

WEA leaders pray with Taiwanese president

WEA representatives Timo Plutschinski and Thomas Schirmmacher participated in Taiwan's National Prayer Breakfast in late August and were among the religious leaders who prayed with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen after her speech.

The National Prayer Breakfast was hosted by CBMC, a Christian business ministry, which invited its members from multiple Asian countries to attend. CBMC's involvement highlighted the importance of Christian values in politics and society, as well as the role of the economy in political developments.

While in Taiwan, Schirmmacher and Plutschinski met with Paul Kong, preaching pastor at Friendship Presbyterian Church in Taipei. Dr Kong gave his guests a tour of the country's largest evangelical training facility, the China Evangelical Seminary, and familiarized them with the state of churches and religions in the country.

The two WEA representatives, both from Germany, also attended a CBMC reception which included guests from Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Israel, who reported on the political and spiritual situation in their countries.



President Tsai Ing-Wen speaking at Taiwan's National Prayer Breakfast © BQ/Warnecke

Insightful Swiss evangelical study of Catholic Church now available in English

In May 2017, the Swiss Evangelical Alliance published a detailed study on its relations with the Roman Catholic Church, covering everything from theological agreements and disagreements to how to respond if friendly Catholics wish to become SEA members. This 46-page paper, originally published in German and French, [has now been translated into English](#) by Thomas K. Johnson, the WEA's special envoy to the Vatican and senior advisor to the WEA Theological Commission.

Johnson's translation points out existing differences of nuance between the German and French versions, so that readers can most fully understand the SEA's perspective. He also added numerous active links to the primary sources of Roman Catholic theology, making extensive use of Vatican websites. As a result, the English version combines in one place many resources for ongoing theological research on Protestant-Catholic discussion and cooperation.

After completing the translation, Johnson commented, 'I was surprised to notice that French-speaking and German-speaking Swiss Evangelicals appear to be responding to slightly different versions of Catholicism within one medium-sized country. In spite of this difference, Swiss Evangelicals have been united in their three-fold emphasis on (1) the importance of love for all people who are known as Christians; (2) noting Catholic-Evangelical agreement on such matters as the Trinity and many themes in ethics; and (3) also pointing out the difficulties for additional levels of Catholic-Evangelical organizational cooperation arising from the Roman Catholic claim that Evangelical churches are not churches. I hope that the efforts of our Swiss brothers and sisters will stimulate an increasing level of love and practical cooperation with Catholic Christians while our thoughtful discussions continue.'

WEA congratulates Ethiopian Patriarch on reconciliation in church and state

In December, the WEA recognized His Holiness Abune Mathias, Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, for his role in the reconciliation and reunification of this previously divided church and on the progress towards national reconciliation that he has assisted, including a peace treaty between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

The WEA's Thomas Schirmmacher travelled to Ethiopia to meet with Bishop Melake Genet Abba Kidane Mariam, who represented the 77-year-old Patriarch. Schirmmacher was accompanied by a six-member delegation of former Muslims from neighbouring Muslim countries, whose experiences the Patriarch wished to be informed about.

The delegation also met with the Human Rights Council of the Ethiopian Parliament and with Pastor Tsadiku Abdo, chairman of the Evangelical Church Fellowship of Ethiopia (ECFE). Bishop Schirmmacher then addressed leading theologians of the ECFE on the topic of religious dialogue.

Abune Mathias has been Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church since 2013. Previously he was Bishop of Jerusalem and Archbishop of North America.

The Ethiopian Church, with 40 to 50 million members, is by far the largest of the seven ancient Oriental churches. Until 1950, it was under the control of the now-smaller Coptic church; since then it has been autocephalous, i.e. it elects its own patriarch.

During the period of communist rule in Ethiopia (1974 to 1991), a foreign church split off with its own patriarch. This division has now been overcome, and the foreign church's patriarch has returned to his homeland with emeritus patriarch status.

The ECFE originated during the time of communist persecution. Prison and torture were frequent experiences for its leadership, but the ECFE was recognized by the Ministry of Justice immediately after the communist regime ended in 1991. Currently, about 18% of Ethiopia's population, or 13 million Christians, belong to the 29,805 local congregations of the ECFE's 22 member churches. The ECFE is a full member of the World Evangelical Alliance.



Patriarch Abune Mathias, Bischof Thomas Schirmmacher, and Bishop Melake Genet Abba Kidane Mariam © BQ/Warnecke

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<https://worldea.org/whoweare/newsletter-signup>

Audience with church and government leaders in Armenia

Thomas Schirmmacher of the WEA and his wife, Islamic scholar Christine Schirmmacher, visited Armenia in December and also met subsequently in Berlin with Armenia's current president, Armen Sarkissian.

