

Featuring the Global Christian Forum gathering in Colombia

This issue of *Theological News* provides three perspectives on the third Global Gathering of the Global Christian Forum: a media report, a commentary by the WEA's Brian Stiller, and portions of a devotional delivered at the gathering by the WEA Theological Commission's Rosalee Velloso Ewell.

Take up the challenge of mutual love, forum urges

Press release by the Global Christian Forum

Christians are called to take up together the challenges of peace, unity and costly discipleship, the Global Christian Forum has said in a 27 April closing message to the churches of the world sent from Bogotá, Colombia.

The Forum, which connects the broadest range of global Christianity, held its third Global Gathering in the Colombian capital from 23–27 April, under the theme 'Let mutual love continue' (Heb 13:1). It brought together the widest variety of Christian traditions, with 251 church leaders from nearly every stream of global Christianity and 55 nations.

Against the backdrop of growing division in the world, the 'meeting itself became a message' of careful listening and respectful engagement across barriers of old enmities and historic separations.

In recognition of the churches of the host nation, the closing message said participants 'have listened to, and been inspired by, witnesses working for peace. We pray that the peace process may continue in Colombia and bring hope and reconciliation to those who are suffering and struggling.'

Participation in the Global Gathering included delegations from the Catholic Church (Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity), the Pentecostal World Fellowship, the World Council of Churches, and the World Evangelical Alliance together with those of many other Christian world communions and international Christian organisations.

Secretary of the GCF, Revd Dr Larry Miller, said participants repeatedly affirmed the Forum as an indispensable instrument for promoting Christian unity and engaging in conversation on the challenges Christian communities worldwide face today.

'The existence of the GCF as a place where churches and church leaders who are often strangers to each other to come together in mutual love is a realisation of the shared yearning for healing in the wounded body of Christ.'



Thomas Schirmacher during his speech at the Global Christian Forum (with permission of BOWA/necke)

At the close of the Global Gathering, leaders of confessional bodies commented on the role and value of the GCF within the wide world of global church relationships.

Bishop Brian Farrell, Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, said, 'This gathering is the third in a series. It has been a moment of tremendously improved relationships between all the participants, which reflects a new era of collaboration among the churches.

'I think the Global Christian Forum has shown that we do have a way forward, which is that we must not use our differences to stay apart and refuse collaboration. We need to see them as a certain contribution of richness to the whole Christian mission in the world,' Farrell said.

Pentecostal World Fellowship Vice Chairman, Revd Dr David Wells, said, 'As a result of the Pentecostal World Fellowship's ongoing privilege of being at the table of the Global Christian Forum, deeper bonds of respect and love continue to develop with fellow Christians from other communions.

'The Bogotá Gathering reinforced the PWF's continuing commitment to participate in the Forum in a fully engaged manner while recognizing the hard work yet to be done.'

World Council of Churches Deputy General Secretary, Father Dr Ioan Sauca, said, 'Through prayer and sharing, the Spirit has led us, during this global gathering, to greater mutual love and to the experience of a real though imperfect communion in Christ despite and beyond our persisting ecclesial divisions and estrangements. This means that the Global Christian Forum is fulfilling its original calling.

'But the GCF will not have accomplished its mission unless we leave this global gathering firmly committed to encourage the churches we represent to walk together towards greater mutual love, mutual support and engagement in the struggles for reconciliation and just peace, starting in Colombia, extending through Latin America, and to the end of the earth.

'Only in this way will the churches we represent be able to address what prevents us from fully manifesting the One Church that anticipates the one reign of justice and peace.'

According to **World Evangelical Alliance Associate General Secretary Dr Thomas Schirmmacher**, 'Bogota was the Global Christian Forum at its best! To hear in small groups the personal faith stories of high-ranking Christians from all confessions—a mark of the GCF—was moving and eye-opening.

'At the same time, plenary presentations by the major expressions of Christianity on the future of ecumenical relations proved how much more friendly our relationships have become. We have matured to the point where we are more eager than ever to overcome major differences, yet without compromising our identities and Biblical convictions.

