

Interview with Johan Candelin

The following is an edited version of an interview conducted on 28 October 2008 at the World Evangelical Alliance General Assembly in Pattaya, Thailand, on the occasion of Johan Candelin's retirement after twelve years as Executive Director of the WEA Religious Liberty Commission.

Q How do you feel after your retirement?

JC I am satisfied I was able to 'do it'. However, there comes a point in life where one has to re-evaluate one's situation, asking oneself, is there still some new ministry one would love to do, some enthusiasm for going towards a horizon one hasn't seen before. That is my situation. Also, when you receive so much bad news about incidents of persecution everyday day for so many years, the risk arises that you stop reacting in the way you should, and I was in that situation.

Q What sparked your original interest in Religious Liberty?

JC From my home in Finland it was about a four hours drive to the Soviet, now Russian, border. There Religious Liberty was a burning topic with Christians being tortured, killed, and put in prison. Hearing about this came as a shock, a good shock.

Q Have you been able to achieve what you set out to do as Executive Director of the Religious Liberty Commission?

JC One of the goals I had set myself was to build up the Religious Liberty Commission so that it would represent Christians from different parts of the world. That has happened. There are areas like Latin America that are not represented on the Commission.

However there are very little religious liberty issues in Latin America, except for Columbia and a few additional places, but compared to other parts of the world religious liberty is not a big issue on that continent. Two other goals we achieved was to find political advisors for the Commission, and to be afforded a position at the United Nations.

* Johan Candelin was born and raised in Finland. In 1966 he was ordained as a Lutheran minister. He went on to pastor congregations in France, and Sweden Helsinki, before being appointed Senior Pastor in the church from which his father had retired. In 1982 he started the organization Friends of the Martyr Church, of which he is still the Chairman. From 1986 he headed a charismatic renewal in the Finnish church. Then followed his involvement with the Evangelical Alliance and the First Step Forum, it's been interesting. His interests include revival, spiritual renewal, foreign policy and stand up comedy. E-mail: candelin@kolumbus.fi.

In addition we set out to inform the world about religious liberty violations. Today people from different regions, inform the world about what is happening.

Q Did you observe any trends in religious persecution over the last twelve years?

JC Persecution develops in three phases. It starts with disinformation in the media – Christians are written about as bad people, enemies of the state, people led by foreign interest and people who disturb the national harmony. This is followed by discrimination, – because they are bad people they cannot be teachers, cannot serve in the military and cannot occupy political posts. From there it develops into persecution, prison, torture and so on. This mechanism applied then and now. However, two new developments have taken place. Firstly, today religion is at the very epicentre of foreign policy and foreign relations. Unlike during the Cold War today most conflicts are no longer between states but within states. This complicates matters, because when conflicts arise between states, it is relatively easy for the United Nations to intervene. If conflict occurs inside a nation and the state insists on its sovereignty, it becomes difficult for international pressure to be exerted successfully.

In addition, the world changed on September 11, 2001. The Muslim community sees the war in Iraq as a war on Islam. Muslims have come to believe that Islam is losing ground, and that every Muslim must now stand up and fight for Islam to conquer the world as the prophet Mohammed has promised. In the process the gap between the Muslim world and the West has become larger and deeper.

Q Have you noticed changes in the church's awareness and response to Religious Liberty issues?

JC Firstly, compared to even five years ago there is a greater understanding today in churches worldwide of the existence of the persecuted church. That is a positive development. Most churches, however, say that as long as our denomination is not under attack, it's not our problem. This view represents a misunderstanding of the theology of the kingdom of God. Secondly, it's not only Religious Liberty that is in the spotlight today. There is also poverty, hunger, refugee and environmental problems. By way of illustration, I was invited to share information on the persecuted church in a church in the United States. After the service I realised that I was not the only one representing a good cause. There were 14 good reasons to help different projects presented

during the same event. We are showered with good projects today, and there exists a clear risk that people will get tired of everything.

Q Have you observed any other important aspects of the church's response to persecution?

JC At present a church wanting to help the persecuted church usually does this by donating money to one organization, and that is a good thing, and I bless these organizations. However, it would be better if a local church could adopt a persecuted local church directly, and send a delegation to this church to meet them there and to invite them for a return visit.

Q How good is the co-operation between the various religious liberty organisations?

JC It has been a shame that for so many years these organizations did not work together. It's of course all about fund raising and building one's own ministry. Praise God that during the last three years we have seen a clear change in this regard.

Q How does the Catholic Church fit into the Religious Liberty movement?

JC This question is related to the bigger question of the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Evangelical Alliance. In this regard the suffering church might be the easiest way to work together with the Catholic Church. The present Pope and the Pope before have spoken out very clearly on matters of Religious Liberty, much more clearly than many Protestant church leaders in the West, who try to be politically correct. We should look at future opportunities to work together with the Catholic Church in the field of Human Rights and Religious Freedom issues, remembering that they have a worldwide diplomatic network at their disposal. The problem here, however, is the question of conversion. It is no coincidence that it is the Evangelical Christians who are being persecuted, because in most cases the Catholic Church lives a quiet spiritual life, while Evangelical Churches often lead a wild, noisy life, planting new churches in villages where there has never been a Christian gospel presence before. It is logical that this is where the Church will be attacked. The Catholic Church doesn't always understand why we create these problems for ourselves. However we do relate to Jesus who said that we should go out and make disciples of all people. Even if the cost is very high this is our main mission, and we must be faithful to that mission.

Q Some Religious Liberty organizations prefer to use assertiveness, others use diplomacy as their main approach. What is your opinion?

JC I think both approaches are needed. If you use purely kind diplomacy many nations will not take note. If you only bash doors down or shout in the streets you will not achieve much either. I have come to the conclusion that we should thank God for all the different ministries. As with the spiritual gifts, that are all different, the various organisations need to be brought together, affirming that we are all different and work in different ways.

Q What were some high points and low points in your ministry during the past twelve years?

JC On the downside, we are so limited. There are more than 60 nations where there is no full Religious Liberty. If they all asked for support it would simply be impossible to help them all. On the upside, one of the highlights was when we were offered a position at the United Nations and were able to make our voice heard there. Also, meeting very interesting people such as Benazir Bhutto, the present Pope and the Pope before, and many other very interesting people.

Q Finally, what are your plans for the future?

JC My first problem with the Evangelical world, of which I am a part, is that it is very divided. More than 160 small groups claim to have the full truth. The second problem is that we are known to be reactive instead of proactive in a time of great possibilities for pro-activity. Thirdly, we do not always consider people outside the Evangelical circles as true followers of Jesus Christ. This is not only a mistake, it is a sin. My dream has been to build a network that would be proactive and would unite people. This is why I started the First Step Forum in 2002. Now I'm joining the organisation on a full time basis, because the missions and the possibilities open to us are so important that I have to do this. The forum unites members of parliament, ambassadors, business people, media experts and legal experts all working together to be proactive, and wanting to build bridges. We have been working with the governments of Turkey, Syria, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Morocco, Algeria and with very interesting projects around the world. I am very excited to be able to concentrate on that venture now, and to hand over the Religious Liberty Commission to my successor. I'm sure they will do much better in the future than they have done so far, and no one will be happier about that than me.

Thank you for the interview.