

Grave accusations against the World Evangelical Alliance: thoroughly unfounded

*To the general secretaries, chairs and board members of all
national and regional evangelical alliances*

**An answer to the Open Letter “Is the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) Moving
Away from its Historic Position on Unity?” of December 6, 2017**

By Thomas Schirmmacher and Richard Howell

Draft, December 13, 2017, Final Version, December 23, 2017

*This statement is our personal response to the open letter, “Is the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) Moving Away from its Historic Position on Unity?” by the Evangelical Alliances of Italy, Spain and Malta, dated December 1, 2017 and distributed with a press release on December 6, 2017. This is **not** the official statement of the World Evangelical Alliance, which the WEA Secretary General will publish in due time. However, we felt that the leadership of the national and regional alliances should receive a more detailed, comprehensive personal response. It is not meant to go to the web, not because we fear discussion of it, but not to be part of a circle of statements in the web forth and back.*

Thomas Schirmmacher within the WEA is responsible both for theological concerns and intrafaith relations including relations to the Catholic. Richard Howell, General Secretary of the Asian Evangelical Alliance, the largest regional alliance of WEA, assures that the perspectives of regional and national alliances is included. We both thank Thomas K. Johnson as well as other staff of the WEA Department of Theological Concerns, for their input and professional editing.

We sent a draft to the authors December 13, 2017 (see below), friendly asking for corrections of facts and presentations of their positions. We received a short line (including “yours is a fake report”) from the Italian Evangelical Alliance (IEA), but after requesting details on mistakes we might have made or misinterpretations of their position, they sent us a commentary by December 22, 2017. We also took into account matters reported to us by Bishop Tendero and Thomas K. Johnson after their meeting with IEA in Rome. There were no real corrections of facts demanded, but we did minor changes or deleted several sentences, where they felt to have been misunderstood. In some cases we added quotations and our commentary in small print.

This document is fairly long because of the broad scope of relevant subjects covered. We have provided a table of contents so that readers who do not wish to study the whole document can skip to those topics of greatest interest to them.

„This is the letter sent December 13 together with the draft:

Dear Giacomo, dear Jaume, dear Mr Caruana,

I deeply regret that we have a new contact only under such unpleasantly circumstances and pray that despite the public debate we will come to agreement and peace again. Our evaluation of the character of the present Pope and other questions might be different, but the evaluation of the official standing doctrine of the Catholic Church and of our common evangelicals convictions, eg the 5 solas, are surely the same. Eg the idea to pray to dead humans and ask them for their mediation will always be seen as idol worship by us and all Evangelicals.

Wherever I personally made mistakes, sinned or erred, I am open to criticism and willing to repent. Feel free to talk to my boss Bishop Ef about it. He is a good counsellor for his staff, as I know from experience. If needed and

proposed by Bishop Ef, I will admit mistakes and sins in public. We all live by the grace of God.

Bishop Ef already send a letter by John Langlois to all national alliances and leaders in WEA and regional alliances. Even though a personal statement, it carries weight because John has been working for WEA for 48 years now.

Bishop Ef asked me to send this text by Richard Howell and myself to you, even though this is a personal view, not an official statement by WEA, so that you have it in hand for the meeting today and have the chance to correct obvious mistakes or state, where you feel to have been misquoted. It is not in my hand when exactly the text will be send to all national alliances leaders, but from my side I will change all mistakes either before it is send out or even afterwards in a second version. Because of this I send the original Word-file beside the pdf, so that you, if you want, can write corrections and commentaries into the Word-file using the tracking function, so that I easily can find them.

Any corrections (and anything discussed by Bishop Ef in the next days with the three boards of your alliances) will also influence the possible final official statement by Bishop Ef on the matter.“

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1 The letter was released worldwide a week before the announced visit of the Secretary General to the Italian Evangelical Alliance

The first shock of the open letter is that it was published in the internet and the leadership of WEA was accused of grave misconduct by way of a press release at the same time as millions of others (see the many articles in religious and secular media already), and this happened one week before the announced visit of the WEA Secretary General to the Italian Evangelical Alliance, December 13.

WEA even did not get to know the content first, at least to affirm or disagree on certain things, as quality secular media would practice it. The better quality secular media let you know ahead of time what they will publish about you, so that you can comment on it.

Because WEA leadership thinks that the accusations are unfounded and unproved and that the major part of the paper is based on the fake news of an upcoming statement in 2018, of which we know nothing, WEA has to react now. We fear that we start an endless circle of an internet battle and no longer talk to each other directly. This is why our answer

will be available to national, regional and global alliance leaders per email and will not be a secret, but will not offered through the web.

What is the goal here? Should we ask the large majority of national alliance who disagree with the accusations to come to our help by publishing open letters in the web themselves? It would be nightmare if the other 127 alliances would use the same means as the open letter.

This style of communication – and not the present relation of WEA to the Catholic Church – is new and unheard of in WEA history. Its use turns the world of the evangelical alliances into a political body where national bodies fight for influence over each other and over WEA.

It becomes a power game, replacing a spiritual battle with the Bible in hand and the prayer to the Holy Spirit to create real unity, even if this means for some of us to repent or at least rethink their position. Collegial interaction and trustful relationships are replaced by the way, the world discusses such matters in media, blogs and accusations.

The right way would have been a letter to all other national alliances. Even this letter could have waited a week until the meeting with Bishop Ef took place. But to go public, so that most NAEs heard about the discussion through the media, is a strange way of communication.

