

World churches' leader to meet Pope in Rome

by [Stephen Brown ENI](#)

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Geneva, December 2 (ENInews)--The general secretary of the World Council of Churches, the Rev. Olav Fykse Tveit, says he hopes his upcoming audience in Rome with Pope Benedict XVI will advance Christian unity.

"It is important that we speak honestly in this meeting about the challenges we have," Tveit said of the 4 December meeting at the Vatican.

It will be Tveit's first meeting with Pope Benedict since the Norwegian Lutheran theologian took up his WCC post in January.

"There are expectations for the ecumenical movement that have not been fulfilled, and there are tensions arising in and between churches," Tveit said in a 2 December statement issued from the WCC's Geneva headquarters.

The WCC groups 349 churches, principally Anglican, Orthodox and Protestant. The Roman Catholic Church is not a member but has members on some WCC committees.

These include the WCC's Faith and Order Commission, which seeks to advance the unity of the Church. Benedict, then German theology professor Joseph Ratzinger, was a member of that commission in the early 1970s.

Tveit's visit takes place shortly after the Vatican's chief unity official, Cardinal Kurt Koch, was reported as saying there is a crisis of ecumenism because of two "profoundly different mentalities" that shape the way Catholics and Protestants describe the nature of the Church.

"The churches and ecclesial communities born of the [Reformation] have renounced the original objective of ecumenism as visible unity and have substituted it with the concept of mutual recognition as churches," the London-based Catholic weekly, The

Tablet, reported Koch as saying.

Koch was giving a 15 November address to the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity of which he was made president in July.

The Vatican official said Protestants see the goal of ecumenism as the "reconciled diversity" of many churches rather than the reconstitution of visible unity, while accepting diversity, in one Church as Catholics teach.

Benedict, before becoming Pope, was the Prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In that role he reaped criticism for a 2000 statement, *Dominus Iesus*, which said Protestant denominations are not "churches in the proper sense".

Still, after being elected in 2005, Benedict said his "primary task" as Pope is to work "to reconstitute the full and visible unity of all Christ's followers".

Some observers, however, have suggested that the Vatican sees relations with Eastern Orthodox churches as having a higher priority than contacts with Protestants.

Under Benedict's pontificate, a commission of Catholic and Orthodox representatives has been discussing the role of the papacy, one of the issues that led to the 950-year rift between the two Christian traditions.

The Catholic Church teaches that the Pope has a leading role among Christians but Orthodox Christians, like Protestants, reject papal jurisdiction.

Tveit said he intends at his meeting with the Pope to reaffirm the WCC's desire to seek visible unity in Jesus Christ.

"The calling that is the starting point of the World Council of Churches is also what is driving us today," said Tveit, referring to a prayer of Jesus "that they all may be one".

"What encourages us is that this calling is something that many share as a high priority, and I know that this is the case with Pope Benedict," said the WCC leader.

Tveit said he also plans to discuss the situation of Christians in the Middle East during his audience with Benedict XVI.

"Our witness to the Gospel, our support for justice and peace, solidarity with the oppressed, initiatives for Jewish-Christian and Muslim-Christian dialogue and cooperation, all of this comes together in the Middle East, and especially in Jerusalem," said Tveit.