

# Evangelical Review of Theology

## A Global Forum

Volume 44 • Number 1 • January 2020

Published by

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WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE

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*Department of Theological Concerns*



# The WEA's 2019 General Assembly: Energy and Urgency

Bruce Barron, ERT editor

During preparations for the World Evangelical Alliance's General Assembly (GA) on November 7–12 near Jakarta, Indonesia, some leaders proposed calling for a 'decade of disciple making'. Others questioned the wisdom of declaring that for the next ten years we will do something that we should be doing all the time. (When we reach 2030, will we stop making disciples and move on to something else?)

I was one of the skeptics, but the conference won me over. The programme team, with its thoughtful approach to holistic, intergenerational disciple making, demonstrated that the idea of a decade of emphasis would be useful. After all, there is ample evidence that most Christians don't take discipling seriously enough.

Indonesian leader Bambang Budijanto highlighted the need. After ten years in the United States as Compassion's regional vice president for Asia, Budijanto returned to Indonesia to discover that no one had reliable data on how the Indonesian church was doing. So he helped to found the Bilangan Research Center, a sort of Indonesian equivalent to the Barna Research Group in the US.

Barna has reported that only 20 percent of US Christians are involved in discipling. Budijanto found a more encouraging result—40 percent—in Indonesia. But that still leaves 60

percent of the church unmobilized. (For the WEA's toolkit of resources to encourage discipling, see <https://tpsweb.site/wea/>.)

Programme developers underscored the need to share evangelical truths effectively with the next generation by giving ninety minutes of plenary presentation time to Tan Seow How, pastor of a Singapore church whose 4,000 attenders have an average age of twenty-two. How detailed his approach to youth empowerment, contending that many churches are led by 'alphas' who prefer to maintain control and 'will not allow spiritual children to grow up and come to maturity'. Few congregations can implement all of How's creative youth-focused methodology, but any congregation can encourage all its members to reach out intentionally to youth and can more fully incorporate youths' voice.

Those present in Indonesia included the first Catholic ever to attend a WEA General Assembly as an official observer: Msgr Juan Usma-Gómez, bureau chief for the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. 'I yearn for the day when all Catholics will be evangelical and all evangelicals will be catholic', Usma-Gómez said. (See the January *Theological News* on the WEA website for an interview with Usma-Gómez.)

The WEA introduced a four-point pledge to uphold evangelical essen-

tials, be authentic followers of Jesus, nurture intergenerational leadership, and link the organization's global focus with national-level impact by strengthening its national affiliates.

That last point is especially strategic. Beyond the call to discipleship, the most pervasive theme at the General Assembly was the need for unity and mutual support. On one hand, delegates from around the world recognized the WEA's value in giving a global identity to evangelicals, especially in countries where they are beleaguered and small in number. As Nik Nedelchek, who went from smuggling Bibles in Bulgaria under Soviet control to heading the European Evangelical Alliance and is now the WEA's ambassador to Orthodox churches, put it: 'Diplomatic recognition is important for a group that used to be seen as a sect.'

On the other hand, the WEA could do more practically to support national alliances. Tendero vowed that this situation will change, citing several planned initiatives. The most substantial among them is the WEA's new Global Institute of Leadership, developed in conjunction with Bakke Graduate University, which will help national alliances self-assess and then grow through training in board governance, leadership skills, communication, vision casting, financial sustainability and public service engagement. The WEA also hopes that its stronger national alliances will mentor weaker ones, or even help to start evangelical alliances in many of the sixty-two countries that don't currently have one.

For Westerners experiencing a church in decline, it was inspiring to see such vibrancy of faith emerging across the Global South, from the

WEA International Council's superbly equipped leader—Goodwill Shana, a Zimbabwean lawyer and megapastor who has played a major role in constitutional development in his country—to the 8,000 Indonesian Christians who inserted a spirit of celebration into the opening session. Meanwhile, WEA global ambassador Brian Stiller indefatigably reminded people that the recent numbers look promising, despite our struggles in the West. By his count, in 1960 there were about 90 million identifiable evangelicals in the world and now there are 600 million. (For an explanation of how that growth happened, see his 2018 book *From Jerusalem to Timbuktu*.)

