



**World Council of Churches 9th General Assembly  
Porto Alegre, Brazil, 14 - 23 February 2006  
'God, in your grace, transform the world'**

**40 Years of Relationships between the Roman Catholic Church  
and the World Council of Churches**

(from brief notes taken at the workshop)

*Chairing this workshop were Bp Bryan Farrell, Secretary to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU); Archbp Mario Conti of Glasgow, former Co-Chair of the Joint Working Group (JWG) of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC)/World Council of Churches (WCC); Bp Jonas Jonsson of Sweden, also former Co-Chair of the JWG; and Diane Kessler, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches and Committee Member of the WCC. These were all members of the JWG during its last session. Other members of the JWG who were present were introduced, from the PCPCU, Rumanian, Israel, Colombia and the US.*

Bishop Jonsson began by describing the role and work of the Joint Working Group, which was established 40 years ago, following the Second Vatican Council. Formal meetings and joint studies replaced the earlier working style of informal meetings and separate studies on the same themes. Since the last Assembly in Harare, the JWG has carried out joint studies on Baptism, Moral and Ethical Issues, and Interchurch Marriage, among other subjects. A full report on their studies was distributed to all participants at the Assembly, and was adopted at a later plenary meeting.

Bishop Conti said that prayer was an essential part of JWG meetings. From his own country, the Roman Catholic Church and Church of Scotland had contributed to the paper on Baptism, and this study was fundamental to furthering Christian unity.

Diane Kessler spoke about the section of the report concerning the relationship between the RCC and other councils of churches or regional ecumenical organisations, which was different in different countries. In some cases the RCC participated and sometimes it was not a full member. The report encourages closer relationships. The process of working together creates trust and respect, which are essential for ecumenical work. The RCC, and the WCC consisting of some 350 churches are asymmetric organisations, continually seeking new ways of relating to each other. There are differing ecclesiologies, which is why the RCC is not a member of the WCC. But the situation is better than it was, and the consensus model used at the current Assembly gave hope. Retiring members of the JWG have tried to hand on something positive to the new generation.

It was emphasised that the goal of full unity will only come as a gift from God. Christians need to go back to their spiritual roots, to practise spiritual ecumenism. A new generation of Christians, without the experience of the change in relationships over the past decades, need to feel the same passion for ecumenism. There is need for ecumenical formation to re-enthuse people. New differences arise, such as on ethical questions, and some can divide as much as previous theological divisions. There is interfaith dialogue too, which can arise from the social commitment of our churches alongside those of other religions.

Questions were asked:

- *Is there a vision of success, or is the travelling together the success?*

The response was that we are seeking full visible Christian unity. Some questions are clearly still a problem. Maybe we don't know quite how we are to get there, but we travel together in faith.

- *What is it that makes the RCC participate in some ecumenical councils and initiatives and not others? Its participation is growing, but there are other patterns too.*

Bp Jonsson said that in Sweden the situation has moved, to where it is not just a majority/minority church situation. There has been reorganisation along more 'families of churches' lines. Archbp Conti described Britain as a 'laboratory of ecumenical relationships', the development of such relationships seeing a different shape of instrument which allows churches perhaps to engage more directly in the consultation.

- *There seem to be fewer women than men on the JWG, as generally in 'deeper' theological studies. Why might this be?*

Bp Farrell said that this question had been discussed several times by the JWG. It arises partly out of structures. For example, some members the RCC delegation to the WCC are drawn from Bishops' Conferences. Also, some of the development of projects and ways of working are not necessarily comfortable to women. He acknowledged that evolution was necessary.

- *How can we ensure that there is still passion in the ecumenical movement, especially among the young?*

A Scottish participant said that the passion was still there among the younger generation, who had often grown up knowing each other across different church boundaries much better than the previous generation. It was felt by another participant that the churches may have reached crisis point, with an inability to sustain structures. Young people are coming back into certain churches wanting to share evangelisation at world level, and are impatient of old structures.

A comment was made that encyclicals and other papers coming out of the Vatican were not in accessible language to many people. The PCPCU is seeking for more information from seminaries and educational institutions to find out at what level ecumenical formation is practised. It was felt that passion and principles need to be maintained among the older generation too, as people are sometimes lacking to do such formation. Funding for joint councils of churches is also being cut back in many places.

- *Bev thanked the JWG on behalf of the Interchurch Families Interchurch Network for its work on questions of interchurch marriage, and noted that it was incomplete. How would the study continue?*

Bp Jonsson and Archbp Conti, when they were Co-Chairs of the JWG, had at one time been planning to come to the Second World Gathering of Interchurch Families held in Rome in 2003, but at a late stage had decided that this would set too firm a precedent and that they would not attend. But interchurch marriages were still a burning question, a growing situation around the world, and it would remain with them as an ongoing concern.

Archbp Conti said that there was quite some discomfort on the JWG around the term 'double belonging', and more work would have to be done on the concept this described. Working with the JWG's document on Baptism would be an excellent place to start.

- *A question to participants from Bp Jonsson: What does the work of the JWG symbolise in the Middle East and Latin America?*

It was explained that there are four families of churches in the Middle East: Greek Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox, Evangelical/Protestant (including Anglicans), and Catholic (seven churches) with various links. The work between them is difficult to compare with that of the JWG, as the ecumenical structures are different. There is also much influence of the secular on the religious, and also interfaith work. The 'family system' seems to work well.

This Assembly was invited by the Roman Catholic Church in Brazil as well as the other churches, as it is fully part of the Brazilian Council of Churches. Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Chile are a bit different from other Latin American countries, as the RCC was involved in ecumenical structures and formations of councils of churches from the beginning. Each area had to work within its own style and culture of churches.

Again it was felt that working jointly from the JWG's document on Baptism would be a good starting point.

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