

# **Between advocacy and readiness to suffer: Religious liberty and persecution of Christians as topics at the World Evangelical Alliance General Assembly and its Mission Commission Consultation 2008**

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## Abstract

The World Evangelical Alliance, which represents 420 million Christians, held its General Assembly in Pattaya, Thailand in October 2008, with a Global Consultation of its Mission Commission in its wake. In both gatherings the complementary emphases of advocacy for persecuted Christians on the one hand and readiness to suffer for Christ played a major role, with the General Assembly giving more prominence to advocacy, while the Mission Commission Consultation emphasised more the willingness to suffer with Christ in God's mission. The WEA Religious Liberty Commission and the International Institute for Religious Freedom played a major role in making advocacy a major issue at the General Assembly. A study process and small expert consultation on developing an evangelical theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom for the global church in mission is in planning.

Keywords: World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), conference, consultation, declaration, General Assembly, Mission Commission, Religious Liberty Commission, International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF), advocacy, suffering, persecution, martyrdom, religious freedom, religious liberty, evangelical theology.

In October 2008 the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) held its General Assembly, which takes place every six years. WEA is a network of churches in 128 nations that have each formed a national evangelical alliance and over 100 international organizations joining together to give a worldwide identity, voice and platform to more than 420 million evangelical Christians. More than 500 senior evangelical leaders gathered for the assembly in Pattaya, Thailand from 25 to 30 October 2008.

The conference programme allocated one day each to: global evangelism through transformational churches, addressing global poverty (Micah Network), public square engagement for effective change, and what is of interest for this report, advocacy for the voiceless and the persecuted church. The WEA has six working commissions and most of them used the occasion of the General Assembly to meet for a consultation of their own before or after the General Assembly. The Mission Commission was one of them and met for 4 days with the triple topic, mission and contextualization, mission and spirituality, and mission in the context of suffering, violence, persecution and martyrdom. The purpose of this article is to present and analyse the complementary approaches to the issues of religious liberty, persecution of Christians and suffering in mission by those two gatherings and to present new developments emerging from those conferences.

## **1. Religious liberty at the WEA General Assembly**

### **1.1 “An ever-present preoccupation”**

As this was my first attendance at a WEA General Assembly (GA), I asked the chairman of the Religious Liberty Commission (RLC), John Langlois, who has served the WEA in various positions since 1969 to what degree the topics of religious freedom and persecution of Christians featured at the earlier GAs that he could remember. According to his notes, at all times in his four decades with the WEA the issue of persecution has been prominent. In the 1970s there was brutal persecution of

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Christians, particularly in the Communist world – Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, Cuba and the Peoples Republic of China. This was a great concern to the WEA. In the 1980s it was the same as in the previous decade, but with emerging active persecution in the Muslim world, starting with Iran in 1979. In the 1990s the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites eased the situation there, but persecution in China, North Korea and other countries, such as Vietnam continued, as well as increasing persecution in the Muslim world.

At the WEA General Assembly held in Manila, Philippines, in August 1992, Langlois, as Chairman of the RLC, awarded the first "Religious Liberty Award" to Romulo Saune from Peru for his work in protecting Christians from the "Shining Path" guerillas. He was murdered six weeks later. The award was the most prominent event at that General Assembly. At the General Assembly held in Abbotsford, Canada, in May 1997, a delegate from Malaysia suggested that the WEF should send delegations to countries where Christians are suffering severe persecution. He made a special appeal for the WEF to send a delegation to the Sudan. The Evangelical Fellowship of Asia appealed to its members and others to extend their financial assistance to the people of North Korea then facing acute famine and starvation and the General Assembly joined in. At the Assembly in Abbotsford Brother Andrew spoke of the needs of the persecuted church. At the General Assembly held in Kuala Lumpur in 2001 there was extensive coverage of persecution and the RLC had a significant role.

Langlois notes: "Looking back I realise that the persecution of our brothers and sisters has been an ever-present preoccupation with the constant reminder that the WEA first took active steps regarding persecution in 1852 when it sent a delegation to the Turkish sultan to plead for the Armenians. Although we did not have a Religious Liberty Commission until 1992 we were active throughout. I can remember in the 1980s attending a conference in Bad Blankenburg organised by the WEA for the general secretaries of all the Evangelical alliances in the socialist world. It is the one conference which is etched in my memory like no other".

