

Vatican leader, others call Global Christian Forum vital innovation: Broadest range of Christian traditions ever

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A senior Vatican official says the Roman Catholic Church welcomes the start of the Global Christian Forum—a new body intended to bring together the diverse strands of Christianity as never before.

“When Christians are divided, the preaching of the gospel suffers and this is a pain we all have to feel,” said Bishop Brian Farrell, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, in addressing the inaugural November 6-9 meeting of the forum near Nairobi, Kenya.

The 240 leaders from Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, evangelical, Pentecostal and other churches agreed in a concluding statement: “Recognizing that unity is first and foremost God’s gift through the work of the Holy Spirit, our commitment is to press on in promoting ever greater understanding and cooperation among Christians, while respecting the diversity of our identities, traditions and individual gifts.”

The forum idea was proposed in the mid-1990s by Konrad Raiser, a German theologian who was then general secretary of the World Council of Churches, whose 347 member churches are drawn mostly from Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox traditions.

The forum in Kenya, which followed enthusiastic regional versions held in recent years, is believed to have brought together the broadest range of Christian traditions ever for a global meeting.

The turnout, while planned well in advance, pleased the organizers. “I am stunned. We have here what might be described as a new Pentecost,” said Fuller Seminary professor Cecil (Mel) Robeck, an Assemblies of God minister and a veteran ecumenist.

“Some would have said that this event was not possible, but here we are,” said WCC general secretary Samuel Kobia, addressing participants November 6.

“It is only by lowering barriers, by coming fully into each other’s presence and confronting our prejudices, that we may come to understand each other significantly better,” said Kobia, a Methodist from Kenya. He said his father, a charismatic street preacher, once donated part of his family’s land for the building of an Assemblies of God church.

The forum’s initial goals are modest—focusing first on personal testimonies and fellowship. Leaders hope eventually to address issues of common concern.

Farrell said the Global Christian Forum is vital, though he cautioned against being too quick to replace existing interchurch bodies. “The experience of all of us in these days is that we have been able to talk to each other in honesty,” the Catholic bishop said. “If we can know each other better, then we can deal with our questions.”

Support came also from another key participant, Geoff Tunnicliffe, international director of the World Evangelical Alliance, a network active in 128 nations. “We believe this table brings greater understanding and breaks stereotypes,” Tunnicliffe said. *—Fredrick Nzwili, Ecumenical News International*