

“Inspired by the Same Vision”: Roman Catholic Participation in National and Regional Councils of Churches A JWG Study

I. The purpose of this document¹

“The member churches of the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church are inspired by the same vision of God’s plan to unite all things in Christ” (Common Understanding and Vision 4.11). One means of moving towards this vision has been membership and participation in councils of churches. After more than forty years of experience, the Joint Working Group is asking some basic questions about Catholic involvement in national and regional councils of churches and other ecumenical instruments. What works well? What is not working well? Why?

Many councils of churches are struggling with a variety of issues that, in some cases, also are vexing their member churches, such as trying to clarify anew purpose and direction; seeking to capture the imagination of new generations, and finding the financial resources needed to meet the expectations of members and the demands of common ministry. These issues have been considered in other contexts, and some references are listed at the conclusion of this text.

Because specific questions about Roman Catholic participation are being raised in the conciliar context, this document will examine some systemic issues that councils of churches are facing. Some of these are inherent in the very nature of councils. Some are new problems in a world that has changed significantly since councils first were formed. This is the contemporary environment in which we are shining a lens on particular questions.

When the Roman Catholic Church is a member of a national council of churches (NCC) or regional ecumenical organization (REO), what were the circumstances that facilitated membership? If concerns have surfaced, what are they? How are they being addressed? If signs of growth have resulted, what are they? How have they been nurtured? How has Catholic membership affected relationships among all the member churches?

When the Roman Catholic Church is not a member of an NCC/REO, what are some of the reasons? If concerns are cited, what are they? Have other ways, short of membership, been used to encourage participation? How has Catholic ecclesiology affected

issues of participation and membership in councils? Has the possibility of participation by the Roman Catholic Church discouraged involvement by another church, and if so, for what reasons?

This study addresses one aspect of a multi-faceted ecumenical scene, and it is part of a series of periodic reflections about the nature and purpose of councils of churches. It was prepared by the Joint Working Group, the post-Vatican II instrument created to enhance relationships between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, in consultation with the leaders of NCCs and REOs, who offered valuable suggestions. We pray that it will strengthen appreciation for, understanding of, and participation in councils of churches.

II. Councils of churches and regional ecumenical organizations

When churches come together to form a council of churches, they consider the theological basis that becomes their organizing principle. Some of these bases have been Trinitarian (e.g. all churches who subscribe to the baptismal formula of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”) or Christological (e.g. all churches which claim “Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour”). Either implicit or explicit in this basis is a definition of their purpose in coming together through the council, and of the marks of membership. These bases, which vary somewhat, become the framework in which churches choose to apply for membership.

The ultimate aim of churches in the ecumenical movement is full visible Christian unity. Councils of churches are a privileged instrument by which churches can move towards this goal as they witness to a real, though incomplete unity in their service of the mission of the church.

At the same time, this study needs a working definition for councils of churches. One such definition has been given by a document produced by the Massachusetts Council of Churches:

A council of churches is an institutional expression of the ecumenical movement, in which representatives of separated and autonomous Christian churches within a given area covenant together to become an enduring fellowship for making visible and effective the unity and mission of the church (Odyssey Towards Unity, p.30).

Sometimes membership in a council or conference includes not only churches, but also other ecumenical organizations. In these cases, the ecumenical body may use another name, such as “Christian Council”, but the precise nature of membership is not necessarily self-evident from the organizational title alone.

1. ROMAN CATHOLIC PARTICIPATION IN NCCs: THE CURRENT SCENE

The participation of the Roman Catholic Church in national councils of churches is a phenomenon that has grown consistently since the Second Vatican Council. At the time of the Council, the Roman Catholic Church did not take part in any national council of churches, but at the present time, of approximately 120 national councils of churches, the Roman Catholic Church is a full member in 70.

The continents and regions where the Roman Catholic Church has membership in an NCC reflect a broad geographical spectrum. Europe, Africa, Oceania and the Caribbean make up the bulk of the regions in which the Roman Catholic Church is fully represented in national councils of churches. Elsewhere, the Roman Catholic Church is a member in some countries of Asia, Latin America and North America.

In several countries, partial or restricted membership has been achieved. In some countries, such as Zimbabwe and the Slovak Republic, the Roman Catholic Church enjoys observer or consultant status in the NCC. Elsewhere, as in the USA and in many Asian countries, the Roman Catholic Church, although still lacking any structural connection with other Christian churches through councils, has ongoing working relationships between the Catholic episcopal conference and the national council of churches. In the United States, for example, the Office of Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops is a member of the Faith and Order commission of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. In Chile, Argentina and Ecuador, “ecumenical fraternities” exist among church leaders. While not councils of churches, these fraternities serve as instruments of community.

Moreover, in many countries where the Roman Catholic Church is not a member of the NCC, Catholic dioceses are represented in the local or statewide councils of churches. For example, in Caracas, Venezuela, there is a council of the historical churches of which the Roman Catholic Church is a member. A less formal ecumenical association of churches, with Roman Catholic participation, exists in Mexico City. In the USA, of 41 state councils of churches, Catholic dioceses are members in at least thirteen state councils and participate as observers (variously defined) in at least six others.

Membership in 70 national councils does not show the full extent of Catholic participation. In 12 countries of the Middle East where there are no NCCs, the Roman Catholic Church is a full and active member of the regional body, the Middle East Council of Churches. At the fifth plenary assembly of the MECC in 1990, seven distinct churches in communion with Rome joined the MECC, forming the Catholic family of churches, along with the Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox and Evangelical families.

2. CATHOLIC PARTICIPATION IN REOS: THE CURRENT SCENE

Of the seven REOs associated with the World Council of Churches, the Roman Catholic Church is a member of three: the Caribbean Conference of Churches (CCC), the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC), and the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC). In 1973, after a process of consultation and prayer begun in 1969, the Caribbean Conference of Churches was formed, with the Roman Catholic Church as a founding member. This was the first instance after the Second Vatican Council where the Roman Catholic Church entered into the process of founding a new regional ecumenical organization. The Pacific Conference of Churches was formed in 1966 and the Roman Catholic Church became a full member in 1976.

Participation of the Roman Catholic Church in a regional conference does not imply that the Catholic Church in every nation of that region also is a member of its respective national council. For example, although the Roman Catholic Church in some dioceses is a member of the regional Caribbean Conference of Churches (CCC), the

Catholic Church in Haiti, Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Dominican Republic is neither a member of the CCC nor of its respective national council of churches.

In regions where the Roman Catholic Church is not a member of the regional ecumenical organization, a good working relationship often exists between the REO and the continental association of Catholic episcopal conferences. In Europe, for example, a year after the Council of Bishops' Conferences in Europe (CCEE) was founded in 1971, the Conference of European Churches (CEC) established, in cooperation with the CCEE, a joint committee to promote collaboration. The two European bodies, the CEC and CCEE, following the encounters at Basel 1989 and at Graz 1997, in April 2001 signed a *Charta Oecumenica*, "Guidelines for CEC/CCEE Cooperation", which continues to have positive ripple effects in countries throughout the region.

In Asia, the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) have intensified efforts at greater coordination and cooperation on common projects. Most recently, the two associations have undertaken cooperative projects on ecumenical formation, peace studies and inter-religious dialogue. Despite Pope John Paul II's appeals that the Roman Catholic Church in Asian countries should consider joining, where pastorally feasible, in ecumenical association with other churches, the churches in Asia have been relatively slow in responding. Only in Australia and Taiwan is the Roman Catholic Church a full member of the national council of churches. In Malaysia, the Catholic Church is not a member of the NCC, but takes part in the more inclusive association of the Christian Federation of Malaysia. It is perhaps because of this reluctance that the pope specifically urged, in his post-synodal exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* of December 1999, that "the national episcopal conferences in Asia invite other Christian churches to join in a process of prayer and consultation in order to explore the possibilities of new ecumenical structures and associations to promote Christian unity" (§30).