## **1.2 Plenary**

The programme on advocacy for the persecuted church at the General Assembly in Thailand 2008 was prepared by the Religious Liberty Commission. The main presentation was given by its outgoing executive director, Rev. Johan Candelin from Finland, who after serving in that position for 12 years, is now focusing on his task of Goodwill Ambassador of the WEA and with the First Step Forum. He underlined the importance of religious freedom, and its prominence on the agenda of the WEA, reminding that a delegation of the Alliance went to Turkey in 1846 "and it still does so today". In a remarkably self-critical tone, he pointed out the weaknesses of evangelical churches in particular and Christianity in general, being sadly divided, and not giving each other the support they could. He criticised the tendency to see enemies outside one's own circles instead of possible friends and real brothers and sisters in Christ. This could be remedied by a stronger "kingdom identity". Highlighting three major challenges he pointed to conflicts within states which increase religious tensions, the assertion of the sovereignty of a state which might be played out against religious freedom advocacy, and the search for national identity in a number of countries making up half of the world population (India, China, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan). Among the steps recommended to take he encouraged national alliances to meet their governments, to take the lead in defining their image by presenting themselves and to ask what they could do for the nation. He encouraged Christians to build bridges, to be proactive and to take initiatives, like starting a WEA business forum, which could send groups of investors to countries that needed strengthening of their pursuit of religious freedom. At times he deems globally arranged demonstrations to be called for, while insisting that they should not be against a nation but for religious freedom in that nation. The delegates were impressed by the constructive and positive message of this religious freedom statesman.

In a plenary round table discussion at the assembly participants from around the globe shared experiences of persecution. One house church leader reported how he was denied citizenship in his South-East Asian country for 29 years, and how only a fraction of applications submitted by house churches for registration have actually been registered up to now. He underlined the importance of unity among registered and unregistered house churches. A participant from Sri Lanka explained that Buddhists there had the perception that “the cross followed the sword of colonialism” which gave a negative image to Christians. In a report about India it was explained how Christians were hated simply for being Christians and because they empower the poor, thereby becoming the only competitors to nationalists who hold power. It was deplorable that Christians in India experience Hinduism as less than a peace loving religion. The massive persecution and displacement of Christians in Orissa going on for months was a major scenario impressing the assembly. Another focal point was the fate of Christians in Iraq of whom millions were uprooted, and two million are in refugee camps outside Iraq. In response to the attitude of many Christians in the West who think that persecution was not their problem one speaker coined the phrase: “If there is not religious freedom for all, there is no religious freedom for all.” Christians were encouraged to prepare for suffering by praying and reading the Bible which deals a lot with persecution and to defend themselves legally and politically.

### **1.3 Resolution**

The *Resolution on Religious Freedom and Solidarity with the Persecuted Church*<sup>2</sup> will probably become the contribution to the topic by the General Assembly with the widest effect beyond the meeting. It is one of six major resolutions of the assembly setting out an evangelical response to issues of religious liberty, HIV and Aids, poverty, peacemaking, creation care and the global financial crisis. Four of the resolutions were prepared before hand by interest groups, and a fifth was commissioned because of the global financial crisis which was unfolding while the conference was in session. Drafts were circulated during the conference with requests for feedback, resubmitted in revised form and then formally adopted during the business meeting in the late afternoon of the last full day. Only in the business meeting did a French delegate ask why there was no resolution on religious liberty, even though the preceding hours of the day had been dedicated to the topic. So the directors of the International Institute for Religious Freedom of the World Evangelical Alliance drafted a resolution virtually over supper which included the suggestions made by the petitioner, concerns voiced during the day and input from the WEA Religious Liberty Commission. The draft was tabled at the evening plenary and a revised version circulated at the closing session of the gathering the next morning, and then officially adopted by the International Council of WEA the day after.