We urge the alliances involved in the open letter from the deepest part of our heart: Let us not change the evangelical world into a political body. Open letters have to be answered by open letters; in the end we start an endless round of discussion or battles and it is very difficult to find a way back to peace and unity if one reads the reactions in the internet and millions of people become part of the discussion.

We urge all national alliances and the network working together in the regional alliances and the WEA and all individuals involved: Let us not become a political body like the UN, where we fight publicly through the internet, press releases and by collecting signatures. This surely is not the DNA of the Evangelical movement. Let us not become a movement mainly know for fighting each other. Public internet debates are a road to nowhere.

2 A grave offense against the integrity of our Secretary General

The open letter is a grave offense against the integrity of our Secretary General. Bishop Ef comes from a Catholic majority country and has a record of not doing what the open letter proposes in his two decades as head of the Evangelical Alliance in the Philippines. He defends the historic Evangelical faith forthrightly. There is not the slightest evidence to the contrary in any of his words or actions. Bishop Ef is in full control of what is happening in all intrafaith relations of WEA to all other churches.

Bishop Ef informed the Italian Evangelical Alliance (IEA) in an email sent of November 21, that he would visit Pope Francis for the first time (after 2.5 years in office) on December 14, 2017 and would like to meet the board of the IEA on December 13 to listen to their input. Within 10 days the paper was finalized (it carries the date of December 1, 2017) and

send out with a press release December 6. Thus a week before his visit, the open letter was published. Could the open letter not have waited for yet another week? Could the open letter not have been given to Bishop Ef directly first, so that he had a chance to comment on it? If he then would have affirmed the plans for 2018, an letter to all national evangelical alliances might have been considered. Bishop Ef will affirm, that there are no such plans, one could have discussed, how to proceed. **Why the rush to publish the open letter before the Secretary General visits the Italian Alliance. And why claim in the open letter, that the national alliances are not listened to, if the Secretary General is coming to listen?**

And even if the senders felt that distributing such a letter was necessary, why not send it only to all national and regional alliances, the only ones the matter concerns? Why was it necessary to inform friends and enemies all over the world? Why do atheists or Muslims need to know about this? Already now there are reports out in the web by laughing enemies of Christianity.

In its reaction of December 19, 2017, the Italian Evangelical Alliance says, "We have prepared the open letter since September 2017 and there was no reason to keep it private". If it was prepared for so long, it even more could have waited for another week! And nobody asked for keeping the matter "private", but just to wait another week and afterwards to write to all national alliances or other alliance leaders, but not let the WEA know about it by a press release and a download from a public space in the web.

3 These are very, very grave doctrinal and general accusations

The authors of the open letter accuse the leadership of WEA, more or less, of no longer being sound evangelicals, but lack any proof for it. They present the following accusations:

- + "significant changes in its theological DNA",
- + "the historic positions ... seem now to be eroded and replaced ..."
- + "WEA leadership softened to the point of becoming superficially ecumenical"
- + "we see a radical shift taking place without any discussion"
- + "if WEA leadership pushes this theological innovation, this in all likelihood will destroy and fracture WEA coalition"
- + "the beginning of the end of this historical evangelical network".

(There are more strong words in the letter; this is only a selection.)

Do the authors understand the gravity of their accusations? If they were true, the whole leadership of WEA, the Secretary General, his associates, and even the International Council (with representatives of regional and national alliances elected by the General Assembly), who let this happen for a whole decade would have to step down, because all these people have been involved in supporting the WEA's intra-faith activities. For example, the International Council that has approved the report on the consultation between the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) and the WEA's Department of Theological Concerns), published in October 2017 (http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/evangelicals-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20171017_comm-report-2009-2016_en.html).

4 No evidence presented for these grave accusations

When such grave accusations are presented to the global public, and even more so after month of preparations, one would expect that the authors of the open letter would quote overwhelming evidence from the period of the last decade, the time about which they complain. But they quote no official document, no strategy paper; they do not quote one of the many books and publications of the Department of Theological Concerns or the Mission Commission of WEA, nor any other WEA departments. They do not quote any of the many books, articles and speeches of the people involved in the relation to the Catholic Church, for example, a book or article by Tom Johnson, Rosalee Velosso Ewell, Rolf Hille, Thomas Schirmacher or other theologians involved within WEA. They do not quote WEAs “Evangelical Review of Theology” (ERT), of which Thomas is the General Editor. But they quote several of their own articles, which we published in ERT! How did they get into our journal, if WEA goes a different road and suppresses other opinions?

Incidentally, Thomas’ view of justification has not changed (see his several books on the topics, especially the book “Indulgences”, http://www.europeanea.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Thomas_Schirmacher-_Indulgences.pdf) and probably is even more conservative than the ones of the authors of the open letter. Thomas is one of the Evangelical authors with the largest number of pages in print criticizing and interacting with Catholic theology on the market. And often the interaction with the Vatican and Catholic theologians deals with those presentations.

5 The whole call to stop is based on fake news

The main evidence for the accusation that the WEA has departed from its evangelical roots is the “fake news” that the Vatican, World Council of Churches and WEA want to release a statement on “greater oneness” in 2018 and this behind the back of its member alliances

There is no plan for a document on unity (“greater oneness”) with the Vatican and WCC. No one has asked for a document on unity, but even if the three bodies were to agree to write one, it would take years to draft such a text, which then would have to be run through all national and regional EAs and finally through the International Council to be approved. That is what happened with the 2011 document “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World.” So even if there would be a plan like this, there would be a lot of time to comment on it before it would be accepted or not accepted.