The Schirmmachers were received by the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Catholicos Karekin II, after they had commemorated the 1.5 million victims of the Armenian genocide from 1915 at the Genocide Memorial Complex Tsitsernakaberd in Yerevan. Christine Schirmmacher regularly lectures on this genocide at the University of Bonn.

Thomas Schirmmacher met with representatives of previous governments to get a comprehensive picture of the situation since Armenia's peaceful Velvet Revolution of 2018 and to ask them to support the nation's new course. Among the prominent figures he visited were Robert Kocharian, president of Armenia from 1998 to 2008, and Eduard Sharmazanov, vice president of the National Assembly and spokesman for the Republican Party, which was Armenia's ruling party until the Velvet Revolution.

The Catholicos, who has also been president of the World Council of Churches since 2013, has been in a precarious political position since the Velvet Revolution because he was seen as having a close relationship with the prior ruling regime.

The Schirmmachers also met with several human rights organizations, including the Armenian branch of the International Society for Human Rights, chaired by Ms Bela Shikaryan. In a conversation with president Karen Zadoyan and board members of the Armenian Lawyers Association, they learned in depth about the work of this human rights organization, which fights corruption with the help of anti-corruption centres throughout the country and defends poorer fellow citizens under labour law, in addition to handling classic human-rights cases.

The Armenian Church (like the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, featured in the previous article), is one of the seven ancient Oriental churches that were formerly called monophysites and accused of heresy by other Christian churches. It is now generally recognized that the theological differences leading to these accusations arose from a different use of the word for *nature* (Greek *physis*) in relation to Jesus Christ, but that all churches confess together that Jesus is one person of the triune God and is both true God and true man.



Thomas Schirmmacher with Armenian President Armen Sarkissian © BQ/Schirmmacher



Two of Armenia's oldest churches, dating back to the fourth century. Armenia was the first kingdom to officially adopt Christianity as its state religion. © BQ/Schirmmacher

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Schirmmacher delivers ‘Bishop’s sermon’ in Bavaria on persecution of Christians

WEA Associate Secretary General Thomas Schirmmacher delivered the annual ecumenical ‘Bishop’s sermon’ on the persecution of Christians in the cathedral of Neumarkt, Bavaria. This event has been held annually since 2014; Schirmmacher was the first Protestant pastor selected to deliver the message.

Schirmmacher called on worldwide Christianity to awaken from lethargy in the face of the world situation and to show an unprecedented solidarity on behalf of those who are persecuted. He stated that many politicians, journalists, and leaders of non-Christian religious groups are more publicly committed to supporting persecuted Christians than some church leaders are.

Schirmmacher lamented the widespread tendency to neglect issues of persecution and martyrdom in theology, church history and liturgy. One reason for this tendency, he said, is that the field of theology is dominated by Western cultures where persecution is not a part of everyday experience. Moreover, to the extent that believers express solidarity with persecuted Christians, they usually concentrate on members of their own denomination.

‘But no Christian and no church can say that they have no time, personnel or financial resources for the simplest form of solidarity, prayer’, Schirmmacher stated. ‘A short prayer for the Christians who are confronted with sheer violence should actually have a firm place in every Sunday service, in every church event, and in every personal morning and evening prayer.’

Norbert Winner (pastor of the Neumarkt Cathedral) and event organizer Pastor Ernst Herbert noted that Schirmmacher was well suited to address the topic not only because he has been working on behalf of persecuted Christians for 20 years, but also because the church he heads in Germany has a large number of former Muslims who had to leave their homeland after converting to Christianity.



The Neumarkt Cathedral service at which Thomas Schirmmacher delivered the Bishop’s sermon © BQ/Warnecke

Lutherans in Rhineland also focus on persecution and discrimination

Schirmmacher delivered a similar message on November 1 to the autumn convention of the Lutheran Convention in Rhineland, which was formed in 1936 to oppose Nazism in Germany. ‘Freedom of religion is a fundamental human right. Where it is violated, other human rights will also be in a bad state’, he said.

‘There is no country in the world where religious minorities are oppressed but the human rights situation apart from that is in good order. Christians worldwide are currently more often affected by violent oppression than members of other religions. One reason for this is that most of the former Christian countries have developed into secular democracies. Precisely because Christians no longer have a Christian state on their side, they become easy victims of violent religious currents and states that despise human rights.’