The resolution even in its title shows a dual focus – of concern for religious freedom for all people, and the solidarity of Christians with the persecuted church. The short statement of 14 paragraphs is structured in four uneven sections. The opening paragraph affirms the history of the WEA working towards religious freedom from its inception in 1846. The next six paragraphs outline what the WEA affirms and believes on the matter and what this is founded on. A statement of concern about increasing persecution of Christians is then followed by six calls for action. Because human dignity is anchored in scripture, the WEA affirms the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other relevant historic declarations of the United Nations. Freedom to exercise any or no religion is regarded as indivisible, and is claimed for all and in collaboration with all who support religious freedom. The WEA is not shy of co-operation, advocating the freedom of others without accepting the truth of what they believe. The affirmations close with a statement of particular solidarity on theological grounds with persecuted Christians. The calls to action are addressed to ever widening circles starting with the global church, moving via the media to governments and the United Nations. The church is called to intercession, particularly to join in the International Day of Prayer

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2 [www.worldevangelicals.org](http://www.worldevangelicals.org).

for the Persecuted Church, (which was inaugurated by the Religious Liberty Commission of the WEA), biblical teaching on persecution, advocacy, and working towards peace with all. The media is called to serious and unbiased reporting on religious persecution, governments which have protected religious freedom at home or abroad are applauded, the United Nations, governments and agencies are called to help stop infringements of human rights, and the UN Human Rights Council is particularly urged to protect the right to change one's religion.

### **1.4 Religious Liberty Commission**

At the assembly Godfrey Yogarajah from Sri Lanka was inaugurated as the new Executive Director of the Religious Liberty Commission. Until recently he served as the General Secretary of the National Christian Alliance of Sri Lanka, used to be the General Secretary of the Asian Evangelical Alliance, and presently also heads the Colombo Bureau of the International Institute for Religious Freedom. During a meeting of the Religious Liberty Commission on the two days preceding the assembly he presented his plans for that commission.

Another member of the Religious Liberty Commission, Prof. Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher from Germany, was honoured with the "International *Pro Fide* Award" from the Finish organization "Friends of the Martyrs," for his ongoing international efforts on behalf of persecuted Christians and followers of other religions.<sup>3</sup>

Among the written reports by the WEA commissions to the General Assembly was one by the Religious Liberty Commission (RLC), signed by its chairman, John E Langlois, Guernsey. The report noted "a significant increase of religious persecution across the world, particularly of evangelical Christians" in the six years since the last assembly. The RLC is presented as concentrating on work that is not being done by other organizations. With the WEA representing a large proportion of evangelicals, it has the potential of speaking on behalf of evangelical alliances before parliaments, government and the press, which can not be done by para-church agencies. Much work is done behind the scenes from the office of the executive director of the RLC, which co-ordinates calls for help with the various national RLCs. The three regular 'products' of the RLC are the co-ordination of the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church (IDOP) and materials for it, the Religious Liberty News and Analysis by Elizabeth Kendal, and the Religious Liberty Prayer Bulletin, which are electronically distributed globally.<sup>4</sup> The RLC does its work in co-operation with a number of affiliated and non-affiliated bodies: The International Institute for Religious Freedom pursues academic research and publications, Advocates International maintains a global network of skilled lawyers, the First Step Forum is a small independent network of some ambassadors, members of parliament and others who pursue private diplomatic initiatives, and the Religious Liberty Partnership gathers agencies working for the persecuted church.

### **1.5 Reports of regional evangelical alliances and global partners**

The conference folders contained numerous reports, including those from the regional evangelical alliances, which link the national alliances of the various regions. Reports were also included by the 12 global partners of the WEA, who are ministering globally, and therefore are accorded their own category of membership.

The Asia Evangelical Alliance (AEA), representing the continent with 61% of the world's population and home to three of the largest and main non-Christian religious groups in the world lists religious fundamentalism and persecution among six major challenges they are facing. "Right winged political parties have emerged in many Asian nations, embedded in the dominant culture and religion. One's patriotism is determined by one's religious identity." The AEA responded by

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<sup>3</sup> See the Noteworthy section IJRF 2008 or <http://tinyurl.com/57fsf5>.

<sup>4</sup> [www.ea.org.au](http://www.ea.org.au).

organizing a training consultation on biblical theology of persecution and discipleship and by bringing together Asian Christian lawyers at the Advocates Asia Conference in 2007, focusing on the issues of justice and religious freedom.

The European Evangelical Alliance sees many of its members facing religious liberty struggles and is publishing 'Position Papers', eg. on freedom of speech.<sup>5</sup> It is also a founding member of the European Platform on Religious Intolerance and Discrimination (EPRID).