The Australian experience is worth noting here. The Australian Council of Churches, formed in 1946, had Protestant, Anglican and eventually Orthodox membership. The Roman Catholic Church was not a member, nor were several Protestant churches. In 1988, the ACC members extended an invitation to churches that were not part of the ACC to work together towards creating a new structure that might more effectively express ecumenical relationships and serve the ecumenical movement in Australia. A planning group tried out ideas on prospective member churches and finally proposed that the ACC make way for a National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) with a rewritten constitution, revamped programme emphases, new decision-making processes and a more inclusive self-understanding. In 1994, the new NCCA came into being with 14 member churches: Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant. The process has served as a catalyst for all the member churches to renew and deepen their ecumenical commitment.

Early relations between the Latin American REO, Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias (CLAI, Latin American Council of Churches), and the Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (CELAM, Latin American Episcopal Conference) were limited and often strained. Since 1995, however, the two organizations have reinitiated relations and have undertaken meetings, mutual visits, and a common project on the study of Pentecostal Christianity. The two organizations now are considering a proposal to form a permanent joint working group. In some countries of the region, such as Costa Rica, the churches

are engaged in discussions that, it is hoped, will lead to an inclusive ecumenical association.

There are no projects in common between the 150-member All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) and the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM). However, the two organizations regularly extend invitations to each other to attend their plenary assemblies as observers.

III. Evolving attitude of the Roman Catholic Church to membership in NCCs

The Roman Catholic Church came late to the ecumenical movement. This is partially due to an attitude that ecumenism would constitute a compromise with error, partly because Catholics in the early part of the 20th century were hoping that other churches would “return” to the “fullness” of Christian faith which was to be found in the Catholic tradition. The turning point came with the 1964 Second Vatican Council Decree on Ecumenism, often referred to by its Latin title *Unitatis Redintegratio* (UR). Although the Decree on Ecumenism did not refer explicitly to councils of churches, the document laid the theological foundations for Catholic participation in such councils by recognizing the ecclesial character of other churches, repeatedly referring to them as “churches and ecclesial communities”. Moreover, the Decree on Ecumenism shifts the focus on Christian unity for Catholics from an ecumenism of a return to Rome as the centre of the church to one in which Christ is seen “as the source and centre of ecclesiastical communion” (UR 20).

At the time of the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church was not a member of any national council of churches, and the document *Unitatis Redintegratio* included no explicit encouragement to seek membership in NCCs. However, in a dramatic development in 1971, only seven years after the Decree on Ecumenism was promulgated, the Roman Catholic Church had joined the national council of churches in 11 countries. The number increased to 19 by 1975, to 33 by 1986, to 41 by 1993, to 70 in 2003 (or 82, if one includes the nations of the Middle East Council of Churches).

1. THE 1975 DOCUMENT, ECUMENICAL COLLABORATION

Before 1975, Catholic participation in NCCs was approved by the Holy See on a case-by-case basis, but no overall guidelines for participation had been published. The first explicit treatment came in 1975 in a document issued by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity entitled *Ecumenical Collaboration at the Regional, National, and Local Levels* (EC). By then, the Roman Catholic Church was a member of the NCC in 19 countries.

This document is important for two reasons: (1) it elaborated the principles on which Catholic participation in councils of churches is based, and (2) it formed the basis of the position taken in the official 1993 Guidelines, which often simply restates the 1975 document. At the same time, the 1975 document must be understood in the context of an evolving attitude towards councils. Some elements regarding the nature and scope of ecumenical organizations as understood in *Ecumenical Collaboration* were subsequently modified in later documents.

Chapter 5 of the document, entitled “Considerations Concerning Council Membership”, takes up the theological motivations for joining in ecumenical association with

other Christian churches, as well as the practical difficulties to be kept in mind. The document holds that “since the Second Vatican Council’s recognition of the ecclesial character of other Christian communities, the church has frequently called upon Catholics to cooperate not only with other Christians as individuals, but also with other churches and ecclesial communities as such” (5a). This association with other churches as churches, states the document, should not be seen as a purely pragmatic cooperation on matters of social and human concern, but should go beyond that to the more essential form of cooperation in the area of a common Christian witness of faith.

Membership in a council of churches implies “recognition of the council of churches as an instrument, among others, both for expressing the unity already existing among the churches and also of advancing towards a greater unity and a more effective Christian witness” (5b). Catholics and other Christians must not see their participation in councils of churches as the final goal of ecumenical activity, as though full Christian unity were to be achieved simply by joining a council of churches. Prayer and worship in common, cooperation in biblical translation and coordination of liturgical texts, joint statements on moral questions, and common responses to social issues of justice and peace are also steps towards unity and can be undertaken also in those regions where the Roman Catholic Church does not belong to a national or regional council, but such paths to unity can be facilitated and encouraged by Catholic participation in the council of churches.

This does not diminish the value of councils of churches, but rather underlines their importance in helping the churches to seek the fullness of unity that Christ desired among his disciples. As the document later concludes: “Among the many forms of ecumenical cooperation, councils of churches and Christian councils are not the only form, but they are certainly one of the more important” (6g). They play “an important role in ecumenical relations” and hence are to be taken seriously by all the churches.

The document seeks to relieve some of the theological disquiet that some Catholics might feel about joining a council of churches. Joining a council in which the Roman Catholic Church would find itself on equal footing with other bodies does “not diminish its faith about its uniqueness” (5b). The document cites the well-known statement of Vatican II that the unique church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church (*Lumen Gentium* 8), and this uniqueness is not compromised by the church taking part, on equal footing with other churches, in a council at the national or regional level. Similar questions about the implications of membership in councils have been raised by other churches. These questions were addressed by the central committee of the World Council of Churches in Toronto in 1950, which stated that membership in a council of churches does not necessarily imply “that each church must regard the other member churches as churches in the true and full sense”.

The document underlines that councils of churches are not churches; nor do they have the responsibility of churches to engage in conversations leading to full unity. As the document saw it in 1975, the scope of councils of churches is mainly in the practical realm, rather than in the dogmatic, a perspective that has since continued to evolve. In saying this, the Holy See does not forbid councils of churches to study together questions of “faith and order”, and the document later notes that “it is normal that councils should want to discuss and reflect upon the doctrinal bases of the practical projects they undertake” (6h). Such discussions, it states, have “a deep importance in stimulating

member churches to a deeper understanding of the demands of unity willed by Christ and to facing deadlocks in a new way” (5c). Nevertheless, it “is not the task of a council to take the initiative in promoting formal doctrinal conversations between churches. These belong to the immediate and bilateral contacts between the churches.” Thus, in joining a council of churches, Catholics need not fear that they will be drawn into technical dogmatic discussions that they may not consider appropriate in this context.

The document regards the proper domain of councils of churches as principally that of practical collaboration, giving particular attention to social problems such as housing, health, relief, etc. (5e, ii). At times, the councils will feel called to make public statements on matters of common concern in areas of peace, social justice, human development, public welfare, and personal morality or social ethics. These may vary from broad statements of position to specific stands on concrete questions. They might examine a subject and point out its social and ethical ramifications, and they often will identify various approaches to treat problems. Even though such statements reflect the theological positions of the churches, they are not to be “considered as official utterances” (5d, i) made in the name of the churches.

In fact, as the document notes, the problematic nature of issuing joint statements is one that the member churches of a council must constantly keep in mind. It has given rise to much debate, tension and hard feelings in a number of councils and on rare occasions has led one or another member church to withdraw from a council. This does not mean that in councils, churches never should make public statements. They should realize, however, that full consensus is very difficult to achieve and that sincere respect must be granted to minority views (5d, iii). All this is to say that in a council of churches the integrity of each member church constantly must be considered, its individual positions honoured, and polarization avoided.

