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12-2019

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Recommended Citation

Andrews University, "Summit on Abuse focuses on helping to recognize and stop abuse" (2019). *Lake Union Herald*. 887.

<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/luh-pubs/887>

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Summit on Abuse focuses on helping to recognize and stop abuse

The Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary Chapel on the campus of Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Mich., was full during the afternoon and early evening on September 4, the first day of the North American Division's 2019 enditnow Summit on Abuse. This is the division's third summit, the first to be held on a university campus and was made available online over two days in English and Spanish.

The two-day summit was organized to give pastors, seminary students, teachers, volunteers, church staff and members the tools and knowledge to help end abuse within their scope of influence. The summit featured a number of experts ranging from church leaders, administrators, professional advocates, educators and women who shared their stories of abuse.*

"This is a very sober and serious subject facing our society and our church," said G. Alexander Bryant, North American Division (NAD) executive secretary, during an introduction to the summit. "It is my prayer that you leave this summit more equipped, informed and motivated to address abuse in the sphere of your influence — where you work, where you socialize, and even where you worship."

In addition to the live audience gathered both days in the chapel, according to Jamie Domm, digital media strategist for the NAD, more than 3,600 registered to watch the Facebook livestream event for both days. More than 500 on average continuously viewed the livestream video presentations on Facebook.

Before the summit's experts made their way to the platform, Ivan Williams, NAD Ministerial Association director, welcomed the audience, and on-site and online audiences participated in a survey on abuse. During both days, presenters (after their lectures), attorneys, pastors, and Adventist



▲ After day one of the livestream broadcast, Latoya Wright, a seminary student and abuse survivor, participates with the panel of speakers in the summit's Q&A session in Chan Shun Hall, Andrews University.

Risk Management representatives were available to answer questions generated on Twitter and Facebook.

"Why is addressing this incumbent upon the church?" asked first presenter René Drumm, who then shared the second part of Jesus' words in John 10:10. "Living a life of abuse is not abundant living. . . . One person is too many."

The topics covered during day one of the Summit on Abuse included: "Relational Abuse and Violence in the Seventh-day Adventist Church," Drumm, professor of Social Work; "Spiritual Abuse: Let's End It Now," David Sedlacek, professor of Family Ministry and Discipleship; "The Silent Victims of Domestic Violence," Ruben Muriente, outreach coordinator for the Family Justice Center (Tennessee); "Peer Abuse: Prevalence, Protection, and Prevention," Mindy Salyers, educator, counselor, bullying prevention specialist; "Pornography and Violence," Stanley Stevenson, Social Services regional director, Mississippi Department of Health; "Double Abuse and Its Consequences," Sarah McDugal, abuse recovery coach; and "The Heart of Abuse," with the coordinator of the Psalm 82 Initiative.

The second day's topics included "El Sutil Poder del Abuso Spiritual," Jorge Mayer; "Aprendiendo lo que Es Violencia Domestica," Melissa Ponce-Rodas, professor; "Dándole Voz a las Víctimas Secundaria de la Violencia Domestica,"

Muriente; "Como Reconocer los Tipos de Hostigamiento contra un Niño/a," Gerry Lopez; "La Relacion Entre la Pornografia y la Violencia Domestica," Claudio Consuegra; and "Cómo Evitar el Abuso Doble," Melissa Ramos-Mota.

Testimonies were shared by Latoya Wright (English) and Dalia Padró (Spanish), survivors of abuse.

One Facebook viewer, Nicole Crosier Parker, shared her appreciation for the summit via comment: "This. Was. Amazing." She continued, "Thank you to all of these awesome presenters, and everyone else who put so much work into this! This is how change happens!"

After the livestreams concluded, in another first, presenters and attendees were invited to a reception and Q&A session. There, audience members asked the presenter panel questions, and got to hear about real-life situations and solutions.

Presenter Perspective

First presenter, René Drumm, Ph.D., who has been doing research on domestic violence and intimate partner violence (IPV) in the church for decades, said she believes that the Adventist Church is uniquely poised to be a world leader in the area of abuse response and prevention.