The easiest thing for the three EAs responsible for the open letter to do would have been to ask the WEA Secretary General whether such a declaration was planned. He would have said no. End of story.

What is the main source for the accusation that WEA is planning a document on “greater oneness” in 2018 bypassing the national and regional alliances? The open letter points only to one little text which does not come from WEA, but is a press release by the World Council of Churches about the meeting in Bossey in October, 2017. *But even this press release is misquoted.* 1. The press release (and the one by WEA) makes it clear, that it was a meeting to discuss 20 years of history of the Global Christian Forum. Thus, the GCF is no new development and plans for a world summit are just routine. 2. The press releases speak about a statement on proselytism, that might be accepted by several bodies (which of course presupposes that the usual ways for accepting such a declaration within each

body have been followed). It makes clear that the first step would be a text by the GCF, which then might be taken up for further discussions by the major bodies, including the WEA.

The main goal of the open letter is stated in the second to last paragraph: “stop the process” to sign a document on “greater oneness”. The problem is: We cannot stop a process that does not exist and cannot sign a non-existing and even non-planned text.

And this process was never approved by anyone because it never took place.

Moreover, even when one knows that a declaration is in development (which, again, is not the case here), it would be more prudent to wait to see the actual draft of any declaration before raising the alarm. Many alarms were sounded during the five years “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World” was in development (2006-2011); when the actual text became available, the alarmists were happy to accept it.

To be crystal clear: the major accusation of the open letter is built on the “fake news” of a statement on unity by the Vatican, WCC and WEA to be released in 2018. If asked for, staff in the Theological Concerns Department are willing to take an oath that this is not true and that there are no secret plans hidden by us.

6 The only currently active GCF process is on proselytism – The Global Christian Forum is 20 years old

Where might this idea of a document on oneness for 2018 have come from? The open letter points only to one source, a press release of the World Council of Churches on the meeting in Bossey (<https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/global-gathering-explore-perceptions-of-proselytism>). Yet, if you read it, it does not prove such a plan. The similar press release of WEA’s Department for Theological Concerns about the meeting in Bossey makes it a bit clearer that we are working on a document on “proselytism” (<https://www.bucer.de/en/ressource/details/bonner-querschnitte-352017-ausgabe-496-eng.html>), but both press releases do not speak about anything else, than a possible statement on proselytism.

Within the GCF, the main focus at the moment is on a global discussion on proselytism (“sheep stealing.”) As WEA we think that the same ethical principles that were spelled out in “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World” apply to discussions between Christians, nominal as believers as well as active participants in different confessions.

At this point, we even do not know whether we will come to any joint conclusions on proselytism. But even if we get beyond a first internal draft on proselytism and achieve to formulate a summary of the discussions which would be accepted by the committee of GCF, then it still would be just a report. If the quality of such a report would be high, then the Vatican, WCC and WEA *might* start a discussion with each other whether we want to use it for a statement on proselytism, a kind of second chapter to “Christian Witness ...”. Then, the bodies would establish a new commission to draft it. Like with “Christian Witness ...” this then would go to all commissions, NAEs, RAEs and partners for comments. (“Christian Witness ...” was sent around to all alliances at different stages three times, including the final version. 5% of all NAEs wanted a personal encounter to discuss objec-

tions, which took place in Bad Liebenzell at the General Assembly of EEA in a special session with Thomas. This included the Italian and Spanish Alliance (who falsely claim they would be never be asked or involved), but in the end no alliances voted against “Christian Witness ...”.

But one would need to be a prophet to know what will happen; WEA or WCC or the Vatican so far have no agenda other than to discuss the hot potato of proselytism with the help of the platform of the GCF.

Also, the idea that the Global Christian Forum (GFC) and its consultations are a new thing could easily have been avoided by looking through old WEA documents and press releases as well as searching the web or checking the website of GCF. Also an email to WEA requesting information would have helped.

The Global Christian Forum is 20 years old and was co-founded by WEA in 1998 together with the Vatican and the World Council of Churches, later adding the Pentecostal World Fellowship as forth “pillar”, while many global other churches and global movements are involved in the GCF as well and represented on its committee. It had the backing of all Secretary Generals (Directors) of the WEA for two decades.

If the GCF is evidence of a major shift, the shift took place 20 years ago. The meeting of the GCF committee in Taize, France, in February 2018 is routine, taking place twice a year. The global summit takes place every six years, the last was in Manado, Indonesia, with approx. one hundred Evangelicals and Pentecostals attending, virtually connected to National and Regional Alliances. The next summit is in Bogota, Columbia, in April 2018. Thomas just visited Bogota and talked with the leaders of the member churches of the national evangelical alliance in Columbia, which is involved in the summit. The summit 2018 has no special agenda except the discussion of a report or declaration on the proselytism process, if a draft is ready by then, as mentioned in the press releases. There is no plan for another statement we would know of.

7 The open letter contains 1.5 pages of invention regarding what the WEA thinks

The long description of “greater oneness” on pages 6-7 is a pure invention and does not represent the position of anyone in WEA leadership and surely not the official position of WEA. It is not by chance that the open letter gives no documentation gives no source for these or similar ideas within WEA.

We are totally lost, when it comes to the content of a paper we are NOT planning. For 1,5 pages the open letter describes the position of the paper on greater oneness. From where do the authors draw the description of what content this paper will have? They know more than we know. They place a dozen paragraphs and many ideas in our mouth with no source given where they found thoughts that are in any way similar. We only can state, that we know of no one within the WEA leadership who would feel at home with the content of those paragraphs.