The document notes that when bishops conferences decide to join an NCC, they should not settle for superficial participation but should fully involve their local church. It is not enough simply to send delegates, but participation in a council should be integrated into the pastoral life and planning of Catholic dioceses. When the Roman Catholic Church joins a council, this must be accompanied by “constant ecumenical education of Catholics concerning the implications of such participation” (51).

In its “Pastoral and Practical Reflections for Local Ecumenical Action” in chapter 6 of EC, the Pontifical Council makes two further important points. First, each council of churches is unique and must be designed according to the needs in each nation. Churches should not simply adopt models that were found to be successful elsewhere (6a). Instead, after reflecting together on the needs and challenges of the churches in their region, they should create their own specific ecumenical relationship. The Holy See thus envisions a great deal of freedom for the churches in each region to form a council which accurately reflects the actual ecumenical relationships “on the ground” and enables the churches to express their unity in realistic service to society.

Second, as valuable as councils of churches are as instruments to express the unity which exists among Christians and to work towards fuller and deeper unity, the creation of new structures never can replace “the collaboration of Christians in prayer, reflection and action, based on common baptism and on a faith which on many essential points is also common” (6c). In other words, if the search for Christian unity is solely focused on structures, procedures and bureaucracy, the unity which councils seek to achieve will be

minimal and the renewal which councils of churches can help their member churches bring to the whole Christian community will not be very profound. The deeper communion that should characterize Christian unity can only come from Christians' praying together, reflecting on the word of God in scripture together, thinking through social problems together, and actually working together in various aspects of the churches' life.

The aforementioned 1975 document on Ecumenical Collaboration was the first official instruction given by the Holy See on the question of Catholic membership in national and regional councils of churches. It noted with satisfaction that the Roman Catholic Church in many countries had decided to join NCCs or to create new ecumenical associations in which the Roman Catholic Church would take part. It pointed out possible problems that could arise and how many of the divisive issues could be foreseen and crises avoided. The document reassured Catholics throughout the world that joining a council of churches can be an important step towards working for Christian unity, expressing the unity which already exists due to our common baptism, and renewing the churches in their commitment to serve God in Christ and, in doing so, to be of service to a world reconciled to God.

Because of the increasing number of countries and regions where the Roman Catholic Church was participating in councils of churches, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the World Council of Churches, within the framework of the Joint Working Group, convened three consultations (1971, 1986, 1993) to reflect on issues connected with national councils of churches.

In a message to the 1993 consultation, held in Hong Kong, Cardinal Edward Cassidy, then president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, stressed a key aspect of the function of NCCs in the ecumenical search for unity. "National councils of churches", he stated, "as servants of unity play an important role in providing opportunities for strengthening the spirit of mutual understanding among member churches." The cardinal emphasized the human dimension, the value of councils to foster personal growth in commitment to Christian unity. He affirmed that in the NCCs, Christians of various churches come to know one another personally, discover a shared Christian commitment through common action, enrich one another by the distinctive elements of Christian life which their particular traditions have preserved and emphasized, and rediscover concretely their common faith in God by praying together in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

2. THE 1993 "ECUMENICAL DIRECTORY"

In the same year as the Hong Kong consultation, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity issued its revised guidelines for Christian ecumenism, entitled the Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism. The 1993 Guidelines, as the document is popularly known, replaced the temporary Ecumenical Directory that had been called for by the Second Vatican Council and subsequently published in 1967 and 1970. The 1993 Directory treats questions of Catholic participation in councils of churches in paragraphs 166-71.

Many of the instructions contained in the 1993 Directory repeat those already given in the 1975 document on Ecumenical Collaboration, but on some key points, the Directory goes farther than the earlier document. This is particularly the case in welcoming, for the first time, Catholic participation in councils. The EC document treated the

phenomenon of Catholic churches joining NCCs and REOs as a de facto reality in the ecumenical movement, calling councils an “important instrument” in the search for Christian unity. The Directory goes beyond this to welcome positively this phenomenon in church life as something to be desired (167).

The Directory distinguishes (166) between a “council of churches, composed of churches and responsible to the member churches”, and a “Christian council”, composed of churches as well as other Christian groups and organizations, such as Bible societies or YMCAs. This distinction reflects a tendency in some regions to form more inclusive Christian councils whose members not only would be churches but also other forms of Christian association. This development recognizes that in the effort to build Christian unity, other Christian groups and organizations often play a leading role.

The Directory does not recommend one form of association over the other, but leaves that decision to the authorities of local churches. These authorities, states the Directory, “will generally be the synod of Eastern Catholic churches or the episcopal conference (except where there is only one diocese in a nation)” (168). In preparing to make this decision, the Eastern synods or episcopal conferences “should be in touch with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity”. The Directory’s careful phraseology underlines that the authority for joining councils rests with the local bishops through their synod or episcopal conference while, as in all matters affecting the universal church, the local churches should always communicate and consult with the Pontifical Council. What is involved is not a matter of “asking permission from Rome” but of acting in communion with the worldwide Roman Catholic Church.

The Directory notes various considerations that must accompany the decision to take part in a council of churches or Christian council. Local and national socio-political realities must be considered. Participation in the life of the council must not blur Catholic self-understanding as to its uniqueness and specific identity (169). In other words, there must be doctrinal clarity, especially in the area of ecclesiology, and ecumenical education should be provided for church members. In ecumenical dialogue, the Roman Catholic Church can propose its ecclesiology to other member churches, but should respect their proper ecclesiological self-understanding. At the same time, the Roman Catholic Church expects that its own theology of the nature of the church will be understood and respected by its partners.

The Directory repeats the view of the 1975 document that councils of churches and Christian councils do not contain within or among themselves the beginning of a new church that could replace the communion that now exists in the Roman Catholic Church. They must not proclaim themselves churches “nor claim an authority which would permit them to confer a ministry of word or sacrament”. In fact, the concern that councils of churches not be regarded as a new “super-church” had already been a constant preoccupation of member churches since the first councils of churches appeared a century ago. The formation of councils among churches still divided from one another is but one instrument aimed at Christian unity, and it must be clearly distinguished from the effort to achieve structural and sacramental unity in the creation of united churches.

The Directory notes matters to be considered before the Roman Catholic Church either decides to join an existing NCC or to take part in the creation of a new association. Such considerations include the system of representation, voting rights, decision-making processes, manner of making public statements, and the degree of authority

attributed to common statements (169.) Finally, the Directory repeats the counsel given in the 1975 document. Joining a council is a serious responsibility that should not be taken lightly. Membership implies responsibilities that are not fulfilled simply by becoming a member only in name. “The Catholic Church should be represented by well-qualified and committed persons” who are sincerely convinced of the importance of actively pursuing Christian unity and who are clearly aware of the limits to which they can commit the church without referring to the authorities who appointed them.

The increased acceptance and encouragement for Catholic participation in councils of churches by the Holy See since the time of the Second Vatican Council is evidence of a positive experience in observing the fruits of such ecumenical involvement. Most recently, in the 1995 document on ecumenical formation of Christians entitled *The Ecumenical Dimension in the Formation of Those Engaged in Pastoral Work*, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity lists information about councils of churches as one of the “important pastoral and practical matters which should not be omitted from ecumenical formation, especially that of seminarians”.

The emerging participation of the Roman Catholic Church in national and regional ecumenical organizations would not be complete without reference to the 1995 encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (“That They May All Be One”), which strongly reaffirmed the commitment of the Roman Catholic Church to work actively for Christian unity. Although the encyclical did not refer explicitly to NCCs and REOs, the pope affirmed that “the relationships which the members of the Catholic Church have established with other Christians since the Council have enabled us to discover what God is bringing about in the members of other churches and ecclesial communities. This direct contact, at a variety of levels, with pastors and with the members of these communities has made us aware of the witness which other Christians bear to God and to Christ. A vast new field has thus opened up for the whole ecumenical experience, which at the same time is the great challenge of our time” (UUS 48.)