WEA global partner Advocates International maintains a global network of Christian Lawyers. Their global taskforce on religious freedom is promoted by Advocates Asia.<sup>6</sup>

## **2. Mission in the context of suffering, violence, persecution and martyrdom**

The 11th Global Consultation of the Mission Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance had as one of its interrelated topics mission in the context of suffering, violence, persecution and martyrdom. The other topics were contextualization of mission and 'mission and spirituality'. The consultation which is held every two to three years gathered 250 mission and church leaders from over 50 nations “for mutual encouragement, fellowship and building of relationships, growth in the understanding of the missional enterprise around the globe, dealing with global issues and challenges, and planning the joint work and strategies, in order to become better equipped for the work”.<sup>7</sup> The general reflection of all participants and the specific missiological teams generated the core content for a new series of three missiological books to be published during the next three years based on the work done by the Global Missiology Task Force. Since its Iguassu Consultation<sup>8</sup>, held in Brazil in 1999, there had been a call to pursue the issue in more detail. The Iguassu Declaration stated in one of its nine declarations: “Suffering, persecution and martyrdom are present realities for many Christians. We acknowledge that our obedience in mission involves suffering and recognize that the church is experiencing this. We affirm our privilege and responsibility to pray for those undergoing persecution. We are called to share in their pain, do what we can to relieve their sufferings, and work for human rights and religious freedom.”<sup>9</sup> One out of 14 commitments was dedicated to the cross and suffering: “As our Lord called us to take up our crosses, we remind the church of our Lord's teaching that suffering is a part of authentic Christian life. In an increasingly violent and unjust world with political and economic oppression, we commit to equip ourselves and others to suffer in missionary service and to serve the suffering church. We purpose to articulate a biblical theology of martyrdom.” This was never fully followed up at the MC consultations until Pattaya. At the Global Issues Summit in 2006 in South Africa Reg Reimer addressed 'persecution, advocacy and mission at the beginning of the 21st century' in the plenary.<sup>10</sup>

### **2.1 Mission Commission Plenary**

The Executive Director of the Mission Commission, Bertil Ekström from Brazil, presented the three themes of the consultation as reflected in the example of Jesus and particularly the passion of Christ. In the light of this, mission is to follow the path of the cross. “The cross shows us ... the way God's mission is carried out, many times in a context of suffering”. Mission in the way of Jesus includes fulfilling God's purpose in a context of suffering, violence, persecution and martyrdom.

The programme was structured in such a way that panel discussions in the evening preceded the plenary speeches on the conference themes. Marvin Newell of CrossGlobal Link (formerly IFMA),

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5 [www.europeanea.org/news.html](http://www.europeanea.org/news.html).

6 [www.advocatesinternational.org](http://www.advocatesinternational.org).

7 [www.worldevangelicals.org/commissions/mc/PRESS\\_RELEASE\\_b.pdf](http://www.worldevangelicals.org/commissions/mc/PRESS_RELEASE_b.pdf).

8 <http://tinyurl.com/igua1999>.

9 [www.worldevangelicals.org/commissions/mc/igua\\_affirm.htm](http://www.worldevangelicals.org/commissions/mc/igua_affirm.htm).

10 [www.worldevangelicals.org/commissions/mc/mc\\_southafrica/resources/0605.doc](http://www.worldevangelicals.org/commissions/mc/mc_southafrica/resources/0605.doc).

who chaired the panel, reminded those present: “Suffering and persecution have always been the lot of the true church of Christ. The worldwide church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is certainly not exempt from it, and is likely to face more hostility than in any previous century. It is estimated that 200 million evangelicals live in pockets of intense persecution. Believers need to be prepared to personalize a theology of suffering that will call them to stand true to their Lord in the face of growing opposition”. He pointed out that persecution of the worldwide church is universal, uneven and unabating. He used Mt 10 to describe various levels of hostility towards witnesses of Christ: rejection, detention, violence, persecution, and martyrdom. In closing he highlighted a coincidence of challenges for the missional community: “The least reached live in the areas hardest to go to, and it needs sacrificial messengers. These are also the regions where the world religions are strongest”.