8 No joint Catholic-Evangelical evangelism

The open letter quotes the Lausanne II Manila manifesto of 1989, stating that “common evangelism demands a common commitment to the biblical gospel”. Several others are quoted as holding the same position, which is surely the majority position of Evangelicals (and Catholics!) worldwide. (Ever since Billy Graham first asked Catholic bishops to pray in his rallies 70 years ago, this discussion has been going on, asking what this means in detail. There is a lot of discussion about this question and similar problems among us still today.)

In any case: Who of the WEA leadership is questioning this? Who of us is engaged in joint evangelism of this kind? There is none. And again: no proof.

(We should add that although the Manila statement is a superb document, but it is not binding on any national alliance or WEA, not in 1989, and surely not in 2017.)

The open letter accuses WEA of departing from the historic principle that joint evangelism and joint sacramental worship are not possible. It fails to indicate who called for such a change and cites no actual instances. Yet we should make clear that in the end, this decision is up to the local churches and the national alliances. The WEA does not bind its membership on such issues.

9 WEA has never gone beyond its 1986 statement

WEA is doing nothing that even the open letter would not allow us to do! 8 pages give enough space for proof for the opposite, but again no example or evidence is quoted.

The open letter clearly states, that the authors are firm in favor of cooperation and dialogue with the Catholic Church on issues including Bible Translation, social and political action, joint research on ethical and theological topics, “mutual listening” and “mutual respect”.

We cannot see that we have in any way overstepped the boundaries for cooperation and dialogue contained in the document that was approved by the WEA General Assembly in Singapore in 1986 and is praised several times in the open letter. The document is well known to the WEA leadership for long. Everything we do is within the boundaries set in the quoted document of the General Assembly in Singapore in 1986. Again, it is the task of the accusers to prove Catholic-Evangelical examples of joint evangelism initiated or favored by WEA.

Yet it needs to be noted, that the 1986 document is not a legal document or a confession of faith; it is even not a precondition for membership in a national alliance. Nothing that the WEA ever has voted on or decided is binding on the national alliance or on the churches. It is the national alliances that decide which churches can become members of them and this varies from country to country.

10 The debate is not new to the last decade, as stated, but has been there in the 1980s, 1990s and beyond.

The discussion of the matter is as old as 1846 and has continued through the last decades. The Secretaries General (previously, Directors) of WEA (formerly, WEF) have been squeezed between national alliances who press for more 'ecumenical' engagement and more cooperation and even common witness between Evangelicals and the Catholics, and those highly critical of any closer form of dialogue or cooperation. By the way: several national alliances, including the Italian alliance, have stood on both sides at different times.

In 1980 both the Italian and Spanish Evangelical Alliance suspended their membership in WEA, presenting more or less the same type of objections as in the open letter, including the charge, that WEA has fallen from the old common position concerning the Catholic Church. The whole discussion started, after the Director of WEF had invited two Catholic bishops involved in Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission (ERCDOM 1977-1984), under the leadership of John Stott) to give a word of greeting at the General Assembly of the WEA in Hoddeson, England. Even at that time none of the other national alliances joined the action of the two alliances. This happened 37 years ago. How than can one say it is a problem created by the WEA in the last 10 years.

Thomas, got involved in the whole matter of relations between WEA and the Vatican as a young pastor, when he and his wife Christine translated the ERCDOM documents (Edited by John R. W. Stott and Basil Meeking, W. B. Eerdmans, 1986) into German. The master mind behind this dialogue was John Stott who also wrote the confession of faith of WEA (and also the Lausanne Covenant). Thomas remembers that the discussions were the same at that time and in general has the impression that the distribution of the diverse opinions across the national alliances on the topic then and now has not changed significantly. ERCDOM stirred up the same worldwide debate with a small minority of national alliances objecting in the end.

If one compares ERCDOM with the newest document released by the Vatican and WEA, we would judge, that the new document is more respectful in tone and much more showing grace and the zeal to find unity in truth, yet is sharper and clearer in naming the theological differences. Outsiders would judge it to be more conservative. The new thing is the respectful way in which both sides present their case, listen to each other, and are willing to overcome wrong ideas about the other.

The kind of criticism as in the open letter has probably hit every Secretary General (Director) of WEA (WEF) and the Theological Commission for several decades. The debate is as old as the EA, founded in 1846, as the most recent history of the international Evangelical Alliance by Georg Lindemann shows in depth ("Die Geschichte der Evangelischen Allianz im Zeitalter des Liberalismus (1846-1879)", English translation of book title: *The History of the Evangelical Alliance in the Age of Liberalism 1846-1879*, published 2011). This can also be seen in Thomas' dissertation on Theodor Christlieb (1985), main speaker at several international General Assemblies of the (International) EA. The debate is also as old as the restart of the WEF and of EEA after the Second World War.

A much larger and public debate of similar kind followed when WEF published its 1987 statement "A Contemporary Perspective on Roman Catholicism." A small number of southern alliances objected, even though the text had been published as a draft before

(*Evangelical Review of Theology* 1985 and 1986) and had been accepted by the vast majority of members of WEF. The arguments from the dissenting alliances were more or less the same as those of today. WEF did a lot to discuss its document with the dissenting alliances. Ironically, the debate finally led to the start of the dialogue between PCPCU and TC/WEF (agreed upon 1990, started in Venice 1993, finishing 2002). At that times the Italian Evangelical Alliance played a key role in relations with the Vatican.

