

WEA Secretary General on the agenda at ground-breaking interfaith forum in Abu Dhabi

Although the first-ever visit by a Catholic Pope to the Arabian Peninsula got most of the media attention, the World Evangelical Alliance was also represented at the Global Conference on Human Fraternity on February 3–5 in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

WEA Secretary General Efraim Tendero was one of the speakers in the session on 'Human Fraternity: Challenges and Opportunities'. Daniel Pantoja, Tendero's longtime colleague in Christian-Muslim peacemaking in the Philippines, and Rey Corpuz, pastor of an evangelical congregation in Abu Dhabi, also attended.

The event highlighted the tension between the UAE's desire to promote an image of tolerance, as a relatively moderate Muslim nation, and the limitations on religious freedom that still prevail there. Conversion from Islam remains illegal, and the UAE ranks 45th on the Open Doors World Watch List of countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian.



Bishop Efraim Tendero delivering his presentation and mingling with participants at the Global Conference on Human Fraternity in the United Arab Emirates © Daniel Pantoja

Tendero chose to address the issue of religious freedom diplomatically by depicting how Christians today preserve this value. 'All over the world, evangelical Christians train their families in the hope that their children will also become followers of Jesus', he said. Unfortunately, some do not. When that happens, we are deeply disappointed, but we continue to love them. We do not threaten, punish, or attempt to harm them. At earlier points in history, Christians have sometimes taken harder stances toward people who abandoned the Christian faith, but we have come to realize that forced religious belief is no belief at all.'

Pope Francis also challenged his hosts, calling on Muslim nations to extend citizenship rights to religious minorities.

After describing his own work and that of other evangelicals in pursuing mutual understanding and peace between Christians and Muslims, Tendero proposed creating Centres for Friendship in communities where members of the two faiths live side by side. 'Establishing such communities does not require that we agree with the faith of the other, only that we know we need friendship with each other', Tendero explained. 'We could start by having pastors and imams share time together to build friendships, then ask local people to open their homes and serve meals to mixed groups of Christian and Muslim participants. Structured events of this type could build relationships between people whose paths would not normally cross, creating channels for respectful relationships and community problem solving.'



Bishop Efraim Tendero delivering his presentation and mingling with participants at the Global Conference on Human Fraternity in the United Arab Emirates © Daniel Pantoja

Tendero urged that leaders and people of all faiths commit to three simple acts in their engagement with other groups: active listening, empathic understanding, and intentional collaboration. He observed that current global tensions made such interaction between Christians and Muslims particularly strategic.

'We are experiencing perhaps the most intense round of confrontation and distrust between Christians and Muslims in 500 years or more', he stated. 'In parts of Europe and the United States, Islamophobia is rampant, fuelling the political success and policy agendas of regimes with nationalist tendencies. Conversely, in many parts of the Islamic world, Muslims are equally suspicious of Christians.'

'We all have an interest in ensuring that the people of our faith communities are treated respectfully and not exposed to mob attacks, persecution, or any other threats to their human rights. That will happen if we learn to understand each other and talk with each other with kindness and respect.'

'There is enormous opportunity for global impact if we stand together in support of mutual respect and peaceful dialogue. Christians and Muslims can do that without compromising their beliefs, and in many parts of the world we have already done so.'

International Institute for Religious Freedom audits World Watch List

The World Watch List, produced annually by Open Doors International, is one of the most valuable resources available to advocates of religious freedom. The World Watch List ranks the 50 countries worldwide where it is most dangerous to follow Jesus, using a comprehensive methodology that assesses the extent to which Christians are affected by pressure and actual violence in each country.



In March, the International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF) announced that the World Watch List had received a positive audit by a team of five scholars. The IIRF chose four countries and tracked the whole procedure, including the selection of experts who answered the questionnaires, the editing process by the World Watch List Unit and the final scoring. Three scholars checked individual countries on which they themselves are experts, while others also examined the whole process.

As a result of the audit, the IIRF submitted several proposals aimed at improving the depth of information on newly assessed countries and ensuring consistency across countries. As in the previous four years, the audit team saw no need for changes in the questionnaires, stating that 'rather the emphasis needs to be on guaranteeing the quality of the responses to the questionnaire particularly in countries newly under close scrutiny.'

IIRF Co-Director Christof Sauer, who co-ordinated the audit team, remarked, 'I am impressed by the collegiality of the Persecution Analysts of the World Watch Research Unit of Open Doors International. I note a remarkable openness for critical feedback and ongoing efforts to improve the World Watch List.'

The 2019 World Watch List can be accessed via www.opendoorsusa.org.

First two volumes released in new book series on 'Christians under Pressure'

The International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF) has announced the launch of a new series of books with the overall title of 'Christians under Pressure: Studies on Discrimination and Persecution'.