3. CONCLUDING COMMENTS ABOUT THE HISTORICAL SURVEY

Tracing the historical background of Catholic participation in national and regional councils of churches shows a progressive awareness in the Roman Catholic Church, beginning at the time of the Second Vatican Council, of the value of taking part in such associations. The Roman Catholic Church has come to see participation in NCCs and REOs as an important step in pursuing the Spirit-driven goal of Christian unity. Councils of churches are not the goal in the ecumenical search for the full unity, but they are an effective tool for following the Spirit’s guidance towards full unity. The late Canadian theologian and ecumenist, Fr Jean-Marie Tillard, OP, sums up this grace-filled instrumentality of councils of churches as follows:

A council of churches makes a “loving dialogue” possible. By breaking the isolation and bringing about knowledge of each other, ecumenical encounter slowly erodes distrust, prejudices and traditional hatreds. While each church begins by hoping to impose its own views and confessional ambitions on the others, we find that among the members something gradually comes into being which triumphs over the interests and claims of each group. In learning to love one another, in the knowledge that diversities exist and in respect for them, we gradually learn the unity that God wants.

IV. Value and benefits of membership

1. WHAT CAN FACILITATE PARTICIPATION AND MEMBERSHIP

When a church joins a council, it brings along not only its rich heritage, but some painful memories as well. The original fear, apprehension or suspicion does not automatically disappear. A relatively long integration process may be needed to purify memories and develop trust, enabling the new member church to perceive itself and to be perceived by others as belonging comfortably to the council.

The process of integration is facilitated by instilling a feeling of respect for the integrity of the new member church. The church needs to feel confident that membership in the council, while causing it to change, will not force unsolicited alterations in its identity. This sense of reassurance is liable to generate deeper commitment to the common agenda of the members of the council and to encourage greater openness and participation on the part of the new member church. Such a feeling of security will allow the richness of yet another tradition to be shared. Both deep theological reflection and a clear understanding of ecumenical spirituality are vital factors in the process of journeying towards the visible unity of the church.

The success of this process also is fostered by the ability of the council members to listen. It hinges on their openness, their readiness to accept and value differences, their ability to be truly inclusive. Such an attitude is bound to lead to greater sharing in the decision-making process, always taking into consideration minority views. When making decisions, no matter how insignificant they may appear, it is always preferable to aim at consensus rather than to risk alienating member churches who may have different perspectives.

The way the council is formed and the manner in which churches are represented can make a difference in how member churches perceive their role in the decision-making mechanism. For example, if the member churches are represented according to their numerical importance some may feel that their vote will not make a difference. As a result they may feel alienated from the decision-making process. Such feelings are bound to influence negatively their sense of belonging to the council.

If the representation is made, however, according to other criteria, such as the “families of churches”, where each family is equally represented, independently of numbers of faithful, no member church will feel at a disadvantage when it comes to influencing decisions. Moreover, the family model may enable the member churches within a family to grow into closer relationships and cooperation with each other. In addition, this model may facilitate the entrance of a church as part of a family when it would be uncomfortable in joining a council that did not have a family structure.

When a new member feels accepted, integrated, valued and represented in the decision-making process, a deeper feeling of belonging can grow. Each member feels more ready to participate in common projects both at the level of leadership and at the grassroots, where the rapprochement remains the ultimate objective of the ecumenical journey.

Becoming part of a council of churches may enhance a church’s renewal, rescue it from isolation, strengthen its awareness of the common calling, increase the effectiveness of its service, and encourage ecumenical initiatives by its people locally.

Flexibility in council structures facilitates participation and membership. For example, each member should feel free to engage in bilateral dialogue outside the structure of the council, while remaining part of it.

The factors named above are practical. They point to aspects of healthy dialogue – a subject that is being explored by a separate study on dialogue conducted by the Joint Working Group. More important, however, are the spiritual and theological motivations of member churches. By joining an ecumenical association, each member demonstrates a willingness to allow the Spirit to witness to the existing unity of the church and an intention to cooperate to further its visible unity.

2. WHAT CAN HELP MEMBER CHURCHES LIVE OUT STATED AIMS

Like any institution, councils of churches derive their strength partly from the quality of the people involved. The contribution of each member church depends a great deal on the capacity of its representatives – on their ecumenical formation and commitment. The ecumenical movement is a journey of the whole community and not of an elite that represents it.

Official representatives to councils should be in close contact with the leaders and people of the churches they represent. Unless the heads of churches are informed about the process and encourage it, their participation could cause internal divisions and discourage communication with the people in the pews.

When people join together through any association it makes a significant difference to the general atmosphere if people get along well and enjoy working together – hence, the importance of the development of a spirit of fellowship. An attitude of trust and readiness for true dialogue are vital starting points for the realization of the stated objectives of the council. Unless members trust each other they cannot easily be committed to the same aims, especially when the commitment involves deep theological convictions. And unless the aims are based on such acknowledged theological convictions, the partners in a council will not be able to get far in the realization of their goals in their ecumenical journey.

Thus, members should have a common mission in their journey towards unity. Ecumenical progress is thwarted by those who have hidden agendas, seek personal benefits, or entertain human ambitions. Such an approach goes counter to common witness.

In conclusion, participants in ecumenical work cannot make progress unless the persons involved succeed in creating healthy human relationships among themselves and a deep relationship with God. Differences should not be hidden. Ecumenical progress cannot be promoted by avoiding real issues or seeking easy solutions to vexing problems. The ecumenical journey is always a journey of mending relationships, of healing the wounds of division and reconciling memories in order to seek together unity in Jesus Christ through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit.

Witnessing to the visible unity of the church starts with prayerful journeying together towards an encounter with God, towards a deeper transformation in order to manifest God's presence in the world through the church. In praying together, Christians encounter the Triune God who brings about the gradual transformation of the community into a true family of Christ's disciples. This process is enhanced through a deep encounter among the various members of the council in which they discover each other's

wealth of tradition and special spiritual experience. Listening to the Spirit speaking to the churches helps dissipate prejudice – at times, even hatred. It produces greater trust and leads to growth. This is perhaps the most eloquent witness of a Council to the visible unity of the church.

3. WHAT SHOULD BE CELEBRATED

Ecumenical awakening is one of the most important developments in the history of the church during the 19th and the 20th centuries. Some Christians began to be aware of the value of cooperation among the churches. Protestants were the first to take steps towards creating ecumenical organizations intended to overcome divisions among Christians. In 1910, the international missionary conference at Edinburgh marked the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement, and from this the churches together continued to cooperate in mission through the International Missionary Council to bring churches together to explore divisive theological issues through Faith and Order; and to engage in reflection and action on political, social and economic matters through Life and Work. In 1920 the Ecumenical Patriarchate issued an encyclical entitled “Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere”, inviting Christians to create a fellowship of churches. In the same year the bishops of the Anglican Communion issued an “Appeal to All Christian People” to manifest unity by “gathering into fellowship all who profess and call themselves Christians, within whose visible unity all the treasures of faith and order, bequeathed as a heritage by the past to the present, shall be possessed in common, and made serviceable to the whole body of Christ”. The rapid development of ecumenical associations, notably the creation of the World Council of Churches in 1948, underlines the importance the churches have ascribed to working for the full visible unity of the church. In 1900 there were no national councils of churches, but by the year 2000 the number had grown to 103.

Since the Second Vatican Council the Roman Catholic Church has joined a large number of ecumenical associations. This rapprochement, along with the engagement in bilateral dialogue with a wide range of churches and ecclesial communions in both East and West, has led to the signing of Christological agreements with some of the Oriental churches. Dialogue with the Lutherans recently produced significant progress shown in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. The efforts of the Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission (ARCIC) have led to the publication of the “Gift of Authority”. Although not a joint declaration, this document offers valuable insights for the future directions of the ecumenical movement.

