

Global Christian Forum News

2016 Edition 01

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Introduction

Welcome to the first **GCFNews** of 2016.

This special issue focusses on the *Discrimination, Persecution, Martyrdom: Following Christ Together* (DPM) consultation held in Tirana, Albania, 2-4 November 2015.

It was a unique and significant event

concentrating on the persecution and violence toward Christians around the world. As a global consultation, participants came from every continent and representatives of suffering churches and those in solidarity with them were there in equal number.

See also in this edition of GCFNews

- Full text of DPM Consultation Message, page 14
- Origin of the DPM consultation, page 9
- Greeting from Pope Francis, page 17
- Plus many other stories



Historic consultation challenges churches to solidarity

A historic consultation of over 140 church leaders, drawn from 65 nations, has called on churches globally to urgently pray, support and be in solidarity with those suffering persecution due to their faith.

The consultation, titled "Discrimination, Persecution, Martyrdom: Following Christ Together" brought leaders from all strands of global Christianity together in response to growing concerns about persecution of Christians.

The Global Christian Forum convened and organised the event together with the Catholic Church (Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity), the Pentecostal World Fellowship, the World Council of Churches, and the World Evangelical Alliance.

The Albanian capital, Tirana, was the location of the gathering, held 2-4 in November and the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania, the Albania Catholic Bishops Conference, and Evangelical Alliance of Albania hosted the conference.

It was historic at two points:

Firstly, it was possibly the first time in the modern history of the church that a gathering consisting of all the traditions of global Christianity coalesced around the issue of persecution of Christians.

Secondly, and significantly, within the gathering high-level leaders from the widest spectrum of churches acknowledged collectively the church's complicity in being also persecutor of people of other faiths, and fellow Christians.

The *Consultation Message* included an apology, offering "repentance" for times when churches had "persecuted each other and other religious communities in history."

These two points in themselves, for some, were a sign of the growing significance of the issues of religious persecution and "freedom of religion" within the complex mix of the geopolitical/religious pressures now facing the world.

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Discrimination, Persecution, Martyrdom: Following Christ Together

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Having heard of the rising tide of religious persecution around the world – 80% of which is, according to the Vatican, directed against Christians - participants issued a final Message which focused on two key areas of concerns:

- a call to global churches for solidarity, prayer and support, and,
- a call to governments to “respect and protect” religious freedom and security.

Overwhelmingly, the consultation prevailed on churches “to urgently strengthen the solidarity of all Christians” in the face of discrimination, persecution and martyrdom in the 21st century.

The message urged:

- Christians to pray for all who are discriminated against and persecuted;
- Christian organisations at regional, national and local levels from all traditions to learn, pray, and work together for the persecuted;
- Churches to engage in dialogue and co-operation with other faith communities, and be watchful and fearless in the face of discrimination and persecution.

In a series of exhortations to governments and secular bodies, the Message also called for:

- **All governments** to respect and protect the freedom of religion and belief of all people as a fundamental human right.

- **All media** to report in an appropriate and unbiased way on violations of religious freedom, including the discrimination and persecution of Christians as well as of other faith communities.
- **All educational institutions** to develop opportunities and tools to teach young people about human rights, religious tolerance, healing of memories and hostilities of the past, and peaceful means of conflict resolution and reconciliation.

During the gathering participants were unafraid to carefully but honestly grapple with difficult issues around the theme of persecution and violence:

- discussing the occurrence and spread of persecution;
- hearing local stories and experiences of persecution of Christians and churches in the Middle East, Asia and Africa;
- considering the relationship and engagement with people of other faiths – including Islam – on issues of religious persecution; and,
- examining both the history and theology within the Church on the theme of persecution.

The consultation was supported by a special greeting from Pope Francis, who said, “I think with great sadness of the escalating discrimination, and persecution against Christians in the Middle East, Africa and Asia and elsewhere throughout the world.

“In various parts of the world, the witness to Christ, even to the shedding

of blood, has become a shared experience of Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, Protestants, Evangelicals and Pentecostals,” the Pope said.

A feature of the gathering was that at least half of those present were leaders of churches suffering persecution, enabling them to raise their voices so that their story could be heard.

Most of the other half of the participants were leaders of global churches in solidarity with “suffering churches”, and included leaders of the Pentecostal World Fellowship, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (Vatican), the World Council of Churches, and the World Evangelical Alliance

Leaders of global organisations such as ‘Open Doors International’ and ‘Aid to the Church in Need’ were also participating.

During the three days of focussed discussion participants followed a program that began with hearing the voices of the suffering churches from around the world (day 1); continued with discussion of what it means to live in solidarity with suffering churches (day 2) and finally, concluded with consideration of next steps as churches walking together as ‘suffering church’ (day 3).

At the close of the gathering the four co-organising bodies (PCPCU, PWF, WCC, WEA) spoke of their next steps, having heard from the suffering churches. The Consultation Message recommended that the GCF evaluate “within two years the work of this event, and report to all four bodies for their follow up.”

The West is 'weak on martyrdom' but weakness is martyrdom's strength



It was as if the speaker had set off a fire cracker. He said from the podium in the opening session of the DPM consultation, what everyone in the room knew but feared: "The West has had little awareness" – and by implication, concern – "for the martyrdom of Christians."

He went on: "Western culture has (so) nurtured a sense of guilt" over Christianity's historic responsibility for the violence it has perpetrated in its history that it has "concealed the important reality" that runs through the story of the twentieth century: that of the persecution of Christians, themselves.

