



# The Lausanne-Orthodox Initiative



## Lausanne-Orthodox Initiative Meets for the Second Time: Conversion and Spiritual Transformation

For the second time (both in Albania) members of the Lausanne-Orthodox Initiative (LOI) gathered to reflect on the relations between the Orthodox and Evangelical communities. Held at St. Vlash Monastery in Durres, Albania the consultation ran from September 15 to 19, 2014. Initially the LOI was designed as a forum for dialogue between the two traditions and to facilitate mutual understanding and continues to evolve in both its scope and purpose as levels of support and collaboration have taken root. Such a project as the joint mission project in Egypt in 2013 has allowed the initiative to grow to new levels. This new level was reflected in the recent gathering in Albania where a true measure of reconciliation and healing has taken place not just within the country but within the various religious groups in Albania. The LOI delights in being a small part of that process and this was reflected in the program.



### Monday

The Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania, the hosts for the consultation, arranged for transportation of the delegates from the airport to the monastery. During the afternoon old friends greeted each other and new friends were made at the Welcome Reception.

In the evening at the opening session, His Eminence Archbishop Anastasios welcomed the delegates and set the tone for the consultation by stressing the importance of our mission in bringing the gospel to the world. Pastor Ali Kurti, President of the Evangelical Alliance of Albania, in his welcome to the delegates, discussed the challenges of evangelizing a country that had lain under atheistic domination.

His Eminence Metropolitan Geevarghese Mar Yulios from the Syrian Orthodox Church, North India brought a biblical reflection. The formal program concluded with the co-chairs of the LOI, His Grace Bishop Angaelos and Mrs.



Grace Mathews giving an updated progress report on the initiative.

The consultation was organized around small groups which met daily to process the experience and to share with each other. The small groups reported back to the consultation in plenary sessions. Monday concluded with the delegates meeting together in their groups.

## Tuesday

After introductions to the consultation by His Grace Bishop Angaelos and Ms. Grace Mathews, co-chairs of the consultation, the first full day of plenary session commenced on the theme of Spiritual Transformation and Conversion. This theme is critical in understanding the approaches by the Orthodox



and the Evangelical communities and often can be mired by misunderstanding. The first speaker, Prof Stelian Tofana from Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj, Romania, spoke on the Orthodox understanding of spiritual transformation which involves a long term process which ultimately results in a change in the person through the Church. The next speaker, Prof Anne-Marie Kool from the Central and Eastern European Association for Mission Studies in Hungary responded by focusing on the relationship between Christ and the person which restores a fractured humanity.

The second plenary session built upon the concept of conversion with a presentation by Prof. Simon Chan of Trinity Theological College in Singapore. Prof. Chan described the different ways in which conversion is viewed amongst evangelicals in the Global South, particularly their focus on the necessity of a sacramental dimension. Archpriest Eric G. Tosi, Secretary of the Orthodox Church in America, presented his paper on the term “koinonic” or community/communal aspect of evangelism in which the community is the evangelism element through a liturgical dimension. Both speakers built on the theme of the communal life as part of the spiritually transformative experience.

The work of the Consultation continued through a joint meeting between the delegates and the youth participants of both Albanian Orthodox and Evangelical communities. This inspired meeting enabled participants to grasp an understanding of their respective traditions, specifically manifested by the singing of some hymns in both traditions, as well as through a dialogue on the challenges of living a Christian life in a secular society. Such encounters between the youth and the delegates highlighted the necessity of discovering common ground in order to witness to the truth of being a Christian.



## Wednesday

The day commenced with a Biblical Reflection led by His Grace Bishop Andon Merdani of the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania. The plenary session in the morning dealt with the theme of Ecclesiology and Mission.

