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WEA and the Vatican release consultation statement, highlighting challenges and opportunities

The World Evangelical Alliance and the Roman Catholic Church have jointly released a ground-breaking statement—based on six years of dialogue—which, while acknowledging continuing areas of theological divergence, also calls it ‘imperative’ for Evangelicals and Catholics to work together in addressing the spiritual needs of an increasingly secularized and polarized world.

The highly readable, 16,000-word statement grew out of six meetings around the world between an Evangelical delegation led by Rev Prof Rolf Hille, formerly the WEA’s Director of Ecumenical Affairs, and a Catholic contingent headed by Msgr Juan Usma Gómez of the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU).

Kurt Cardinal Koch, president of the PCPCU, in his letter to the WEA confirming the Vatican’s approval of the text, stated that ‘the competent Catholic authorities ... considered it a valuable reflection to be offered to the Catholic public for study and discussion.’

Rev Prof Thomas K. Johnson, the WEA’s Ambassador to the Vatican, commented, ‘I am tremendously impressed with the quality of this accomplishment. It is a profoundly important document that sets a

benchmark for future Evangelical-Catholic interaction, a document that no Christian who is concerned about the other parts of Christendom can afford to ignore.

‘The mutual love and respect shown in this document, while stating clearly where the two sides agree and where they disagree, establishes a pattern that we must follow in all Evangelical-Catholic interactions, especially as we seek mutually to find effective ways to respond to the intense persecution of Christians in our time.’



The WEA’s Thomas Schirmmacher, Bishop Efraim Tendero, Thomas K. Johnson as well as Msgr Juan Usma Gómez from the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (left to right, across table) meet with Pope Francis in Rome on December 14, 2017 © L’Osservatore Romano

The theological content of the document covers two of the most important areas of historical difference between Evangelicals and Catholics: the relationship between Scripture and tradition, and the role of the Church in salvation. It is ideally structured to foster local-level dialogue and study because—along with outlining areas of theological agreement and encouragement—it reproduces key questions posed by each side to their fellow discussants across the table.

By way of illustration, in the section on ‘Salvation in the Church’, the first question posed by evangelicals to Catholics is ‘What practical hope and comfort can you give to those with troubled consciences or those who have fear concerning their eternal destiny?’ with a series of Scripture references. Conversely, Catholics ask evangelicals to consider how they deal pastorally with people who do not sense an assurance of salvation, how they deal with apparent believers who then turn away from the faith, and how they interpret the warning in Heb 6:4–6 about those who have ‘tasted the goodness of the word of God’ but then turn away. Altogether, the document contains three dozen paragraphs full of such questions.

With striking frankness, the document acknowledges the ‘wide range in the quality of local relationships’ between Catholics and Evangelicals globally: ‘Sometimes relations are characterized by open rivalry and opposition in the missionary field, marred by accusations and counter-accusations of proselytism, persecution, inequality, idolatry, and/or rejection of the recognition of the Christian identity of the other’ (paragraph 6).



The WEA delegation visiting the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity under Kurt Cardinal Koch. Left to right: Sorin Muresan (WEA), Msgr Juan Usma Gómez (PCPCU), Thomas K. Johnson (WEA), Bishop Efraim Tendero (WEA), Kurt Cardinal Koch (PCPCU), Thomas Schirmmacher (WEA) © Thomas Schirmmacher

In place of this mutual distrust, the participants called for collaborative efforts wherever possible so that Christian believers can respond in united fashion to the serious threats posed by secularism, ethical disorientation, religious pluralism and polarization.

‘It is our hope that both Evangelicals and Catholics around the world will read this document and use it as a basis for mutual conversation, enabling both groups to move beyond past misunderstandings and hard feelings and encourage each other towards a deeper walk with Christ’, Johnson stated.

The PCPCU has posted the document at www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/information_service/pdf/information_service_149_en.pdf; the WEA has also posted it online and will publish it with commentaries in the April *Evangelical Review of Theology*. To obtain bulk copies of that forthcoming publication, contact the editor.