The speaker was Prof. Andrea Riccardi, founder of the Sant'Egidio community, and researcher into the presence and history of Christian martyrdom, delivering the opening keynote address at the DPM consultation.

A wide-ranging keynote address on martyrdom now and in the last century sparked a profound discussion on
Discrimination, Persecution, Martyrdom: Following Christ Together. Kim Cain reports.

He told the participants that somehow modern Christian communities (in the West) are now so "closed in on themselves, or self-centred, they do not like the question or hear the cry that comes from a world of men and women of faith (who are) humiliated and

persecuted" for their faith.

"They do not feel the searing memory of this history of the twentieth century.... (their) insensitivity and ignorance are intertwined."

Since the late 1990s Riccardi and the Sant'Egidio community have been collating, studying and honouring the reality of Christian persecution and martyrdom across the world and across Christian tradition.

In the year 2000, Riccardi published a book examining the experience of Christian martyrdom during the 20th century, saying that as he researched the stories it seemed he was "going down into the catacombs of history".

He learned that "each story was different" and that the cause of extended persecution is not the commonly rolled out thesis of the "clash of civilisations" within a bitter

struggle between Islam and the West.

No, the "suffering of Christians is not the clash of civilisations or religions, but something deeper, certainly mixed with history; but there is something deeper to understand with regard to their (Christian) history."

The answer lies, he said, within the Christians themselves: "These figures (people) with their humanity and actions represent a different way of living: this is unacceptable to the prevailing fanaticism or for the dark interests (of some) that aim to control society."

What Prof Riccardi found in his research was a litany of Christian martyrdom that extended across the century from the death of the Armenian Catholic Archbishop Maloyan, as part of the Armenian massacres at the dawn of the last century, to Christians murdered due to ethnic conflict in Rwanda and Burundi, towards its close.

So much so that he quoted Pope John Paul II, who said on the eve of the year 2000: "At the end of the second millennium the Church has become a Church of martyrs."

The feature of this persecution was, said Riccardi, surprisingly, its ecumenical nature – ironically producing a profound sense of Christian unity across an equally surprising geographic and political spread.

"Orthodox, Evangelicals and

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The West is 'weak on martyrdom' but weakness is martyrdom's strength

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Catholics have suffered together in Nazi concentration camps and in the communist gulag: there everything united them and little divided them.”

He went on, “In the twentieth century the concentration camp universe, created by totalitarian regimes, was the place par excellence for the persecution of Christians.

“Christians have also fallen as missionaries in every continent”. Great persecutions took place, he said, in “secular and anticlerical Mexico”, the Spanish civil war and independent Africa.

Throughout the century “there have been martyrs who were opposed to violence, oppression, domination, intrusive mafias and acts of terrorism.”

Now, Riccardi said, there are “new martyrs of the third millennium”. But, why are Christians still dying, in this our “new time of martyrdom”?

“Christians cannot be subject to the logic of conflict, on the contrary they seek spaces of dialogue and coexistence, they educate the young generation in a responsible way in life, they do not cooperate with criminal or repressive powers, they are friendly and human, they communicate their faith.

“Despite the weakness or minority status, without using any armed force, the Christian is in fact a meek alternative to the prevailing ideology or power.

“For this reason they will be put aside, silenced, eliminated.”

Riccardi said that this risky but purposeful powerlessness was highlighted in several examples of 21st century killings:

- Annalena Tonelli, an Italian volunteer in Somalia, was killed in 2003. She gave witness to a generous and peaceful life in the violent and degraded Somali environment: “Our task is to live on earth,” she wrote, “and life is certainly not sentencing, *ius belli* (the law of war), prosecution, revenge ...”. Although Tonelli saw the violence, her hospital remained a human space in the barbaric situation of Somalia. Despite the threats she did not flee.

of customs who, despite the attempts of bribery and threats, refused to allow rotten food on the market. He resisted in the name of faith and was assassinated. Another young Christian in El Salvador, William, working alongside poor children, was threatened and asked to join the mafia. He refused and continued his service: he was killed. These have fallen unknown to the world, but I think not forgotten by God.”

So, says Riccardi, “Christianity continues in the 21st century to produce people who are generous and faithful in the service of others in a disarmed way. These people are obstacles to evil projects, which are carried out through threats, imposition, and terrorism.

“In degraded lands and among peoples in grave difficulties, these

Christians, the Christian communities and Christianity, are resources of humanity.”

But all persecution and honor is not reserved for Christians either, says, Riccardi. He pointed to the story of Salmaan Taseer, a Muslim and Governor of the Punjab province in Pakistan, who was murdered when he came out against the blasphemy law that has seen many minority Christians summarily charged, goaled or executed.

“Righteous people do exist” he said. “In fact, religions are not destined to clash in wall-to-wall confrontation, almost as if the gene of the conflict were present in their chromosomes.”

Riccardi closed by saying, when the atlas of persecution is opened today we are “carried away from our own communities” and meet

“religions are not destined to clash in wall-to-wall confrontation” as if it is in their genes

- American Sister Dorothy Stang lived in Brazil. The nun, 73 years old, was killed in 2005. Threatened for years, she made the intimidation public. Her commitment to the “landless” clashed with landlords, who saw in her an obstacle to the exploitation of precious forests. Two gunmen stopped her and asked her if she had weapons. Sister Dorothy showed a Bible: “Here is my only weapon.” She was found murdered and bent over her Bible.

He also quoted the cost of Christian faith, shown by two young men from his own Sant’Egidio community:

- “Two brothers should be included... One in Congo, Floribert, the young director

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“worlds that seem impossible” - such as communist North Korea which has totally destroyed all the Christian communities.

