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Historic gathering of global Christian leaders to discuss a common reaction to “Discrimination, Persecution, Martyrdom”

(Bonn, 17.11.2015) 75 Christian church leaders from churches and countries that know “Discrimination, Persecution, Martyrdom” were listened to by 75 top global Christian church leaders from other countries, in a recent non-public consultation in Albanian’s capital Tirana. The consultation, organised by the Global Christian Forum, then went from listening to discussing how the church at large should react to discrimination, persecution and martyrdom.

A member of the planning committee, which worked under the leadership of the General Secretary of the Global Christian Forum, Larry Miller, explains the historical importance of the event: “The consultation is historic for two reasons.

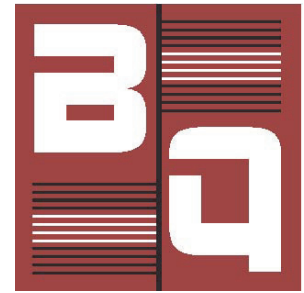
1. It was the first ever global meeting of any kind in which representatives of virtually all Christian confessions gathered around the topic ‘discrimination, persecution, martyrdom’ and listened to witnesses from dozens of countries from all continents.
2. For the first time ever World Christianity apologised for having persecuted each other in history, as the final document now reads: ‘We repent of having at times persecuted each other and other religious communities in history, and ask forgiveness from each other and pray for new ways of following Christ together.’

Both steps are a historic move both for ecumenical relations between churches as well as for the larger fight for religious freedom worldwide.” (Thomas Schirrmacher)

The delegations from the four global Christian bodies, that worked together under the umbrella of the Global Christian Forum, were represented by their top leaders. The



The General Secretary of the Albanian Evangelical Alliance Akil Pano welcoming the delegates of the consultation “Discrimination, Persecution, Martyrdom” to Tirana – at the table the representatives of the four global Christian bodies and of their counterparts in Albania



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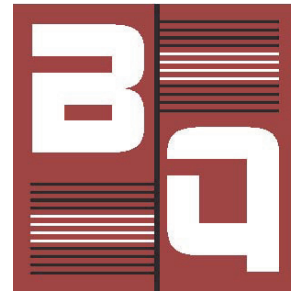
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Vatican was represented by Kurt Cardinal Koch, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the World Council of Churches and the World Evangelical Alliance by their General Secretaries, Rev. Olav Tveit and Bishop Efraim Tendero, and the Pentecostal World Fellowship by board member Rev. David Wells representing the Chairman Prince Guneratnam, who had fallen ill. In a message to the consultation, Pope Francis said, “I think with great sadness of the escalating discrimination, and persecution against Christians in the Middle East, Africa and Asia and elsewhere throughout the world. In various parts of the world, the witness to Christ, even to point where blood is shed, has become a shared experience of



Thomas Schirmmacher, Chair of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance

Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, Protestants, Evangelicals and Pentecostals.”

The delegation leaders who had spoken in the opening session also had the last word, stating what their community takes from the conference and wants to do with its results in the future.

E.g., Bishop Efraim Tendero stated on behalf of WEA: “We will do whatever possible to help and train our

people to overcome prejudices against other Christian traditions, and not to confuse things from the past with present realities.” He especially called for healing memories of past persecution of Christians by Christians, stating: “We are glad that repentance for persecuting each other is part of our message. We see the importance of healing memories wherever this has happened. We will encourage our pastors and churches to do this on a local level and discuss ways with the four bodies behind this consultation, how to facilitate this on a national, regional and global level.”

The equivalents of the four global bodies within the host country Albania were led by the head of the Albanian Orthodox Church, Archbishop Athanasios, the General Secretary of the Catholic Bishops Conference, Bishop George Frenedo, O.P., and the Chair of the Albanian Evangelical Alliance, Rev. Ali Kurti.

Cooperation and equal sharing between the different confessions was manifested everywhere. The planning committee consisted of 2 representatives from each body plus the General Secretary of the Global Christian Forum, Larry Miller, and his conference director, Joy Lee. It applied to the speakers and witnesses, as well as to the 40 young stewards that came in equal numbers from all confessions in Albania and had spent several days together before the consultation.

