor to disarm prejudice by placing ourselves in a proper light before the people.

We should bring before them the real question at issue, thus interposing the most effectual protest against measures to restrict liberty of conscience.”



The “Conscience and Liberty” Concert was organized in partnership with the Ministry of Culture and was held in the most important concert hall in the country - the Romanian Athenaeum. Among the 800 attendants to the event were academics, top officials, ambassadors, international experts, religious leaders and people of culture who had substantially influenced the thinking of the Romanian public.

The choir that performed the musical part was the famed Romanian Madrigal National Chamber Choir which has been part of the UNESCO patrimony since 1992. For several years in a row, it was acknowledged as one of the best chapel choirs in the world. The guest speakers brought an international perspective through speeches on the topic of freedom of religion and conscience.



BERT B. BEACH

Vice President of the International Religious Liberty Association



BOGDAN CIUCĂ

Chairman of the Legal Committee Romanian Parliament House



LIVIU OLTEANU

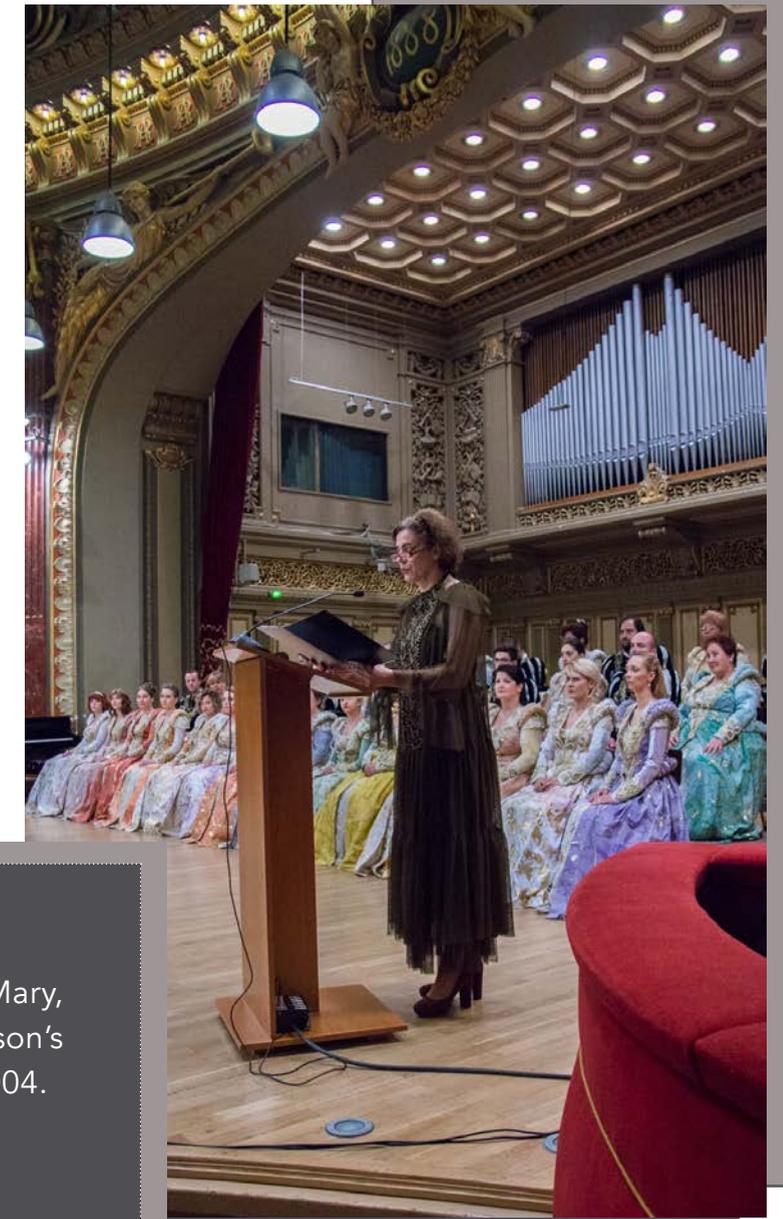
Secretary General of the International Association for the Defense of Religious Liberty



NELU BURCEA

President of the Conscience and Liberty Association

The presenter of the concert was actress MAIA MORGENSTERN.