“In many parts of the world, it seems that Christianity is destined to disappear. Will there be a defeat of Christianity in the twenty-first century? We could say that. But in the martyrs there is a meek power, both humiliated and hidden.”

'the martyrs reveal... the heart of Christianity'

“The martyrs, humiliated and defeated, show the strength of ‘weak and meek’ Christianity... (but) this is the power of Christianity, Riccardi said, quoting the apostle Paul: “when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Cor.12:10)

“In this sense the martyrs reveal to us the heart of Christianity: they show us the mystery of faith, they evangelize us.

“Strength (ultimately) is not in the economic resources of the Churches, nor in the wealthy supporters; it is not in dealing with governments, nor in organization.”

So it is, “that we are contemporaries of the martyrs. How can we remain the same? How can we remain closed-up in our institutions and communities?”

A firecracker for the DPM consultation had been lit.



Why in Albania?

Albania was chosen as the location for the DPM consultation as it has been a nation that has experienced systemic and continuous religious persecution for people of all religious traditions during the Communist era. In that time, Christian and Muslim communities were persecuted equally.

Today, the Church is rebuilding: it has been resurrected after a dark and brutal period of oppression and is now working to take its place in community and national life, as are Muslim and other religious communities.

In 1968, Dictator Enver Hoxha, had declared the country the world's first fully atheistic state where every form of religious observance was banned and militantly oppressed.

Churches and mosques were destroyed or purloined to be used as factories, stables or a myriad of other uses.

Everything about the consultation reminded participants about the painful story of persecution of the church in Albania and its courageous ‘resurrection’:

- Where most participants slept, the Tirana International Hotel, was once the site of the Orthodox Cathedral. It had been appropriated by the state, demolished and the hotel built there for visiting Communist officials. In the post-Communist era it is now a privately owned and managed hotel.
- Across the road from the hotel, the national museum – still complete with a massive Communist-era mosaic at the entrance – has a special section dedicated to the era of religious repression in Albania. Images, footage and bullet-ridden clothes serve as a reminder of the costliness of faith during that time.
- Within walking distance of the hotel, the newly dedicated ‘Resurrection of Christ’ Orthodox Cathedral and Cultural Centre of Tirana rises above the city skyline. It is the very location of the DPM discussions.

In the week after the meeting the Catholic Church of Albania celebrated the 25th anniversary of the first Catholic mass said after the Communist era. Life and hope was about to begin anew. It was November 11, the same day called ‘Remembrance Day’ for many other nations, recalling the end of WWI.

Discrimination, Persecution, Martyrdom lifts GCF to face common challenge: a reflection

In what was a historic first for the Global Christian Forum, the Discrimination, Persecution, Martyrdom: Following Christ Together consultation in Tirana, Albania last November, was by many measures a significant global achievement. By Kim Cain.

With some 145 participants from 65 nations dealing with the fraught issues around 'discrimination, persecution and martyrdom of Christians on a global scale', the GCF made space for rich expression in line with the second objective stated in the GCF guiding purpose statement - formulated in 2002 and affirmed in 2007 at the inaugural GCF global gathering in Limuru: "to explore and address together common challenges."

Until now the GCF has mainly, but not only, focused on the first objective articulated in the guiding purpose statement: "to foster mutual respect" between leaders of "a broad range of Christian churches and inter-church organisations."

The DPM Consultation has brought the GCF and its constituent participants to a deeply 'focussed kind of space' where a specific, difficult but "common challenge" was addressed in a responsive and open way at a global level, uniquely resourced by the breadth that comes with the GCF and its participants.

In effect it was a tangible expression of a "common challenge" that enabled those from the suffering church in every continent to be heard honestly in a truly global forum; and the global church in solidarity with them, having heard, begin to articulate their own 'next steps' in response.

This consultation created a fresh kind of space, a grounded space, built on the GCF's experience in creating a genuine forum for faith sharing and understanding, but this time by

confronting the painful, increasingly concerning and yet often dismissed area, of persecution of Christians.

In that fresh version of the 'space' offered by the GCF special and valuable discoveries were made that may not have been possible in a less ecumenical or global forum. This included, the very humbling "confession" of need for Christians themselves to acknowledge their own actions in being perpetrators and beneficiaries of persecution of people of faith — both Christian and other faiths.

The GCF does not carry out programs or projects: that is the domain of the participant bodies. Yet, in convening this unique gathering of intentional listening and honest dialogue the GCF has demonstrated the distinctive *charism* it offers to the world church.

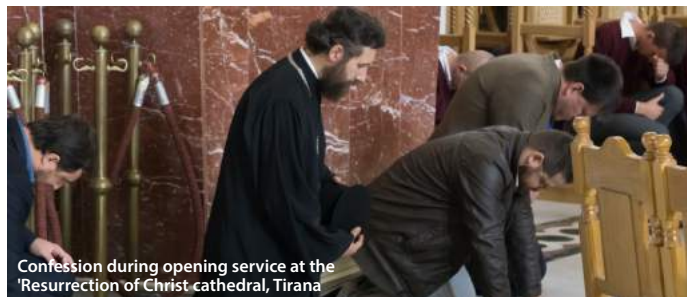
At the second global gathering of the GCF (Manado, Indonesia, 2011), participants called on the GCF "not only to foster respect for one another, but now also to move forward together in addressing common challenges."

The first global gathering (Lirumu, Kenya 2007) had "affirmed the value of the Forum as an open space for developing new relationships and continuing conversations, and identifying common concerns, recognising that any resulting joint

actions will be outworked through the participating churches and organisations."