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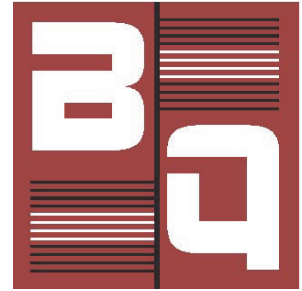
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The consultation was non-public due to the danger for church leaders from the Middle East and other violent situations. Only after the end of the consultation things became public especially though a reception for all delegates by the Muslim President of Albania, who praised religious freedom and thanked the Global Christian Forum and the four global bodies for having chosen Albania as host country, a country, where all religions had been molested by communism, even destroying every church building or mosque, but which since 1990 has returned to full religious freedom for all the major and minor religions in the country.

Quotations from leaders of WEA present in Tirana

Bishop Efraim Tendero, Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance:

“As Christians, we follow a Lord who was crucified as a criminal. The good news that Jesus brought was a threat both to civil and religious powers of his day, so it should come as no surprise to us that persecution will likely follow for those who follow Jesus. And yet... we come together because the gospel also says NO to persecution.

Despite the differences that separate some of our communities of faith, the current crises around the world demand that together we collaborate for those who suffer persecution and martyrdom.”



The General Secretaries of the World Council of Churches, Rev. Olaf Tveit, and the World Evangelical Alliance, Bishop Efraim Tendero, in front of the Orthodox Cathedral in Tirana

Bishop Cesar Vicente Punzalan III, D.Min., Ph.D., vice-moderator of intrafaith and interfaith relations, World Evangelical Alliance:

The conference had provided a venue to share faith stories which moved everyone to pray for one another.

Dr. Wilf Gasser, Associate Secretary General, World Evangelical Alliance:

“I was already encouraged to see how the global church united around this issue of discrimination and persecution of brothers and sisters in faith. But I was most impressed how asking each other for forgiveness for slandering and discriminating

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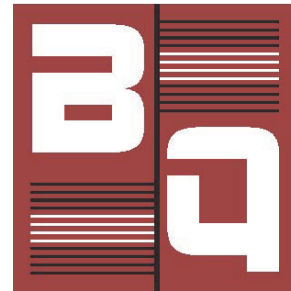
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each other throughout history has made it into the final message of the meeting. Change in the world has to start within ourselves.”

Brian C Stiller, Global Ambassador, World Evangelical Alliance:

“This Global Christian Forum avoided cerebral niceties and conventional mantras. Resting clearly in the heart of the Gospel and made alive by Christ’s presence, the subject at hand was faced head on. We established a foundation of biblical assumptions which led us together. We acknowledged historical squabbles and in conversation opened the door for further opportunities of clarification and resolution. I was deeply enriched by the homilies and messages of many.”

Rev. Dr. Richard Howell, General Secretary, Asian Evangelical Alliance, board member, Global Christian Forum:

The united voice of the Global Church determined to work for peace and reconciliation in solidarity with one another is a sign of the Triune God at work in the lives of His people. The highlight is the mutual repentance which paves the way for united action in common witness to the crucified and resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. May the global Church always remain sensitive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and committed to overcome barriers that have divided us and undermined our witness.

Prof. Dr. Christof Sauer, Co-Director, International Institute for Religious Freedom of WEA, member of consultation planning group:

“The consultation issued a remarkable message to the global church. It has found a language that can be widely accepted. The division of Christians by differing use of language must be overcome. The ongoing production of a glossary on the topic discrimination, persecution and martyrdom by the International Institute for Religious Freedom of WEA can contribute to that.”

Prof. Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher, Chair of the Theological Commission of WEA, Moderator of intrafaith and interfaith relations:

“We had not planned to discuss the question of Christians discriminating against and persecuting Christians, even though it came up in the discussions from the very beginning. But then the heads of the delegation of the Catholic Church proposed, that any call to stop persecution of Christians should mention first, that also Christians in history have persecuted other religions and other churches. The representative of the Pentecostal World Fellowship was very happy about this, but added the apology, that Pentecostals often had a pride and ignorance to those historic churches who carried the gospel through history, often at high costs. The repentance of churches persecuting churches and other religions in the final message is was the unexpected cream on top of a very successful consultation – if one may use such terms in spite of the sad topic of the consultation.”