'If the GCF did not exist, we would have to invent it today! Bogotá also proved that it was the right decision of the World Evangelical Alliance to endorse the future of the GCF when last year we reviewed its 20-year history,' Schirmmacher said.



Thomas Schirmmacher with African delegates and the incoming secretary of the Global Christian Forum, Casely Essamuah, and his wife © BQ/Warnecke

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Reflections on the GCF Global Gathering

by Brian Stiller, WEA Global Ambassador

Ecumenical has not been a friendly word in my lexicon. In my younger years, our small church and much of our community was in a defensive mode, somewhat fundamentalist and afraid that if we got involved with 'liberal' mainline Protestants, it was the beginning of a slippery slide to a lukewarm faith.

This major rift within Protestantism, between a growing Evangelical world (and in my case more specifically Pentecostal) and mainline Protestants, had enormous consequences. At stake, so we believed, was that their theology might erode our trust in the Scriptures and in Jesus as the only way to the Father. That made ecumenical dialogue something to avoid.

Yes, we were too sectarian and our reaction was often unnecessary, stoked by what we sensed was a manifest lack of respect by mainline churches for who we were and what we believed. These two perceptions soured our sense of each other and resulted in a loss of mutual witness of Christ to our world. We also lost potential in working together to do good within our communities.

That's why recent days spent in Bogotá, Colombia as part of the Global Christian Forum were important. Various major groupings of the global church met to affirm friendship and strengthen Christian witness and bonds in the life of Jesus.

Much of our time was spent within smaller groups, telling personal stories of faith and how our lives had been captured by Jesus. Be it Orthodox or Methodist, Catholic or Pentecostal, we were connected by knowing Jesus and in having been taken hold by the Spirit.

Issues

All was not sweetness and light. Issues of regional conflicts and differing interpretations of on-the-ground realities filtered through. On the issue of Syria, there were two distinct sides, one charging that the American and Allied response to the gassing of Syrians was to them an invasion from the West. This surprised many who saw this intervention as a responsible move in the face of the gassing of innocent persons.

Then there was the predictable concern over proselytizing. This is seen as an unfair invasion, especially in countries where there has been a Christian majority, usually populated by the Orthodox or Roman Catholics. And on this topic it is generally assumed that the critics see Evangelicals as at fault, often described as missionaries. The majority churches view this activity as unnecessary and as implying that some who have already been baptized still need the Gospel. The Christian majority see this as needless religious reconversion.

A story was told of a drug addict raised in a country with a Christian majority. Though baptized as an infant, he had never had a personal walk with Christ. Led to faith, converted through the ministry of an Evangelical church, he was freed from addiction and later started a local church. But the police, acting on complaints by the Christian majority, threw him in prison. So, the speaker queried, was this a needless reconversion or an overreaction by the majority church?

Making the text sing

From the four corners of the world I heard biblical homilies that would make the heart of my Pentecostal father sing. In our prayers, messages, debates or sidebars, we were framed by this singular interest that in fellowship and dialogue, Jesus the Christ, is Lord and King of all of life.

From conversations in groups to times of prayer, as we heard messages from the Word, I concluded that if this is what 'older' churches mean by the word ecumenical, that's mighty fine with me.

A name badge saying ‘Not from this world’

(excerpted from Rosalee Velloso Ewell’s reflection at the GCF)

Text: John 17:13–19

As we come together from all around the world for this third Global Gathering, we celebrate the mutual respect and love that mark our time together. This text from the gospel of St John reminds of that respect and that love that the triune God makes possible for us. The text also tells us of the cost of this love.

Look at your name badge. What does it say? If I ask you, ‘Where are you from?’ how will you answer?

In Jesus’ prayer in John 17, he gives us an answer to this question, ‘Where are you from?’ He says: Not from this world. Now there’s a weird identity!

Jesus’ prayer is set within the context of his love and care for his disciples. It is a prayer that mixes up present and future. In John 16:33 Jesus speaks of being of good cheer because he has already overcome the world, yet this is all before the crucifixion. It is a prayer about unity and evangelism, and living as God’s people in a world that does not like us.

