

Progress in Ecumenism

By Fr. Tony Bickett, Ecumenical Officer

On many fronts I hear that the ecumenical movement has slowed. Some say the movement is experiencing a winter in which little progress is being made. For many ecumenists the hopes and enthusiasm that occurred after the Second Vatican Council has all but disappeared. But the movement towards the restoration of unity among all Christians can never end.

In the history of Christianity the search for unity in the Body of Christ has been a constant effort. Ever since Jesus prayed at the Last Supper, "Father, I pray that they may all be one" (John 17:21) the Church has tried to produce and maintain this unity. In our own time we have all grown up in and have inherited a divided Church. In our country there are over twice as many different denominations (40,000) than there are Catholics parishes (19,000). We take this reality for granted as if this is the way it was meant to be. But as a divided Church we endanger the Church's mission to proclaim the Good News to the entire world. Our search for Christian unity is not an end in itself. We strive for Christian unity for the sake of the Gospel. We proclaim that Jesus came to reconcile us to one another and to the Father but our message does not follow our actions.

But progress is being made none the least. One important way occurred in June when the three largest Christians bodies in the world published an historic document entitled, "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct". This document is the result of five years of dialogue between the World Council of Churches (WCC), the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue (PCID) of the Roman Catholic Church and the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA). These three bodies which include Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, Protestant, Evangelical, Pentecostal and independent churches have a combined membership of some two billion people representing nearly 90 percent of the world's Christians.

Not since the first World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1910 have Christians reached such broad consensus on appropriate missionary conduct. This agreement spells out a list of recommendations regarding respectful behavior on the part of missionaries, evangelists and other witnesses when sharing the Christian faith. The document, released during a public presentation held at the Ecumenical Center in Geneva, Switzerland, outlines the conduct of mission "according to gospel principles".

The document begins, "Mission belongs to the very being of the church." The recommendations that follow suggest practical ways of engaging in mission while showing sincere respect for neighbors of other faiths. The Church has a duty to proclaim the faith and we do it better whenever we can do it together. Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, president of the PCID, cited a principle of Catholic teaching, "Reject nothing that is true and holy in each religion", cautioning that Christians must overcome religious conflicts if they are to "present the truth of God in a credible way." We are called to be one so that the world may believe in the Son of God.

This joint document reminds us that ecumenism is not dead. Movement towards greater visible unity among all Christians is happening in spite of the fact that some Christians continue to choose to separate themselves from the main body of the Church. Much is happening especially in the hearts and minds of ordinary Christians in an effort to build new bridges. The release of the text is a historic moment in the quest for Christian unity. The joint document on Christian witness calls for careful study of the issues of mission and inter-religious dialogue, the building of trust and cooperation among people of all religions and the promotion of religious freedom everywhere. Christians are encouraged to pray for the well-being of all, to strengthen their own religious identity and to avoid misrepresenting the beliefs of others.