Now, eight years later, the DPM consultation became a global outcome of that call and of that way of operating: facing together an important "common challenge" even as churches continue to explore the nature of their unity.

Perhaps few participants at Manado or at Lirumu would have thought that the topic of persecution would be the one that would see a coalescence of interest – and indeed the GCF Committee in discerning its way



Confession during opening service at the 'Resurrection of Christ cathedral, Tirana

forward considered several other possible areas.

But that is how discernment works as faithful people respond to the prompting of the Spirit.

As a true 'open space' the GCF worked conjointly with four key participants bodies – PCPCU, PWF, WCC, WEA - and a myriad of other churches and church-based organisations to bring this consultation to fruition. And herein lies another important achievement: these four global entities committed to, and jointly shepherded, the process all the way through. This in itself was a significant expression of ecumenical sharing and trusting, and "space making".

Welcome to persecution?

As participants in the DPM consultation gathered in the conference centre of the Orthodox ‘Cathedral of the Resurrection’, Tirana — itself a witness to Christian faith enduring through persecution — they naturally greeted and welcomed each other.

The paradox, however, was for all to experience. How do you welcome people to persecution?

The contradiction of “gladly gathering together” set

against a backdrop of discrimination and violence against fellow Christians produced its own dynamic when leaders of world Christian bodies wanted to both ‘welcome’ each other but also ‘warn’ the wider church and the world of the ‘growing concern’ of religious-based persecution. Here is an excerpt of ‘greeting and opening messages’ to the consultation from leaders of the four global church bodies that joined with the GCF in organising the consultation:

• **Cardinal Kurt Koch**, President of the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, greeted participants saying the gathering, “represents a meaningful illustration of global Christianity today and a significant expression of universal Christian solidarity which exceeds ‘denominational’ or ‘confessional’ boundaries.”

He said, “Once again in the course of history Christians of different traditions are facing discrimination,

persecution and martyrdom, yet probably never before have they felt so close to each other as they do today.

“Indeed, the most convincing form of ecumenism is the ecumenism of blood and suffering.”

But, that suffering also brought us to confession: “While recalling our martyrs of yesterday and today, let us repent of our divisions and mutual harm and ask the Holy Spirit to reunite us in one Church, finally visibly reconciled.”



Cardinal Kurt Koch, President, PCPCU



Bishop Efraim Tendero, WEA General Secretary

• **Bishop Efraim Tendero**, General Secretary, World Evangelical Alliance, opened by reminding participants that “as Christians, we follow a Lord that was crucified as a criminal. The good news of Jesus...was also a threat to civil and religious powers.

“It should come as no surprise...that

persecution is likely to follow those who follow Jesus.

“Despite the differences that separate some of our communities, the current crises around the world demand that together we collaborate for those who suffer persecution and martyrdom”.

• **Dr Prince Guneratnam**, Chairman of the Pentecostal World Fellowship who could not travel to Albania because of illness, supported the note of solidarity in the message, he sent, saying, “it (is) vital that the Body of Christ stands together with (the persecuted) in prayer, fellowship and to see how we can render practical assistance that would encourage and strengthen their faith.”



Rev. Dr. David Wells of the Pentecostal World Fellowship, reads the opening greetings on behalf of the Chairman, Dr. Prince Guneratnam.

• **Rev. Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit**, World Council of Churches General Secretary, said the gathering was “timely” and “very much needed”: the suffering of so many makes us all sad and vulnerable.” He said participants are here “because an increasing number of churches and Christians are going through different types of darkness at this moment in history as one humanity.”

Acknowledging the presence of

those who are from suffering churches he said many of you are “in a special way light in the world.”

“You are not alone when you experience darkness. We are together here to say and show that.

“There is another way you (the suffering churches) are not alone: there are so many (others) from all cultures and faith communities who are also suffering injustice and



Rev. Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit, WCC General Secretary

violence. We are (all) created by the same God, loved by the same God. God is hearing you as God is hearing them all,” he said.



Theology leads to a passionate call to action on issue of martyrdom and peace

In a clarion call to action to all Christians “living in free countries”, the Orthodox Archbishop of Tirana, Dürres and All Albania, His Beatitude Anastasios reminded the DPM consultation that churches “cannot remain indifferent to the sufferings of our brothers and sisters” who are being “oppressed in various ways” in the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

“We must use our vote,” said Archbishop Anastasios, “to influence rulers” and we “are obliged to raise our voices by any means available to protect (and) to actively support” those who are suffering.

The appeal came at the end of a keynote address to the DPM consultation held in Tirana, Albania in which he outlined a theological approach to the issue of martyrdom.

Archbishop Anastasios said, for the “church to fulfil its mission in the world events of the 21st century (it) must maintain ...its sacramental, salvific character (and) the courage of the martyr’s ethos.”

Archbishop Anastasios was a leading participant at the DPM consultation as the location of the meeting was the ‘Resurrection of Christ’ Cathedral and Cultural Centre of the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania, in Tirana.

His church symbolised the journey of all churches in Albania, which has been a journey through intense persecution to discover ‘new life’

today, after dictatorship.

His Beatitude Anastasios was also a member of the consultation’s national advisory committee.

Looking at the issue of persecution and martyrdom from a theological perspective, Dr Anastasios said the whole notion of costly faith starts with Jesus himself, “the martyr par excellence”.

From the time of his childhood facing “Herod’s mania” which required him (Jesus) to take refuge in Egypt, to his understanding that his “work would be realised with the acceptance of martyrdom” Jesus did not hide from the “tragic, but also saving aspect of pain and persecution”.