The WEA is a highly energized undertaking, so massive in scope and so decentralized that it's hard for any individual to keep up with. Tendero, who displayed a map showing that he had visited forty-two countries since 2016, believes that the appointment of two deputy secretaries general—Godfrey Yogarajah for ministries and Ray Swatkowski for operations—has been very helpful. In any case, despite its relatively limited resources, the WEA is doing amazing work on behalf of the world's estimated 600 million evangelicals.

You can learn more about what the WEA does by reading Tendero's State of the Movement message, starting on the next page. After that comes Thomas K. Johnson's presentation on the significance of *Christianity: Fundamental Teachings*, the book on the essentials of Christianity published last year with participation by all major Christian groups in Turkey. (See the July 2018 ERT for Thomas Schirmacher's message upon the initial release of this book.)

# The State of the Evangelical Movement

Efraim Tendero

Greetings! It is a great joy to be here with you. We are especially grateful to the Indonesian Evangelical Alliance and Pastor Niko Njotorahardjo for their exceptional generosity in hosting our General Assembly.

In my role as Secretary General, I think often about the apostle Paul and his ministry as recorded in his New Testament letters and the book of Acts. Paul traveled throughout the Christian world of his day, enduring great hardships to encourage believers.

Paul knew that all his efforts would be in vain if the local churches did not prosper. He referred to the churches as his 'joy and crown' (Phil 4:1; 1 Thess 2:19). He prayed earnestly for them (Eph 1:16–19; 3:14–19). He felt a deep, daily emotional burden for the churches (2 Cor 11:28). And he was especially concerned to see the church function together in unity. This theme is very prominent in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians and pervades even his personal communications, such as when he begs Euodia and Syntyche to quit squabbling in Philippians 4:2.

The World Evangelical Alliance today is a lot like Paul. We travel all over the world, seeking to support, unite, and empower believers. Just as

Paul defended the Gospel before governors of the Roman Empire, we represent the gospel before national governments and at the United Nations. We pray diligently for the church around the world and feel an especially great burden for the churches that are remaining faithful to God in dangerous circumstances. And just as Paul's work was meaningless unless the local churches flourished, so the WEA can do nothing unless we have strong national alliances.

This is especially true because we are not a top-down organization. We have no hierarchical leadership. The WEA is respected and treated as an important voice at the global level only because of the cumulative voice and effectiveness of evangelical alliances in countries around the world.

Our vision as the WEA is to unite evangelicals globally for Gospel transformation. This is a collective effort. The WEA works only because all of us are committed to active participation in a global network of evangelicals that produces unity, Gospel witness, and discipleship.

In our global organization, nearly everyone raises his or her own support or serves on a volunteer basis. Nevertheless, the commitment level of our global, regional, and national

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***Efraim Tendero** is Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance and Bishop Emeritus of the Alliance Bible Christian Churches of the Philippines. He delivered this address on November 8, 2019 at the WEA General Assembly in Bogor, Indonesia. Bishop Tendero also wishes to thank the many other leaders and entities within the WEA whose work, due to time limitations, he could not mention by name in his message.*

leaders is extraordinary. I want to thank all of you for your generous, dedicated contributions without which we could not exist, let alone thrive.

The World Evangelical Alliance's role is to unite and empower evangelicals globally, giving them identity, voice, and platform in every nation. That mission drives everything we do. In this message I will summarize how we are doing it and what we need to do better in the upcoming years, as God enables us. I hope you will sense how our efforts consistently aim at supporting our networks and especially our regional and national alliances.

## **I. What We Have Done**

### **1. Improving the Organization**

As you know, this is our first General Assembly in eleven years. When I was elected Secretary General, we had not elected our governing body, the International Council or IC, for seven years. Over the course of seven years, inevitably some people's commitments and activities change. So electing a new IC was very important in building our organizational strength. I am grateful for our active IC. They are deeply engaged in ensuring good governance and accountability, providing oversight, and giving wise guidance to the WEA staff.

