

Ecumenical quandary

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [March 1, 2000](#) issue

Recently Yale Divinity School organized a conference to mark a major ecumenical event of the last decade (some would even argue, the major ecumenical event of the last century). It was the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church. The declaration affirms “a consensus on basic truths on the doctrine of justification” and claims “that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations.” With the signing, an important bridge has been built across a rift that divided Western Christendom for almost 500 years.

As I was preparing for the conference, I was reminded of the raging debates in Germany about the text of the declaration. After the final draft was sent to the churches for consideration, some 140 Protestant theology professors publicly opposed it. Since the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was also displeased, an Annex was prepared. Although Rome and some prominent Protestant theologians considered the Annex a marked improvement over the main text, an even greater number of theologians rose up against it. At the bottom of an appeal urging the LWF not to sign the declaration with the Annex, one could read the names of more than 230 German theologians who belong to groups that otherwise have almost nothing in common. Moreover, the debates about the issue were not limited to theological faculties and churches. Some of the most prominent newspapers in the German-speaking world participated vigorously.

No such uproar over the declaration took place in the U.S. For all I can tell, discussions among theologians were limited to a relatively narrow circle of ecumenical activists who thought the declaration a great success. But the wider public hardly registered the event. In general, there was neither criticism nor celebration of the declaration. Its advent was greeted with the silence of indifference.

The vehemence of the debates in Germany can partly be explained by the fact that Germany is the land of the Reformation. But why indifference elsewhere? I want to

suggest two reasons, one that concerns general culture in late capitalist societies and the other that concerns developments in Protestant Christianity.

First, wide segments of the population in Western cultures increasingly deem debates about religious doctrines to be insignificant. The problem is not primarily that life has run ahead of a particular set of beliefs, so that they no longer seem relevant. Rather, doctrines as such have lost importance. Flexible “options” and shifting “feelings” about things are increasingly replacing strong convictions with a claim to truth. People today tend to think that only bigots argue about the truth of their religious beliefs.

Second, for some years now established Protestant denominations have been declining numerically, losing social influence and undergoing an identity crisis. Within Protestantism, numerical growth and spiritual dynamism seem to have migrated to evangelicals, Pentecostals and charismatics, especially in non-Western countries. Pentecostals and charismatics have larger membership than all the Protestant denominations combined: they represent the second largest body in Christendom. And there are no signs that their growth is slowing down. Hundreds of new churches are being born daily.

The significance of these two trends for the future of ecumenism becomes obvious as soon as one remembers the character of ecumenical work as practiced over the past 50 years. The way the declaration about justification was forged is a good example. It took 30 years of painstaking work in numerous national and international settings. And the work is by no means done. Once the document is finished, the process of its ecclesial reception begins—with uncertain results, as the “rebellion” of German theologians shows. Add to this that the document addresses only one issue that divides Catholic and Lutheran churches, even if the issue is the most important one. After a staggering magnitude of work, there is a snail’s pace of ecumenical progress.

The most significant challenge for ecumenical efforts stems from the clash between the nature of ecumenical processes and powerful cultural and ecclesial developments. Just think: In the time it takes for ecumenical agreement to be reached on just one doctrine, dozens of new denominations and thousands of loosely associated congregations will emerge worldwide with a multimillion membership. All the ecumenical running notwithstanding, we will continue to fall behind.

One way to address the problem would be to replace an ecumenism of theological dialogues with an ecumenism of ecumenical practical cooperation. But this will not do. On critical issues, churches find it as difficult to work together as it is to believe together. After all, as the difficulties in forging common action-statements in relation to the global economic system or the issues of sexuality show, in the absence of shared beliefs it is not easy to agree on what is to be done. Doctrines matter, and one major theological task is to help churches understand why.

We can neither abandon an ecumenism of dialogues nor rest satisfied with it. How to get past this quandary is *the* most important problem facing the ecumenical movement today. The crisis of ecumenical institutions is real (as in debates about the survival and shape of the National Council of Churches), and it demands our attention. But we will hardly be able to create healthy institutions if we are unclear about the very nature of the ecumenical work that will be required in the future.