She is best known for the role of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, in Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" in 2004.



11

CONSCIENCE AND LIBERTY diplomatic dinner

Titus Corlățean

Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs

“An open and transparent dialogue of the state with all the actors of religious life in the development of the common well-being is necessary. Religious diversity, therefore, appears as a resource in the development of a society. Managing religious and cultural diversity means recognizing the contribution of that diversity in society. Ignoring it would deprive society of useful resources in its endeavor towards development and democracy.”

The Conscience and Liberty dinner is an annual event organized by the Conscience and Liberty Association, sponsored by the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and hosted by the Diplomatic Club in Bucharest.

The event is usually attended by more than 100 people, which includes distinguished guests such as the ambassadors of European countries, leaders of international organizations which focus on the defense of religious freedom, local government officials, policy-makers, businessmen, and religious leaders.

The purpose of these yearly dinners is to create connections for religious freedom and to create a positive image of the Adventist Church as a defender of human rights.

“This diplomatic meeting represents a significant contribution to the development of a culture of rights and responsibilities, a culture of fundamental freedoms. I congratulate you for your direct contribution towards a better world
FOR ALL,
not just for some.”



GANOUNE DIOP, Secretary General, International Religious Liberty Association; Director of Public Affairs & Religious Liberty for the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists World Headquarters



12

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY annual conference

Mihnea Costoiu

Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research

“Although the existing laws must be enough for ensuring a comfortable religious climate, for preventing and sanctioning any deviations, the need is as great for a much greater interest from governments and religious representatives in general for a permanent education of people regarding the understanding and acceptance of the reality and benefits of a global and local religious pluralism. I think that the basis for education is communication, and it has to be adapted to a open form of understanding.”

The International Academic Conference held at the Romanian Palace of Parliament was initiated in 2013 by the “Conscience and Liberty” Association, in partnership with the Committee for Legal Matters of the Romanian Parliament, and sponsored by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The event created the opportunity for a more ample debate regarding religious freedom and was an opportunity to meet prominent personalities from the world of politics as well as national and international academia from the areas of political science, law and theology. The international conference was for years one of the most important meetings organized in Romania on the topic of freedom of religion and belief.



Annual International Academic Conference at the Romanian Palace of Parliament



MIHNEA COSTOIU
Minister for Higher Education,
Scientific Research of Romania



TITUS CORLĂŢEAN
Minister for Foreign Affairs of
Romania



SORIN CIMPEANU
Prime Minister of Romania



VICTOR OPASCHI
State Secretary for
Religious Affairs, Romania



Sorin Cîmpeanu, Prime Minister of Romania, Ganoune Diop, Director PARL General Conference, Nelu Burcea, Romanian Religious Liberty Leader, Mihnea Costoiu, Minister for Higher Education, Scientific Research, Bogdan Ciucă, Chairman of the Committee for Legal Matters, Romanian Parliament, Titus Corlăţean, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Victor Opaschi, State Secretary for Religious Affairs



DUDLEY ROSE
Associate Dean at the Harvard
University Divinity School



DANIEL BARBU
Minister of Culture of Romania



THOMAS HARVEY
Dean Oxford Centre for Mission
Studies



MIHAI UNGUREANU
Former Prime Minister of Romania



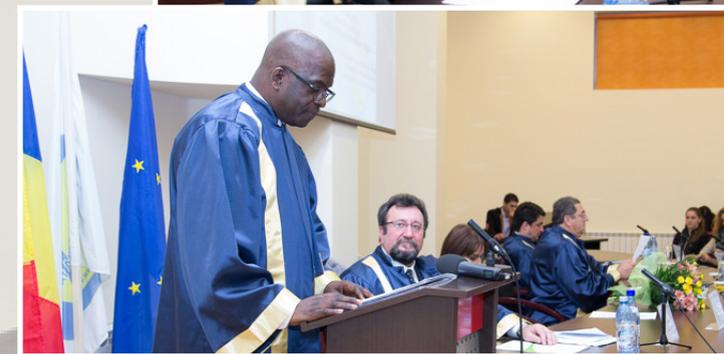


Dr. Nelu Burcea, Dr. Liviu Olteanu, Minister Mihnea Costoiu, Dr. Ganoune Diop, Dr. Mihaela-Alexandra Tudor, Dr. John Graz, Dr. Stefan Bratosin

