



175 Years of the Swiss Evangelical Alliance

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I congratulate the Swiss Evangelical Alliance and its French-speaking “mother,” founded in 1847 as the Alliance Evangélique Romande, on its 175th anniversary.

I do so also on behalf of the International Council of the World Evangelical Alliance, with members from all continents, which met recently in Jerusalem and sends its congratulations.

May Jesus Christ, whom alone the Alliance seeks to serve, continue to be gracious to all those responsible.

And may the Holy Spirit, who alone can weld us together as one, fill all those responsible with strength and wisdom, and with

- (1) the infinite love of the Father in heaven,
- (2) the willingness to serve our Savior Jesus Christ, and
- (3) the power of the Spirit and the openness to his blowing where he wills.

Much has been said about history today, and my task at the end of this celebration is not to prove my knowledge. I will limit myself to some brief historical reflections. The World Evangelical Alliance would be nothing without the diverse history of its national and regional alliances, for that is where churches and believers actually work together. In a few years, for example, we will celebrate the 175th anniversary of the Turkish Evangelical Alliance, which is closely linked to the history of evangelical churches in Turkey up to the present day. The SEA and the national alliances also reflect the fact that alliances are “collectors.” We do not collect stamps; rather, we collect revival movements and sanctification movements. This is how we understand the Reformation; many evangelical movements and churches that are more than 100 years old, such as the Methodists, the Salvation Army or the Pentecostal movement together with its many children and offshoots; and so many awakenings from more recent times. It is always fascinating to me that we have been able to maintain the unity of the body of Christ right up to the present day, despite constant new additions.

Each evangelical alliance, like the European Evangelical Alliance and the World Evangelical Alliance, is a complementary mixture of two things:

(1) a large family that, for example, celebrates the Lord's Supper together across many borders, and

(2) an organization that allows for structured representation with Permanent Representatives to the UN, such as in Geneva to the UN Human Rights Council. My recent visit to the Secretary General of the United Nations in New York and to our UN office in New York, directly across the street from the UN headquarters, reminded me that we are truly not only a family, but also a powerful global organization.

Here I would like to express my sincere gratitude to SEA, which has been making the Geneva Human Rights Office logistically possible and has generously supported it financially since 2012, or already for a decade!

A nice example of the complementarity and family nature of our organization is that the General Secretary of the WEA has an astonishingly strong position as CEO for Evangelicals, but his predecessors have not disappeared into oblivion. Rather, they remain active worldwide, in close cooperation with the CEO, as his Global Ambassadors, just as one does not exclude a grandfather from a family when the next generation takes over his responsibilities.

This can be confusing for outsiders, and it is also true for the Swiss Evangelical Alliance: the Alliance has churches of all kinds on board, then leaders from churches that do not belong to the Alliance as churches, and then many ministries and individual persons. This can result in a branched internal structure, as Switzerland has shown very nicely since the 1875 merger. The Belgian Evangelical Alliance, for example, consists in effect of three sub-alliances: one including the synod of all Protestant churches with a state treaty, one including the other Flemish churches and organizations, and finally the congregations and organizations working in a majority-Catholic and French speaking environment. Nevertheless, the three very different groups form one Evangelical Alliance.

It is also typical of such alliances to adapt their structure to changes in church and society. A short look into history shows how much this has been true of Switzerland.

Our main interest is not in having a nice hierarchical structure, which is then made legally correct across Europe up to the global level, but what structure best fulfills the purposes of the alliance. And these purposes are to affirm:

(1) the unity of the church of Jesus,

(2) the common proclamation of the gospel, and

(3) our shared commitment to transforming society in the spirit of Jesus, which then almost automatically leads to critical cooperation with the state and cooperation with all people of good will of every religion and conviction.

Jesus once said that the Sabbath was created for man, not man for the Sabbath. So too, we believe that structures of Jesus' church are there to serve people, not that people are there to fill our structures.

Take a look at the constitution of the WEA. The goal there is not to increase the size of the WEA, although it does call for "the formation and strengthening of the work of evangelical institutions at the local, national and regional levels throughout the world." More important is "to cooperate in the proclamation of the Gospel, the defense of Christian liberty, the renewal of spiritual life, and other matters of common interest."

That is why, 25 years ago, the WEA, together with the Vatican and the World Council of Churches, founded the Global Christian Forum, a non-institutional and non-binding platform where representatives of all churches and Christian groups can meet, even those who, for whatever reason, do not belong to a global association. The success of this concept is illustrated by the fact that our formerly critical guests from the Pentecostal movement today form the fourth "pillar," as we call it internally, of the GCF through the Pentecostal World Fellowship.

Our evangelical alliances, on a national, regional or global level, do not see themselves as a company seeking to market its own brand and attract new customers. To those who say they don't like the term "evangelical," we respond, "So what?" The main thing is that you love Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord and want to work together with other Christians! It should be noted that it is not by chance that in German and French the term is used for "evangelical" and that in much of the world and in several languages, "evangelical" simply means Protestant ("evangelisch").

Let me conclude by throwing a few challenges into the ring, so that you have something to talk during the reception ("Apero") afterwards.

A. Issues around sexuality are being used to formulate a complete societal perspective counter to the Christian faith. At a time when churches are actually moving closer together on dogmatic issues, these ethical issues have had globally disturbing, divisive tendencies in all churches. At the same time, especially in the Global South, this dynamic is increasing the number of historic churches of the Reformation that are turning to the Evangelical Alliance movement. Our movement will have to prove once again that unity requires much prayer, much dialogue, and much listening to one another, even across cultures and denominations.

B. The growing number of "evangelicals" worldwide makes them a politically powerful factor in many countries. Never before have so many countries of the world had prime ministers from our "camp," such as in Papua New Guinea, Australia or Ethiopia. At our founding in 1846, however, one of the Evangelical Alliance's key points was precisely that we reject state religions on the basis of religious freedom and that, despite all the need for Christians to be involved in politics, we do not want a confessional state. Moreover, we want to practice the unity of the church precisely when we are far apart on political issues. This will keep us on our toes for the sake of unity!

C. Worldwide migration is leading to more and more Christians from the global South forming congregations in Western countries. The German Evangelical Alliance has

renamed itself the Evangelical Alliance in Germany because, for example, African or Iranian congregations are not "German" and do not worship in "German", but still participate in the unity of the church of Jesus in Germany.

In this respect, I congratulate the SEA on its newly appointed intercultural representative, Egzon Shala, who will certainly come up with new ideas!

Thank you for your attention.

(Attachment)

In the future, the strategy of the World Evangelical Alliance will proceed in two directions.

On one hand, we want to work more closely with national and regional alliances to strengthen Christian unity at the grassroots level and to reach out to all those who should be with us but are not, for whatever reason, because of misunderstandings on their side or laziness or false prejudices on our side.

On the other hand, we want to develop the WEA itself as a powerful representative of our churches and believers and as a global actor. This concern will guide our relationship with the UN and its sub-organizations as well as our deployment of official representatives to other global churches and church federations and toward the major world religions. It will mean a greater role in global coordination, whether through our new Global Evangelism Network, the new World Freedom Network against human trafficking, or a planned worldwide network on the right to life.