We also revised our bylaws to streamline our organizational structure, membership categories, and upgrade the Office of the Secretary General. Instead of just one person, we now have three people carrying out the office's work, including Godfrey Yogarajah for programs and ministries and Ray Swatkowski for op-

erations. We are now stronger, more effective, and better positioned for a smooth leadership succession.

Our Senior Leadership Team also includes our Associate Secretary General for Theological Concerns and the directors of the four other Ministry Departments we have created: missions and evangelism, church in community, communications and public engagement. All our commissions, task forces, and initiatives (to which we refer collectively as 'networks') have been placed under one of these Ministry Departments for improved coordination. For all our departments and networks, achieving increased engagement with our regional and national alliances is a high priority.

We communicate regularly with the seven regional general secretaries—covering Asia, Africa, Latin America, North America, Europe, the Caribbean, and the South Pacific region. We meet monthly by teleconference to update each other and coordinate our work.

To make our entire organization accessible and responsive to the needs of our member alliances, we have decentralized our operations, creating six global hubs so that we can be closer to the regional and national alliances and readily available throughout the entire world.

We harnessed the partnership of our members who provided the hospitality for the annual meetings of global leaders in Seoul, Korea in 2016; Bad Blankenburg, Germany in 2017; Fort Lauderdale, Florida, USA in 2018; and Nairobi, Kenya in 2019.

We have created a Task Force on Development to enable the WEA to expand its efforts while remaining financially sustainable. We thank God for our Global Ambassador, Brian

Stiller, who has agreed to assist us with short-term leadership in the area of financial development.

## **2. Strengthening National and Regional Alliances**

To assist believers around the world, especially those in countries where Christians are frequently under strain, we seek to establish national and regional alliances where none have existed. We have formed two new regional alliances, one for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and one in Central Asia, along with twelve new national alliances.

Since every national alliance is autonomous, each one must be able to function effectively on its own in terms of board governance, staff leadership, and addressing prominent issues. The WEA has responded to those needs by offering trainings on five topics: leadership, public engagement, advocacy, theology of persecution and suffering, and making use of available mechanisms through the United Nations. Furthermore, we have just launched a Global Institute of Leadership, which will offer peer mentoring by regional coaches and experienced leaders of national alliances, along with online resources. We believe that these new training and mentoring resources will bear great fruit in the form of peer learning and replication of successful work.

## **3. Global Advocacy for Religious Freedom**

Advocacy for religious freedom is one of our most important activities. This advocacy is essential to our goal of enabling the gospel to be preached throughout the world. We also, as a

matter of principle, support religious freedom for all people, not just Christians. In doing so, we gain respect and partners for our efforts.

We are one of many voices on the topic of religious freedom, so we do not try to claim credit for any particular successes, but our work on this front has been substantial. We did much of the background work and preparation that enabled the Global Christian Forum's December 2015 conference on religious persecution to be so effective. We also continue to sponsor the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church each November. Our Religious Liberty Commission does extensive research and analysis on situations in specific countries. We are on the board of the Religious Liberty Partnership, a collaboration of agencies involved in ministry to the persecuted church.

The International Institute for Religious Freedom, which is part of our Department of Theological Concerns, has participated in about fifty government conferences on religious freedom and twenty discussions in national parliaments. It has also sponsored or been involved in the program for eleven United Nations conferences. The most recent of these was the Second World Summit on Religious Violence and Religious Freedom, held at the UN headquarters in Geneva six months ago. The IIRF has also opened an office in Brasilia, Brazil to serve Latin America.

Our Geneva Liaison Office takes up cases from an average of twenty national evangelical alliances per year. Based on careful research, it submits reports and appeals to United Nations bodies and to the embassies of the governments we are lobbying, usually on matters of religious freedom. Our

Geneva office is increasingly playing an important bridging role between WEA member alliances on one hand and global human rights institutions and governments on the other hand.

When Pastor Andrew Brunson was imprisoned in Turkey, we spoke directly with the Turkish ambassador to the United States regarding his case. We believe that our conversation, along with many others, helped to secure Pastor Brunson's release.