Jesus makes four requests in this passage. He prays the disciples may have his joy. He prays that they be protected from the evil one. And he prays twice that they be sanctified in the truth. Yet, in a text about love and truth and unity and complete joy, Jesus says we will be hated.

The word of Jesus is truth and light. So why is it hated? Because the type of holiness for which Jesus prays, the type of love which we are to show one another, threatens the powers of this world.

Jesus prays that this little band of disciples will be so peculiar that those who meet them and see their love might actually think that they are not from this world.

Jesus’ prayer for his disciples becomes his prayer for us. This is our story. It is an invitation that we join in God’s mission, as Jesus continues with his prayer in John 17:23, ‘so that the world may know’. Our gathering here in Bogotá is a sign that points to Jesus and to the love that only he makes possible between us.

More than that, we have no part in God’s mission if we cannot love as God loves.

If we make Jesus’ prayer our own—if we pray that God sanctify us, that God’s truth and love be known in this gathering—are we really ready for God to answer our prayers?

If we do trust in God, then as Jesus says, we should expect to be hated. He had already warned the disciples of this in John 15:18: ‘If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. ... Because you do not belong to the world ... the world hates you.’

When we think of hate, joy is not the first thing that comes to mind. And yet this is the first request Jesus makes: ‘I speak these things so that they may have my joy made complete’ (17:13).

Jesus is not asking them or us to laugh at hatred, to dismiss the suffering that so many Christians face because of their faith. Not at all. Indeed, there is a call for mourning, for lament, for coming together alongside those who suffer and who are persecuted. Doing so has been a hallmark of the Global Christian Forum.

This is not a text that makes light of suffering or hatred. This is a text about belonging, about being joyful in our heavenly citizenship, about showing that we are peculiar people because we have all been called by God.



Dr Rosalee Velloso Ewell delivering her devotional at the Global Christian Forum © Albin Hillert of the WCC

If you ask me, “Where are you from?” I might say I’m from São Paulo, Brazil. I’ll say my grandmother was from the Tupi-Guarani tribe and my grandfather was half German, half Portuguese. I’m married to a North American and I live in England.

But during the World Cup, I am 1000 percent Brazilian. It’s not a thoughtful, rational decision, made after careful consideration whether ours is a good team or not. That does not matter. It is a joyful sense of belonging.

My joy in being Brazilian during the World Cup is just a very faint echo of what Jesus is saying here. I belong to Jesus and I belong to you much more than I belong to Brazil’s football team. You are my identity markers.

Where are we from? We are from another world, a world formed and chosen and redeemed by God. Through Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit, God has given us another origin, another belonging, another identity in which we are to be joyful. Jesus said to Nicodemus that it is an identity born from above, and it is an identity that we share with Jesus himself.

Let mutual love continue! Through our love, the world will come to know the one true God. What greater promise, what greater incentive could there be for us indeed to show that love to God and to one another?

This isn’t just a global gathering. We are the light of Christ—as St Paul says in Philippians, a light shining like stars in a dark world. Let us not take this gathering for granted. Let us shine the joy and love of being in Christ amidst all our diversity, difference and wonder. That is how God enables us to move forward in mutual love.

New professorship on religious freedom in Germany

Christof Sauer, previously research director for the WEA’s International Institute for Religious Freedom, has been named to a newly established professorship for religious freedom and research on persecution of Christians at Germany’s Giessen School of Theology (FTH Giessen). This is the first such professorial chair in Germany.

Stephan Holthaus, director of FTH Giessen, described the new post as a signal to the scholarly community that issues of religious freedom do not belong only in pulpits but should also be studied at universities. He emphasized that such research should cover persecution of members of all religious communities: ‘Freedom of religion applies to everybody, and therefore this professorship will stand up for general religious freedom in all countries of the world, and not just for Christians.’

Holthaus noted, however, that the specification of ‘research on persecution of Christians’ was added to the name of Sauer’s position because, as a theological college, ‘we have a special interest in issues relating to the propagation of the Christian faith.’ Moreover, Sauer pointed out, the term ‘religious freedom’, which refers primarily to matters of human rights, does not cover all possible phenomena.