Dr. Liviu Olteanu, Dr. Ganoune Diop, Minister Titus Corlatean, Dr. John Graz, Victor Opaschi, Secretary of state, Irina Cajal, Secretary of state, Dr. Nelu Burcea

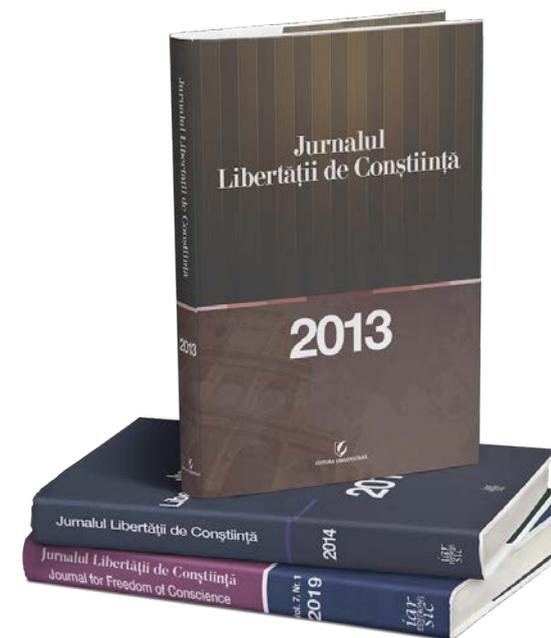


On October 23, 2014, the Wallachia University in Targoviste, Romania, awarded the title of 'Doctor Honoris Causa' to Dr. Ganoune Diop and Dr. John Graz, the official representatives of IRLA, as a sign of academic appreciation and respect for their involvement in the efforts of developing and promoting religious freedom in Romania. Mihnea Costoiu, Romania's Minister Delegate for Higher Education and Scientific Research, in the presence of 40 Romanian university presidents and other important academic and institutional figures, appreciated their contribution to developing and advancing freedom of religion, grounded on the idea of human dignity.



CONSCIENCE AND LIBERTY

academic journal



The *Freedom of Conscience Journal* was established in 2013 as a necessity to develop and promote the principles of human rights and religious freedom in the academic field.

The official launch of the *Freedom of Conscience Journal* takes place every year during the conference at the Parliament. The Journal was also launched in universities and other important institutions such as the Romanian Academy, the Academy of Sciences of Moldova in Chisinau, and Chernivtsi National University in Ukraine. Every year the Journal was sent to the most important Universities and libraries in Romania to be a useful academic source for researchers in the field of religious freedom.

The Freedom of Conscience Journal

The *Freedom of Conscience Journal*, launched annually at the Palace of the Romanian Parliament is considered an essential publication in Romania for the field of fundamental human rights and freedoms, and especially of religious freedom. The journal includes the academic articles presented at the annual conference by numerous national and international personalities from universities of political science, legal sciences, and theology. The journal has contained articles in several European languages such as Romanian, English, French, German, Italian, and generally has over 850 pages.



Academy of Sciences of Moldova in Chisinau

14

THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF OPINION television program

United Nations

Art. 19 Universal Declaration of Human Rights

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

“The right to freedom of opinion” was a television program dedicated to promoting fundamental rights and developing religious freedom as well as creating and strengthening relations with Romanian personalities. The guests of the program were defenders of religious freedom, university professors, religious leaders, students and officials from state institutions that came in connection with our interest in developing the right context of religious freedom. In the period 2009-2015, over 200 episodes were made for Speranta TV on judicial and religious freedom topics.



15 PURSUING religious freedom

Ellen G. White

The Acts of the Apostles, 68

“The banner of truth and religious liberty held aloft by the founders of the gospel church and by God’s witnesses during the centuries that have passed since then, has, in this last conflict, been committed to our hands. The responsibility for this great gift rests with those whom God has blessed with a knowledge of His word.”



