

Progress reported on proselytizing code: World Evangelical Alliance to support pact

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Efforts to establish a code of conduct to govern Christian churches' missionary and evangelism efforts—especially those aimed at other Christians—took a major step forward recently when the World Evangelical Alliance indicated that it would support such a pact.

“We see this as a major step forward on the way to getting the code agreed on among organizations representing a huge body of Christians,” said Juan Michel, a spokesperson for the World Council of Churches, which is heading up the project along with the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

The code, expected to be finalized in 2010, would be directed at both inter-Christian evangelism and Christian mission to those outside the faith.

The decision of the WEA, whose membership numbers 233 evangelical denominations in more than 120 countries, was announced at an August 8-12 consultation in Toulouse, France. The meeting was attended by a broad spectrum of Christians, including Pentecostals and evangelicals as well as representatives of WCC churches and Roman Catholic delegates.

Conversion to Christianity from Islam can be a punishable offense in some nations with a Muslim majority, but serious tensions also exist within Christianity. Catholic leaders have voiced sharp criticism of evangelicals and Pentecostals for seeking to convert Catholics, and Orthodox leaders in Russia have accused Catholics of encroaching on their traditional hegemony in church matters.

Thomas Schirrmacher, a German theologian who heads the WEA’s International Institute for Religious Freedom, said the code would seek to “establish the borderline between acceptable forms of mission protected by religious freedom and undue

forms of trying to convert people.”

He added: “‘Evangelical’ and ‘ecumenical’ Christians have never been as close in this regard as they are today.” At the same time, Schirmacher said, it will be very difficult to nail down specific “unethical means” of conversion.

Enforcement will also be a problem. Neither the WCC nor the WEA has any formal enforcement powers over its members. WCC officials also said that despite Vatican participation in the process, any code is unlikely to become official policy within the Roman Catholic Church.

At the Toulouse consultation, Tony Richie of the U.S.-based Church of God said the code of conduct would not be about whether Christians evangelize, but how they do it. He drew a distinction between “dialogical evangelism” and “aggressive evangelism.” Schirmacher stressed that the code “will only make sense if it is not directed against evangelicals and Pentecostals but written together with them.”

WCC officials were heartened by the meeting. “The fact that Protestants, Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Pentecostals and evangelicals were able to meet and discuss such a complex issue is in itself a success,” said Hans Ucko, a Swedish theologian who heads the WCC’s program for interreligious dialogue. *-Religion News Service*