

Churches urged toward visible unity: Overcoming longtime obstacles

by [Stephen Brown ENI](#) in the [March 21, 2006](#) issue

The appeals for visible church unity made at the recent World Council of Churches assembly in Brazil were not new, but the longtime obstacles remain a sore point for many—especially limits on celebrating communion in each other's churches and the lack of a common date for Easter.

The Geneva-based WCC is urging its member churches to consider a new statement, "Called to Be the One Church," that deals with sensitive issues of ecclesiology, or the doctrine of the church, including mutual recognition of each other's clergy and baptism.

"Our continuing divisions are real wounds to the body of Christ, and God's mission in the world suffers," says the document issued at the February 14-23 assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The text encourages churches "to continue on this arduous yet joyous path."

The WCC, founded in 1948, has more than 340 member churches from predominantly Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox traditions. The Roman Catholic Church is not a WCC member but has representatives on some WCC bodies, including the Faith and Order Commission.

"The key to deepening the fellowship between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC lies in rigorous theological discourse and holding fast to the vision of visible unity," said Bishop Brian Farrell, secretary of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

Through the WCC, the text states, "churches have been able to listen to one another and speak to one another, engaging issues that challenge the churches and imperil humankind." Still, it added, "Bearing in mind the experience of the life we already share . . . it is now time to take concrete steps together."

The “One Church” text poses ten questions, which cover issues such as the extent to which churches recognize another church’s baptism and whether they believe it is “necessary, or permissible, or not possible” to share the Eucharist with members of other churches.

The WCC assembly said it hopes all churches will have responded by its next assembly in about seven years.

Concerning the intermittent effort to settle on a simultaneous date for Easter, a top Vatican official said earlier at the assembly that an agreement would be an “enormous” step forward. “Especially for churches in Muslim countries it is a scandal if Christians cannot celebrate together,” Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Vatican’s Christian unity council, told a media conference.

Easter is usually celebrated on two different dates, one by most Protestants and Roman Catholics and the other by most Orthodox churches. The different dates stem in part from disagreement over reform of the calendar by Pope Gregory XIII in the 16th century.

This year Easter Sunday is April 16 for most Protestants and Catholics and one week later for most Orthodox churches. The Easter dates will coincide in 2007 and 2010.

The WCC and the Middle East Council of Churches launched an initiative in 1997 to enable all churches to celebrate Easter together every year. Although many churches around the world welcomed the initiative, hopes that the start of the millennium might mark the end of division over the dates proved unrealistic.

“If we can reach this agreement it would be an enormous step forward,” said Kasper, noting that the Vatican is open to different ways of resolving the issue. Kasper and Farrell were part of an 18-member delegation of Catholic observers at the assembly.

The Vatican and WCC churches remain divided over issues such as the Eucharist, the role of clergy and papal authority. But the cardinal urged churches to reach agreement on the mutual recognition of baptism, terming it “fundamental” to Christian unity.