“The Cross became the Christian symbol par excellence (and together) with the Resurrection, it forms the DNA of the church.”

As such, he said, the Church historically has lived continuously through the experience of the Apostles, and then other followers, in a manner consistent with Christ’s martyrdom. Founded on ‘the glorious

martyrdom of Christ’, the Church is both ‘apostolic’ and ‘martyric’.

“In its history, martyrdom acquires a special significance, which is revealed in Jesus Christ himself. This is about the imitation of Christ by participating in his sufferings and his salvific work.”

As such, the Church is “apostolic” not only according to its doctrinal tradition and episcopal succession, but also according to its ‘martyrish’ tradition.” For, “one cannot follow Christ without taking part, at least partially, in the passion of Christ.”

This raises consideration of the ‘characteristics of the ethos of the martyr’. Archbishop Anastasios, reinforcing the real possibility of suffering for Christ sake, says “Christ clearly warned his disciples about persecutions.”

But should suffering come, Anastasios says, “four surprising experiences” take place for the Christian:

- **Reconciliation** with pain

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Theology leads to a passionate call to action on martyrdom and peace

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- especially the pain of martyrdom for the love of Christ. This suffering, it seems, “is a special charisma”
- **Communion** (koinonia) with Christ - a deep knowledge and relationship
- **Transformation** of tribulations - “eventually the martyrdom in the perspective of Christian faith is transformed into a hymn of love and praise of God.”
- **Blessedness and joy** - the culmination of the martyr becomes that of a blessing. “With absolute clarity Jesus stressed, ‘blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake’”.

So it is, that the Church must maintain the virtue of “the courage of the martyrs ethos.”

“It must remain open to the pursuits of humanity, faithfully following the path outlined by Christ.” It is this characteristic that the Church takes into the world.

Connecting these ideas with contemporary experience of the Christian in the world, Anastasios said “Today Christians live in a complex world characterised by pluralism and interdependence. In the modern globalised world we are indebted to increase our sensitivity, vigilance, solidarity.”

The Church remains “open to experience its universal responsibility with Cross-Resurrectional resilience, peace and joy.”

Against the backdrop of increasing strife in the world which is leading to inter-religious conflict and violence, Archbishop Anastasios noted the “close relationship between global peace, justice and development.” “Poverty”, he said, “remains the worst



type of oppression.”

“When people are deprived of the basic needs for survival, it is not strange for them to turn to other options and adopt extreme religious beliefs to achieve a just society.

“In the 21st century we need to cultivate more and strengthen the solidarity of all Christians in following Christ together.”

The road to Tirana: from Limuru 2007 via Manado 2011 ... the journey to the DPM Consultation

When about 250 Christian leaders, representing all streams of world Christianity, gathered in the tropical city of Manado on the island of Sulawesi, Indonesia in October 2011, not many of them thought how their presence might produce another, even more historic gathering, in the far off Balkan city of Tirana, Albania four years later.

And prior to Manado, there were those at Limuru (Kenya) in 2007 for the inaugural gathering of the GCF itself, who had confirmed the need for a “global forum” to provide an open space to deal with “common

challenges”.

Manado emphasized this in a series of guidelines for the GCF, asking that it “not only foster respect for one another, but now also move forward together in addressing common challenges.”

The Manado guidelines continued: “GCF participants believe that the Forum has the potential to be a space for discussing relevant topical issues, even and perhaps especially where we are not in agreement with one another.”

When the GCF Committee met in Rome, in January 2012 — just two months after Manado —

consideration began on what such “common challenges” and “relevant topical issues” could be.

It was here that Archpriest Rev. Mikhail Gundiaev, who represents the Moscow Patriarchate (Russian Orthodox Church) on the GCF Committee, suggested that the persecution of Christians should be considered as one of the concerns on a list of many concerns.

The consideration of various suggestions continued in the GCF committee meetings in Akropong, Ghana (December 2012) and Geneva (September 2013). An

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Archpriest Revd Mikhail Gundiaev (l) at the DPM consultation in Albania. It was his suggestion in 2012, that brought the topic for consideration.



The DPM Planning Committee meeting in Strasbourg, 2014

The road to Tirana: from Limuru 2007 via Manado 2011 ... the journey to the DPM Consultation

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exploratory panel was formed; further consultations took place.

Deliberation proceeded in close collaboration with major GCF participants, including the World Evangelical Alliance, the World Council of Churches, the Pentecostal World Fellowship, the Catholic Church (Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity), and other Christian World Communions.

Conversations with church leaders from across the spectrum of traditions, experiences, and continents took place. Meetings with church-based organisations whose work focused on Christians experiencing persecution proved important.

Two major “common challenges” were finally identified: the issue of ‘persecution and discrimination of Christians’ and the issue of ‘mission and proselytism’.

It was agreed that persecution issues would be best considered by way of a process culminating in a ‘global consultation’, while mission and proselytism issues would be pursued through a ‘global conversation’.

Commenting on the decision to take up the issue of the persecution of Christians, GCF secretary Larry Miller said that globally there is a growing

“impression of the intensification of pressure, discrimination, suffering and ‘persecution’ in a number of parts in of the church. Every global Christian church is experiencing some kind of persecution somewhere in the world.”

Major church leaders, Miller noted, had made public comment on the situation, including Pope Francis, Justin Welby the Archbishop of Canterbury, and Evangelical and Pentecostal leaders. The Pope had begun to use the phrase ‘ecumenism of blood’ in relation to the situation in the Middle East.

