

## WEA names ambassador to Russian Orthodox Church

Dr. Vitaly Vlasenko, a pastor and missionary in Russia for nearly 25 years, has been named the World Evangelical Alliance's ambassador to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Kirill I, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, accepted the appointment in a meeting on 6 September (see photo).

Vlasenko has held numerous national leadership positions in Russia. From 2005 to 2012, he was president of the Council of Christian Evangelical Churches of Russia; from 2007 to 2017, he headed the Department of External Church Relations for the Russian Union of Baptists. He was also president of the Russian National Prayer Breakfast for 10 years and co-chairman of the Christian Interfaith Advisory Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States countries for nine years.

The ambassador arrangement is part of a shared effort by the WEA Department of Theological Concerns and the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchy (DECR), which is responsible for the ROC's ecumenical relations, to pursue closer coordination. The talks concerned relations between the WEA and the ROC as a global body, including the autonomous Orthodox churches associated with the ROC. The relationship between the Russian Evangelical Alliance and the ROC within Russia was not a subject of discussion.

WEA Associated Secretary General Thomas Schirmacher and Vlasenko, however, visited the board of the Russian Evangelical Alliance both before and after the official announcement. They also spoke at a conference of leading Russian evangelical pastors, held on the 150th anniversary of the birth of the renowned religious personality I. S. Prokhanov. In his welcoming message, Schirmacher noted that Prokhanov was a representative of the WEA and made significant contributions to the unity and development of evangelical and Protestant movements in Russia.



Kirill I, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, accepts the appointment of Dr. Vitaly Vlasenko as WEA ambassador to the Russian Orthodox Church © BQ/Thomas Schirmacher

Schirmacher and Vlasenko also met with Peter Valterovich Mickiewicz, president of the Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists of Russia, and Bishop Pavel Vladimirovich Orekhov, chairman of the High Council of the 'Evangelical Christian Church'. Furthermore, they held a press breakfast with numerous media representatives present.

Earlier, Schirmacher spoke with Yevgeny Eremin, Russian President Vladimir Putin's church and religious advisor, about religious freedom in Russia.

## Pope Francis urges World Council of Churches to emphasize evangelism

The World Council of Churches (WCC) celebrated its 70th anniversary this summer. On 21 June, Pope Francis spoke at an ecumenical event in Geneva commemorating the milestone. Along with sharing many kind words, the Pope gently urged the WCC to make evangelism and mission top priorities. Following is a portion of the official English-language version of his message.

*Dear brothers and sisters, allow me to thank you for your commitment to unity, but also to express a concern. It comes from an impression that ecumenism and mission are no longer as closely intertwined*

as they were at the beginning. Yet the missionary mandate, which is more than diakonia and the promotion of human development, cannot be neglected nor emptied of its content. It determines our very identity. The preaching of the Gospel to the ends of the earth is part of our very being as Christians. The way in which the mission is carried out will, of course, vary in different times and places. In the face of the recurring temptation to tailor it to worldly ways of thinking, we must constantly remind ourselves that Christ's Church grows by attraction.

But what makes for this power of attraction? Certainly not our own ideas, strategies or programmes. Faith in Jesus Christ is not the fruit of consensus, nor can the people of God be reduced to a non-governmental organization. No, the power of attraction consists completely in the sublime gift that so amazed the apostle Paul: 'to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings' (Phil 3:10). This is our only boast: 'the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Cor 4:6), granted us by the Holy Spirit, the Giver of Life. This is the treasure that we, though earthen vessels (cf. v. 7), must offer to our world, so beloved yet so deeply troubled. We would not be faithful to the mission entrusted to us, were we to debase this treasure to a purely immanent humanism, adapted to the fashion of the moment. Nor would we be good guardians if we tried only to preserve it, burying it for fear of the world and its challenges (cf. Mt 25:25).

What is really needed is a new evangelical outreach. We are called to be a people that experiences and shares the joy of the Gospel, praises the Lord and serves our brothers and sisters with hearts burning with a desire to open up horizons of goodness and beauty unimaginable to those who have not been blessed truly to know Jesus. I am convinced that an increased missionary impulse will lead us to greater unity. Just as in the early days, preaching marked the springtime of the Church, so evangelization will mark the flowering of a new ecumenical spring. As in those days, let us gather in fellowship around the Master, not without a certain embarrassment about our constant vacillations, and, together with Peter, let us say to him: 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life' (Jn 6:68).

Thomas Schirmacher, the WEA's Associate Secretary General for Theological Concerns, was sitting just a few meters from the lectern as the Pope spoke those surprising words. Schirmacher commented afterwards that 'the WEA could not have said it more clearly'. He also emphasized that evangelicals must make this observation self-critically, not triumphally, 'since for us also the question arises, whether the evangelistic momentum to mission ... is indeed still formative today—especially in Europe'.