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‘If, for instance, a girl in India turns to the Christian faith and her Hindu parents therefore disinherit her, this is no violation of human rights, as long as no violence is used’, Sauer explained, ‘but of course, it is a form of religious discrimination.’ Such issues require a specifically Christian and theological perspective, he stated, and therefore, in his opinion, the topic is in good hands at an institution of theological education.

Thomas Schirmacher, Deputy General Secretary of the World Evangelical Alliance, also saw no selectivity in the concept of the professorship. ‘We stand up for our family, and likewise, of course, for the families of others’, he declared, arguing that from its inception the WEA has regarded the topics of mission and religious freedom as two sides of the same coin. ‘Religious freedom creates peace, religious oppression creates upheaval. This discovery, new at that time, has time and again proven true in the course of history.’

Schirmacher expressed hope that the establishment of this professorial chair would have a ground-breaking character in encouraging broader attention to the topic of religious freedom. After all, he observed, no one would attempt to carry out policies that particularly affect women without consulting experts on women’s issues.

Herman Gröhe, the German member of parliament who first made the persecution of Christians around the world a prominent item on that country’s political agenda in 1999, insisted that political engagement with the subject depends on precise information and cannot not be based on ‘well-meaning alarmism’. He is hopeful that the new professorship will contribute to such precision through scholarly monitoring of the topic.

Gröhe called on Christians not only to view themselves in the role of victims, but to treat religious freedom as a human right to which all persons are entitled. Some would argue, for example, that the building of mosques in countries like Germany should be permitted only when Muslim-majority countries permit the construction of churches. ‘But freedom of religion is a birthright and not based on reciprocity. Every human deserves respect for his own sake. That respect does not have to be earned. And we as Christians even believe that this respect is given by God’, Gröhe said.

Heiner Bielefeldt, who was the United Nations Special Rapporteur for freedom of religion or belief until a year and a half ago, commented that this birthright of religious freedom is frequently trampled upon worldwide—naming as examples the suffering of the Rohingya in Myanmar, Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia, Yazidis in the Near East, and Muslim refugees in Hungary. ‘Every day we receive new reports of human rights violations, but we still have systematic blind spots. We need to ask ourselves whether we lack the antennas for this, or whether they are just wrongly aligned’, Bielefeldt lamented.

Bielefeldt further cited the plight of domestic workers such as the tens of thousands of Buddhists living in Lebanon or the large number of Hindus in Qatar, people for whom no religious infrastructure exists. ‘They are not counted, because they don’t count’, he said—or if they are mentioned at all, it is with reference to their ‘slave-like conditions’ and not the denial of their religious freedom. Therefore Bielefeldt advocated that



Christof Sauer at his lecture at the opening of the new professorial chair on religious freedom © Martin Warnecke/IIRF



(from left) Hermann Gröhe, Heiner Bielefeldt and Thomas Schirmacher conversing at the opening of the new professorial chair on religious freedom © Martin Warnecke/IIRF

religious freedom engagement be placed in a broader human rights framework: 'Religious freedom needs human rights, but the reverse is also true. For without freedom of religion, the whole human rights claim would be nothing but an empty shell.'

Besides all these theoretical considerations, Holthaus, the director at FTH Giessen, has also discovered a practical need for study of this topic. 'We have over 1,000 graduates in 42 countries of the world', he explained, 'and some of these work in countries where no religious freedom exists or where Christians are being persecuted. Therefore this subject is deeply important to us as an officially recognized theological college.' FTH Giessen's 140 students are now required to closely engage with this complex of themes for one semester.

With regard to the content of his research, Sauer identified several points of emphasis, including quantitative and statistical research on the extent of persecution and cross-country comparisons along with historical, theological and ethical considerations. 'I hope that through our commitment the topics of religious freedom and the persecution of Christians will receive wider recognition', he said.