In 1990 WEA (than WEF) agreed on an institutional dialogue between PCPCU and the Theological Commission of WEA, which started in 1993 and ended in 2002 with the statement “Church, Evangelization, and the Bonds of Koinonia: A Report of the International Consultation between the Catholic Church and the World Evangelical Alliance.” (http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/evangelicals-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20111220_report-1993-2002_en.html) The open letter criticizes this document (which the IEA did not object to in 2002!). But again, this is 15 years ago and happened under the pre-pre-predecessor and the pre-predecessor of Bishop Ef.

As the open letter asks why no General Assembly – meeting every 6 years – ever voted on this text: The constitutional procedure is, that the Theological Commission has to agree, then the Secretary General, who proposes it to the International Committee (voted in by the General Assembly and composed of representatives of the regional alliances and acting on behalf of the GA between two GA’s) which has the final word on it. The same procedure has been followed with the newest document between PCPCU and the Theological Commission within the Department for Theological Concerns, published in October 2017. The General Assembly does not meet often, the next one is in 2019, the last one was in 2008, and a nonbinding report like the 2017 is not voted on in the GA, if not a larger number of members sets it on the agenda.

The open letter mentions “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World”, released in 2011, and states in principle that the authors favor the document. What they do not mention is that, John Langlois and we both, and others involved in the process, as well as Geoff Tunnicliffe as WEA’s Secretary General, were under attack the whole time we negotiated the text (2006-2011). The attacks came from a quite small but vocal number of alliances. The effort was seen as a conspiracy, as a secret agenda of WEA without approval of its members, and as a way to sell Evangelical DNA. It was not fun to get all those letters and read attacks in blogs and on the web. It was strange because none of our critics had a text, and the core group working on the text had no idea how far we would get. Only when the text was finalized and was sent to the national alliances and others for comment, the text met so much agreement, even enthusiasm, that the criticism slowly faded away. Today it has stood the test of time, and no one sees it as selling out Evangelicals’ DNA. Just read the first two sentences!

11 The Italian Alliance changed its position itself

There was a shorter time span between the protests of the Italian Evangelical Alliance in the 20th century and its present protest, in which IEA sided the approach of WEA at large and of the major documents between Vatican and WEA released.

The President of the Italian Evangelical Alliance (IEA), Gaetano Sotile, together with the President of the European Evangelical Alliance, Nik Nedelchev, visited Pope John Paul II twice, **in 2000, and again in 2002**. There were many further contacts at that time between the Italian Alliance and the Vatican or the Catholic Church. Sotile even worked together with the Catholic Church in the program “Italy for Christ”, which came close to a joint evangelism program, but he was no longer chairman of the IEA by then.

The leadership of IEA has the right to change its position. Depending on its leadership they changed their approach. But it is wrong to give the impression to have stuck to a once for all position, while EEA and WEA have fallen from it, when 15 years ago the position of IEA was more ‘progressive’ (or however you want to call it) in their dealings with the Catholics than WEA or the majority of NAEs. And this was in the times of Pope John Paul II, not of Pope Francis.

The relation to the Catholic Church of other national alliances has varied in time in both directions as well, depending on who was in leadership. And in many NAE’s the different opinions are reflected within the board of the NAE.

Also, the history of the Evangelical Alliance does not back the position of the open letter. Even in times of political tensions between evangelicals and Catholics, the Evangelical Alliance defended discriminated Catholics in Protestant countries. When the Alliance opposed Sweden with a delegation in 1858 after the highest royal court expelled six women from the country who had converted to Catholicism, by calling for religious freedom for these Catholics, there was a storm of outrage outside throughout Europe still marked by state churches everywhere. The Alliance was then significantly involved in the Swedish Parliament’s 1860 abolishment of the penalties for leaving the Lutheran state church. At the end the ladies who became Catholics stayed in Sweden thanks to our forefathers. (All this is described in detail in Lindemann’s book mentioned above.)

12 Press releases are a bad basis for doctrinal battles – and most press releases are even misquoted

Most of the quotes of the open letter come from press releases. Press releases are really not a good ground to discuss theology and the DNA of evangelicalism or to prove official positions. It is even stranger, that the press releases quoted are not official press releases by WEA, as they can be found on WEAs website. But even if some unwise words would have slipped into a WEA press release (and sometimes press releases are written under undue time pressure or eg by interns), why can the concerns not be discussed in-house instead of circulating an open letter worldwide. An open letter of this seriousness questioning the integrity of WEA and judging, that they have given up evangelical theology, should be based on more than mere press releases.

One press release of EEA is cited, but with no link, (<http://www.europeanea.org/index.php/pope-understands-luther-better-many-protestants/>). It is not really a news item, but a personal commentary/report by Thomas on the Lund event sent out by EEAs email list. Again it is false information, as they quote the press release with the words “love declaration” [to Pope Francis], words, that do not appear in this commentary and even do not capture the character of the commentary.

In its reaction of December 19, 2017, the Italian Evangelical Alliance reacts to this by saying, “it appears that Schirrmacher is highly emotionally involved in his relationship with Pope Francis (see the picture book)”. But the open letter uses quotation marks in a footnotes quoting evidence. If this just

wanted to say, how they feel about the statement, it should have been stated in the footnote. Even then, the statement sent around by EEA is not talking about Schirrmachers emotions or the character of the Pope, but about what he said in Lund/Sweden. The “picture book” points to the German book “Kaffeepausen mit dem Papst” (“Coffeebreaks with the Pope”) about the relationship of Evangelicals and Catholics, which has 16 color pictures in the middle and several black and white pictures in the book showing many people other than the Pope, but 304 pages of text, which among others discuss major theological differences, eg prayers to Mary.

