

Historic consensus on proselytizing

by [Francis X. Rocca](#) in the [July 26, 2011](#) issue

Christian missionaries should renounce all "deception and coercive means" of winning converts, according to a final document from a coalition of evangelicals, the World Council of Churches and the Vatican that is unprecedented in its breadth.

"Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct" is the latest attempt to assuage sometimes violent tensions over proselytizing in non-Christian societies. The agreement was released June 28 in Geneva, Switzerland.

The WCC, the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) together "represent over 90 percent of the world's total Christian population," according to a WEA statement, which hailed the accord as the "first document of its kind in the history of the church."

Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran of the Vatican council noted that this was the first time the three Christian bodies have worked together. The key message of the text, said Olav Fykse Tveit, the WCC general secretary, is that in witnessing to the Christian faith, "our task is . . . not to impose it or not provoke anybody in the way we present it."

The document has political significance as well, said Geoff Tunnicliffe, CEO and secretary general of the evangelical group. It shows "that Christians are not only able to work together, but that together we are an even stronger voice on behalf of those who suffer oppression and persecution," he said.

The document calls on individual Christian churches to develop guidelines for proselytizing "among those of different religions and among those who do not profess any particular religion."

Christian missionaries are to "reject all forms of violence . . . including the violation or destruction of places of worship, sacred symbols or texts," the document says. Instead, they should "acknowledge and appreciate what is true and good" in other religions and make any criticisms "in a spirit of mutual respect."

The document also calls on missionaries to respect the "full personal freedom" of their converts by allowing them "sufficient time for adequate reflection and preparation" before they adopt a new faith.

Noting the importance of faith healing in many ministries, the document instructs missionaries to ensure that the "vulnerability of people and their need for healing are not exploited." Likewise, the document denounces proselytizing with the use of "financial incentives and rewards."

Though not a full-throated apology for such practices, the injunctions are "tantamount to an admission that they have been going on," said Daniel A. Madigan, an expert on Muslim-Christian relations at Georgetown University.

While the document recommends sensitivity in missionary work, it also affirms religious freedom as a fundamental human right, "including the right to publicly profess, practice, propagate and change one's religion."

Preparation of the document began in 2006, largely in response to accusations of "unethical methods" used by Christian missionaries, according to the WEA statement. The document does not name specific countries or regions. "In some cases these objections have led to anticonversion laws and violence," the WEA noted.

A 2009 study by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life said the highest levels of legal and social restrictions on religious freedom are found in non-Christian countries, including Iran, Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, India and Saudi Arabia. —RNS/ENInews