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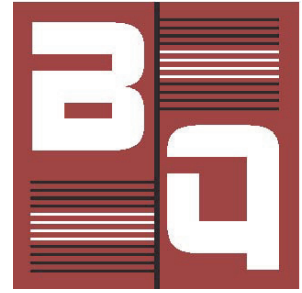
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Rev. Prof. Thomas K. Johnson, Ph.D., Human Rights Advisor to the Theological Commission, World Evangelical Alliance:

“1. In response to the encouragement from Bishop Ef, the evangelical church in which I normally worship already took special efforts on the IDOP, November 8, 2015, to pray for persecuted Christians whose churches were previously unknown to most of our members. It was simply right, and pleasing to God we think, to pray for the heroic believers from the ancient, historic churches, some of whom are now suffering greatly while offering a powerful witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

2. A crucial achievement of the Tirana consultation on the discrimination, persecution, and martyrdom of Christians is that not only have Christians who may have once persecuted each other now pledged to treat each other like brothers and sisters in the faith. They have also pledged multi-dimensional cooperation in responding to religious persecution and extremism, using the tools available in research, education, the media, and government relations. There is a huge amount to do, but altogether these efforts might turn the corner in response to the current flood of religious discrimination and persecution in so much of the world.”

Quotations from other church leaders

Larry Miller, General Secretary of the Global Christian Forum:

“The GCF exists to enable churches of all traditions to face common challenges together. It is highly fitting that the first of these initiatives is to support Christians around the world as they face discrimination, persecution and martyrdom in their communities. But these situations have inspired not only Christian unity. It has also provoked fraternal conflicts or at least mutual suspicions. Yet, awareness of this fact only reinforced the conviction that the time had come for us to address the challenge together.”

Pastor Ingolf Ellssel, board member, Pentecostal World Fellowship Executive, member of the planning committee:

„I am excited about this initiative of the Global Christian Forum bringing world Christianity together and lifting up the voices of those suffering discrimination, persecution and martyrdom. I hope is the beginning of a new process of unity in the Body of Christ.“

Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, General Secretary, World Council of Churches:

“It is so significant that we start with listening to those whose churches are going through challenging times right now. All of us need to learn from those voices among us that on a daily basis experience the reality of discrimination and persecution. We need to listen to those who know how martyrdom, witness, and martyrdom are closely interrelated and inter-connected.”

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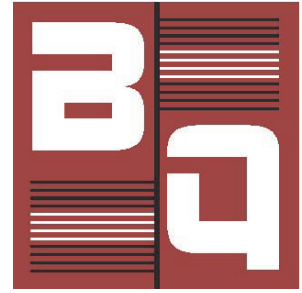
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Rev. Dr Hielke Wolters, associate general secretary, World Council of Churches:

“The consultation has turned out to be a unique event, where Christians from different traditions came together in a very effective way to support the churches going through difficult and challenging times.”

“It is a strong sign of hope that churches and ecumenical organisations with such a diverse background are ready to work together to support Christians that go through difficult times. Religious freedom is important for all of us, whether Christian, Muslim or adherent of any other religion. We are grateful that we can strengthen this important work in cooperation with churches and organisations from the Catholic, Pentecostal and Evangelical traditions.”

Downloads:

- Consultation Message ([pdf](#))
- Final speech of Bishop Efraim Tendero ([pdf](#))
- All Photos © International Institut for Religious Freedom (IIRF)
- [Photo 1](#): The General Secretary of the Albanian Evangelical Alliance Akil Pano welcoming the delegates of the consultation “Discrimination, Persecution, Martyrdom” to Tirana – at the table the representatives of the four global Christian bodies and of their counterparts in Albania
- [Photo 2](#): Three heads of delegations (left to right): Bishop Efraim Tendero, General Secretary of the World Evangelical Alliance, Olav Tveit, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Kurt Cardinal Koch, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity
- [Photo 3](#): Godfrey Yogaraja addressing the plenary of the consultation “Discrimination, Persecution, Martyrdom” as Director of the Religious Liberty Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance
- [Photo 4](#): Thomas Schirmmacher, Chair of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance
- [Photo 5](#): The General Secretaries of the World Council of Churches, Rev. Olaf Tveit, and the World Evangelical Alliance, Bishop Efraim Tendero, in front of the Orthodox Cathedral in Tirana
- [Photo 6](#): Bishop Efraim Tendero and his wife listening to the Albanian president, together with Thomas Schirmmacher (left) and the president of the Albanian Evangelical Alliance (right)
- [Photo 7](#): The General Secretary of the Global Christian Forum, Larry Miller, and his wife Eleanor talking with the President of Albania
- [Photo 8](#): Speech manuscript copies in different languages

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