We would like to add: *The alliances responsible for the open letter never wrote an official letter to the Secretary General or to the Department of Theological Concerns asking for documents, eg speeches given at the many conferences around remembering 500 years of Reformation (eg by the Secretary General or several staff of the Theological Concerns department) or about plans for the future or other relevant documents. They never asked for information or explanation on the alleged 2018 document.*

We also cannot see that they took the time to work through speeches, working papers, drafts or through the books and articles of those they attack.

When you accuse fellow believers as severely as the open letter does, you should invest a lot of time in ensuring that you are right, and you should give the accused the chance to defend himself or herself, a right clearly taught in the Old Testament already. (We are even not mentioning Mt 18 here.) If after all, the accusation then remains credible and stands firmly, you may go public, which would here mean going to the other national alliances.

13 There is no Evangelical “magisterium”

The WEA and the evangelical world does not have a magisterium. There is no synod that can make decisions that bind any member alliance and surely not the member churches of those alliances.

The open letter acts as if there is an once-for-all Evangelical doctrinal position. Yes, the confessions of faith of the WEA and of the regional and national alliances are binding. They have changed over time at a national, regional and international level. (To be frank, we still think the one from 1846 is the best.) But these texts do not solve any of the problems being discussed here, and the WEA has no magisterium to solve doctrinal problems on baptism, church hierarchy or relations to, for example, the Orthodox or Catholic churches.

Thomas comes from a Reformed camp – a minority group within the large world of Evangelicals and Pentecostals – and has probably holds to a much narrower view of the theology of salvation than most board members of the alliances that produced the open letter. Richard, comes from a non-Reformed camp and would argue with Thomas in depth over some aspects of his theology of salvation. Yet WEA is not there to solve this question and cannot solve this question. We both love the Bible and only want to teach and preach a Biblical theology. We both work well together for decades for the glory of Christ and the gospel, but get nervous, if a kind of “magisterium” wants to tell us, which of the views are the real Evangelical ones. We want to serve all evangelicals, including those with forms of Reformed or Arminian views of salvation. The WEA encompasses a huge range of theologies and churches and cannot make one position the litmus test for all. It lives with the fact

that national alliances can set the borders within their membership more broadly or narrowly.

The WEA and the evangelical movement are bound together by central elements such as the exclusive role of Jesus Christ as Savior, the infallibility of the Bible, the need for personal faith and a personal relation to Christ. But within these core commitments, evangelical churches have a wide range of confessional standards worldwide.

14 Keep matters of doctrine or matters of policy apart

We would like to stress very much: Ironically, we cannot see that there is a real difference in the theological position and the Biblical evaluation of the differences between Catholics and Evangelicals between the national alliances worldwide or between the authors of the open letter and the leadership of WEA. We see differences in policy, but not in dogmatic positions. We differ in the question whether we should meet the Pope often or not, but surely not in the question, whether the Papacy is taught in Scripture. We might have discussion over whether we might attend a Catholic mass as guests or should refrain from it, but surely no one of us teaches transubstantiation.

The Secretary General of WEA, Bishop Efraim Tendero, his associate Thomas Schirrmacher, and Thomas K. Johnson, WEA's liaison to the Vatican, in October 2017 were original signers of the statement "The Reforming Catholic Confession: A 'Mere Protestant Statement of Faith to mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation" (<https://reformingcatholicconfession.com>, available in several languages) together with many Evangelical leaders as well as Dr. Leonardo De Chirico from the Italian Evangelical Alliance and others from Italy (<https://reformingcatholicconfession.com/signatures/>). That would not be possible if we would disagree in theology in principle. And we think, that the open letter should have informed its readers about WEA leaders signing this great document.

The "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" (JDDJ) of 1999 between the Vatican and the Lutheran World Fellowship (http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html) is mentioned several times in the open letter. The open letter states it clearly, that major Evangelical theologians disagree on evaluating it. Yes, we personally are of the opinion, that JDDJ was a major progress. We are also convinced that large parts of Evangelicalism are in danger of even having a lower view of justification than the one spelled out in JDDJ.

(By the way: none of our statements on JDDJ was published on behalf of WEA or in its media. The statements on JDDJ by Thomas Schirrmacher and Thomas K. Johnson appeared in discussions on the website of the World Reformed Fellowship, of which both are members. Here are some links to the WRF website:

http://wrfnet.org/articles/2017/08/wrf-members-thomas-schirrmacher-and-thomas-johnson-discuss-collaboration-without#.WkynPiOX_UI

http://wrfnet.org/articles/2017/03/wrf-members-thomas-schirrmacher-and-thomas-johnson-urge-we-let-reformation-continue#.WkynPCOX_UI

http://wrfnet.org/articles/2014/11/wrf-members-thomas-johnson-and-thomas-schirrmacher-suggest-area-which-evangelicals#.WkynRyOX_UI

<https://www.thomasschirrmacher.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/WRF-Member-Thomas->

But this does not say anything about our or anyone's position on justification. We read and take seriously the arguments of those who think that the JDDJ is a fake and that the Catholic Church does not really mean what it said there. But this is just a matter of exegesis of the text, not one of infallible exegesis. We cannot see, how there can be the one and only true evaluation of JDDJ mentioned in the open letter, if there is so much disagreement among us. But to turn this question into a litmus test of what one believes is wrong.

