

New leaders to guide the WEA and its theological work

This issue introduces a new set of leaders in the World Evangelical Alliance and particularly in its global theology and advocacy activities.

Thomas Schirmmacher (Germany), formerly director of the Department of Theological Concerns, became the WEA's Secretary General as of 1 March. Peirong Lin (Singapore), who was human resource director and research coordinator for the department, has taken on the role of Deputy Secretary General for Operations. Brian Winslade of New Zealand is Schirmmacher's deputy for Ministries.

The previous leaders have not gone away. Efraim Tendero (Philippines), who preceded Schirmmacher as Secretary General, has been designated as a WEA Global Ambassador; Ray Swatkowski (US), formerly deputy for Operations, is now the WEA's chief financial officer; and Godfrey Yogarajah (Sri Lanka), the previous deputy for Ministries, has been named chair of the Asia Evangelical Alliance and a member of the WEA's governing International Council.

We have two more leaders to introduce. Schirmmacher's former leadership role in theology and religious freedom has now been split between two highly regarded and influential women: Theresa Lua (Philippines) in Global Theology and Janet Epp Buckingham (Canada) in Global Advocacy.

To mark the occasion, this issue of *Theological News* contains excerpts from Schirmmacher's inauguration message, an article based on an interview with Lua, and an essay from Buckingham.

Schirmmacher: Sharing the DNA of Christianity

This article is excerpted and lightly edited from the message Thomas Schirmmacher delivered on his inauguration as Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance on 27 February 2021.

When Anglican priests and the Salvation Army started to work together in the nineteenth century, people thought that would not be possible. When German Lutheran pastors and professors invited Methodists from the United States to preach the gospel in Germany, that was unheard of.

Today, we are even more diverse confessionally, ethnically, and in language and culture. We have churches in the Brazilian rainforest where they worship ten meters above the ground in high trees, and we have churches on the 20th floor of skyscrapers in Malaysia.

What, then, does it mean to be evangelical?

Well, I can tell you one thing: evangelicals never agreed on politics! You can see this around the globe. There are countries with evangelical members in Parliament on the government side and in the opposition. We did not agree on politics in 1846 either. This is not the secret of the evangelical movement.

For me, to be evangelical implies enthusiasm for the DNA of Christianity. But this requires us to search for the DNA of Christianity.

For example, if someone questions whether the resurrection of Jesus or the story of Pentecost happened, we evangelicals stand for the historicity of our faith. But we do not treat this belief as something specific to us alone. Rather, we think it's the DNA of Christianity that we owe everything to what Jesus did and what the Holy Spirit does.

We are deeply convinced that the Bible is the confession of the Church. But the idea of a paper document that would rule the people comes from the Old Testament. For the ancient Hebrews, the Torah was above the king and everyone else. Some people mock us and say the Bible is our 'paper Pope'. We are proud to have a paper Pope, because it assures us that none of us, including me, are above the Word of God.

The Westminster Confession of 1647 states, ‘The supreme judge by whom all controversies of religion are to be determined and all decrees of councils or opinions of ancient writers and doctrines of man and private opinions are to be examined and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other...’—and now you would expect it to say ‘than the Scriptures’. But no! In 1647, they said the supreme judge ‘can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture’. We believe the Holy Spirit is ruling His Church, but this is not *in opposition* to Holy Scripture. Rather, the Spirit is the author of the Holy Scriptures and is using His constitution, the Scriptures, to rule the Church. That for us is the DNA of Christianity and it is what evangelicals are all about.

Evangelicals have always emphasized that each believer should share the message that Jesus died on the cross for us and that only in Him can we find communion with God and eternal life. But let us look at the 2011 document ‘Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World’, co-authored by the World Evangelical Alliance, the World Council of Churches and the Vatican. It begins by stating that ‘mission is the very being of the Church’ and speaks about every believer being obliged to witness to others about the gospel. Is this emphasis, then, specifically evangelical or is it generally Christian? It is Christian insofar as all churches agree now that mission is the very being of the church. This is the task that Jesus Christ handed to us. Insofar that not everybody is happy about putting it into action, it might be seen as a particular concern of evangelicals. But we have to be very careful about thinking that as evangelicals, we automatically do what Jesus said. Mission is not always the essence of our local churches. We evangelicals often have to be reminded as well to put witnessing to the gospel at the centre of our work.

As another example, let us consider religious freedom and persecution. In 1846, the World Evangelical Alliance was the first large religious body ever to speak up for religious freedom. That meant speaking up against state churches, against Christian nationalism—which is still a hot potato today even within our own ranks—and against the state pressing its religion and its thoughts on the people.



Screenshot of Thomas Schirrmacher during his inauguration speech.

At the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church said exactly the same thing: that religious freedom is not just a political principle but part of the DNA of Christianity. So is this view evangelical? Well, we have stood for it for a long time. But we did not stand for it as a confessional item, but because we viewed religious freedom as an essential part of pure Christianity. God wants us to trust Him with our lives, but He does not want us to pray to Him because we are forced to or because someone paid us to do it. He wants our trust, our heart and our love, and love is something that cannot be forced.

So I am convinced that the evangelical movement stands up for specific things in the Christian world, but that these things are not specific in the sense that they are owned by us and distinguish us from others; rather, they are the DNA of the Christian faith itself. And when we strive for unity within evangelicalism, if we want to bring the Anglicans, the Pentecostals, the Reformed, the Salvation Army and all those groups in our midst together, we can do it only around the DNA of Christianity. We are open to any other church outside our movement joining us in affirming these aspects of Christianity’s DNA, and we hope wherever possible to extend our vision to many other churches around this world.

I am privileged to serve the World Evangelical Alliance. I know all of us are sinners, and we all come under Holy Scripture, which defines when we fail in what we do. And so I am deeply convinced that only the prayers of millions—along with the prayers of close friends who know my needs more fully—make it possible for me to take over a task that is too big for just one human being.