Vietnam hosts Reformation celebration!

by Thomas K. Johnson

I had the honor of speaking at ‘Evangelical Protestant Faith: Historic Milestones and Current Trends’, held by the Vietnam National University–Hanoi School of Social Sciences and Humanities and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam–North on 4–5 December to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. It was a surprising and refreshing experience. The event seemed to be not just an historical commemoration but a positive expression of growing religious freedom for Protestants in Vietnam.

The still sensitive relationship between church and state certainly hovered over the commemoration, even influencing how it was described. Under Vietnamese law, an event must meet certain criteria to be called an

'international conference'. The organizers were not certain whether they had met all those conditions, so they called the event a 'roundtable', to avoid provoking the authorities over something trivial.

It was not surprising that international Christian scholars and experts mixed freely with Vietnamese pastors and theologians, but it was surprising that a representative of the German parliament (the land of Luther) gave the overview of the Reformation. It was very surprising to hear academic representatives of the Vietnamese government and Communist party think tank freely participating in the event, giving serious speeches mixed in with the presentations by Christian professors. I was astonished at what the government and party scholars had to say; hearing their talks made the exhausting travel (and intestinal inflammation) seem worthwhile.

The foreign Christian scholars invited to speak at the roundtable offered very serious substantive presentations. Jim Lewis (Bethel College) presented landmark research on the recent large numbers of Christian conversions among ethnic minorities in Vietnam's northwest highlands. Robert Woodberry (Baylor University) described his ground-breaking study of the connection between Protestant missions and the emergence of democracy in several countries. Reg Reimer (Vietnam advocate, World



Tom Johnson speaks at a graduation ceremony during his visit to Hanoi, Vietnam

Evangelical Alliance) delivered an insightful message on the dynamics of religious and social renewal, comparing Vietnam's 1986 economic 'Renovation' with the Reformation and emphasizing the importance of religious pluralism in a modern society. Andreas Jahn (German parliament) gave a heartfelt summary of the Reformation and explained why the revival of classical Protestant theology is urgent for church and society today. My presentation highlighted how the Reformation jump-started major social and economic development in Europe.

The Vietnamese presenters were equally inspiring. Prof. Do Quang Hung (School of Social Science, National University of Vietnam) departed from the standard Marxist and communist depiction of religion as the 'opiate of the people' which promises them a better afterlife and deters them from working to improve society today. Standard Marxist-communist ideology has declared that religion (especially Christianity) must be eradicated to bring about the new society. That is why communist governments have persecuted Christians. But influenced by the philosophy of Paul Tillich, whom he read while in graduate school in Russia, Prof. Hung came to view religion as a normal dimension of human life and as a way of responding to the biggest questions and anxieties of life. Particularly striking, he felt comfortable sharing this perspective with high-level government and Communist party officials in the room. Actually, the Vietnamese Communist party has officially acknowledged since 1990 that religion can play a positive role in a socialist society, but practical change has progressed only very slowly.

Prof. Nguyen Quang Hung, from the same university, explained that according to Marx, whatever religious and philosophical convictions people may have are the result of economic factors and class relationships. In contrast, Hung claimed, history shows the opposite of what Marx taught. Pointing out in Weberian style that the Protestant work ethic led to prosperity in the West, he suggested that it could do the same in Vietnam.

The lectures by both Vietnamese professors were more positive about Christianity than many lectures given at secular universities in the West. This recognition of the positive social and personal value of Christian faith does not mean that millions are turning to Christ in Vietnam yet, or that the persecution of Christians is over. In some areas, Christians are still victims of mistreatment by local authorities. But at high academic levels, there is no longer a consistent philosophical foundation for persecuting Christians; instead, there is a growing recognition that Christianity is needed. I was delighted to both observe and contribute to this historic evolution.

World Reformed Fellowship celebrates 500 years since Wittenberg, installs new director

The singing of 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God' in English, German, Korean and Indonesian was one of the many highlights of the World Reformed Fellowship (WRF) conference in Wittenberg, Germany, on 25–30 October 2017.