With councils of churches as their principal instruments, the churches are building relationships with each other through which they are:

- growing in mutual respect, understanding and trust;
- dissipating many prejudices through learning to pray in each other’s words, singing each other’s songs, reading scripture through each other’s eyes;
- offering service in Christ’s name to those who are in need, locally and far away;
- giving common witness to the gospel and working together for human dignity;
- listening to and learning through each other’s insights into matters of faith and life over which they have been divided;

- holding Christ’s people together, even when the world’s pressures would tear them apart (CUV, 3.9).

Relationship building affects all those involved. One church encountering another may find that it wants to reflect afresh on its own identity, its own thinking, its own Christian commitment to unity. Ecumenical ties bring many benefits, some quite unexpected.

V. Some issues and concerns

1. WHAT’S IN A NAME?

Names can matter. A name says something about how the churches perceive their life together. When a Catholic bishops conference joins a national council of churches, a name change may dramatize that the churches are making a fresh beginning together. The new name may symbolize new intentions and new reality – an awareness that the culture of the council will be transformed as new churches live into new relationships through the council. Thus, names are important, but context, history and vision will determine the choice in a given place.

Most call themselves councils of churches. Some call themselves conferences of churches. Others have adopted names like churches together or Christian fellowships. In fact, the vast majority of national ecumenical bodies with Catholic membership use the phrase “council of churches” in their name. The phrase “Christian council” sometimes, though not always, indicates that other ecumenical organizations (e.g., Bible societies, Church Women United, YMCA and YWCA) also may be members.

The Roman Catholic Church’s relationship to national and regional councils of churches may take one of several forms: full membership, observer status, ongoing collaboration, occasional cooperation. Although some concerns are felt more acutely when Roman Catholic Churches are involved, other churches and ecclesial communities may experience, to varying degrees, the same problems. Councils within a country (state, province, city) may have similar experiences. Thus, awareness of and attention to these concerns may enable greater and better participation in a council, not only by the Roman Catholic Church but also by the other churches.

2. ISSUES OF AUTHORITY

In national settings, the Conference of Catholic Bishops has the authority to make the decision about joining a national council of churches. In a diocesan setting, the bishop makes the decision. The attitude towards councils of churches taken by an individual bishop or bishops conference can either encourage or inhibit participation in a council and the movement towards membership. Just as in any church, a few ecumenically committed bishops can stimulate action by the whole bishops conference. Furthermore, positive ecumenical experiences in the diocesan context may predispose bishops to consider membership in a national council. In Australia, for example, Catholic membership in some state councils of churches preceded consideration of participation by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. Membership in the National Council of Churches in Australia in turn stimulated other Catholic bishops to lead their dioceses into state councils of churches. The positive process was circular and expansive.

Once a Catholic Conference becomes a member of a council of churches, entering fully into the life of the ecumenical body, the relationships cannot be reversed lightly, without serious provocation. On rare occasions, such situations do arise. In 1998, the Catholic Bishops Conference in New Zealand withdrew from membership in the Conference of Churches in Aotearoa-New Zealand (CCANZ) after it became apparent that the method of representation did not afford the bishops the degree of necessary comfort with policies and practices of the new structure. The new body had set out to be a different type of council, seeing itself as a forum for various kinds of interest groups and causes as well as for the member churches who were financing it. From the outset some predicted that there would be difficulties for Catholic members. The Lutheran church in New Zealand experienced similar problems and withdrew from membership in the Conference in 1994.

Since the withdrawal of the Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches, religious leaders (especially Anglican, Presbyterian and Catholic) have made considerable effort to develop greater trust and to seek ways of working together even if their experience in CCANZ was not satisfactory. The Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops have met regularly for over a decade. They have expressed the sadness felt by many about CCANZ. Recently, CCANZ decided to conclude its organization, primarily because the remaining number of member churches is so small. At the same time, the possibility of a new body is being explored. This would give Catholics, Lutherans and Baptists (who had not joined CCANZ) a way back into a new ecumenical entity. As of this writing, plans for a new, inclusive council are scheduled to be unveiled by September 2004, when CCANZ will meet for its final annual forum.

This leads to the examination of another aspect of authority when churches are members of a council of churches. Who actually can speak for the churches at the ecumenical table? With what weight? The variations in ecclesiological self-understanding among churches sometimes are baffling to members, since all churches may be puzzled by polities and structures of authority that differ from their own. In the Catholic context the bishops need to trust that the concerns and policies of their church are reflected by the Catholic representatives, respected by other member churches and by the professional staff of a council of churches. In fact, this is true for leaders of other churches, as well.

Concerns have emerged about who, when, and on what basis the churches may speak together through a national council of churches. Members of the World Council of Churches faced these concerns early on and, in the 1950 Toronto statement clarified the limits of Council authority. Fr Yves Congar and other Catholic theologians were consulted prior to the drafting of the Toronto text.

To the degree that councils of churches and their professional leaders have honoured the policies articulated in Toronto, they have quelled fears that a council could become a “super-church”, acting apart from or above its members. The WCC constitution addresses issues of authority as follows:

The World Council shall offer counsel and provide opportunity for united action in matters of common interest.

It may take action on behalf of constituent churches only in such matters as one or more of them may commit to it and only on behalf of such churches.

The World Council shall not legislate for the churches nor act for them in any manner except as indicated above or as may hereafter be specified by the constituent churches.

Recognizing the complexities involved in issues of authority does not necessarily solve problems, but an awareness of the dynamics may help. In the final analysis, many issues of authority depend on styles of leadership and modes of working together. When the style is relational, even when hard issues surface where tensions are high, people can rely on the human connections they have developed to consult together to seek the will of Christ.

3. PROPER PREPARATION FOR MEMBERSHIP

Experience has shown that by paying careful attention at the outset to issues of representation and decision-making processes, councils can minimize the problems in these areas that could arise later on. Serious preparation for membership in a council is an important factor leading to the successful functioning of all councils, both those with and without Catholic membership. For example, both the Canadian and Brazilian Catholic conferences of bishops were engaged for over a dozen years before they became full members of their national councils.

The Canadian Catholic Conference of Bishops joined an already established council, the Canadian Council of Churches, as full members in 1997 after a lengthy process that began in the 1970s when the two organizations worked together on social justice issues. In 1984, the Catholic Church applied for associate membership. The Conference of Bishops became an associate in 1986 with the intention of becoming a full member in 1997. The differences between the two types of membership were technical, i.e., not holding the office of president or general secretary, and not voting on constitutional issues.

The Canadian Catholic Conference of Bishops and the Canadian Council of Churches saw full membership as a concrete expression of greater commitment to the ecumenical movement. The inclusion of the Roman Catholic Church also brought an increased French dimension into what had been a largely English-speaking council. Before becoming full members, the Canadian Catholic Conference made a serious review of the constitution and by-laws of the council. The council resolved the concern about the organization being perceived as a “super-church” by frequently expressing itself as a forum “in which churches meet as churches to decide together on common agenda”. Particular attention was given to making public statements and to identifying the authority those public statements would have.

The Brazilian council of churches began to take shape in the enthusiastic atmosphere following the Second Vatican Council when Catholics joined with other Christian leaders to form a council. The leaders met in Rio de Janeiro and in other major cities. These ecumenical efforts throughout the country resulted in the formation of the Brazilian National Council of Churches in 1982. The membership includes the Lutheran Evangelical, Episcopal, Methodist, United Presbyterian, Syrian Orthodox, Catholic and Christian Reformed churches.