If you want to know what we stand for, please read what we have written about justification. *People can agree in the doctrine of justification and disagree in regard to JDDJ!*

To take an example. When the two Evangelical Alliances in Switzerland (one German speaking in a Protestant realm, one French speaking in a Catholic realm) published a long document on their relationship to the Catholic Church, leading to an invitation to the Catholic Bishops Conference for official talks, Thomas had the privilege to speak at the joint General Assembly. Among others he said, that there are areas, where we make progress compared to the 16th century and used the definition of 'justification' as an example. But he also said, that no matter whether one agrees with this judgement or not (and even the open letter acknowledges that this is a controversy among Evangelical theologians), there still would be a long way to go, because at the same time in other areas the gulf is much larger than in the 16th century, for example concerning the role of Mary. And he mentioned, that the dialogue on Mariology has not really started yet. Interestingly, many Catholic media took up the latter topic, while those critical of his position quoted Thomas' statement on justification as proof for his new heretical position, but did not report the other half of the story.

The same is even true for evaluating the character and theological position of Pope Francis, which is not a topic in the open letter. We evaluate Pope Francis as an honest person, trustworthy in doing what he announces, willing to listen to our views and even our complaints. We take his apologies as real and serious apologies meant to change things for the future. We tend to take his quite evangelical language to be genuine more often than not. We see him as a great chance for us, as we have the same normal ongoing personal relation with him and major leaders in the Vatican, as we have it with leaders of other non-evangelical historic churches for long already, eg the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of the Orthodox Church. Under his predecessors, it still was more like dealing with a State and a diplomatic corps and very rare personal encounters with the CEO of the Vatican.

Members of your boards have described Pope Francis in darker colors and have criticized evangelical leaders for being too enthusiastic about him. They see him as a Jesuit and a master of wording, saying to Evangelicals what they want to hear and to others what they want to hear. They see him more as an universalist, who cooperates with Evangelicals the same way as with Muslims and Atheists. They do not see any real changes in the Catholic Church under Pope Francis.

We argue from many personal interactions with Pope Francis and cooperation with high ranking Catholic leaders in the fields. Board members from your side argue the other way round (not in the open letter), that our close relationship has made us blind to the larger picture and that we are led astray by the Pope's personality.

Yet all this is not a difference in doctrine, but in the evaluation of one person. Half a billion Evangelicals probably never will have agreement on something like this. It is an evaluation of a present situation, of present speeches and acts. The situation might change any time and easily might change with the next Pope. It does not put aside any of the questions about Catholic doctrine which are listed eg in the new document between PCPCU and the WEA published in October 2017.

Time will show, who was right. But this evaluation of the character of one person is not a difference in doctrine. We can have opposed views here and have a common belief in the same God, the same gospel, the same five solas of the Reformation, the same revelation fixed in Scripture etc. We can see this one person more black or more white, but will together be opposed to the Pope praying to Mary or installing indulgences.

15 National EAs are indeed asked for their opinions, including the Italians and Spanish

Both the Italian and the Spanish Alliances were offered a seat among the seven theologians working on the evangelical side with seven theologians from the Catholic side over a period of seven years (2009-2016) (http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/evangelicals-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20171017_comm-report-2009-2016_en.html) and they filled their seats. (You can find their names at the end of the document, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/information_service/pdf/information_service_149_en.pdf , page 43). At the end of the document you can find who was part of the group for how long,). The result was a heavy over-representation of Europeans on our side, which other NAEs complained about. The majority of the seven evangelical theologians came from Catholic majority countries. The only one of the seven theologians working for the WEA was Rolf Hille, who organized the whole process and from all we know invested a lot of extra to listen to the concerns of the Italian and the Spanish EA. The whole time other WEA leadership did not influence the process during the consultation.

As the final result was excellent, and the Theological Commission only asked for minor changes in wording, the Secretary General proposed to the International Council, to accept it as a report for publication. If you read the new document, you will see, that despite the friendly and respectful tone of the discussion, all the concerns are clearly articulated in several sections: "Questions Evangelicals would like to ask Catholics".

Secretary General Geoff Tunnicliffe visited the Italian EA or its board members several times, as did Thomas or others in the Theological Concerns Department. In 2014 Geoff Tunnicliffe invited the IEA to nominate a delegate for a delegation visiting Pope Francis and to offer topics for the agenda. The IEA declined.

At the General Assembly of the European Evangelical Alliance (with 36 member alliances) in Prague in October 2017 there was room to discuss the whole matter after a speech given by Thomas K. Johnson (already available on the website of the World Reformed Fellowship and upcoming on the WEA's website). The alliances responsible for the open letter got the chance to present their case as did many other alliances. Some alliances

reported an amazing close cooperation with the Catholics, several stated clearly, that they are unsure which way to go or that they have a wide range of opinions among their members or within their boards. This is the reality. But the alliances responsible for the open letter claim afterwards that the topic still is never discussed, that they are never heard, that the WEA and EEA are not interested in the opinion of the national alliances.

The alliances in the open letter protest against a top-down approach by a few people within the WEA. This is nonsense. The WEA leadership is not just a few people. Many people are involved, and after all, it is the large International Council of WEA that always has the last word.