Sauer has engaged with these issues ever since, during his university studies, he observed that no seminar topics on 'mission and martyrdom' were offered and his professor challenged Sauer to conceive such a seminar himself. This initial effort was followed by diverse papers, a mini-thesis, books and finally his habilitation (post-doctoral qualification thesis) on the topic at Protestant University Wuppertal/Bethel.

Hong Kong Cardinal Zen receives prize for opposing persecution

At a ceremony in Bonn, Germany on April 7, Catholic Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kai, the former bishop of Hong Kong, received the Stephanus Prize for Persecuted Christians, in recognition of his decades of courage and persistence on behalf of freedom, particularly religious freedom.

In his acceptance speech Cardinal Zen said: 'I've never asked for the grace of martyrdom. The colour red that I wear reminds me of the blood of numerous brothers and sisters in China, who are living martyrs even if they have not necessarily shed their blood in the literal sense of the term.'

All totalitarian regimes, Cardinal Zen said, have only one goal: control over everything and everybody. Nowadays these rulers avoid making martyrs of people; "They rather employ threats and bribery. They threaten you and your family, they bribe you with money and honours", he warned. They are not content to restrain people physically, but also keep their consciences shackled.

In the weeks before receiving the Stephanus Prize, the Cardinal made worldwide news with his warning against the Chinese Communist Party's religious policy and against a possible compromise between the Vatican and China, which he termed a 'sellout'. A new Act on Religious Affairs, which has been in force since February in China, tightened the country's control over religious groups.

In 2011, when a new law allowed Hong Kong to take over 300 Catholic schools and turn them into government schools, Cardinal Zen, then 79 years old, nevertheless went on a hunger strike, causing the whole world to become aware of the situation.



Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kai at the Stephanus Prize award ceremony © BQ/Warnecke

In his commendation speech at the ceremony, WEA Associate Secretary General Thomas Schirmmayer stated, 'Your totally peaceful and respectful, but bold and risky action in standing up for those who are oppressed and persecuted makes you more than worthy to receive the Stephanus Prize, named after the first Christian martyr.'

Schirmmacher especially highlighted the Catholic dignitary's role among the defenders of human rights in Hong Kong, who assemble each year on July 1, the anniversary of the day in 1997 when Great Britain handed the territory over to China, to demonstrate against the influence of the Chinese Communist Party over this Special Administrative Region. At age 86, Cardinal Zen planned to spearhead this year's protest march by the Civil Human Rights Front. When he urged the protesters in 2014 to demonstrate that they were not slaves but free, those gathered were attacked with tear gas.

Schirmmacher, who is also President of the International Council of the International Society for Human Rights, called Cardinal Zen a clear voice against discrimination of Christians, a defender of religious freedom for all people regardless of their religious affiliation, and 'a symbol of human rights in general far beyond religious problems alone'.

The Stephanus Foundation, which awards the Stephanus Prize, is named for the deacon of the early Christian church who was the first to be killed for his confession of Jesus Christ. The foundation supports persecuted Christians in need (e.g. by assisting with living costs or attorney fees) and seeks to uncover violations of the right of religious freedom. Among the previous awardees are the Syrian Orthodox nun Sister Hatune Dogan; the Patriarch of Babylon, Louis Raphael I. Sako, head of the Chaldean Catholic Church; Pastor Gottfried Martens of the Trinity Church in Berlin-Steglitz, which belongs to the Independent Evangelical-Lutheran Church; and the Jesuit Father Frans van der Lugt, who was murdered on April 7, 2014 in the Syrian city of Homs. Last year the Pakistani human rights lawyer Aneeqa Anthony received the prize for defending Christians who were wrongly accused of blasphemy. The Stephanus Foundation was founded by the now-retired senior teacher Wolfgang Link from Gegenbach in Germany's Black Forest. Foundation board president Michaela Koller is an advisor to the International Society for Human Rights in Frankfurt.



Bishop Thomas Schirmmacher congratulates Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kiun; at left is Michaela Koller, chair of the Stephanus Foundation
© BQ/Warnecke

WEA THEOLOGICAL NEWS

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