Two volumes of the series have already been published. The first, *Fruitful Minorities*, includes various perspectives on the witness and service rendered by Christian communities in predominantly Islamic societies. The second contains the recollections of a veteran missionary on the experiences of an Ethiopian evangelical denomination during the Marxist revolution from 1972 to 1994.

IIRF co-director Christof Sauer said that authors from theological fields, church history and the social sciences are welcome to submit manuscripts for consideration. 'We are looking forward to more analysis and reflection on discrimination and persecution of Christians, as this is an under-researched field in academia', he added. 'This series will complement our Religious Freedom Series which focuses primarily on freedom of religion or belief for all and does so from a secular perspective.'

EEA celebrates 25 years of socio-political engagement with Europe through its Brussels office

In January, the European Evangelical Alliance (EEA) celebrated the 25th anniversary of its Brussels office, which represents Europe's 23 million Evangelicals from 33 countries to the European Union. To commemorate the occasion, the EEA held a forum on the integration of Muslims in Europe and a worship service at the Chapel of Europe.

Julia Doxat-Purser, who was intensively involved in the start of the Brussels office in 1994, expressed her gratitude to the staff, interns, volunteers, churches and evangelical NGOs who have kept the office open as a beacon of Christian hope to European politics, despite limited resources that caused the EEA to consider closing it on several occasions.

The main speakers at the forum on Muslim integration were Christine Schirmacher, specialist in Islamic Studies at the University of Bonn and at the Evangelical Theological Faculty in Leuven, Belgium, and Peter Adams from the St Marys Centre for Peace and Reconciliation, Luton, UK.

Schirmacher emphasized that we cannot understand Islam in Europe without the context of Islam in Saudi Arabia and in the Middle East. 'Christians can play an important role as a kind of mediators between Muslims and politicians', she said. Christians and committed Muslims share the desire to live according to ethical values derived from their faiths, and they know what it is to be 'in the world but not of it', a worldview that secular Europe increasingly struggles to understand. Christians can also share their ethical values with Muslims and learn from them about what their faith means to them as they function in Europe's highly secular context.

Adams described his experience in working with the Muslim community in a city known for much upheaval, as well as his interactions with nationalist groups like the English Defence League and Britain First. Over the years, Adams has developed strong working relationships with Muslims in Luton, enabling them to work together for the common good.

The EEA's socio-political arm helps national Evangelical Alliances to develop their social, advocacy and religious liberty ministries. Among the priorities of the EEA's socio-political programme and therefore the Brussels office are freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression for all, human dignity and the sanctity of life.

The EEA reaffirmed its commitment to advocating for a civil public square open to a wide variety of voices, including evangelical ones. In the run-up to the European elections in May, the EEA will work with its national member organizations to mobilize evangelicals across Europe, challenging its constituency to engage with European politics and to look beyond easy sound bites.



Logo of the jubilee event "25 years EEA Brussels office"



Thomas Schirmacher speaking in the Chapel for Europe
© Thomas Schirmacher

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WEA establishes Sustainability Center in Bonn

Recognizing the need to strengthen global creation care efforts by churches, evangelical ministries and individual evangelicals, the WEA has established the World Evangelical Alliance Sustainability Center (WEASC) in the strategically important 'UN City' of Bonn, Germany. Closely working together with the WEA's Creation Care Task Force, the WEASC will address sustainability issues from a Christian perspective, contribute evangelical positions and recommendations to global debates and policy processes, and empower followers of Christ to exercise leadership in sustainability efforts from the local to the global level.

'We strongly believe that caring for God's creation is part of an authentic and biblically orthodox Christian faith', said Bishop Efraim Tendero, WEA Secretary General. 'By providing guidance, practical support, and actionable ideas the WEA Sustainability Center will inspire and empower both individual believers and congregations in every part of the world to faithfully care for God's creation, make a positive contribution to the common good, and provide constructive evangelical input to international politics concerning the environment.'

The WEA has been working with various UN bodies for many years in support of its efforts on global sustainability issues.

The WEASC will be directed by Matthias K. Boehning, the WEA's permanent representative to the UN in Bonn, with Chris Elisara, head of the Creation Care Task Force, as associate director. Its overarching objective is to equip churches and congregations around the world to implement creation care on a daily basis, thereby becoming a strong, legitimate and unified voice in global sustainability. 'Our efforts and daily activities', Boehning stated, 'are guided by a very simple vision: Churches Championing Creation Care'. The WEASC's priority issues include participation in global policymaking processes, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and sustainable cities.

The WEA hosted an official side event, titled 'Advancing climate justice with faith-based renewable energy projects', at the fourth assembly of the UN Environment Programme, on March 11–15 in Nairobi, Kenya. Along with the Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development (ICSD) from Jerusalem and the Kenyan evangelical partner Jitokeze Wamama Wafrika, the WEA described how decentralized renewable energy projects by faith-based actors in rural Africa can be a means to greater empowerment towards achieving climate justice for vulnerable groups.