4. FORMS OF REPRESENTATION, MODELS OF MEMBERSHIP

In countries where Roman Catholics form the majority of Christians, one of the arguments often given to explain the lack of Catholic membership in councils is that, by becoming “one church among others”, the Roman Catholic Church would be conceding identity and leadership to a group of small churches. On the other hand, numerically small churches in such nations and regions also may be hesitant to welcome membership of the Roman Catholic Church, which they feel would dominate the council by its very size and social presence.

Such apprehensions could explain, for example, the absence of Catholic membership in church councils in much of Latin America and areas of Mediterranean Europe where Roman Catholics are predominant. Another factor affecting membership is that historically some councils of churches in predominantly Catholic contexts were established by minority churches precisely in order to help and support each other. In such situations, the prospects for Catholic membership may be difficult to accept for both the majority and minority churches.

Another model has been adopted by churches in Great Britain and Ireland – the churches together model. It is based on the model of “consensus”. No action is taken unless and until there is agreement. The churches no longer delegate tasks to outside bodies, but each church takes responsibility in conjunction with other churches. This model very often includes as a full member the Roman Catholic Church (e.g. CTBI, ACTS, CTE in the United Kingdom). Often, in this model, there is a dual pattern of meetings of church leaders and a wider assembly of church representatives to pursue the agenda, and to provide an opportunity for mutual accountability.

Although these are real concerns, some councils, including those in regions with Catholic majorities such as Austria, Madagascar and Hungary, have found creative solutions which permit the various member churches to feel adequately represented. Several models of representation have been tried, and no single model can be said to be superior to others. It cannot be presumed that a solution that has worked well in one council can for that reason be applied successfully elsewhere. In whatever form of representation is devised, the main consideration always must be to ensure that all member churches are satisfied that their voices will be heard and that their views can find a proper forum, and that no church feels that its concerns will be ignored or over-ridden by the others.

Concerns of representation are not limited to Catholic participation. It is a perennial challenge for all church councils to find a structure that both adequately reflects ecumenical relationships and provides an arena for free discussion and interaction. In virtually every nation and region, the complexion of membership varies greatly. A church that represents the vast majority of Christians in that region can be uneasy if it feels that small churches will have the ability to push through legislation and projects on a “one church, one vote” basis. Conversely, small churches often will not feel comfortable in a structure that permits one or two large churches to dominate the council and force their will on other members.

On these bases, various councils have sought to devise systems of representation according to their particular needs and relationships. For example, the Uruguay Council of Christian Churches, with eight member churches (Anglican, Armenian, Catholic,

Evangelical, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal and Salvation Army) has adopted a direct form of representation, with no adjustments made for church size.

By contrast, in the Canadian Council of Churches, representation of the 18 members reflects church size: three representatives from large churches, two from mid-sized, and one from small churches. Membership size of churches also determines Brazilian representation in that council's decision-making structures. The Brazilian council also rotates the presidency among leaders from different churches.

Representation based on "families of churches" rather than the size of church membership is used in other countries and regions with Catholic participation. The council of churches in France (CECEF), perhaps one of the few formed through the initiative of the Roman Catholic Church, has three co-presidents and three co-secretaries (one each from the Catholic episcopal conference, from the Protestant federation, from the assembly of Orthodox bishops). Its 16 member churches are composed of two Armenian Apostolic, five Catholic, three Orthodox, and five Protestant representatives, and an Anglican observer.

The Swedish Christian council, newly reconstituted in 1993, is based on four families, despite the fact that the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sweden enrolls over 80 percent of the Christian population of the country. The families are the Lutheran, Orthodox, Catholic, and free-church families.

The family model also is followed by the Middle East Council of Churches, which is made up of four families: Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Evangelical and Oriental Orthodox churches. In this context, the family model ensures that each of the major ecclesial traditions can feel that its position in the council will be taken seriously, that factors which make some churches historically and theologically "closer" to others will be recognized within the council structure, and that no single church or group of churches will be able to dominate leadership and decision-making processes.

The family model also has its drawbacks. Churches within a family may hold different positions on various issues. Concentrating on family relationships at the expense of building broader ecumenical relations can result in introversion and self-isolation. At times, the "family" can be an artificial construct, bringing together churches into families in which they are not comfortable. Moreover, some churches may not fit well into any given family, or there might be internal disagreement among church members about the family to which they belong. A church might see itself in one family, but not be regarded as such by others in that family. The family system on occasion even can result in a church being denied membership in the council. For example, one of the factors which has thus far prevented the Assyrian Church of the East from being accepted as a member of the Middle East Council of Churches is the lack of agreement over the family to which the church should belong.

Christian charity and the desire for fairness demand that all member churches be willing to give up some measure of autonomous decision-making and independent action for the sake of common voice and endeavour. Moreover, any form of representation only will work well when the churches have a measure of trust that other members are not seeking to manipulate council structures for their own purposes. It has been the experience of some councils that the prayerful deliberations that lead to determining the type of representation to be followed have been a valuable educational exercise and one that has occasioned greater fellowship and understanding.

5. DECISION-MAKING

Initially, most councils used the parliamentary, majority vote method for making decisions. More recently, many councils are employing methods that use discernment and consensus as being more compatible with the goal of promoting communion among their members. A common understanding of consensus is the achievement of a decision acceptable to all members. In some cases this agreement may be unanimous. More often, the consensus involves a decision that members can accept without objection. If councils cannot reach a consensus, other actions that may be taken are to record the various opinions, to postpone the decision or to refer the issue for study rather than for action. The understanding and practice of consensus must be agreed upon and accepted by all members. It is important, therefore, to have written protocols and to follow them.

Acceptance of consensus formation as the main pattern of decision-making does not imply that recourse must never be taken to parliamentary-style voting. Some issues (e.g., disbursement of funds, the appointment of officials) simply cannot be achieved by consensus.

Some councils are moving towards a more sophisticated understanding of consensus that might be expressed by the term “differentiated agreement”. Derived from the experience of bilateral dialogues, differentiated agreement indicates a consensus on basic truths, although differences of language, theological elaboration and emphasis might remain. In a differentiated agreement, each church formulates the agreed-upon statement according to its own categories and understanding of its theological import.

A consensus style of decision-making often does not enable a council to make a prophetic statement in a timely manner. Some councils refer matters to individual member churches for separate actions. Other councils develop principles on particular issues on which the churches agree. Responses then can be made flowing from these principles. Potentially divisive and strongly prophetic positions only should arise from a profound spirit of prayer. A prayerful, discerning attitude and process may enable either a consensus to be reached or a respectful acceptance by the church that is unable to act on a particular issue.

6. PUBLIC STATEMENTS

Perhaps the factor that causes the greatest reluctance for churches that are considering membership in church councils concerns apprehension about public statements. Churches fear that their name will be used against their will to endorse causes with which their church is not in agreement or to protest issues on which they feel the churches should maintain a prudent silence. They may have heard of previous instances where churches were embarrassed by the actions of a majority of member churches, committees or general secretaries whose positions were announced publicly without prior consultation or full agreement of all member churches.

Differences in ecclesiology lie at the root of some difficulties in making public statements. Some churches at the local or national level may state their position on matters of importance without consulting other bodies. Catholic positions are to be in agreement with the magisterial teaching of the universal church and to reflect the position of

their national bishops conferences. For the Orthodox, statements must be in accord with Orthodox theology.

In some cases, such as on questions of abortion or homosexuality, the problem is theological; some churches are concerned lest they appear to take positions contrary to the wider community's understanding of the Christian faith. In other cases, the churches may be concerned about the political implications of public positions, particularly in instances where government policy is criticized. In the case of many controversial issues, such as the death penalty, support or condemnation of war, or reproductive technology, opinion within the individual churches itself may be divided, with various interpretations of Christian teaching put forth by segments of the local community. A public statement on which many church members agree may be hotly contested by others.