Pope Francis delivering his remarks at the World Council of Churches' 70th anniversary celebration in Geneva © Thomas Schirmacher

#### JOURNALS AND NEWSLETTERS WITHIN THE DEPARTMENT FOR THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS

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<https://www.islaminstitut.de/en/category/publikationen/journal/>

Jahrbuch für Verfolgung und Diskriminierung von Christen  
 [Yearbook on Persecution and Discrimination of Christians]  
 (German) <https://www.iirf.eu/journal-books/german-yearbooks/>

International Journal of Religious Freedom (semiannual)  
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Jahrbuch für Religionsfreiheit [Yearbook on Religious Freedom]  
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#### DIGITAL ONLY:

Theological News (quarterly)  
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## WEA joins group on religion and sustainable development

On 1–3 May, the WEA participated for the first time in the General Assembly of members of the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD), held in Copenhagen, Denmark. The WEA's application to become a member of PaRD was approved in April.

PaRD is an international platform that brings together government, civil-society and faith-based organizations to engage the social capital and capacities of diverse faith communities on behalf of sustainable development and humanitarian assistance. Established in 2016, PaRD now has 105 members or observers.

In Copenhagen, WEA Associate Secretary General for Theological Concerns Thomas Schirmmacher and Lilian Kurz from the World Evangelical Alliance Sustainability Center (WEASC) interacted with other faith-based organizations from various denominations as well as government representatives and United Nations and African Union officials. Meeting topics included the shrinking space for civil-society organizations, the role of religious actors therein, and the conditions for successful cooperation between governments, multilateral organizations and faith-based communities.

In conjunction with other faith-based organizations present in Copenhagen, the WEA and WEASC representatives advocated successfully for the establishment of a working group titled 'Environment, Water and Climate Action'. The WEA was elected interim co-lead of the working group alongside Tearfund and the Catholic Youth Action Network on Environmental Sustainability in Africa (CYNESA). This working group is to evolve into an official stream of activity, joining the three existing PaRD focus areas of health, gender and empowerment, and peace.



Thomas Schirmmacher, Dr Thomas Lawo from the PaRD Secretariat, and Rabbi Awraham Soetendorp of the Jacob Soetendorp Institute © WEASC

## Global Workplace Forum seeks to mobilize Christian believers

Almost 900 people from 110 countries attended the Global Workplace Forum in Manila, the Philippines on 25–28 June. The participants endorsed the vision of having a 'great movement of God through believers in their workplace'.

Although many people spend more than half of most waking days in a work context, they often struggle to connect their faith in Christ with all the factors that play an important role in one's day-to-day work life. This conference emphasized the strategic meaning of the workplace for spiritual formation.

Several WEA leaders were among the conference speakers, including Rev Timo Plutschinski, international director of the WEA Business Coalition; Dr Rosalee Velloso Ewell, executive director of the Theological Commission; and Secretary General Bishop Efraim Tendero.

'We have lost opportunities for personal witness', Plutschinski stated. 'We have not known how to use our work as a means to transform the environment in which we have been placed, and society in general. And we have lost an opportunity to develop the talents and gifts God has given us in those areas in which we naturally invest a huge amount of effort every week.'



Timo Plutschinski delivering his message at the Global Workplace Forum © Roland Werner

Plutschinski stressed that church leaders and other Christian organizations need to work alongside groups of professional workers, to accomplish a mission that none of these groups could do on its own.

A follow-up event dealing with similar questions, the Kingdom ConAct Conference, will take place in Hamburg, Germany on 25–27 October. For information, visit [www.kingdom-conact.com](http://www.kingdom-conact.com).

## WEA's Johnson speaks on Humanitarian Islam at US State Department event

In July, the US State Department held its second Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington, DC. Thomas K. Johnson, the WEA's Senior Advisor on Religious Freedom, attended the Ministerial and spoke at a side event sponsored by the Washington-based Institute on Religion and Democracy.

Johnson's topic was a penetrating analysis of the Humanitarian Islam movement founded by Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest Muslim organization, headquartered in Indonesia.

Johnson praised Humanitarian Islam for its 'serious response to religiously motivated violence and thoughtful attempt to establish a better paradigm for how religions [may] relate to society'.

He explained, 'Within the spectrum of Islam, the Indonesian humanitarians represent the opposite end from ISIS and Al-Qaeda, but claim to be fully orthodox Muslims, not liberal half-Muslims. And it is precisely as orthodox Muslims that they fully endorse human rights for all people, religious freedom for those of other faiths, and constitutional democracy. This merits attention from scholars, diplomats and activists.'

Johnson has closely studied Nahdlatul Ulama's declarations and manifestos, concluding that the group employs 'a hermeneutic that distinguishes between eternal, unchanging moral norms and religious norms that are limited in their application to a particular time and place. The current crisis of Islam arises, they claim, from taking contingent norms from previous centuries, whether the seventh century CE or a "mere" 500 years ago, and then applying them in the 21st century, as if they are eternal and unchanging norms.'

Nahdlatul Ulama proposes that 'The purpose of religious norms is to ensure the spiritual and material well-being of humanity', and that these norms seek to preserve five primary human goods: faith, life, progeny, reason and property. Johnson contended that this definition of Islamic law (shari'ah), 'if followed by the global Muslim community, would undermine many reasons for Islamophobia'.