Fr. Prof. Ioan Sauca, from the Ecumenical Center at Bossey and on the staff of the World Council of Churches, presenting the Orthodox position, stressed the common affirmations of both the Orthodox and the Evangelical positions. The agreement on Scripture, genuine preaching of the Apostolic faith and the necessity of an authentic life in Christ are common themes. He pointed out the differences that arise from our historical, cultural and hermeneutical contexts. Fr. Sauca pointed out that the church is a pneumatological event, dependent on the Holy Spirit to function and that furthermore the mission of the church is carried out in the power of the Spirit. The oneness of the church is founded on the unity of her head, Christ who remains one. This view is in keeping with the patristic understanding of the church and the faith that is shared in Christ by the believers.

An Evangelical perspective was provided by Dr. (Cecil) Mel Robeck, Professor at Fuller Theological Seminary in California. Dr. Robeck, who like Fr. Sauca, has many years of ecumenical experience in various consultative bodies, also brought a perspective from his own Pentecostal tradition. He identified the distinctives that define Pentecostals from the wider body of Evangelicals helpfully pointing out that Evangelicalism is a movement with many variants in ecclesiological theology and practice. These differences and the traditional evangelical emphasis on individual conversion have resulted in Evangelicals having a weak ecclesiology which we see in the confessional statement of pan-evangelical bodies. Such ambiguous statements are necessary due to the different practices of the Churches belonging to the evangelical movement. However, this lack of precision does not mean a lack of a sense of community and a sole focus on the individual. Dr. Robeck stressed the reality of the Church as the new creation of the Triune God and wondered if there was not more actual agreement between Evangelicals and Orthodox in spite of some very real differences. The Evangelical position is that Christ sends His church into the world as He had been sent into the world by the Father. Dr. Robeck admitted that this was not always seen as the actual life of the Church which often leads individuals to undertake the task of spreading the gospel.

As was the practice of the consultation, the small groups met after the morning plenary session to discuss the presentations.



In the afternoon the plenary session focused on Conflict Transformation by looking at a series of areas where there needs to be reconciliation in the name of Christ. Led by His Grace Bishop Angaelos of the Coptic Church, the delegates heard presentations from four different perspectives. Dr. Bishara Awad spoke of the situation in the West Bank. He acquainted the consultation with the "Christ at the



Checkpoint" conferences held in Bethlehem. Dr. Richard Harvey presented the issue of Reconciliation from a Messianic Jewish perspective. He demonstrated the various positions and opinions on the issue of reconciliation and peace within the numerically small community of Messianic believers in Israel and helped the participants see the complexity of the situation from that perspective. It was a great benefit to the discussions to have two such presentations on this issue.

An example of Orthodox - Evangelical conflict was presented by Tekletsadik Belachew Negru on the situation in Ethiopia. A convert from Orthodoxy, he was able to speak of the impact that the Orthodox Church had on him as a young person and his continued appreciation for some of the elements of Orthodoxy such as the liturgy, sacraments and iconography. Belachew went on to discuss the theological ignorance that exists between the two traditions and the attempts to correct this lack on the part of evangelicals by means of academic studies and lectures. He outlined the problems of hostility and misunderstanding between the two communities and suggested concrete steps to change this situation of conflict that exists, including the establishment of an Orthodox-Evangelical Society and Study Center.

The very difficult issue of religious freedom was addressed by Archdeacon Radomir Rakic of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Helpfully pointing out that religious freedom per se is an Enlightenment concept, he went on to discuss how true human freedom is what God intended for His creation. It is in the light of this theological understanding of God's purpose for humankind that we can fathom the issues of freedom of religion and even censorship. The paper by Archdeacon Rakic was a welcome contribution to the work of the consultation. The consultation then devoted time to group prayer for the situations of conflict that had been presented as well as other areas known to the participants.

The evening session was held in Tirana where participants were first received by His Eminence Archbishop Anastasios at the recently consecrated Resurrection of Christ Orthodox Cathedral. His Eminence took participants on a tour of the building, whilst the choir sang hymns, and then spoke about the post-Marxist resurrection of the church in Albania and its contemporary mission. After this visit participants joined two different Evangelical churches for a time of worship followed by a series of testimonies from Albanians of different backgrounds and occupations who had experienced the grace of Christ and shared their walk with the Lord. In one church seven individuals told of their experiences and their passion to share the gospel where they are working. Two work in government offices and actively share their faith. Many were from a Muslim background, including the pastor of the church where this meeting was held. After the service, the participants and some local Christians retired to a restaurant where fellowship continued over a shared meal.