"The first study in the early 2000s showed that our rates of IPV are about on par with U.S. national statistics," said Drumm. "The second study took an in-depth look at Adventist victim/survivors of IPV, which

captured my heart and energy. The pain from the survivor's stories convinced us that the most pressing need was to train pastors to respond to disclosures of abuse. From there, the Lord opened the doors for our research team to train the pastors in our area (then Georgia-Cumberland Conference) on abuse response. We developed a 4-hour training that the conference mandated for all of their pastors with amazing and lasting results."

Drumm concluded, "Because a significant number of people in our church are suffering with this silent affliction, we need to act. We have the data; we know what needs to be done; and we have a proven path for improvement."

Another presenter, Ruben Muriente, said that he is participating in the summit because he wants to equip the Adventist Church with the best available resources, education and awareness possible to battle abuse head on. Muriente, the outreach coordinator for the Family Justice Center in Tennessee, spoke both days of the summit, presenting in English and Spanish.

"My goal is to eradicate abuse in our church," said Muriente. "At the summit, I will be presenting on the effects of abuse on children who witness abuse. I want the audience to understand that children need our help and support."

David Sedlacek, a professor at Andrews University, said that "as a survivor of spiritual and emotional abuse, I am convinced that the Seventh-day Adventist Church has a responsibility to create safe churches — not only for our own members, but also for the communities surrounding us."

Sedlacek believes that the enditnow NAD Summit on Abuse has provided information, testimonials and strategies to help deal with abuse and violence of all sorts. "It will help to move our church forward. . . . This is an essential element of the healing mission of the church as we prepare for the Second Coming of Jesus," added Sedlacek.

"The enditnow Summit on Abuse is crucial for the Adventist church because it is long

past time for us to take the subject of abuse seriously," shared Sarah McDugal. "We carry a gospel mandate to accurately represent the loving character of God to those who are vulnerable and wounded. Properly dealing with abuse and abusers is an evangelistic imperative, because poorly handled abuse situations is one of the overwhelming contributors to young people leaving the church. How can we expect our young people to stay, when they too often see leaders misrepresent God's character by protecting abusers and sweeping victims aside?"

McDugal hopes the audience comes away from the summit with a healing awareness that there are people in the church who care about counteracting abuse, a sense of more freedom to speak out about pain and find support, and a connection to practical tools to be used to increase education on abuse topics.

From the NAD

While many from the North American Division administration and leadership have supported the summit in myriad ways — from hosting to planning to presenting, two gave presentations at this year's event during the Spanish-language broadcast.

Gerry Lopez, associate director of NAD Children's Ministries, said "It is time for our church to talk and inform about these topics, to put them out there in the open. We need to educate our leaders and members, and make them aware that this is a real problem that exists in our church. We really have to educate everyone so that we all can know how to identify the problem and help the victims."

Lopez presented on bullying with the hope that viewers would gain a better understanding about not only what bullying is and how to prevent it, but also how to help kids deal with it. "As pastors, Sabbath School teachers, children's ministry leaders, school teachers and parents, we must be the people that the victims of bullying can go to for help and protection. The only way that will happen is they can trust us enough

to come to us; the only way we can help is if we ourselves are informed on what to do."

"I spoke about the relationship between pornographers and intimate partner abuse," said Claudio Consuegra, D.Min., NAD Family Ministries director. "Our hope is to shed some more light on the growing problem with pornography in our churches and communities."

Additional Information

If you are in immediate need of help, visit enditnownorthamerica.org/get-help to connect with resources in your area.

The Seventh-day Church in North America also offers a silent whistle program that allows users to send anonymous reports of abuse. Visit silentwhistle.com. Click on "file an ethics/compliance incident report," then enter "Adventist." The reports go to the Office of General Counsel for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. ■

*Both days of the Summit on Abuse are available to watch on the NAD enditnow facebook page at facebook.com/enditnowNAD/

You also can watch the Summit on Abuse by visiting enditnownorthamerica.org/watch2019.

Kimberly Luste Maran, associate director of Communication, North American Division



▲ David Sedlacek, professor of Family Ministry and Discipleship at Andrews University, addresses both the online audience as well as those gathered at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary Chapel on September 4.