The four panelists represented various regions of the world. From South Central Asia it was reported that the cause for persecution of Christians by Muslims lay in the largely negative historic perception of Christianity and in the growth of the Christian church over against a non-fulfilled self-perception of Islam as the solution to all of the world's problems. This led to the attempt to counter defections from Islam by laws punishing apostasy. In a country in West Asia the media is portraying Christians and missionaries as the biggest threat to the nation. In a large African nation a ministry is taking care of 100 widows of pastors who have been killed. A panelist appealed to equip church leaders, in situations of massive violence, as they often did not know how to help people and were traumatized themselves. They needed help to learn to listen to the victims and a theology of suffering. Another panelist found that workers from a Latin American country were very effective in helping to heal trauma in an Asian nation because of their human warmth and physical touch. But there was also concern about the seriousness of sending first generation missionaries who had never experienced such situations of violence and persecution into such areas. There was also criticism of the church being too focused on the maintenance of their own status quo in some situations where converts bear the brunt of persecution. Or as a panelist held: “The church is more focused on removing pain from daily life. But God is focusing on how to remove evil through sacrifice”. Kees van der Wilden, the deputy director of the Mission Commission was impressed by the striking appropriateness for these situations of the slogan of the preceding General Assembly which still decorated the platform: 'One Lord, one body, one voice.'. Belonging to one Lord, suffering alongside the part of the body that suffers, the church is called to speak with one voice on behalf of those persecuted for Christ.

A plenary speaker giving a perspective from South East Asia deplored the lack of a theology of suffering in mission. Popular theology focused too much on self and had given up to a consumer Christianity which only asked: 'What do I get out of it?'. “Our theology of suffering is confined to historical texts, and only concerns people far away.” He challenged the participants to prepare their churches for suffering and to rediscover the relevant New Testament heritage (Mt 8:20; 1 Pt 4:14, Phil 1:29). Alluding to current persecution in Orissa, India, he claimed: “One of the problems is the stone-throwing church. It throws the stones that have been thrown into the church back out. “Inappropriate responses cause violence to spiral.” He encouraged his listeners to prepare themselves to deal with the practical areas of suffering, before sending workers into situations of persecution. In his own ministry, they assured wives of local evangelists for example, that provision had been made for them and the education of their children if their husbands were killed. Asking whether all suffering was necessary, he distinguished between self made suffering and suffering for the sake of Christ. Christians should ask themselves whether in some instances they were triggering their suffering, e.g. when evangelising minors without their parent's consent, ignoring social structures of the community, offending by confrontational preaching which ignored cultural communication patterns, or through a lack of contextualization. The speaker noted a two-fold response to suffering: Faith that endures and grows and faith that falters under the pressure of suffering. He appealed to the consultation: “Do not fear suffering, but don't invite it either”!

Another speaker presented a Christian perspective of the Arab world, which is united by the Islamic religion and the Arabic language. He divided the area into three different regions: North Africa, the

Middle East, and the Arab Peninsula. In the Middle East, where Christianity started and stayed, Christians encounter problems when they preach publicly. In North Africa Christianity arrived in 700 AD but did not survive in some places because of disunity and infighting in the church, and because of a lack of cultural rootedness. In the Arab Peninsula the church had been represented from the first or second century, but it later disappeared. Part of the church's suffering in these regions comes about when a Muslim chooses to become a Christian or when Christians witness to Muslims. The speaker found it particularly hurtful to witness what happens to children. When a Christian from a Muslim background marries a partner from the same religious background, their children are still registered as Muslims, because from a legal perspective a change from Islam to Christianity is not possible. Thus the children are torn between two identities: in their families they are raised as Christians, while outside family and church they are considered Muslim. When they themselves may want to marry one day they will again encounter the restrictions of Muslim family law. A major emphasis was laid by the speaker on the challenges such a church faces when it wants to partake in the Great Commission by sending out Christian workers. Raising awareness about mission work, sending, funding and member-care for workers, and building good international partnerships are all very difficult tasks if this has to be done with the greatest discretion and confidentiality in order not to risk the lives of national believers. The numerical outcome of such efforts is not impressive in the short term, but has been seen to bear fruit over the period of a generation. This is why the decision by foreign agencies to invest funds and workers based on projected measurable outcomes, like in a business investment, was found to be detrimental. In such cases a growing discrepancy developed between the reality in the Arab World and much of the academic missiology that was being developed by the Western world. When the speaker presented images from a national prayer conference in Iraq to stress the importance of prayer during persecution, I was impressed to see an African brother encourage the local Christians.