The conference examined 'The Global Impact of the Reformation and Its Relevance for Continuing Reformation'. With 28 speakers from 12 countries on 6 continents, the universal scope of what the Lord brought about 500 years ago through Martin Luther and others shone clearly through five days of worship, discussion, and presentations.



Multicultural worship pervaded the conference, with leadership by Michael Oh (CEO of the Lausanne Movement), Benjamin Kwashi (Archbishop of Nigeria), Stephen Tong (Founder of the International Reformed Theological Seminary in Jakarta, Indonesia), Mwaya wa Kitavi (chair of the Theological Education in Africa Conference), and James Courtney (who has appeared in almost 2,000 performances of the Metropolitan Opera in New York City).

During the conference, Davi Charles Gomes was installed as the fourth International Director of the WRF. Dr. Gomes currently serves as the Chancellor of the 40,000-student Mackenzie Presbyterian University in Sao Paulo, Brazil. On the final morning of the conference, he led the participants in considering the Reformational implications of the last stanza of Josh Bales' 'Hymn for All the World'. Videos of Wittenberg plenary sessions and other related messages will be posted at www.wrfnet.org.



Castle Church, Wittenberg

Asia Evangelical Alliance meets in South Korea

by Richard Howell, Secretary, AEA Theological Commission

The Asia Evangelical Alliance held a three-day conference on 5–7 December at Hallelujah Community Church in Seongnam City, South Korea. The gathering brought together various leaders from the 16 evangelical alliances in Asia and directors of various commissions.

The AEA Theological Commission met under the chairmanship of Prof Dr Do-Hong Jou from South Korea. The AEA leaders reflected on the topic of how churches can respond to humanitarian disasters. This challenge has become especially salient due to the increasing number of disasters impacting Asia, with particularly adverse effects on women, children, the elderly and the disabled. The AEA has set up a Commission on Disaster Response to enable churches to respond more effectively.



The TC also identified various issues that call for in-depth theological reflection. Among the most prominent were freedom of religion and the challenge of persecution, environmental disruption, and Christian identity amidst multicultural diversity. Thoughtful consideration of these pressing issues will strengthen the church to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom of God in word and deed in our multiple contexts.

WEA Creation Care deals with ‘Faith in Finance’, future of cities

Members of the WEA’s Creation Care Task Force and its Business Coalition travelled to Zug, Switzerland on 30 October–1 November for a unique international meeting, ‘Faith in Finance’, convened by the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC). Religious groups from all major faiths, financial investors, and UN representatives came together to discuss guidelines for faith-consistent investing in global sustainable development.

‘We’ve known what the faiths are against. This meeting is asking a very simple question: What are you for? Where will you put your money to make this a better world?’ explained ARC Secretary General Martin Palmer. For most participants, the answers to that question involve investing in environmentally sensitive activities that meet human needs in such fields as agriculture, technology, and economic development.

‘The financial industry is like a herd of cows’, Palmer added. ‘We [religious groups] are the fourth largest investment group in the world. ‘If we decide to go in a different direction, the market will follow.’

Dr Chris Elisara, director of the Creation Care Task Force, stated that the evangelical participants did not propose any guidelines but sought to learn from other groups’ experience. He said that a pre-conference on this topic will take place in conjunction with the 2018 Christian Economic Forum in July in St. Moritz, Switzerland.

Faith-based investment guidelines presented by other conference participants are available at www.arcworld.org/downloads/ZUG_Guidelines_to_FCI_2017.pdf.

On another front, the Creation Care Task Force is preparing to release its statement ‘The Gospel and the Future of Cities: A Call to Action’ at the World Urban Forum 9 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on 7–13 February. The statement starts by reaffirming the *Cape Town Commitment’s* call to ‘love our cities as God does, with holy discernment and Christ-like compassion, and obey his command to “seek the welfare of the city”, wherever that may be.’ It then takes up the accompanying charge to give ‘urgent strategic attention to urban mission’, especially in light of the challenges generated in today’s rapidly urbanizing world where the population living in cities is expected to rise from 50% to 70–75% over the next two to three decades.