The process, it was decided, would respect the diversity of Christian backgrounds and organisations, and should reflect the GCF ethos - creating a safe space to discuss common concerns.

It was also decided there would be a balance of participants in the global consultation: equal numbers of delegates from ‘older’ and ‘newer’ streams of Christianity and at least half of the participants would be leaders from “suffering churches.”

Further impetus in making the conference a ‘safe place’ was added

with the realisation that those who came directly from places of persecution and violence needed anonymity. This meant pre-publicity was kept at a minimum with general information being released only when the conference was closed.

It has, at it turns out, become a truly historic and unique event, many meetings, discussions, considerations and prayers in the making; and almost four years’ worth of effort.

The result: for the first time in the contemporary history of Christianity, people from almost every tradition across the breadth of the church family, and from across the globe, came together to discuss that growing, worrying, and sensitive topic: ‘discrimination, persecution, martyrdom – following Christ together’.



A cantor leads singing at early morning prayers at the consultation.

DPM: What was affirmed? What are the next steps?

What should be done with information gleaned, stories shared, insights discovered after three days of intense discussion around the complex and growing concern about the persecution of Christians? And, all this occurring within the wider context of persecution of religious communities that is increasingly prevalent because of global power dynamics.

The final sessions of the DPM consultation gave the

leaders of the global churches and organizations that joined with the GCF opportunity to articulate some of their initial responses to what they had heard.

The GCF does not itself conduct programs, but many participants represented churches and organisations that can act.

Here's how spokespersons for some groups responded:

Catholic Church (Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity)

In the absence of PCPCU President Cardinal Kurt Koch, who had to leave before the end of the consultation, His Eminence Stanislav Hočevár, Archbishop of Belgrade and PCPCU member, offered these remarks:

- We are aware that this event is promoting a new unity: bringing all Christian groups together, also those from 'newer' traditions.
- We are glad to have taken part in this GCF consultation: it is a good ecumenical event and there has been a good atmosphere. We enjoyed the reality of the Body of Christ, although it is still divided. It gives us deeper hope.
- We think we should cooperate more with non-governmental organizations, for example on human rights, and there is a need for stronger cooperation with others in seeking solutions to the problems.
- The Catholic Church has institutions that can help the suffering churches, e.g. Aid to the Church in Need, Caritas.
- We must develop networks of solidarity. There is an urgent need for prayer, and for exchange with those who suffer.
- We are open to future steps together. Let us grow together in solidarity and witness.



World Evangelical Alliance

General Secretary Bishop Efraim Tendero outlined a series of "next steps".

- Repentance is part of the Consultation message. This is important for us. We will encourage this on all levels.
- We will help and train our people to overcome prejudices about other Christians. We should not confuse the pain of the past with present realities.
- We will continue the work that began here – with the four bodies (PCPCU, WEA, WCC, PWF) working together.
- We will appoint ambassadors to other Christian communities, in relation to discrimination, persecution and martyrdom.
- Our Commission on Religious Freedom will work more with other Christian organizations.
- Prayer: we will promote the 'International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church' – second Sunday of November.

What was affirmed? What are the next steps?

World Council of Churches

General Secretary Revd Dr Olav Fykse Tveit described the consultation as an important moment in our journey together.

We as WCC, he said, see the event as an important stage in our pilgrimage of justice and peace. It is a faith journey, as a WCC fellowship and more widely, for praying and working together for the Kingdom of God.

The focus of this conference has been on what affects us as Christians. But what is Christian solidarity? It is about the light of God, not our light, in the world. We need to be self-critical so that we follow the light of righteousness, justice, peace.

We need enlightenment – a deeper and more profound theology of the cross and resurrection. What does it mean to carry the cross? What is sacrifice? How can we be churches of the cross and resurrection?

This requires theological study and educational efforts to strengthen our ability. We need to be a light for one another and to be light together.

We need to be a stronger light for people of other faiths and to be aware of their suffering. We need to give more space to women, acknowledging their sacrifices and the violence against them. How can women contribute to this discussion? How can their perspectives be brought to light?

The Global Christian Forum is a platform for sharing – to strengthen one another – and to make our light stronger.

Pentecostal World Fellowship

Speaking on behalf of Pentecostal World Fellowship (PWF) Chair Dr Prince Guneratnam, PWF Executive Committee Member Revd David Wells:

- We affirm the Global Christian Forum: it is a positive experience. It is good to be exposed to ourselves and to others.
- In reporting back to the Executive of the Pentecostal World Fellowship, we will ask how to enhance the ability of the PWF and the Assemblies of God World Fellowship to work with churches suffering persecution. We need to pray and to raise our voice together with other Christians, globally, regionally, nationally and locally.
- We affirm the Consultation Message. We see the need to equip our churches to stand with the suffering church. But we are not comfortable with the emphasis on some social issues.
- We are encouraged by the expression in the Consultation Message of mutual repentance. We must address our own arrogance. This is very important for us. Mutual repentance means addressing discrimination and persecution within the church. Some of us have felt the hurt. It can be hard to envision a new day. Please help us. Please work with us. We will continue to pray and work with you.

A Middle East Perspective

Responding to these remarks from his Middle East churches experience, His Eminence Anton Audo (Archbishop of Aleppo of the Chaldeans, Chaldean Catholic Bishopric of Aleppo), said that the GCF is a unique opportunity for the eastern Churches. It is a new development of the highest importance. As Middle East Christians, we are suffering greatly from the violence that makes our peoples flee. Churches are disappearing. Our role is to be living churches and to live with Muslims. More specifically, Archbishop Audo said that:

- Mutual repentance is very important so that we Christians can walk together.
- Pilgrimage is dynamic movement. The meaning of the word “synod” is to “walk together”.
- I understand the suffering of Pentecostals in our countries. It also seems that sometimes they want to teach us how to be Christian.