When Bulgaria proposed legislation that would have curtailed the rights of religious minorities, our national alliance in Bulgaria and our global advocacy team in Geneva worked together to communicate our concerns. We were successful in getting the undesirable provisions removed from the legislation before it was passed.

When Kosovo was considering a similar bill, our national alliance arranged for me to meet personally with the country's President and the Speaker of the Parliament. Again, the bill did not pass.

When two Sudanese pastors and a third person from the Czech Republic were sentenced to twelve years in prison for allegedly spying against the state, we called on the Sudanese government to grant them clemency. The Czech national was released within twenty-four days and the two pastors were freed three months later.

Our efforts to protect religious freedom in Algeria, where churches have recently been shut down by government authorities, are ongoing. Some churches were reopened in 2018 after we encouraged the US State Department to look into the situation. However, in recent months, Algerian authorities have closed six more churches. Our member alliance

in Algeria is appealing for support and prayers.

On the other hand, we just enjoyed a wonderful success this week when the Palestinian National Authority granted full recognition to our evangelical alliance in Palestine, which they have been seeking for twelve years.

When Pope Francis visited the United Arab Emirates last February for a conference on human fraternity, I was there too representing the WEA. In my message, I gently urged my hosts to move toward religious tolerance. I reminded them that forced religious belief is no belief at all.

Christians all over the world are suffering for their faith. It is gratifying to know that we play a significant role in standing up for them and encouraging them.

#### **4. Building Our Commissions and Networks**

We thank God for our many commissions and networks that are addressing particular issues. For example, our Peace and Reconciliation Network has spearheaded advocacy on behalf of peacemaking in various countries.

Our Mission Commission is strongly advancing the idea of polycentric mission—that is, the idea that mission should be from everywhere to everywhere, not just from the West to the rest—by publishing books, mobilizing mission organizations and organizing mission consultations.

Our Women's Commission has held a global consultation that connected female leaders from around the world, and our Youth Commission has been similarly bringing youth leaders together for meaningful collaboration.



With our support, our national alliance in the Philippines held the first-ever Jesus Global Youth Day, organized by Generation Next, in Manila last August. Fifty thousand youth leaders from about fifty countries came together for this event, and we also had virtual participation from 83,000 local sites around the world. One outcome of this event was a challenge to churches to lower the average age of their membership to twenty-three during the next decade.

Our Sustainability Center, located in Bonn opposite the entrance to the United Nations facilities there, has organized several side events at UN conferences and has established stable relationships with the UN climate secretariat and other UN bodies. In fact, the Center has become co-chair of a working group within the UN's International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development, a network of 180 global institutions of all faiths.

Our Department of Theological Concerns has helped to launch the Society of Christian Scholars, a global network of Christians seeking to effectively represent and communicate the gospel in academic settings.

This department has also developed 'Re-Forma', a global basic training program that we hope will reach one million untrained pastors.

## **5. Interfaith and Intrafaith Relations**

Our interfaith and intrafaith work is some of our most exciting activity, though also perhaps where we are most often misunderstood. It is exciting because the WEA, as a voice for evangelical Christians globally, is recognized as among the most important

religious organizations in the world.

Some have expressed understandable concerns that our evangelical message could be compromised as we build friendships and collaborations with people of other faiths. But we have found that we can relate graciously with other faith groups while clearly maintaining our commitment to Jesus Christ as our 'calling card' in every encounter.

We have changed the designation of the Office of Ecumenical Relations to the Office of Intrafaith and Interfaith Relations. The International Council approved earlier this year a detailed statement of principles defining how we will carry out our intrafaith and interfaith interactions.

On the intrafaith side, which refers to our dealings with other groups that identify as Christian, we have established friendly, ongoing institutional relationships with all major Christian confessions. As part of this work, we have appointed specific, highly knowledgeable individuals such as our ambassadors to the Vatican, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of the Orthodox Churches, and the Russian Orthodox Churches.

We also meet frequently with the heads or general secretaries of all non-evangelical and evangelical global denominations.

