

In tough straits: Can the ecumenical logjam be broken?

by [Michael Root](#) in the [December 29, 2009](#) issue

The ecumenical path has always been narrow, but recent events cast a new light on the limited and shifting range of ecumenical possibilities. With the exception of the success of the rapprochement of Lutheran, Reformed and United churches in Europe, intra-Protestant ecumenism seems to be dead in the water.

Churches Uniting in Christ, the successor to the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), the most ambitious of all intra-Protestant ecumenical initiatives in the U.S., suspended operations in January 2008, and its future is uncertain at best. Full communion agreements between individual Protestant churches, which blossomed in the 1990s, have proven to make little difference in how the national churches operate or in the lives of most individual congregations. (Churches supposedly in full communion tear themselves apart over sexuality questions in complete isolation from each other, without seeking a common mind.)

Meanwhile, the move toward Catholic-Orthodox reconciliation, which to outsiders seems possible with sufficient good will, remains stuck. Evangelicals have yet to find a way to engage effectively in new ecumenical ventures.

The Catholic Church, for all of its occasional clumsiness, remains the one significant actor with some kind of vision. In October its words and actions highlighted important aspects of the present situation. At the beginning and end of the month, celebrations occurred in Chicago and in Augsburg, Germany, to mark the tenth anniversary of the Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. Methodists, who affirmed the JDDJ in 2006, joined in. The German events included an academic symposium, at which Eberhard Jüngel, an early and harsh critic of the JDDJ, gave a presentation. What has been achieved in the bilateral dialogues remains important and continues to be affirmed.

At the Chicago celebration, however, Catholic archbishop Wilton Gregory made explicit mention of the ecumenical difficulties created by the recent decision of the

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to affirm both same-sex blessings and partnered homosexual clergy. The summer of 2009 also witnessed significant decisions by the Episcopal Church to affirm homosexual relations. For most Catholics and Orthodox and for many Protestants, these decisions are not just mistakes; they are hard to comprehend.

A driving force behind many ecumenical efforts of the last century has been the sense that, beneath all the obvious differences, the churches share the same fundamental faith and need to find theological and institutional ways to live out that unity. The arguments over sexuality are significant not only because the issues are important in themselves, but because they undermine that assumption of deep agreement. Christians on the varying sides of the debate often cannot understand how other faithful Christians could reach such conclusions, unless disagreements on biblical authority and the shape of Christian life run much deeper than had been thought. And unlike the more obscure issues that concern many ecumenical discussions, differences on sexuality elicit visceral reactions, among both clergy and laity. The sense that we really belong together begins to seem more dubious. What has been achieved needs to be affirmed and preserved, but the road ahead appears ever longer.

Between the two celebrations of the JDDJ, the Vatican announced its initiative to create new structures—termed personal ordinariates—for Anglicans who are ready to embrace Catholic doctrine and authority, but who also wish to preserve distinct Anglican traditions of liturgy and spirituality. The ecumenical impact of this move is impossible to estimate. If very few Anglicans take advantage of this opportunity, it may have little importance. If the new structures become significant and lively bodies, it's possible that they could provide a new testing ground for how Western traditions in relation to Rome might be “united, but not absorbed” (to use a slogan from early 20th-century Anglican-Catholic discussions that was cited in the statement from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith announcing the new initiative).

Could such structures help break up the ecumenical logjam? Or will they only harden the lines between the two sides? The various “Catholic rite” churches or particular churches in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, which offer one of the few analogies for the new structures, have so far not proved ecumenically helpful in Catholic-Orthodox relations.

The Catholic initiative does point to a new reality whose ecumenical importance is hard to gauge: the increased willingness of individuals to change churches. One of the most significant findings of the Pew Research Center's survey is that 44 percent of Americans do not belong to the church or denomination (or lack of such) in which they were raised. More than in the past, if Americans are not happy in the denomination to which they have belonged, they simply go elsewhere. On the one hand, ecumenical rapprochement may have helped to make this fluidity possible. If church authorities downplay differences, then why not move if one is unhappy with a decision the denomination has made, especially on an emotion-laden issue such as sexuality?

On the other hand, this fluidity can tend to cement disagreements and hamper ecumenical approaches in the future. Congregations may not leave denominations in large numbers, but laity and future clergy might self-select particular denominations on the basis of hot-button issues. Paradoxically, the ecumenical progress of the recent past might foster polarization in the immediate future.

Precisely in that light, the Anglican initiative by the Vatican contains both danger and promise. The danger is that the new ordinariates could become a haven for the disaffected for whom rapprochement is precisely what is not desired. The promise is that such structures could become bridges that maintain lines of communication during a time of increased mutual suspicion.

Good will and patience will need to be in large supply for the positive possibilities to be realized. The gracious response of Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams to the announcement of the initiative is a hopeful sign.