

People involved in the five year process leading to the ecumenical recommendations “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World”, whom I want to thank

Januar 22, 2012 by Prof. Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher

On the 28th of June, 2011, the ecumenical code “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World – Recommendations for Conduct” was launched in Geneva as reported in my blog twice.

At the launch, my introduction to the purpose and history of the recommendations had to be short, as I was the first of fours speakers. Thus the following details had to be skiped, also not to give the impression, that the recommendations were bound to much to specific people. But now half a year later, I would like to offer my personal thank you.

Hans Ucko from Sweden with a PhD from India, programme director of WCC’s Office on „Interreligious Relations and Dialogue“ (IRRD, later „Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation“, I stay with IRRD) for nearly 20 years from 1989-2008, brought the idea up in one of the yearly staff meetings between PCID and IRRD. This is why I took the liberty to invite him to the launch of the recommendations in Geneva. (*see photo 1: talking to Ucko in Toulouse*)



talking to Ucko in Toulouse

I also wanted to invite Mgr. Dr Felix Machado for the launch, then Undersecretary of the PCID, who traveled to Geneva quite a lot, but he lives a bit far from Geneva. Since 2008 he is back in his native country India, since 2009 as the Archbishop of Vasai.

2006 I was invited by the WCC as an expert to a small meeting in Geneva (*see photo 2:*). It was there when Hans Ucko – with the consent of Felix Machado – invited WEA on behalf of WCC to become part of the process.



The group in WCC headquarter

The consultation „Towards an ethical approach to conversion: Christian witness in a multi-religious world“, which was prepared by a small group meeting in Geneva, January [11-12,] 2007, took place as a larger meeting of all branches of Christianity in Toulouse, France, August [8-12,] 2007 with 45 participants. (*see photo 3*)



The leadership of Hans (Ucko) and Felix (Machado) in Toulouse 2007 is unforgettable! Beside achieving our business, many participants became friends across all theological lines. Eg the Catholic archbishop of Nepal became one of my best friends here – I just visited his cathedral recently, which was bombed by Hindu fundamentalists with three young people dying.

After Toulouse, a draft committee of the three bodies involved started to work on the text of the recommendations, following the topics listed in Toulouse. The text was revised again and again in discussion with the leadership and taking in reactions from church leaders from all over the world who got to see the text. Finally the text was taken to a third consultation in Bangkok under the title “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for a Code of Conduct”, January [25-29,] 2011, with 45 high ranking representatives of the three bodies plus church leaders and experts, which had the sole task to discuss and revise the text of the recommendations. After Bangkok, only very minor changes were agreed upon between PCID, WCC and WEA.

The project has stayed on course, while the President of PCID changed as well as the General Secretary of WCC. The responsibility for interreligious dialogue within WCC changed even twice. The majority of the staff on the side of PCID and IRRD changed within the five years. (This is why it came by chance, that at the launch I by chance happened to be the longest one working on the script committee.) This proves that the project was not just a project bound to certain people and their private interest, but was a joint need of the whole Christian community and a result of official cooperation of the largest Christian bodies.

Let me mention some further peoples and names, who were important during the process, even though surely not complete.

I mentioned Hans Ucko and Archbishop Felix Machado already.

Pentecostal Bishop Tony Richie from the USA, representing the Pentecostal voice in the process, is the only person to my knowledge, who visited all three major consultations in Lariano, Toulouse and Bangkok, plus one of the smaller meetings.

The process started under His Eminence Michael Cardinal Fitzgerald and His Eminence Paul Joseph Jean Cardinal Poupard as presidents of PCID. We thank them for their gracious blessings and leadership in the beginning. His Eminence Jean-Louis Cardinal Tauran, from France, became president of PCID in autumn 2007 and without him backing the process and its result on behalf of the largest church in the world, we would not have achieved anything.

Archbishop Pier Luigi Celata from Italy, has ‘outlived’ them all, being the Secretary of PCID since 2002 and thus bringing a lot of stability to the process. He played a major role in the final Bangkok meeting as one of the two chairs.

Later, Andrew Vissanu Thanyaanan from Thailand followed Felix Machado as Undersecretary of PCID. The experts from PCID were a great team: Ms. Khaled B. Akasheh from Jordan and Ms. Denis Chidi Isizoh from Nigeria.

Early 2008, Dr Shanta Premawardhana from Sri Lanka followed Hans Ucko as director of IRRD of WCC. He has been instrumental to ensure that the process would go on even after a major change of staff both in PCID and IRRD. A little earlier in 2007, Ms Rima Barsoum from Syria, became programme executive for Christian-Muslim relations till 2011, and she has been a constant major reminder to us all to view the code with the eyes of adherents of other religions. I am glad, that she attended the launch even so she no longer worked for WCC.

Hans Ucko got Rev Jacques Matthey, programme director of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) of WCC, involved from the beginning, as was Ms Yvette Milosevic in organising the administrative side.

In 2009, John Baxter Brown from the UK became consultant for evangelism of the WCC. One of his major tasks was to further the process for a code. He acted as a great bridge builder combining love for mission and love for ecumenical cooperation.

Late in 2010, Dr Shanta Premawardhana left for a new position in the USA and was not immediately replaced. Dr Mathews George, Director of the International Affairs and Public Witness kara from India, had to take over responsibility despite his already full calendar of travels etc. In the midst of an incredible work load he guided the last month of the preparation of the text and organised the launch.

On WEA's side we would have to mention especially Dr Richard Howell from India, General Secretary of the Asian Evangelical Alliance, and Godfrey Yogjahara from Sri Lanka, Executive Director of the Religious Liberty Commission.

From our WEA-side John Langlois from Guernsey, chair of the Religious Liberty Commission and member of the International Committee, and Dr Richard Howell, general secretary of the Asian Evangelical Alliance joined me in Toulouse. John's longstanding experience as a lawyer and a politician, to formulate short and concise texts, was vital to the whole project. In 2010, Dr Rosalee Velosso Ewell from Brazil, joined our team. All participants will not forget her superb ability to write minutes of the discussions and to harmonize proposed formulations.

Dr Geoff Tunnicliffe from Canada, secretary general of the WEA, encouraged and backed the process from beginning to the end and was always willing to deal with critics personally. He used his many connections towards a good end.

The new general secretary of WCC, Dr Olav Fykse Tveit from Norway, was involved in formulating a similar interreligious code in Norway before he took

office. He thus backed the finalising of the process and text out of deep conviction and has to be thanked for arranging a fine and successful launch in the hall of WCC.

But beyond all these thanks to finite humans, we thank our Creator and Saviour, the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Whom we worship, and whose Holy Spirit has led us to formulate what it means to witness his message of salvation in a spirit of trust, peace and dignity. May He give us the strength to live out what we state and help to admonish wisely those amongst us who still might use unethical means in preaching the gospel.