We have carefully structured our relationship with the World Council of Churches so that we can cooperate well where possible and can listen and have mutually respectful discussions in areas of disagreement. We collaborate with the WCC and the Vatican within the Global Christian Forum, again sometimes joining hands as partners and sometimes respectfully discussing differences.

Our intrafaith work also involves



reaching out to evangelical friends like the Lausanne Movement, Transform World, Empowered 21, and the World Pentecostal Fellowship. We initiated several conversations with their leaders so we can avoid duplication and instead collaborate effectively.

On the interfaith side, we have established an ambitious dialogue program with Muslim leaders. In these meetings we work toward peace and reconciliation, give a clear witness to the salvation that Jesus Christ offers, and advocate for our brothers and sisters living in Muslim-governed lands. We have paid visits to every grand mufti and every Muslim minister of religion. We have also participated in every major Muslim-Christian global dialogue conference as well as broader conferences like Religions for Peace, on an average of once a month.

Beyond this, we are preparing to enter a global dialogue with Jewish representatives and have started to engage with global or national leaders of other world religions.

In our pluralistic world, as we relate to other groups we must constantly keep in mind what we as evangelicals are best known for: boldly and graciously proclaiming and demonstrating the Gospel.

## II. What We Need to Do

We thank God for what has done and continues to do throughout our network of alliances. But we realize that significant challenges remain.

First, we need to strengthen our communications systems and networks so that leaders in all parts of the world are aware of and can access available resources. Global communication, even to remote areas, is more

possible today than ever before. Our challenge is to use the means available to us not only to share information and create networks where people with like passions can encourage and strengthen each other toward fulfilling the vision that God has given us.

Not only do we need to share our success stories more broadly, but we also need to communicate our successes and best practices, gather information, and facilitate cross-national sharing of ideas. Accordingly, we are upgrading our communication systems by integrating universally available technologies. We will increase our use of social media to tell stories, share ideas, and interact on important issues that will strengthen our collective ministries. We are grateful that God has provided funding for additional communications staff to support this work.

Second, we need to increase our capacity to raise funds. We are expanding our development efforts to connect with people who share our ministry passion across the US and around the globe.

We are grateful that many people engaged in WEA ministries have been able to raise funds to support their ministry. We also want to equip leaders of regional and national alliances to expand their own fundraising capacity. We are currently searching for skilled people who can mentor and train national alliance leaders in raising funds.

Third, we are not yet a truly global organization. We have national alliances in 131 nations, at various levels of organizational maturity. But there are about sixty-two more countries where we have no representation.

We will be aggressive and focused

in establishing new alliances and strengthening the current ones to maturity. We want to have a national alliance in every country. Our main strategy will be to ask stronger alliances to 'adopt' other countries and either mentor sister alliances there or help to create one if none exists. We will do this in partnership with the respective regional evangelical alliances.

Our national alliances will, of course, retain their autonomy, but we want to assist them to do their work with consistently high quality. We have developed a self-assessment tool that national alliances can use to examine their own performance and capacity. Working through our Global Institute of Leadership, we intend to help our national alliances apply this tool and then improve in their areas of need.

Externally, our relevance and impact are observed most strongly in our advocacy on global issues such as religious freedom, creation care, peacemaking, human trafficking, and refugee populations. We want to build on the gains we have achieved in our global advocacy. In particular, we must amplify the evangelical voice on behalf of freedom of religion, es-

pecially in places where Christians are a minority. I believe that our most promising way to enhance our advocacy is by creating a culture of healthy and interdependent partnership among our national and regional alliances, commissions, and networks.

We also want to strengthen our relationships with other faith groups as well as with the United Nations and other global networks so that our voice can be clearly heard.

Finally, we must constantly be looking for more effective ways to fulfill the Great Commission. In partnership with the International Evangelism Association and the Billy Graham Training Center, we have introduced disciple-making ministry in thirty-eight countries. In this General Assembly, our primary focus is intentional, intergenerational and holistic disciple making. During the next decade, we want to accelerate high-quality disciple-making efforts that will usher in global spiritual renewal and awakening, so that we can see the kingdoms of this world become the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ forever.

Together, let us advance the Kingdom of God. Maranatha!