Events on religious freedom at the national level have created enthusiasm and motivation to continue events at the local level. Regional events and strategies played an important role in promoting and protecting religious freedom throughout the country.



Annual religious liberty concert organized in the County Council Hall, Buzau

A very important point in the campaign for religious freedom was the desire to continue expanding projects. PARL conference directors, pastors, politicians, and business people have successfully created events of great impact on the topic of religious freedom in different regions of the country.

Religious freedom symposiums, concerts, and many other programs, such as “Open Doors Day” and “Religious Liberty Sabbath,” were successfully organized by the PARL conference directors in Banat, Transylvania, Muntenia, Moldova and Oltenia. These events managed to create exceptional relations with regional and local authorities. The first protocol for the defense and promotion of religious freedom in universities was created in partnership with the famous Babeş-Bolyai University.

It is worth mentioning a remarkable case in Buzau where a businessman, Ionel Turturică, successfully created religious freedom events with great success in the region of Buzau county. Each year, he and his family organized and sponsored a series of events with local county authorities, and later began inviting national political leaders and religious leaders from the area. Among his most successful events was an annual religious liberty concert organized in the County Council Hall in Buzau, where the most influential people from the region were present.

Targoviste was another important center for the promotion of religious freedom. Events successfully organized in this area were the annual humanitarian concerts held by the choir of pastoral families “Fideles Domini,” religious freedom symposium sponsored by Dambovita County Council and the launch of the Journal of Freedom of Conscience at the County Library “Ion Heliade Radulescu.”



Annual religious liberty symposium, County Council Hall, Targoviste



The debate “70 years since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights”

Former Romanian Minister and current Senator Titus Corlăţean participated and initiated annual symposiums on religious freedom in many Romanian cities. It is significant that Senator Titus Corlăţean and Ukrainian parliamentarian Pavlo Ungurian chaired the debate on “70 years since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Is religious freedom guaranteed for Christians?” during the 2019 Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). The debate was attended by many PACE members, representatives of international, non-governmental organizations and guests from European Member States. Romanian Senator Titus Corlatean proposed a motion for resolution to initiate the procedure for a debate on the situation of Christians in different regions.

Another exceptional example has been the involvement of the former Minister for Higher Education & Scientific Research and current Senator Mihnea Costoiu in organizing the International Academic Conference held at the Romanian Palace of Parliament every year.

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CONCLUDING REMARKS

Dr. Ted Wilson, President

General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

“I am very positive and very optimistic about the future because I know the end of the story. Scripture assures me of the prophetic destiny for those who answer the biblical challenge to stand for God. God has His hand over all, and I’m not worried. Yes, we’ll go through challenges and problems. But the activity of the church and its unity is only by the power of the Holy Spirit—God’s promised power. We’ve got plenty of challenges: social, educational, institutional challenges, religious liberty problems—all kinds of challenges. But when you rely on the Lord and remember His promise to take us through, it gives you a large measure of comfort.” [Interview - LIBERTY Magazine](#)

During a major evaluation done by the PARL Department and Legal Advisory Committee in 2015, it was observed that real improvements and positive developments had been made with respect to religious freedom, where hundreds of discrimination cases were solved, and the annual number of cases decreased from 500 to less than 50 cases per year. This result was based on prayers, promoting and protecting religious liberty, organizing events, and gaining the trust of important political and religious leaders.

There have been improvements in the Romanian media with regard to the approach to the activity and identity of religious minorities, with the amount of derogatory news about them decreasing significantly. The written media covered Adventist social, educational, humanitarian, and healthcare projects with greater frequency than in the past.

The Adventist Church, together with other religious denominations, started being invited to debate laws affecting religious life in Romania. In the last few years the Adventist Church has developed the profile of an important partner in relations with state authorities and other religions. The Adventist church is considered a leader by other minority religions in promoting and protecting religious freedom.

There were several specific actions and legislative projects on religious liberty in Romania during 2009-2015. One of the most important actions was the initiation of the first law on cemeteries, a project that relaxed the relationship of other denominations with the majority church, which owned almost all cemeteries in rural Romania, a situation that created hundreds of violent conflicts between members of different denominations.