‘The Gospel and the Future of Cities’ presents a biblical vision of ‘urban shalom’ that includes the pursuit of urban economic justice as a response to the gaping gulf between rich and poor; showing respect for human dignity and diversity as people of ‘welcome and hospitality’; caring for creation; supporting urban design that fosters human flourishing; engaging the public square; and participating in collaborations for the common good. The growing list of endorsements of the forthcoming statement currently includes Micah Global, the Lausanne Movement, Arocha International, and the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) to name only a few.

For more information on either endeavour, contact Dr Elisara at celisara@worlddea.org.

Society of Christian Scholars plans January 2019 launch

Global Scholars, which places and serves Christian professors at universities around the world, has announced plans to launch the Society of Christian Scholars (SCS), a global support organization for Christian academics seeking to integrate faith and scholarship, in January 2019. The WEA’s Department of Theological Concerns is collaborating in this effort. We interviewed Keith Campbell, Vice President of Global Partnerships at Global Scholars, about the project.

How did you get into this work? I did my PhD in New Testament studies, hoping to serve at a Bible college or seminary on the mission field. I learned about Global Scholars at a conference in 2008 and came to appreciate the role of universities in influencing people and cultures. Since my PhD was from a seminary, I thought that getting a university job would be a long shot, but I ended up getting placed at a government-run university in a secure country, where I served for four years. I then transitioned into my current role.

What is the rationale for SCS? There is currently no interdisciplinary global society for Christian scholars working at public or secular universities, although a few such movements are forming organically at the local level, especially in Africa, Australia, India and Europe. Global Scholars’ expatriate (mostly Western) professors frequently have local colleagues asking them, ‘Is there anything that can help us integrate our Christian faith and our scholarship?’ And in places where Christian scholarship is not prevalent, the few Christians serving in this way feel lonely. One such person, now our regional

representative in South America, told us, 'I felt as if I was the only Christian scholar in the world.' The need for a ministry serving the academic elite in public university settings is clear.

What benefits do you plan to provide to members? Our secure website, in addition to providing resources on integrating faith and scholarship, will permit members to post interdisciplinary and discipline-specific information on what is happening in their country. It will also let them connect with each other through a secure platform, searching for fellow members by geography or by discipline. SCS will facilitate webinars on various topics related to faith and scholarship and will support the flourishing of local small groups of Christian scholars. Existing groups tend to just replicate the fellowship that happens at church; they often need guidance to ask the right questions about how to be effective Christians in the university.

In addition, we intend to offer a program for senior Christian scholars to mentor junior scholars, assistance to local groups that want to hold conferences, and an editing service helping scholars who are not native English speakers to publish in English.

What about people in countries where they can't be open about their faith? We are developing a way for people to join under a pseudonym. SCS and Global Scholars staff would be the only people aware of their actual identities. SCS will also have regional representatives who can make personal visits where Christian academics feel that interacting through the website would be risky or not feasible.

Why are you taking such a long preparation time before launch? Mainly because of our philosophy. SCS is a grassroots, bottom-up movement being developed by a planning team of 30 scholars from nearly every major region of the world, in partnership with and supported by Global Scholars. Global Scholars could have rolled out a predominantly US-based program three years ago, but we want to avoid any hint of Western hegemony. Building relationships, working together, crafting governing policies that truly foster partnership, and striving to serve in step with existing organizations in such culturally diverse settings takes time, a lot of time. But the end product will better serve the needs of Christian scholars around the world.

What has the response been like? Far greater than I had predicted. Initially I thought that if we had even 50 scholars interested in SCS, then that would be a good start. As it turns out, my meetings with scholars in a number of countries worldwide, my deepening relationships with partnering organizations, and word-of-mouth sharing by Global Scholars—sponsored professors have had a ripple effect. Though it is too early to make solid predictions, I thank God that the numerical and geographically diverse interest in SCS has far exceeded my first expectations.

For more information on the SCS, see <https://www.global-scholars.org/society-of-christian-scholars/>.



Keith Campbell discusses applying faith to academia with scholars at a conference in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.

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