



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

**United in Our Differences:
Search for Unity in Prayer and Action by Lay Spiritual Communities**
(from brief notes taken at the workshop)

This workshop was held in a big hall to enable interpretation - the speakers were all going to use English, so interpreters were provided for Spanish and Portuguese. About 200 attended. A group of Focolare singers greeted us as we arrived.

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Speakers from six different ecumenical communities introduced their ministries in response to the question: 'What binds you together?' They were asked to speak about how they live their spirituality and how they are involved in transformation. All these communities originated in Europe but now have members throughout the world, and have gone beyond the original confessions within which they originated. They were:

- Joan Buck for Focolare Roma
- Sr Anne Emmanuel from Paris, for the Grandchamp Community
- Kathy Galloway for the Iona Community in Scotland
- Professor Viorel Ionitsa for the Army of the Lord Community within the Romanian Orthodox Church
- Leonardo Umberto for the Sant-Egidio Community
- Fr Richard for the Taizé Community

Focolare: Joan Buck

Joan spoke of Focolare's sense of God as Love, and doing his work in unity, a spirituality of Jesus among us. She spoke of the 350 churches in the World Council all working together in this way too.

Grandchamp: Sr Anne Emmanuel

The Grandchamp Community is a community of women, founded in Switzerland, following the rule and pattern of Taizé. Sr Anne Emmanuel described a monastic community seeking God's face in solitude, enlarging the 'waiting place' in our hearts. The spirituality is one of community life, the work of welcome, the rhythm of prayer, being open to the unknown, living in integrity.

Iona: Kathy Galloway

The Iona Community started in the 1930s in the Reformed tradition, but now includes ten Christian traditions, and has lay and ordained, single and married, members. They follow a common rule of life and faith, including daily prayer and Bible reading, mutual accountability for money including tithing and for the use of time, meeting together in community including 'family groups', prayer and action for justice and peace in society. Kathy Galloway said that costly reconciliation is at the heart of the Gospel. The ministry of prayer and welcome is shared by members who come from traditions which are different in theology and ecclesiology but they live in unity in the community.

The Army of the Lord: Professor Viorel Ionitsa

This movement started between the wars, during the persecution during the Communist era, and then at the end of Communist rule around 1990 it came to life again among Romanians who found themselves often organising themselves to help each other. For example, there is a sizeable Romanian expat community in

Spain who support each other. Professor Ionitsa said there is no formal membership, but both lay and ordained people in the movement work to deepen their spirituality and work in unity.

Leonardo Umberto: Sant'Egidio

Leonardo Umberto asked: How can a Christian community unite people and then the world? The community of Sant'Egidio was born in Rome 40 years ago within the Catholic community. It was founded on the Word of God, a Word of love and affection to all, serving the poorest. This Word speaks directly to my life, and is not used to judge or condemn your life.

Fr Richard: Taizé

Fr Richard spoke of the three times a day that everything stops at Taizé for people to gather in the church for common prayer. Members make a life commitment as brothers in simplicity, sharing and celibacy. They live in the spirit of the Beatitudes, a spirit of joy, simplicity and mercy. Fr Richard described their life as a parable of Communion among people, witnessing to unity.

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The next part of the workshop started with the singing of an Iona 'Alleluia' led by Kathy Galloway. We were then invited to talk with our neighbours about how we saw our ministries of unity in our own settings. I found myself with a small group of young people from the Netherlands and Switzerland who were willing to talk but seemed to feel they were fairly alone as young people in their own churches. There wasn't enough time to develop the conversation, sadly.

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Questions asked of the speakers:

- How do you see the presence of the Holy Spirit in the current Assembly, and the process of the ecumenical movement in general?
- What are the special difficulties of living in communities involving different traditions, particularly the question of eucharistic sharing?
- What rôle do young people have in your communities?
- Which spiritual tradition is predominant in your community and is there a place for charismatic traditions?
- Do you embrace any inter-religious dialogue?
- Do you see any parallels between the growth of ecumenical communities and growth in theological courses, and what is your relationship with the institutional churches?

Time was running out, but several of the speakers gave a response to these questions:

Sr Anne Emmanuel for Grandchamp spoke of a consensus process in community similar to the Assembly consensus process, through which the Holy Spirit could work gently.

Joan Buck for Focolare said members receive the Eucharist in their own churches, and they accept divisions as suffering, but as a 'healthy difficulty'. There is a sharing of the joy of the presence of Christ among us, and a commitment to working for unity within members' own churches. Focolare does not see a dichotomy between institution and community. There are many young members, and also inter-religious dialogue. Focolare offers renewal, peace, challenge, community.

Kathy Galloway for Iona said that members remain members of their own churches, and respond in conscience to divisions. They find enrichment from other perspectives on sacramental unity - for example, there are Quaker members who have no sacramental worship. She mentioned the strong youth involvement in the community.

Professor Ionitsa said the Romanian community has problems with the authority of the institutional church; for example, there is one group among them which is breaking away.

Fr Richard said that Taizé has some inter-religious connections in Bangla Desh, Senegal and elsewhere. They are engaged together in pilgrimages with the disabled. There are possibilities to work together in the context of weakness.

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The Focolare singing group, consisting of members of several different generations, sang as we left the hall. It was a very interesting workshop, but we lacked time to develop the themes properly!