

Hundreds of Christian leaders see new unity: Conference on World Mission and Evangelism

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A broad range of more than 600 Christian leaders ended an eight-day missions conference after hearing a plea from Samuel Kobia, general secretary of the World Council of Churches, that they be a “moral compass” for contemporary society.

The May 9-16 Conference on World Mission and Evangelism, held at a military recreation center outside Athens, was the 12th such meeting since 1910—when the modern ecumenical movement began in Edinburgh—but the first held in a predominantly Orthodox country.

Unlike some other WCC-sponsored meetings in the past, the mission conference was short on political declarations but long on prayer, Bible study and workshops on a range of issues that confront the Christian movement in the new century. They include economic globalization, violence (such as the war in Iraq), AIDS and Christian and interreligious reconciliation and dialogue.

Participants did, however, draft a “message to the churches” that called on the world’s Christians to be “reconciling and healing communities.” While noting a power imbalance between the global North and the global South and East, the statement offered no specific suggestions to address the difference.

“We have become painfully aware of the mistakes of the past and pray that we may learn from them,” it added. It said delegates were conscious that race, caste and gender bias continue to exist in the churches.

Perhaps reflecting the larger than usual presence of Pentecostals at the meeting, the statement put special stress on the role of healing, including that which takes place through prayer, ascetic practices “and the charisms [gifts] of healing through sacraments and healing services [and] through a combination of medical and

spiritual, social and system approaches.”

In some ways, the ecumenical nature of the conference overshadowed the more overtly political issues.

For the first time, the Roman Catholic Church had an official delegation rather than just observers at a WCC-sponsored meeting, and Bishop Brian Farrell, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, was upbeat about the future of ecumenical relations under recently elected Pope Benedict XVI.

Farrell told a May 12 news conference that formal dialogue between the Orthodox churches and the Catholic Church will restart soon. Such talks were ended, with some bitterness, in 2000.

“We definitely feel, I think on both sides, that we are at a point where we can build a much more positive relationship,” Farrell said. Ecumenical News International, the Geneva-based religious news service, reported that Farrell also said that Metropolitan Kirill, a top Russian Orthodox Church official, had a “long private talk” with Benedict.

Historically, the WCC has been made up primarily of Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox church bodies. But in the past decade, under the leadership of Konrad Raiser, the previous general secretary, it has—like the National Council of Churches in the U.S.—sought to expand.

Fifteen of the 650 conference delegates appointed by their churches and mission agencies were Pentecostals. Additional observers from other Pentecostal and evangelical churches not affiliated with the 347-member WCC also attended.

“I think there will be a time when my church may join the World Council of Churches,” said Yong-Gi Hong, a Pentecostal scholar and senior mission executive of the Yoido Full Gospel Church in the Republic of Korea. “There are already Pentecostal member churches, and my church is a full member of the national council in Korea.”

But full participation in the WCC is still problematic not only for the giant Catholic Church but also for Pentecostals. Opoku Odinyah, rector of the Pentecostal University College in Ghana and an adviser at the conference, said “there would have to be change” before his Church of the Pentecost would consider membership.

The main source of reluctance is Pentecostalism's aversion to "hyperinstitutionalism," he said.

Nonetheless, at least one of the major issues discussed in the workshop sessions—AIDS—could be a major force in bringing the disparate churches together as the pandemic ravages Africa. -*Religion News Service*