

Ecumenism's new basis: testimony: The Global Christian Forum

by [John Dart](#) in the [August 21, 2007](#) issue

After keeping a low profile for several years, advocates of a fresh approach to ecumenism are going public about a promising international gathering in Kenya this November.

About 240 leaders from the Vatican, World Evangelical Alliance, Orthodox churches, historic Protestant and Anglican communions, and Pentecostal and independent churches will gather November 6-9 at a conference center outside Nairobi.

Planners say the Global Christian Forum 2007, building on successful regional consultations since 2000, will be unique in its ecumenical breadth. The hope, says the group's Web site, is "to move beyond the separations of the 19th and 20th centuries and to engage in common witness for the sake of God's mission in the world."

The new approach is based on an old religious practice—"personal testimony."

Coincidentally, a somewhat similar solution was urged last month by Cardinal Avery Dulles, a theologian who teaches at Fordham University. Speaking at the 50th-anniversary Faith and Order conference in Oberlin, Ohio, Dulles said that formal theological dialogue aimed at harmonizing differing doctrines "has nearly exhausted its potential." He advocated "an ecumenism of mutual enrichment by means of mutual testimony." Dulles did not indicate any familiarity with plans for the international forum.

By using personal testimonies to begin each meeting, Global Christian Forum leaders say, high-church, low-church, liberal and conservative believers will uncover surprising insights and commonalities that foster respect and trust.

"I have been at two regional meetings, and each participant shares their journey of faith—it takes a day and a half," said Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary of the Reformed Church in America. "They build bonds of relationship.

Even ecumenical veterans come away absolutely amazed.”

This conversational method was used to establish trust among the participants in Christian Churches Together, which formally launched that broadest-ever U.S. ecumenical venture last February under the guidance of Granberg-Michaelson and other leaders.

Both the global forum and the CCT kept low profiles in their early stages, admitting neither outsiders nor news media in order to shield some skeptical church leaders from the public spotlight. Once the comfort level increased, CCT participants began crafting even-handed statements on poverty and on evangelicalism. But the focus on nurturing fellowship remains crucial.

“I think the CCT borrowed what we have done at the global level,” said Cecil “Mel” Robeck, a longtime Fuller Seminary professor. He and Granberg-Michaelson are on the 12-member continuation committee for the Global Christian Forum.

“It’s slow, but it’s a good model,” said Robeck, an Assemblies of God minister. “We prefer first names, and not using titles,” he said. Most of the participants describe their faith and understanding in personal terms.

“That’s the thing that breaks down the walls; you find people who had no idea others thought the same way,” Robeck said. “After that, they’re hooked.” The meetings also have general lectures and small-group discussions, and the latter is where participants may raise issues of concern once the preliminaries have built camaraderie.

Supporters hope the gathering in Kenya will not get embroiled in disputes involving scripture or homosexuality. “I certainly wouldn’t anticipate it,” said Robeck; it “would have the potential to derail our effort.”

The secretary of the Global Christian Forum, Hubert van Beek of Versoix, Switzerland, said by e-mail that planners hope for an atmosphere in which a controversial issue may be named but explored only briefly. Since the meeting “is not equipped to deal with it at length,” participants (the term *delegates* is not used) would delay the matter for a more appropriate time—an admittedly “provisional” strategy, he said.

Asked whether the recent Vatican statement defining many non-Catholic churches as “not churches in the proper sense” put a damper on the upcoming meeting, van Beek reflected a widespread ecumenical consensus that the document only restated traditional Roman Catholic positions. “There have not been any cancellations so far and we do not really expect any,” he said.

The Vatican contingent at the gathering will be strong, said Robeck, who has been a participant for more than 20 years in international Pentecostal-Roman Catholic dialogues. Three Catholic bishops took part in the June Latin American Forum in Santiago, Chile, in which they “interacted in a remarkable way with the evangelical and Pentecostal participants,” said van Beek.

Pentecostals should be present in good numbers, too, although Robeck said that he tried in vain to get the Missouri-based Assemblies of God denomination to send a church official to Nairobi. The sessions will be at a conference center in Limuru, near Nairobi.

Two major umbrella church organizations arranged to meet in Limuru to attend the forum gathering as well. One is the 30-member international council of the World Evangelical Alliance, headed by Richard Howell of the Evangelical Fellowship of India. Howell is also on the forum’s continuation committee.

The other is a less visible group—the Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions (CS/CWC). It brings together administrators of bodies such as the Lutheran World Federation and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

The CS/CWC has met annually since 1957 for informal exchanges, though in recent years it has explored how to enrich dialogues and rethink ecumenical relations.

At the secretaries’ meeting last October at the Vatican, Pope Benedict XVI in his message to them prayed that the CS/CWC might gain fresh insights as it “continues to grapple with important questions of its identity and its specific role in the ecumenical movement.”

If Cardinal Dulles, now 88, has his way, ecumenical leaders would leave behind many formal theological dialogues that reach an “overstated consensus” and are susceptible to criticism that theologians choose “politically correct” formulations.

Since 1995, he said, he has urged more informal and personal sharing of gifts that one church tradition has and that might appeal to other churches. He cited as an example of that approach a January 2006 experiment in England at an international conference of Catholics in conversation with Orthodox, Anglicans and Methodists.

“How then can Christian unity be envisaged?” Dulles asked at the Oberlin conference, convened by the National Council of Churches. Aside from being “open to the Holy Spirit,” the cardinal said, the first condition is to listen to the testimonies of various Christian communities.

“The witnesses and their hearers need not insist on rigorous proof,” he said. “Testimony operates by a different logic. We speak of what has been graciously manifested to us and what we have found to be of value for our union with God.

“If others accept what we proclaim, it is because they trust us, at least on this point,” Dulles said. “Our words, they may find, carry the trademark of truth.”