## **2.2 Topical issue of Connections Journal**

The groundwork for the consultation had been laid by two issues of the WEA Mission Commission journal 'Connections' (2008) dedicated to the consultation themes, with a third one to follow. Thus one 80-page-double-issue of the journal, which was made available to all the participants, contains an impressive array of articles on mission in contexts of suffering, violence, persecution and martyrdom.<sup>11</sup> The insertion of violence in the usual triad of suffering, persecution and martyrdom, probably stems from the editors' focus on missionary experience and is also reflected in a book review on Keith Eitel's *Missions in contexts of violence* (2008). The journal covers missiological reflections, contemporary trigger events for persecution, global voices (40 writers from 27 nations) and a strong emphasis on best practice commitments. Tonica van der Meer, a Brazilian, contributes biblical reflections on ministry and suffering which emanate from her doctorate in missiology on 'understanding and supporting missionaries in contexts of suffering,' and Glenn Penner summarizes 'a biblical theology of persecution and discipleship' from his book on the same topic. The reflections on trigger events largely focus on the Korean hostage incident in Afghanistan in 2007. They include remarkably self-critical voices from Korean missiologists. They emphasise the need for wisdom, research, qualitative growth, development of expertise, avoidance of massive public rallies in sensitive contexts, refocusing outcome-expectations of short-term mission trips, and better care for missionaries in this younger sending nation which has the second largest protestant missionary contingent in the world. Sadly consultants on crisis management conclude that "the circumstances of the negotiations and the agreement leading to the release will increase the probability of future kidnappings of Christian missionaries and relief workers in Afghanistan and other venues" where Christian workers and Islamist terrorists coexist (:21-22). A plethora of voices and experience emanated in response to questions sent by the editors to national mission movements, mission agencies and sending churches concerning their policies and guidelines on pre-field preparation of missionaries, contingency plans, policies on kidnapping and ransom, post-

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11 Full text of journal available at [www.weaconnections.com](http://www.weaconnections.com) -> back issues -> July 2008.

trauma care, missionary training and general member care. An additional question was: "Do you have a written summary statement giving a Biblical theology of persecution or martyrdom?" A number of best practice documents from agencies are reproduced, such as model policy recommendations for crisis management or guidelines focusing on crisis prevention. Very clearly this publication focuses on the issues encountered by mission practitioners.

### **2.3 Task force on mission in contexts of suffering, violence, persecution and martyrdom**

Much of the consultation time was spent in task forces and networking groups. Moderated by Bill Taylor and Reg Reimer between 10-15 people met to brainstorm on a new book in the Mission Commission *Global Missiology Series* on ministry in the context of suffering, violence, persecution and martyrdom (abbreviated SVPM). It is to be edited by Bill Taylor and Tonica van der Meer for publication in 2009. This missiological textbook will be designed to be translated into various languages and adapted into various contexts. Its unique contribution among the existing books on a number of its sub-themes is that it will represent the voice of the missionary movement. It will primarily address the global mission community, that is, reflective practitioners such as leaders of missionary movements, networks, training centres, academics, sending churches, and missionaries in training and in ministry. Its purpose is to positively influence the being, thinking, doing and teaching of mission practitioners in regards to SVPM.

It will probably include some of the content of the above topical *Connections* issue. While the final production of the compendium will be in the hands of the editors and depends on the availability of authors and already published material, it is interesting to note the issues which the brainstorming exercise has brought to light. Certainly solid biblical foundations must be laid for a theology of SVPM. Additional issues to be dealt with are the contrasting health and wealth teaching, as well as an eschatological perspective for SVPM. A survey on the role of SVPM in the history of mission will also need to deal with the question of how persecution and church growth relate to each other. This will probably be pursued in a number of case studies. Then an overview of the current situation of the Christian missionary enterprise in relation to SVPM, and a survey of the 'engines of persecution' will need to be produced, and hopefully we will be supplied with some instructive maps in that regard. The array of foundational contributions and overviews would not be complete without definitions of SVPM and a reflection on how they are inter-related. Some major topics that need to be addressed are: Learning from the persecuted church, equipping church leaders for SVPM, appropriate responses to persecution, instruments for missionary training re SVPM, engaging public opinion on SVPM, engaging Christian youth on the topic, ministry to the persecuted and their families, navigating national laws, risk and crisis management vs. readiness to suffer, member care for missionaries, the use of expressions of SVPM in the arts, contextualization and SVPM, spirituality and SVPM. All issues should be dealt with a view for practitioner application, including and as appropriate, guidelines, statements of best practice, case studies, and testimonies.