The consultation steering committee planned for interaction with both Albanian Orthodox and Evangelicals which rooted the consultation in the concrete situation of the country. Like the interaction the previous afternoon with the youth from both traditions, the fellowship on Wednesday evening left a positive lasting impression in the participants' hearts and minds.

### Thursday

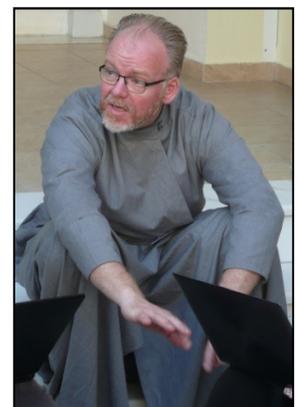
Building on the theme of spiritual transformation, ecclesiology and conversion, the consultation turned its attention to one of the more difficult topics, that of ethical evangelism and proselytism. For many participating in the consultation, this topic was one that could be filled with emotions and division. The speakers were Dr. Elmer Thiessen from Canada, His Eminence Metropolitan Yuhanon Mar Demetrios from India and Dr. Danut Manastireanu from Romania. Dr. Thiessen spoke about the criteria and parameters of evangelism in which the freedom of the person is preserved while understanding and accepting the need to ethically evangelize those who seek Christ. He made an important distinction between proselytism, a word which can be misused and pejorative and unethical evangelism, which leads to division and hostility.



His Eminence Metropolitan Yuhanon focused on the question of proselytism in the Asian context. He specifically noted the challenges which stem from a lack of respect for local contexts as well as the increasing issue of non-denominational groups which challenge traditional Christianity. The final speaker, Dr. Manastireanu, responded to Dr. Thiessen by firstly acknowledging certain unethical approaches and heightened tension between the Evangelical and Orthodox communities. He believes that common service projects which witness to the reality of Christ

are a way forward through such tensions. Such witness to Christ can assist in assuring the other of their own good and honourable intentions.

The sessions concluded with more breakout groups in which specific proposals were presented for the development of the consultation. Among the proposals from the breakout groups were the development of a working lexicon of terms to reduce misunderstanding when discussing theological particularities; focusing on joint projects through which we can reduce the divisions between the communities at a local level; and to move the LOI consultation to different regions in the world where there is conflict between the Orthodox and Evangelical communities as a mode of reducing tensions by facilitating contact. The final plenary session built upon these and other ideas in order to ensure that the LOI achieves its mission and commitment during the coming years.



## Friday

As part of the experience of the Consultation, His Grace Bishop Nikolla Hyka of St. Vlash Monastery served the Orthodox Divine Liturgy on Friday morning. Relics of St. Innocent of Alaska, Apostle to America were presented to the Monastery on behalf of His Beatitude Metropolitan Tikhon, Archbishop of Washington, Metropolitan of All America and Canada as an inspiration to continue the good missionary work in the newly restored land of Albania.



The Lausanne Orthodox Initiative continues to be an inspiring and unique ecumenical dialogue. It is not on any official level nor does the dialogue have any institutional impact. Instead the impact is on a personal level; person to person, community to community, two different Christian traditions reconciling with each other after years of mistrust and misunderstanding. It is on this level that common ground is discovered and conflicts can be resolved; each acknowledging their genuine differences but each also acknowledging their common faith in Christ. Each Consultation brings the two faith traditions closer to a better understanding and respect. In this they have truly succeeded.

The next LOI consultation is scheduled to take place on September 1 to September 4, 2015 just outside of Helsinki, Finland. It will be co-sponsored by the Orthodox Church of Finland and the Evangelical community in Finland.



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*Dr. James Stamoolis is the Executive Director of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship and former Dean at Wheaton College. Archpriest Eric G. Tosi is the Secretary of the Orthodox Church in America and an instructor in evangelism.*

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