In comparison to previous years, both state-owned and private universities demonstrated greater willingness to move exams scheduled for Saturdays to other days to accommodate Adventist students. Almost all County School Inspectorates agreed to sign a protocol with the Adventist Church, allowing it to teach religion classes in the county schools.

On 21/02/2012, the State Secretary of the Ministry of Education, Iulia Andreea Oana Badea, issued document No. 30641 in which she stated that Adventist students had the constitutional right to be treated equally in being exempted from courses that took place from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday and solicited schools to take this into consideration in the establishment of the class schedule. This approved document was sent to all schools in Romania to ensure the observance of students' religious convictions.

University presidents and professors who participated in the Religious Liberty Conference at the Romanian Parliament created a space conducive to religious freedom in their institutions and had an important contribution to resolving religious liberty issues. It is worth emphasizing that the president of one of the largest universities in Romania was present at the academic conference at the parliament and together with the university senate they decided that no admission exam should be scheduled at their university on Saturday. Public authorities have begun to be more receptive to proposals made for the respect of religious freedom.

The Conscience and Liberty concert was very well received, both by the special guests and by the press. The Minister of Culture himself spoke positively about this concert in a meeting of the Romanian Parliament, appreciating the Adventist Church for its openness and vision to promote religious freedom for all people regardless of the denomination they belong to.

The website of the government's e-governance project allocated much more space to the Orthodox Church, in comparison to the other 17 recognized religious denominations, which were very briefly described. The Adventist Church sent a memorandum requesting an objective, nondiscriminatory presentation of all recognized religious denominations, as well as requesting that such presentations should be drafted by the respective religious denomination in question. The government decided that the requests were valid and included them in the final form of the project.

The Minister of National Education, Mihnea Costoiu, visited the Headquarters of the General Conference in 2013 and was impressed by Adventist philosophy of health, education and religious freedom. When he returned to Romania, he summoned all presidents of Romanian universities and talked with them about religious freedom in Romanian schools. It was an extraordinary step forward for religious freedom in Romania. In the following years the said minister was one of the speakers at religious freedom meetings organized by the SDA and even the current president of the country supported the program promoting religious freedom.

The Adventist Legal Advisory Committee for Legislative Monitoring and Crisis Legal Intervention provided support in several religious liberty cases when the court ruled in favor of the Adventist Church.

As a PARL Director and previously as a Director of the Adventist Media Center, I had the honor to meet four Romanian presidents with whom I discussed the situation of religious freedom in Romania and the involvement/contribution of the Adventist Church in promoting moral and spiritual values in society.

In 2014, during the presidential elections in Romania, one of the candidates, Prime Minister, Victor Ponta, had formed his electoral campaign on the slogan "Proud to be Romanian, Proud to be Orthodox." We considered that the electoral campaign was based on a discriminatory slogan. There were at least two reasons why we thought the Prime Minister used this slogan. Firstly, because he was influenced by a political group supported by the majority of the Orthodox people. Secondly, because the other candidate was not Orthodox and came from an ethnic German minority. We arranged a meeting with the Prime Minister where we explained how this slogan can be perceived as discriminatory. Our message was well received and he changed the electoral slogan.

During 2009-2015, there were hundreds of solved religious discrimination cases that created great stories of faith through which church members were encouraged to step out in faith and to trust in God who works on their behalf. These stories brought hope and inspiration to members and were seen as being the work of a powerful, miracle-working God.



Dr. Nelu Burcea serves as the liaison to the United Nations for the Seventh Day Adventist Church and for the International Religious Liberty Association and as Associate Director of the Public Affairs and Religious Liberty Department at the General Conference of Seventh Day Adventist Church.

Dr. Burcea's previous appointments had been as director for Communication, Public Affairs and Religious Liberty for the Adventist Church in Romania, and director of the Romanian Adventist Media Center, which includes the Speranta television network, and Voice of Hope radio network. He has also served as a local church ordained pastor and led numerous evangelistic campaigns in Europe and the United States.

Dr. Burcea has many educational credentials, including a PhD in Economics specializing in Management Business Ethics, a Master's degree in Management of Business Development, and a Theology degree. He has also completed postgraduate study in Media and Marketing and Diplomatic Protocol and Communication. He is a Postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University focusing on religious freedom.