*(This article was drawn from coverage of Johnson's message by Bayt Ar-Rahmah, a Nahdlatul Ulama affiliate.)*



Speakers at the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom roundtable event, 'An Exploration of Religiously Motivated Violence', from left to right: Jacob Rudenstrand (Swedish Evangelical Alliance), Dr Paul Marshall (Hudson Institute), Dr Thomas K. Johnson (International Institute for Religious Freedom), and Faith McDonnell (Institute on Religion and Democracy) © Bayt ar-Rahmah

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## IIRF helps launch institute to study history of religious freedom

At a ceremony in London on 16 August, the Institute for the History of Religious Freedom, located in Oxford, was officially launched. It is a joint project of Regent's Park College of Oxford University, the International Institute for Research and Legal Studies on Fundamental Civil Liberties (FCL LAW), the Brazilian Lawyers' Association and the International Institute for Religious Freedom.



Roberto de Lucena of Brazil speaks at the IHRF opening ceremonies  
© BQ/Warnecke

The IHRF's main aim is to encourage the development of research on the history of religious freedom.

The first part of the ceremony took place in the British House of Lords. Lord Andrew Green, Baron of Deddington, spoke on the importance of parliamentarians for religious freedom worldwide. Lord Green was the British ambassador to Arab countries for many years and headed the Middle East Department at the British Foreign Office.

The opening ceremonies continued at Regent's Park College, where the principal, Dr Robert Ellis, noted that the first authors to promote religious freedom were British Baptists whose portraits still hang in the college's dining room.

The guest of honour was Roberto de Lucena, chair of the Parliamentary Front for Religious Freedom in Brazil. A member of the Brazilian parliament from the Green Party since 2011, de Lucena also heads the transparency office of the House of Representatives, which aims to uncover and combat corruption in Brazilian federal politics.

The WEA's Thomas Schirmmacher, who will serve as an IHRF director, delivered an inaugural lecture, examining the question of why Baptists, beginning with Thomas Helwys in 1611 and Leonard Busher in 1614, were the first to demand full religious freedom in the modern sense. He saw a close connection to the theology of adult baptism, stating that 'Baptists stand up for the religious freedom of their children, who are not to be forced to believe in Jesus Christ, but must decide for themselves.' Schirmmacher interpreted this willingness to grant children autonomy in matters of faith as itself a radical step towards religious freedom.

## Thomas Schirmmacher visits Liberia's oldest church

In August, after addressing the 32nd General Assembly of the Liberia Council of Churches, WEA Associate Secretary General Thomas Schirmmacher spoke with the leaders of almost all churches in the country and with several politicians. He also visited the oldest church in Liberia, Providence Baptist Church, which was built in 1835 but severely damaged by shelling during the country's civil war in 1989.

In 1839 Liberia's independence was declared in this church, where the two chambers of parliament initially met. Since 1975 the church has been a national shrine, but Liberia has not yet provided assistance for needed renovations.

On the following Sunday, Schirmmacher preached in the main church of the Apostolic



The chairman of the Liberia Council of Churches, Bishop Kortu K. Brown, and Thomas Schirmmacher in front of Providence Baptist Church, founded in 1821 © BQ/Warnecke

Pentecostal Church International at Brewerville in Montserrado County, the administrative district of Liberia to which the national capital belongs. His hosts gave him a traditional costume and appointed him as honorary bishop with the title 'Bishop Sengbeh', using the word for 'strong' in the Mende language.

## Christian-Islamic dialogue in eight emirates

Associate Secretary General Thomas Schirmmacher and his wife, Islamic scholar Christine Schirmmacher, represented the WEA in inter-faith engagements in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. Their stops included all seven UAE member emirates: Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras al Khaimah, Sharjah, and Umm al-Quwain.

The trip included numerous visits to mosques (including the Al Badiyah Mosque in Fujairah, the oldest mosque in the UAE, completed in 1446) and dialogue meetings. In addition, Thomas Schirmmacher was a participant in the Global Conference on Human Fraternity last February, for which Pope Francis made the first-ever visit by a pope to the UAE.

Schirmmacher expressed encouragement regarding responses by government leaders, which showed concern for the religious liberties of Protestants living in the UAE. Of the country's approximately 9.6 million residents, only about 11% are UAE nationals; the remainder are labour migrants from 200 countries around the world, with nearly 60 percent of the total population being South Asian in origin.



Thomas Schirmmacher touring the Masjid al Kabir (Great Mosque) in Kuwait © BQ/Schirmmacher

### WEA THEOLOGICAL NEWS

WEA Theological News is published quarterly by the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) Department of Theological Concerns led by Thomas Schirmmacher, Associate Secretary General for Theological Concerns, located in the WEA's Bonn office.

WEA is located in Church Street Station, P.O. Box 3402, New York, NY 10008-3402 and represented by its CEO, Secretary General Bishop Efraim Tenderso, Manila.

WEA Theological News is available at <http://www.worldevangelicals.org/tc/publications/TN.htm> and an email subscription can be ordered from [timothyg@worldidea.org](mailto:timothyg@worldidea.org).

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