Dr. Chris Elisara (left) and Matthias Böhning (right) with representatives of the Kenyan Evangelical partner organisation Jitokeze Wamama Wafrika at the United Nations Environment Assembly in Nairobi/Kenya in March 2019 © WEA Sustainability Center

JOURNALS AND NEWSLETTERS WITHIN THE DEPARTMENT FOR THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS

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<http://www.worldevangelicals.org/tc/>

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 (German) <https://www.iirf.eu/journal-books/german-yearbooks/>

DIGITAL ONLY:

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WEA RLC Research and Analysis Report (periodic)
<https://worldea.org/whoweare/newsletter-signup>

Schirmmacher brings human rights message to University of Freiburg

Thomas Schirmmacher, head of the WEA Theological Concerns Department and president of the International Council of the International Society for Human Rights (ISHR), delivered a lecture at the University of Freiburg, Germany in March. The well-attended lecture was hosted by the ISHR's Freiburg working group.

'Freedom of religion, freedom of conscience and freedom of speech are not marginal', Schirmmacher emphasized. 'Rather, they are central elements in the concert of human rights, without which there can be no democracy.'

Schirmmacher specifically addressed the question of whether it is possible to simultaneously protect everyone's religious freedom and fight enemies of religious freedom. His answer was that this is not only possible but necessary. 'Every human right requires protection against those who want to do away with it', he said. 'A well-fortified democracy also has to ensure that everyone can enjoy a human right and that they are protected against those who infringe upon it or demand or promote the human right's removal. Therefore, Germany must also manage to offer all people of all religions and worldviews a home with freedom and at the same time manage to contain the enemies of freedom of religion. Freedom of religion exists only where it is also protected by the state's monopoly on the use of force. This also means that Muslims who love freedom must be protected from Muslims who are prepared to use violence.'



Thomas Schirmmacher during his ISHR lecture at the University of Freiburg (with audience) © BQ/Warnecke

Thomas Schirmmacher looks at the Vatican's Abuse Summit

I had been a pastor for just two years when the children of a man who held a leadership position in my congregation told me that they were regularly experiencing severe abuse from him. Inexperienced as I was, I tried to tackle the situation on my own. Eventually I was transferred to another parish, and only later, after a police investigation, did the truth come to light. (The children, however, are still grateful to me that I ended their abuse by intervening.)

Now, based on much more experience, I urge that all churches adopt strict guidelines regarding violence and sexual abuse in general, and specifically for cases involving minors; that they immediately involve the responsible state prosecuting authority (at least in countries with a functioning legal system); and that, if appropriate, they bring the victims directly to the authorities responsible for an evidentiary hearing.

The problem is, of course, not limited to Catholic churches, but the Vatican's abuse summit in February brought an additional spotlight to it. Evangelicals should be paying close attention. We cannot prevent people from wanting to engage in abuse, but we can make it harder for abusers to carry out their repulsive desires and we can make detection easier.



Thomas Schirmmacher in discussion sexual misuse of priests and bishops with Cardinal Ladaria, the head of the Vatican's Congregation of Faith, that is responsible for the topic (by the way: handing over two issues of ERT) © Schirmmacher

In terms of practical theology, I see five important implications:

1. Original sin (*corruptio* in Latin) has resulted in widespread abuse of power by humans, whether large or small. Thus we must always seek to put suitable checks and balances in place to limit the power of any individual or group and to enable the appeal of any decision. Christians have participated in the development of democracy because they are convinced that power is always, not just occasionally, susceptible to corruption. That is also why there must be means to remove a corrupt government without bloodshed—the big advantage of a democratic system.
2. Even the Christian remains a sinner and needs forgiveness and grace (Luther's famous *simul iustus et peccator*, i.e., at the same time righteous and a sinner). It cannot be assumed that a 'holy' boss automatically rules better and is free from corruption, whether in church, state, the business world or the family.
3. The priest is not the mediator for Jesus Christ and does not speak in his place. Treating priests as if they were mediators, no matter how it is phrased theologically, endues them with enormous authority in the eyes of those who depend on them. The fact that the Catholic priesthood is lifelong and cannot be revoked adds to this tendency.
4. Compulsory celibacy is wrong, and having celibates living close together brings its own problems. People who live celibately are no worse than other people, but those who do so only because it is required of them are in a more difficult situation, and seriously unhealthy dynamics can emerge as a result.
5. Church and state need to be separated, and thus investigations of sexual and other forms of abuse belong in the hands of state prosecuting authorities, not church bodies. For far too long the Catholic Church has assumed the role of the state in these questions, enabling bishops and cardinals to obstruct investigations. Evangelicals must not fall into the same pattern.

Whatever we say about revelations of abuse in the Catholic Church or elsewhere, we should not be tempted to evangelical hubris. The true evangelical does not say with the Pharisee, 'Lord, I thank you that I am not like others', but with the publican, 'Lord, be gracious unto me, a sinner' (Luke 18:10–14).

WEA THEOLOGICAL NEWS

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