This article is certainly still incomplete and only the author's abbreviated summary of the discussion in which he participated. However it seems we can anticipate an authoritative textbook and compendium on the issue of the same calibre as some earlier volumes in the series.

## **3. IIRF: Equipping the church through research**

A player that could not be overlooked at both conferences was the International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF) of the World Evangelical Alliance, which is closely linked to the WEA Religious Liberty Commission. It is an academic research institute that equips the church to face issues of religious freedom and persecution directed by Prof Dr Thomas Schirrmacher and the author of this article. Delegates engaged IIRF staff in numerous conversations, sharing their



concern on legislation emerging in their countries affecting their religious freedom, asking for the publication of national incident reports on persecution, and equipping themselves and libraries with the materials provided by the institute.

The General Assembly was the occasion for the launch of the *International Journal for Religious Freedom* which was distributed to all participants. A second item made available, particularly to seminaries, was the first volume of the *Religious Freedom Series*. The series is dedicated to the scholarly discourse on the issue of religious freedom in general and the persecution of Christians in particular. It is an interdisciplinary, international, peer reviewed, scholarly series, serving the practical interests of religious freedom. The first volume is entitled *Re-Examining Religious Persecution – Constructing a Theological Framework for Understanding Persecution* by Charles L. Tieszen. This innovative study examines the shortcomings of many modern studies of religious persecution. Noting the gaps in current theological reflection, Tieszen offers a theological framework for properly understanding religious persecution of Christians and for responding to it. Perhaps most importantly, a definition of persecution is put forth that seeks to incorporate necessary and often over-looked elements.

Finally the IIRF, at the request of the WEA General Director, produced *The WEA Global Issues Series*. The volumes are written for popular understanding and contain 100-150 pages. Five volumes were made available so far: The philosopher Thomas K Johnson wrote a Christian primer on human rights. The WEA human rights spokesperson, Thomas Schirmacher, contributes a collection of essays 'May a Christian go to court' and his monograph 'The persecution of Christians concerns us all'. WEA spokesperson on Islam, Christine Schirmacher, provided her volume on 'The Islamic view of major Christian teaching' and a collection of essays on 'Islam and society, Sharia law, Jihad, Women in Islam'.

The materials were received with great interest and are now freely available online to anyone interested at [www.iirf.eu](http://www.iirf.eu).

#### **4. Looking ahead: Developing an evangelical theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom for the global church in mission**

An outcome of numerous discussions with key role players at both conferences was the emergence of a draft for a study process and small expert consultation on developing an evangelical theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom for the global church in mission. The main sponsor of the consultation will be the World Evangelical Alliance Religious Liberty Commission in co-operation with some other commissions. The International Institute for Religious Freedom of the WEA will organize the consultation, which will take place in September 2009 in Germany. The purpose is to come to a common understanding among those who have already written on the topic in various contexts, and to a description of differences of opinion. This will result in a statement, journal articles and a compendium.

The organizers give the following rationale for the consultation: “The prevalence of prosperity theologies in parts of the evangelical/pentecostal movements tends to ill equip the church for the suffering that comes with its mission in the world. This at times leads to the neglect of solidarity with suffering parts of the body of Christ. For decades evangelical Christians in the Global South have called for 'a theology of the pathway of the cross', which deals in depth with suffering, persecution and martyrdom. There are different types of such theologies in other streams of Christianity with liberationist, Roman Catholic, Orthodox and other shades of influence. Much can be learned from their insights and concerns. Simultaneously evangelicals at times hold different paradigms and positions on particular issues. Some global evangelical gatherings have touched on the topic and there have been some regional consultations. The Forum 2004 Issue Group “The persecuted Church” and the 2008 WEA Mission Commission focus topic “Mission in a context of violence of suffering, persecution and martyrdom” call for deeper theological reflection. In the

preparations for Lausanne III in Cape Town 2010 the topic has been identified as one of the key challenges facing the global church. The proposed consultation has been welcomed by the Lausanne director as a preparation towards Cape Town 2010. Neither WEA Commissions nor the Lausanne Movement and its tracks, consultations or working groups have ever made a global attempt to systematically develop such a theology. There have been a number of doctoral theses and books mainly from the global south on the issue in recent decades which might reflect some of the deepest expert knowledge on the matter. But too often, they did not take notice of each other.”

