

Ecumenical meeting in Sydney explores life-affirming evangelism in the city



Participants in a WCC and CWM meeting on evangelism in Sydney.

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In view of the changing global landscape of mission and evangelism, participants in a meeting organized by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Council for World Mission (CWM) explored the concept of evangelism and its life-affirming aspects in the city of Sydney, where the event was held from 5 to 13 September.

The primary aim of the meeting was to change the discourse on evangelism, inspired by the WCC statement on mission and evangelism titled [*Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*](#). The document highlights the urgency for the church to “renew its methods of evangelism to communicate the good news with persuasion, inspiration and conviction”.

Kyriaki Avtzi, WCC programme executive for evangelism and organizer of the meeting, said that the meeting featured “personal encounters with local communities, churches and establishments” in Sydney. This experience, she said, brought a “unique process of mutual

learning” which manifests “multifaceted and diverse expressions of evangelism in the city of Sydney”.

Avtzi called discussions at the meeting a “testimony of hope and encouragement”. She said, “We have witnessed new ways in which the life-affirming message of the gospel can transform the secular context of the city. Our hope is that this exploration, being the first in a series of such dialogues to follow in coming years in different parts of the world, will significantly feed into the theme of transformative discipleship in the next World Mission Conference in 2018.”

Philip Woods, co-organizer of the meeting and programme secretary for Mission Enabling at the CWM, shared that the dialogue on evangelism in the meeting was truly “life-affirming”. He said the “exposure visits in Sydney challenged participant’s assumptions and prejudices related to the concept of evangelism, while they wrestled with what it means to talk about and share about their faith today in a pluralist and secular environment.”

“Enriched by the experience and by each other’s contributions, we have come up with fresh ideas of how we can express our faith in open and life-affirming ways,” he added.

Metropolitan Geevarghese Mor Coorilos, moderator of the WCC’s Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, said the “Sydney encounters on ‘life-affirming evangelism in the city’ raised, amongst others, a number of compelling questions.” These questions, he said, were about the inter-connectedness between evangelism and ecclesiology.

“The Wayside Ministry of the Uniting Church in Australia that we had the privilege to encounter, for me, was a powerful example of the margins reshaping the way gospel is communicated and re-imagining the Church,” according to Metropolitan Coorilos.

“Exploring life-affirming evangelism in Sydney through dialogue, education and community engagement has challenged me to stretch my imagination regarding the typical approaches and metrics used to measure success in our evangelistic practices,” said Heather Heinzman Lear, director of Evangelism Ministries - Discipleship Ministries for the United Methodist Church, USA.

“I am grateful to the WCC, CWM and my ecumenical brothers and sisters for their words, which I hope to use in my work of reclaiming evangelism at the United Methodist Church,” added Lear.

Deacon Denise Champion, who is the first Aboriginal woman ordained in South Australia by the Uniting Church in Australia, shared her reflections at the meeting. She said, “We have shared many new insights and explored many concepts that have inspired us to dream and visualize.”

Champion said she found “freedom to explore what the gospel looks like to Indigenous peoples in their own cultural contexts”. “For me hearing the most ancient voice of God through creation and through first people’s wisdom in story-telling of the land was a new and refreshing perspective,” she added. “In this environment there is a need to recreate spaces where Creator God is visible. This exploration in evangelism gave us the opportunity to dream and visualize such places.”

The outcomes of this exploration on evangelism in Sydney will be published in a forthcoming issue of the International Review of Mission.

Ecumenical perspectives on mission and unity

The World Council of Churches promotes Christian unity in faith, witness and service for a just and peaceful world. An ecumenical fellowship of churches founded in 1948, today the WCC brings together 345 Protestant, Orthodox, Anglican and other churches representing more than 550 million Christians in over 120 countries, and works cooperatively with the Roman Catholic Church. The WCC general secretary is the Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, from the [Lutheran] Church of Norway.

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