Eminence Anton Audo (Archbishop of Aleppo of the Chaldeans, Chaldean Catholic Bishopric of Aleppo)



Enthusiastic stewards meet with the DPM planning committee. Credit: Kim Cain/GCF

Stewards are and become the unexpected fruit of consultation

Ergys, Alpiniqi, Henri, Vasiliqi, Denis, Arvela, Kostandin... are seven of the forty youth volunteers who gave time to serve the DPM Consultation, held in Tirana, Albania, 2- 4 November 2015. Pierre Bou Zeidan reports.

They were at the airport, at the hotel, in the conference centre and in churches. Seemingly everywhere.

This group of young dynamic, generous and big-hearted volunteers came from the three Churches in Tirana, Catholic, Evangelical and Orthodox, to give up a week to help participants at the consultation.

The enthusiastic volunteers in many ways reflected the character, needs and history of each church. They reflected the diversity of Albanian churches. It was their own first ecumenical encounter.

Kostandin, 21 years old, the son of an Orthodox priest. Like his sister, he is a Byzantine singer and he gives time for catechism. "There is a saying that it is far better to give than receive. I

truly believe this. The joy, the fun and the friendships I am having are proof of this."

Vasiliqi, studied in an Orthodox boarding school, and has a degree in the German language. She has a feeling of discrimination in Albania, but she is touched by some of the participants "who have lived through war, and some have been through far more difficult times than we could ever imagine. I find it a privilege to have contact with them."

Ergys, 22 years old, member of the Evangelical Alliance church, he has a diploma on food technology. Born in a Muslim family, he was converted and baptized two years ago. As he said, God sent him a sign and Jesus changed his life. "With my involvement in the consultation, I will now pay more attention to worshippers from other churches"

Arvela, a Catholic who studied at Don Bosco school and has a Masters degree on urban planning, said that this experience allows her to feel like she is helping others but importantly

she came to realise that it's also adding value to her own life. "I find this experience very rewarding. I have met many people from all over the world."

Maria, feels lucky to discover the variety of Christian churches that she might not have the opportunity to meet otherwise. "It is an enjoyable experience and I felt I had something to learn not only theoretical but also practical understandings."

Elidon, likes the variety of other young people he with which he was involved. "The young people were able to meet, and despite the stress, I liked the fact that the Centre was relaxed and people were approachable."

Involving the young volunteers was a mere detail at the beginning, but as it unfolded, it became one of the important fruits of the Global Consultation.

The young volunteers were able to step out of the comfort zone of their own truth to enter a new environment where there is solidarity between all the believers.

DISCRIMINATION, PERSECUTION, MARTYRDOM: FOLLOWING CHRIST TOGETHER

Global Consultation | 2 - 4 November 2015 | Tirana, Albania

CONSULTATION MESSAGE

04 November 2015

“If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together.”

(1 Corinthians 12:26)

1. For the first time in the modern history of Christianity high level leaders and representatives of the various Church traditions gathered together to listen to, learn from, and stand with discriminated and persecuted Churches and Christians in the world today.
2. This global gathering of 145 people took place from 2 – 4 November, 2015, in Tirana, Albania, a country that was declared by its constitution to be an atheist state in 1967, and now has flourishing churches in a framework of religious freedom even though some discrimination may remain.
3. The Consultation, entitled *Discrimination, Persecution, Martyrdom: Following Christ Together*, was convened by the Global Christian Forum together with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (Roman Catholic Church), the Pentecostal World Fellowship, the World Evangelical Alliance, and the World Council of Churches. It was organized in close collaboration with the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania, the Albanian Bishops' Conference, and the Evangelical Alliance of Albania.
4. We have come together because discrimination, persecution and martyrdom among Christians and people of other faiths in the contemporary world are growing due to a complex variety of factors in different realities and contexts.
5. As we follow Christ, Christians can be exposed to any form of persecution, suffering and martyrdom, because the sinful world is against the Gospel of salvation. But from earliest times Christians experienced the hope and reality of the Resurrection through walking the way of the Cross. Together we follow Christ as we “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matthew 5:6) for all.
6. The life of the Church for centuries has been a constant witness in two ways: the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ, and the testimony through the shedding of the martyr's blood. The 21st century is full of moving stories of faithful people who have paid for their dedication to Christ through suffering, torture and execution. Christian martyrs unite us in ways we can hardly imagine.
7. We acknowledge that solidarity among Christian churches is needed to strengthen Christian witness in the face of discrimination, persecution, and martyrdom. In the 21st century, we need to urgently strengthen the solidarity of all Christians, following up on what has been accomplished with insight and discernment from this Consultation.
8. We repent of having at times persecuted each other and other religious communities in history, and ask forgiveness from each other and pray for new ways of following Christ together.

In communion with Christ we commit ourselves:

- (a) *To listen more* to the experiences of Christians, Churches, and of all those who are discriminated against and persecuted, and deepen our engagement with suffering communities.
- (b) *To pray more* for Churches, Christians, and for all those suffering discrimination and persecution, as well as for the transformation of those who discriminate and persecute.
- (c) *To speak up more* with respect and dignity, with a clear and strong voice together, on behalf of those who are suffering.
- (d) *To do more* in mutual understanding to find effective ways of solidarity and support for healing, reconciliation, and for the religious freedom of all oppressed and persecuted people.