If anything, there is not a top-down problem, but a bottom-up problem: Two alliances that hold to a minority position (which we respect and listen to, but do not always follow) may not force their opinion on other NAE's, on their regional alliance or on the WEA, eg by mere political means of public pressure through the web.

EEA or WEA are in no position to tell any NAE how they should relate to the Catholic Church in their country. **But neither have the NAEs of the open letter the right to push their views on other NAEs or make them a litmus test for being an evangelical.**

WEA (and EEA as all other regional alliances) has to be there for all member alliances. It is not always easy to bridge the wide range of positions, concerns and wishes of far 129 alliances. *Alliances including, IEA and SEA, should not only ask WEA, but first of all listen to other national alliances before going public.*

Let us give an example: All NAEs believe in what the Bible says about homosexuality and object to same sex marriage. Yet it is a real challenge when alliances from Africa and from Europe want to agree on a statement on whether or how homosexuality should be punished by law, and then want to communicate it to the media, for example in Uganda and Germany at the same time. WEA has no magisterium here, but will help to moderate a friendly exchange between believers and try to find the best solution possible.

16 "Greater Oneness"

Is there a biblical meaning of "greater oneness in Christ"? Yes, as it was understood in 1846 as much as in 1951. The Evangelical Alliance was never just about the unity of its members, knowing that even many Evangelicals are not organized within an alliance and surely not all believers in Christ. *But it was and is about the unity of the whole body of Christ.* We never will work for a unity by means of bypassing the truth, but we also will never stop working for unity in truth with all Christians and to have dialogue with all Christian churches in search of more unity in truth, where ever possible. If we fail, we have to accept it, but we have to try again and again. And we never should give up to pray for revival for all churches and the Holy Spirit to fall on everyone named after Jesus Christ.

This also includes that we work and arrange for ways, where other churches in a trusted and friendly way can and want to listen to our perspectives on all levels. The Global Christian Forum is a global platform for this, high-level talks with Catholic leaders another form. We do not want anyway to know our views and positions from rumor or the media, but out of the mouth of our leadership. And we are willing to listen and learn at the same time, proving everything and keeping good, as the New Testament commands us.

According to Jesus' prayer in John 17, the question of unity is closely connected to mission and evangelism. If we love mission and evangelism as much as our forefathers did in 1846, we also will have to pressure for more and growing unity worldwide – with the Bible in hand, trusting that the Holy Spirit can do things, we never would expect and can change the dead trunk into a living tree, to use a picture from the Old Testament.

To give an example, leaders from the WEA Department of Theological Concerns have been meeting the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in Istanbul as elsewhere twice a year in average for many years now. We have an Ambassador to the Patriarchate, Nik Nedelchev from Bulgaria. Thomas, together with Titus Vogt, attended the "One and Holy Synod" of the Orthodox Churches in Crete. Whoever is honest will not dream of a quick union between us and the Orthodox churches. Yet our talks and joint actions have brought forth much good fruit and our goal is unity in truth with this large branch of historic Christianity.

The relation between national alliances and Orthodox churches in the same countries differ greatly. It reaches from close cooperation in one country to a friendly, to rare relation, to countries with a lot of tensions, to finally countries where evangelicals have the impression they are discriminated severely by the majority church using the power of the state against other churches. At the same time the WEA and Evangelicals at large are one of the major voices against the persecution of Orthodox Christians in the Middle East and elsewhere. No matter, how the local relationship actually is: Having a good relationship, studying each other's history and theological literature, and listening to each other closely never can be a mistake.

17 The Pentecostal World Fellowship

The open letter also mentions the Pentecostal World Fellowship (PWF) as a partner in the evil activities criticized therefore, we clearly want to emphasize, that the accusations are as much an invention concerning PWF as concerning the WEA. We treasure our close friendship between the leadership of the PWF, and are truly ready to defend our friends, as we are first of all partners in spreading the good news of Jesus Christ to our world.

18 The Alliance of Malta is not a member of the WEA

Before this open letter, we were not aware of the membership of the Evangelical Alliance of Malta (TEAM) with WEA. It does not state to be a member of WEA on their website (<http://teamalta.org>) and is not listed among the members of WEA (<http://www.worldevangelicals.org/members/alliances.htm#Europe>) or EEA. Why should TEAM be concerned about how the WEA works with its member national and regional EAs if it is not even a member and never was? But we invite TEAM to become a member of WEA and EEA as soon as possible. The WEA and its regional alliance have much more to offer than a discussion about the Catholic Church and first of all networks churches and Christians in the task to reach the whole world with the precious gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

In its reaction of December 19, 2017, the Italian Evangelical Alliance writes: "The European Evangelical Alliance repeatedly asked TEAM (The Evangelical Alliance of Malta) to join EEA (therefore WEA). EEA even invited TEAM in a Southern Europe EAs Meeting (2015). The reason why TEAM for

the moment cannot join the international bodies (EEA and WEA) is strictly connected to the content of the Open Letter. The Open Letter was also signed by the Albanian Evangelical Alliance (VUSH). This should be taken into consideration.”

Thus they clearly affirm that TEAM is not a member of the WEA or the EEA. And the fact, that they do not apply, is because of the relations of WEA to the Vatican, does not answer the question, why this information was not given to the readers, especially not to other national alliances.

According to the documented information we got from the Albanian Evangelical Alliance its chairman wrote an email, that he agrees that these serious matters have to be discussed and to be solved, but never signed the letter as such. The board of the Albanian EA didn't vote on the letter nor did it endorse the letter officially in any way.