There is no easy answer to the question of public statements, and disputes over the issue sometimes have led churches to withdraw from membership when no acceptable solution can be found. Most churches agree that there are times when the Christian conscience is united on an issue that, therefore, must be stated clearly in a public way. In fact sometimes a church's collective conscience will demand that it take a prophetic stance on controversial issues that run contrary to public opinion. Extensive ongoing consultation can minimize the possibility of conflict, dissension and hard feelings.

Councils must resist the culture of the instant statement, despite the pressures to the contrary. On the one hand, in today's fast-paced world, with instant modes of communication and a demanding news media, the insistence by member churches on full consultation and consensus may mean that the churches' voice on major ethical issues will be muted. On the other hand, members of councils have found that taking adequate time to deliberate may be frustrating, but it also can result in statements that are more clear and thoughtful. When there is open, continuous communication between council officials and the leaders of member churches, questions about which issues are likely to raise controversy or to be divisive become second nature to the conciliar staff.

Most councils issue statements only when they have achieved unanimity. If unanimous agreement is not possible, the statement may not be issued in the name of the council, because the council speaks not for itself but for every church that is a member. In such situations, it always must be clarified whether council officials speak as members of the council or as the official representatives or heads of their churches. Those who support the action may sign in the name of their church, while the minority may indicate their objections and their reasons for not signing the statement.

It also is important to honour a reluctance of members to make conflicts public unless external factors, such as media scrutiny, force the situation. Therefore, councils may need a common understanding of a procedure for relating to the media. For example, if one leader receives a call that could be contentious, prior agreement on the need for consultation before any public statements are made provides a level of trust and confidence among members.

7. FINANCES

Because councils of churches are their members, this fact should be reflected in a fair and equitable distribution of the costs entailed by membership. As churches, themselves, are challenged economically, these challenges are felt keenly in the budgets of councils of churches.

When councils of churches are especially dependent on outside funding, they find themselves being constrained by the expectations of funding agents who try to determine the programme of the council, regardless of the needs and perspectives of the member churches within a country.

When the Roman Catholic Church considers becoming a member of an NCC or REO, questions of and fears about cost inevitably arise (as they do for any potential member). When the Roman Catholic Church is predominant in size, members and budget, questions arise about how to work out an equitable resolution to financial responsibilities. The issue is not insurmountable, nor should it be used as a convenient excuse for avoiding the membership question, but it needs to be acknowledged forthrightly.

8. ECUMENICAL FORMATION

Although much has been accomplished by the churches in describing “the nature of the unity we seek”, not all share this vision to the same extent. Even in the midst of these ambiguities, however, all churches have a crying need to foster ecumenical formation among religious leaders, teachers, clergy and laity. Many are talking about the need for ecumenical formation. How to translate perceived need into effective action is a vexing challenge – one that councils of churches must face as they seek to juggle the sometimes conflicting demands of inclusivity, expertise and historical memory.

Attentiveness to ecumenical formation is especially important for those who are asked to serve as official representatives in ecumenical contexts such as councils of churches. The Holy See has urged that Catholic representatives have adequate ecumenical education and experience in order to express well the Catholic position, and to be aware of the history and methodology of the ecumenical movement.

All churches face the challenge of finding systemic ways to promote ecumenical formation for religious leaders, clergy, pastoral workers, and laity. The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity addressed this issue in its text, *The Ecumenical Dimension in the Formation of Those Engaged in Pastoral Work*. Seminary education is an obvious place to look for it. Ecumenical consortia of seminaries and theological faculties also could be the locus for ecumenical education.

A variety of institutes provide formation. Some of these include the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey (Switzerland), the Irish School of Ecumenics (Dublin), the Tantar Institute (Jerusalem), St Thomas University (Rome and Bari) and the Centro Pro Unione (Rome). Some councils of churches also have offered formal study. For example, the Christian Conference of Asia has offered courses of ecumenical formation for more than 25 years.

What has been lacking thus far, however, are adequate structures for monitoring and accountability of the ecumenical mandate within churches. Thus, we pose some questions:

- What processes are in place to encourage regular reporting back to the churches by their ecumenical official representatives?
- What mechanisms might be created to encourage the teaching of ecumenics by ecumenical teams? For example, when courses on the history, theory and practice of ecumenism are offered, are they planned, promoted, supported and taught in cooperation with ecumenical partners?

- When church leaders meet internally, do they make time to consider the ecumenical implications of their actions? Do they consider the significance of ecumenical texts for their churches?
- When churches reconsider previous positions in the process of theological development, do they make efforts to share the process and its outcome with other churches?
- In what ways can the churches better recognize, encourage and support those who have proposed fresh ecumenical initiatives?

9. ALTERNATIVES TO FULL PARTICIPATION

The ultimate aim of churches in the ecumenical movement is full, visible Christian unity. Councils of churches are a privileged instrument by which churches can move towards this goal. Thus all churches are encouraged to enter into prayerful reflection through which the Holy Spirit might lead them into membership in a council of churches as a step along the way towards full, visible unity.

For a variety of reasons, membership may not seem possible or advisable at a particular time in a given context. When this is the case, some alternatives may be considered. These include the following.

Ongoing structured cooperation: For example, the Christian Conference of Asia and the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences have an agreed policy of reciprocal invitations to participate in each other's activities, have a joint ecumenical planning committee, and hold joint staff meetings that lead to the common planning and execution of projects. In the United States, the Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs Committee of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops is a member of the Faith and Order commission of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, although it is not a member of the NCCC. In Europe, the Conference of European Churches and the CCEE have been working together for a long time on a structured basis on various ecumenical projects, most recently in promoting the *Charta Oecumenica*.

Occasional cooperation on specific projects: An example might be taken from Sweden, where the Swedish Council of Churches worked together with the Roman Catholic Church in Sweden to prepare for the visit of the pope in 1989, at a time when the Catholic Church was still not a member. Inspired by the friendships formed and the cooperation achieved on that occasion, the Roman Catholic Church asked to be a founding member in the reorganized Swedish Christian Council.

Observer status: Some years ago, the CCEE nominated two permanent observers on the Conference of European Churches Commission on Churches in Dialogue. The Anglican church has observer status in the Council of Christian Churches in France, as does the Roman Catholic Church in the Zimbabwe Council of Churches.

Shared participation in ecumenical gatherings beyond one's own nation: At the second ecumenical European assembly in Graz, Austria, in 1997, some representatives of Orthodox, Greek Catholic and Protestant churches from Romania worked together ecumenically for the first time.

10. BILATERAL DIALOGUES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Some councils have experienced a lessening of physical presence and financial support from council members who give priority to bilateral dialogues, common agreements or mergers. All these relevant venues are means of promoting the one ecumenical movement and can best be viewed as complementary rather than competing.

The numerous Catholic international bilateral forums focus on specific doctrinal issues that continue to divide the churches. Some national bilateral dialogues have provided significant theological and biblical resources for these international dialogues. Also, bilateral dialogues have allowed Catholics to have formal conversations with evangelicals.

Some churches are moving towards fuller communion through specific bilateral or multilateral agreements. Also, some churches are developing closer relations with their worldwide community. Such movements necessarily involve the participating churches in intensive dialogue on a wide range of theological, ecclesial and other issues. When integrated into councils, these insights can be powerful means of deepening theological discussion and renewal to promote Christian unity. They also can provide opportunities for fresh opportunities and insights when viewed from the multilateral context that a council affords.

Since whatever occurs between two churches affects all churches in the ecumenical movement, churches engaged in bilateral dialogues should seek wherever possible to include observers from other churches in their dialogues. They also should encourage all participants to make detailed reports to the broader ecumenical community.