Four objectives are pursued by the consultation: Bringing the various evangelical theologies from different contexts of either suffering for Christ, persecution for Christ or Christian martyrdom into fuller dialogue. Scrutinizing and building upon previous consultations and statements. Possibly interacting with theologies of other Christian traditions on the topic. Developing a synthesis of evangelical approaches to the topic.

This consultation draft is an example of the synergy created at international conferences.

## **5. Advocacy and readiness to suffer**

In order to highlight the particular emphases of these conferences it might help to contrast them with two other gatherings on related topics in which the author participated in recent years. From the 2004 Forum of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, also held in Pattaya, emerged a 'Lausanne Occasional Paper' on 'The Persecuted Church'.<sup>12</sup> This was a working conference of many small groups commissioned to produce short books each containing practical recommendations for local churches. This group on the one hand focussed on listening to the voices of representatives of the persecuted church, describing various contexts of persecution, and on the other hand on giving recommendations for action and best practice to churches and agencies helping the persecuted church. Theological aspects were comparatively under-emphasised.

In 2007 the International Religious Liberty Association held its 6<sup>th</sup> world congress with the topic 'combating religious hatred through freedom to believe'. Mainly Christian but also some Muslim and secular speakers addressed the topic from various angles. The main purpose of the conference seems to have been to raise public awareness for the freedom to believe and to educate the participants on defending religious liberty in public policy in various contexts. The majority of the participants were 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists, a small protestant minority group, who consider themselves 'the canary in a coal mine' as their religious freedom is usually restricted earlier than that of other Christian groups. The congress issued a short statement and some of the presentations were published in the journal *Fides et Libertas*.<sup>13</sup>

By contrast the WEA General Assembly was a world gathering of a large stream of Christianity. The delegates usually were general secretaries or chairpersons of national or regional evangelical alliances, and church leaders and directors of some large Christian agencies and networks operating internationally. Advocacy for the voiceless and the persecuted church is one of several burning issues on the agenda of this Christian world body. This issue has been important throughout the organization's history and it will likely remain important because of the body's deep rooted convictions. There was only one day set aside for the topic, but it had a major impact on the assembly, and resulted in a public declaration on religious freedom and solidarity with the persecuted church.

The Mission Commission Consultation quite differently was a gathering of reflective mission practitioners, network and agency leaders and trainers from among evangelical churches. Its perpetual focus is the global missional enterprise, with various aspects having been previously dealt with at different conferences. The context of suffering, violence, persecution and martyrdom

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12 [www.lausanne.org/documents/2004forum/LOP32\\_IG3.pdf](http://www.lausanne.org/documents/2004forum/LOP32_IG3.pdf).

13 [www.irla.org](http://www.irla.org).

was for the first time a dominant theme. The question at the heart of this topic is how to carry out the missional task in those contexts, and what this means for strategy, training, theology, member care, contextualization, spirituality, etc. in mission. It is taken as a given that the task involves suffering, but some self-made suffering could be avoided with more wisdom. The conference provided the participants with an opportunity to deliberate among themselves and their community of practice. The logical outcome is a textbook and compendium for mission in the said context. In contrast to the Lausanne 2004 Forum Working Group the focus was not on persecution, but on mission, and the interest was less in 'helping' the persecuted church, as in fulfilling the missional task together.

In both WEA gatherings the complementary emphases of advocacy on the one hand and readiness to suffer for Christ were present. But clearly standing up for one's rights, solidarity with and advocacy for the persecuted church and adherents of other religions was at the forefront at the General Assembly, while at the Mission Commission Consultation the willingness to suffer with Christ in God's mission was more prominent.

The Apostle Paul, who considered it a privilege to suffer for Christ and for the task of bringing the gospel to Jews and gentiles, while at the same time appealing to his rights as a Roman citizen, was viewed as a model for this two-fold approach. Paul and other biblical authors also gave the church a theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom in mission, which urgently needs to be spelled out anew for those faithful to God's mission today.