Schirmmacher said that democratic countries must call for the protection of persecuted Christians, ‘because otherwise in the end nobody will do it.’

Experts at German Bundestag hearing say ethnic minorities face multiple threats

On November 28, the Human Rights Committee of the German Bundestag (parliament) held a hearing on 'Displaced ethnic groups—threatened peoples'. In addition to considering the ethnic and religious dimensions of the problem and the persecution of minorities around the world, the event also addressed the question of how democracies can deal with increasing 'ideologies of inequality' and 'cultural closure tendencies'.

Dr Heiner Bielefeldt (University of Erlangen-Nuremberg) stated that how a society deals with its minorities reflects the condition of that society as a whole. The majority has the task of keeping public spaces open, supporting institutions that prevent an 'identity policy collapse', and enabling minorities to participate without fear.

Ulrich Delius (Society for Threatened Peoples International) emphasized that the problem was not limited to direct persecution by state or non-state actors. Delius contended that about 450 million members of indigenous peoples worldwide are threatened by economic, geographic and climatic factors and challenged by social change or by generational and role conflicts. He called for the ratification of International Labour Organisation Convention 169, the only international treaty that deals exclusively with the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples.

Sister Hatune Dogan (Hatune Foundation, Warburg) described her own family's experience of discrimination as Aramaic Christians in Turkey, where they were forbidden to practice their religion or speak their language, and where teachers mistreated Aramaic children and declared them to be 'soldiers of the Turkish state'.

Dr Gudrun Hentges (University of Cologne) drew attention to the diversity of 'ideologies of inequality', ranging from religious fundamentalism to racism and anti-Semitism. Such forms of 'group-related misanthropy' (a term coined by education professor Wilhelm Heitmeyer) could increase with the rise of right-wing parties in Europe. Hentges cited a recent study, 'Flight into Authoritarianism', which concluded that xenophobia had increased in Germany.

Dr Mouhanad Khorchide (University of Münster) differentiated between the attitudes of various Muslim groups. While the Egyptian mufti emphasized that Muslims had a duty to enable Christians to build churches, he explained, other Islamic clerics were calling for the destruction of Christian churches on the Arabian peninsula. Christians in Europe face the challenge of how to support from a distance those forces that stand up for human rights in the Middle East.

Citing renowned philosopher Jürgen Habermas, Dr Michael Reder (Munich School of Philosophy) referred to the presence of 'cultural closing-up tendencies', which reflect a widespread longing for homogeneity and social stability. In the globalized and pluralistic present, however, one cannot return to such concepts. Democracy is not only a matter of the constitution and form of government, but also of the attitude of citizens. Reder said that education about globalized contexts is an important part of enabling mutual respect among social groups.

Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher (International Institute for Religious Freedom) echoed Reder, arguing that in the end democracy is not measured by the 'banal execution of a majority vote', but by whether it guarantees the rights of minorities. It is shocking, he said, to see 'what enormous energy and time states, groups or parties around the world spend on making sure that others are not faring well and on running minorities down'.



Mouhanad Khorchide, Michael Reder, and Thomas Schirrmacher at the Bundestag hearing © BQ/Warnecke

Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions

WEA Secretary General Efraim Tendero and theological consultant Thomas K. Johnson were among the approximately 30 participants at the November meeting of the Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions (CS CWC) in Geneva.

The CS CWC was created in 1957, in response to perceptions that lack of communication among the branches of Christianity had worsened the humanitarian crises that occurred during and after the century's two world wars. To be considered a Christian world communion, an organization must have churches on multiple continents. Participating communions range from the Roman Catholic Church and the WEA to smaller groups like the Unitas Fratrum (Moravian Church). About 98% of all people who identify as Christians are represented through one of the participating bodies.



Although the CS CWC does not take any formal actions or publish any opinions, it offers unparalleled high-level contact among many types of Christians. By mutual agreement, personal reports presented at the CS CWC's annual conference are not shared publicly. However, Johnson provided the following general impressions of the discussion:

- Outside North America and Europe, the largest problem faced by church leaders is their inability to train pastors or build church buildings rapidly enough to serve the many new Christians coming to faith.
- Outside North America and Europe, many Christians are experiencing the worst persecution in recent memory.
- There are about 25 million church members living in refugee camps, almost none of whom come from Europe or North America.

'These issues indicate that interaction between Christians in the West and those in the rest of the world is more urgently needed than ever,' Johnson stated. 'Christians need input from fellow believers on other continents so that they can perceive and support spiritual renewal, address situations of worsening persecution, and care for Christians who are refugees.'

WEA THEOLOGICAL NEWS

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