9. Listening to the experience of those going through challenging times, praying and discerning together ways of following Christ in these harsh realities, the Consultation calls on:

- (a) *All Christians* to include more prominently in their daily prayers those who are discriminated against, persecuted, and suffering for the fulfilment of God's Kingdom.
- (b) *All Christian organisations on regional, national and local levels* from various traditions to learn, pray and work together in their localities for the persecuted to ensure they are better supported.
- (c) *All Churches* to engage more in dialogue and co-operation with other faith communities, and be "as wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16) by remaining vigilant, watchful and fearless in the face of discrimination and persecution.
- (d) *All persecutors* who discriminate against and oppress Christians and violate human rights to cease their abuse, and to affirm the right of all human beings to life and dignity.
- (e) *All governments* to respect and protect the freedom of religion and belief of all people as a fundamental human right. We also appeal to governments and international organisations to respect and protect Christians and all other people of goodwill from threats and violence committed in the name of religion. In addition, we ask them to work for peace and reconciliation, to seek the settlement of on-going conflicts, and to stop the flow of arms, especially to violators of human rights.
- (f) *All media* to report in an appropriate and unbiased way on violations of religious freedom, including the discrimination and persecution of Christians as well as of other faith communities.
- (g) *All educational institutions* to develop opportunities and tools to teach young people in particular about human rights, religious tolerance, healing of memories and hostilities of the past, and peaceful means of conflict resolution and reconciliation.
- (h) *All people of goodwill* to work for justice, peace and development, knowing that poverty and disrespect of human dignity are major contributing factors to violence.

10. We recommend that the Global Christian Forum evaluates within two years the work of this event, and reports to all four bodies for their follow up.

May God the Father who created us equal by His grace, strengthen our efforts to overcome all forms of discrimination and persecution.

May His Holy Spirit guide us in solidarity with all those who seek peace and reconciliation.

May He heal the wounds of the persecuted and grant us hope as we look forward to the glorious coming of our Lord Jesus Christ who will make all things new.

MEDIA RELEASE

07 November 2015, Tirana, Albania

Historic gathering of global Christian leaders urges churches and governments to address growing concern for persecution of Christians

An historic consultation of church leaders, drawn from 56 nations, to focus on intensifying 'discrimination, persecution and violence' against Christian communities around the world has called on churches globally to pray, support and be in solidarity with those suffering persecution due to their faith.

In a two pronged response the leaders:

- offered "repentance" for times when churches had "persecuted each other and other religious communities in history"; and,
- urged churches "to urgently strengthen the solidarity of all Christians" in the face of discrimination, persecution and martyrdom in the 21st century.

In a greeting from the Vatican, Pope Francis said, "I think with great sadness of the escalating discrimination, and persecution against Christians in the Middle East, Africa and Asia and elsewhere throughout the world.

"In various parts of the world, the witness to Christ, even to the shedding of blood, has become a shared experience of Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, Protestants, Evangelicals and Pentecostals," he said.

The consultation also called on governments to "respect and protect the freedom of religion and belief of all people as a fundamental human right."

In a public message from the consultation participants called on:

- Christians to pray for those who are discriminated against and persecuted;
- Christian organisations at regional, national and local levels from all traditions to learn, pray and work together for the persecuted;
- Churches to engage in dialogue and co-operation with other faith communities, and be watchful and fearless in the face of discrimination and persecution.

The historic gathering was the first time in modern history that every stream of global Christianity had joined together to listen and learn from Christians who experience discrimination, persecution and violence.

The consultation was an initiative of the Global Christian Forum and supported by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (Vatican), the World Evangelical Alliance, the Pentecostal World Fellowship, and the World Council of Churches. It was held in Tirana, Albania, 2-4 November.

Media Information:

- Full text of Consultation Message (in English, Spanish, French), images, stories and video footage: resources.globalchristianforum.org
- About the Global Christian Forum: www.globalchristianforum.org
- Media information, Kim Cain, GCF Communications + 61 419 373 123
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Message from His Holiness Pope Francis

Delivered by his Eminence Cardinal Kurt Koch, to the 'Discrimination, persecution, martyrdom: following Christ together' consultation, Tirana, Albania 2-4 November 2015

His Eminence Cardinal Kurt Koch

President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity

I extend greetings to you and all those participating in the Global Christian Forum Consultation, to be held in Tirana from 2 to 4 November 2015, as you reflect on the theme "Discrimination, persecution, martyrdom: following Christ together".

In a particular way, I wish to greet our brothers and sisters of different Christian traditions who represent communities suffering for their profession of faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. I think with great sadness of the escalating discrimination and persecution against Christians in the Middle East, Africa, Asia and elsewhere throughout the world. Your gathering shows that, as Christians, we are not indifferent to our suffering brothers and sisters. In various parts of the world, the witness to Christ, even to the shedding of blood, has become a shared experience of Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, Protestants, Evangelicals and Pentecostals, which is deeper and stronger than the differences which still separate our Churches and Ecclesial Communities. The *communio martyrum* is the greatest sign of our journeying together.

At the same time, your gathering will give voice to the victims of such injustice and violence, and seek to show the path that will lead the human family out of this tragic situation. With these sentiments, I assure you of my spiritual closeness. May the martyrs of today, belonging to many Christian traditions, help us to understand that all the baptised are members of the same Body of Christ, his Church (cf. 1 Cor 12:12-30). Let us see this profound truth as a call to persevere on our ecumenical journey towards full and visible communion, growing more and more in love and mutual understanding.

From the Vatican, 1 November 2015