VI. Some questions to consider

Beyond issues explored elsewhere in this document, the possibility of the Roman Catholic Church becoming part of an existing ecumenical body confronts all concerned, the council's member churches no less than the prospective newcomer, with searching questions. For churches that are already members, the challenge is not only the organizational one of accommodating one more delegation around the ecumenical table, but also presents other questions:

- Are they willing to examine critically what previously may have been a Protestant conciliar culture, and to alter that culture when Catholics become members?
- Are they sufficiently aware of Catholic documents and teachings about ecumenism?
- Do they appreciate the variety of ecclesiological assumptions that will be around the expanding table and the ways these differences will impact their ecumenical deliberations?

Catholic bishops conferences, too, may find some assumptions challenged:

- Are their members sensitive to the significantly different history of ecumenism as it has been experienced by Orthodox churches and churches of the Reformation?
- Can they deal positively with a Protestant approach to ecumenism that sometimes may seem practically oriented, cooperatively driven and less interested in addressing doctrinal differences between the churches?

And for each church involved even more fundamental questions arise:

- Is its approach to the prospect of a more inclusive council driven by self-centred considerations, a “what’s in it for us?” approach – or by the gospel imperative?
- Is the church prepared to be enriched by the gifts that each church brings to the ecumenical table?
- How can we, through our participation in the council of churches, further the mission of the church of Jesus Christ?

VII. Concluding observations

At one level a council of churches is a structure, with all the accoutrements that go with structures – memberships, constitutions, decision-making procedures, policies, programmes, budgets and, probably, staff. Structure matters. As shown above, a well-functioning council of churches can do much to further the quest for Christian unity. Functioning badly, it may slow or even obstruct the quest.

But at a deeper, more important level, a council is a set of relationships between still-divided churches. Under God, they are the principal actors in the ecumenical movement. A council is not primarily an organization, or staff, or programmes. It is the member churches, in their shared commitment to God and to one another, attempting to respond together to the pressure of their common calling.

Such ties between churches find expression in many ways, not least in the relationships between the people who lead and represent them. Hence the emphasis in these pages is on the importance of fostering mutual understanding, respect, forbearance, trust. Hence the emphasis, too, is on making decisions in ways that will strengthen such relationships and foreshadow the reconciliation for which the churches yearn. Relationship-building, for any council of churches, always takes priority over the adoption of policies, the running of programmes, the administering of an institution. At least, it should. Ecumenical structures, like others, are tempted at times to a certain introversion. If finances are inadequate, for example, or policies are contentious, a focus on organizational problems is likely to distract attention from the very movement such structures were created to foster.

Likewise, even the best council loses something vital when a pioneering generation passes, to be succeeded by church leaders and representatives who inherit commitments over which others had to struggle. Like baptismal or marriage vows, the ecumenical promises churches make to each other, and to God, would benefit from continuous renewal in the Holy Spirit.

Increased Catholic participation in NCCs and REOs may provide a stimulus for just such renewed commitment by churches already involved in councils, no less than by those considering membership. It comes as a reminder, yet again, that the gospel of reconciliation requires a visibly reconciled faith community, so that the churches dare not rest content with the status quo. Above all, it comes as a sign of hope, a reminder that God in Christ and the Holy Spirit has not abandoned his people to their divisions and does not cease to lead them forward on their pilgrimage towards unity.

VIII. Recommendations

This document suggests many initiatives that usefully might be taken by churches, episcopal conferences, NCCs and REOs. Two further recommendations, however, might stimulate the World Council of Churches and the Holy See to encourage Roman Catholic participation in ecumenical structures.

1. Distribution of “Inspired by the Same Vision”. Its arguments deserve to be weighed by churches in each country and region and, if found persuasive, acted upon. Responses should be noted, so that “Inspired by the Same Vision” serves to stimulate discussion, not end it.

Recommendation:

That the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the World Council of Churches send this document to all NCCs, REOs, Eastern Catholic synods and Catholic episcopal conferences for study and comment, with the recommendation and encouragement that in those countries and regions where the Roman Catholic Church is not presently a member of the NCC or REO, a joint committee composed of members of the NCC, REO and bishops conference be formed which would have the responsibility to translate the document and distribute it to all NCC member churches and all Catholic bishops; and where appropriate, that they initiate a joint process of consultation among representatives of the NCC and bishops conference to examine the possibility of Catholic membership in an existing NCC or the formation of a new inclusive ecumenical body.

2. Further consultation: The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the World Council of Churches have sponsored three useful consultations on issues connected with NCCs – in 1971, 1986 and 1993. This report provides a timely occasion for another gathering. There is need for a new international consultation to bring together representatives of NCCs, REOs and episcopal conferences, especially from places where the Roman Catholic Church is not in membership.

Recommendation:

That the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity be asked to co-sponsor a consultation of representatives of NCCs, REOs and episcopal conferences from places where the Roman Catholic Church is not in membership. The consultation should consider the document “Inspired by the Same Vision” and reflect on the experience others have gleaned regarding Catholic participation.

IX. Appendices

A. A SHORT BIBLIOGRAPHY

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B. NCCs AND REOs WITH CATHOLIC MEMBERSHIP

Regional Ecumenical Organizations

- Caribbean Conference of Churches
- Middle East Conference of Churches
- Pacific Conference of Churches

National Councils of Churches/Christian Councils

Africa: 14

- Botswana (Botswana Christian Council)
- Congo (Ecumenical Council of Christian Churches of Congo)
- Gambia (Christian Council of The Gambia)
- Lesotho (Christian Council of Lesotho)
- Liberia (Liberian Council of Churches)
- Madagascar (Council of Christian Churches in Madagascar)
- Namibia (Council of Churches in Namibia)
- Nigeria (Christian Council of Nigeria)
- Sierra Leone (Council of Churches in Sierra Leone)
- South Africa (South African Council of Churches)
- Sudan (Sudan Council of Churches)
- Swaziland (Council of Swaziland Churches)
- Uganda (Uganda Joint Christian Council)
- Zimbabwe (Zimbabwe Council of Churches), RC observer

Asia: 3

- Australia (National Council of Churches in Australia)
- Malaysia (Christian Federation of Malaysia)
- Taiwan (National Council of Churches of Taiwan)

Caribbean: 12

- Antigua (Antigua Christian Council)
- Aruba (Aruba Council of Churches)
- Bahamas (Bahamas Christian Council)
- Barbados (Barbados Christian Council)
- Belize (Belize Christian Council)
- Curacao (Curacao Council of Churches)
- Dominica (Dominica Christian Council)
- Jamaica (Jamaica Council of Churches)
- Montserrat (Montserrat Christian Council)
- St Kitts/Nevis (St Kitts Christian Council)
- St Vincent (St Vincent and the Grenadines Christian Council)
- Trinidad and Tobago (Christian Council of Trinidad and Tobago)

Europe: 25

- Austria (Council of Churches in Austria)
- Belgium (Meeting of Christian Churches in Belgium)
- Britain and Ireland (Churches Together in Britain and Ireland)
- Croatia (Ecumenical Coordinating Committee of Churches in Croatia)
- Czech Republic (Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Czech Republic),
RC associate
- Denmark (National Council of Churches in Denmark)
- England (Churches Together in England)
- Estonia (Estonian Council of Churches)
- Finland (Finnish Ecumenical Council)
- France (Protestant Federation of France)
- Germany (Council of Christian Churches in Germany)
- Hungary (Ecumenical Council of Churches in Hungary)
- Ireland (Irish Council of Churches), RC observer
- Ireland (Irish Inter-Church Meeting)
- Isle of Man (Churches Together in Man)
- Lithuania (National Council of Churches in Lithuania)
- Malta (Malta Ecumenical Council)
- Norway (Christian Council of Norway)
- Netherlands (Council of Churches in the Netherlands)
- Scotland (Action of Churches Together in Scotland)
- Slovak Republic (Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Slovak Republic),
RC observer
- Slovenia (Council of Christian Churches in Slovenia)
- Sweden (Christian Council of Sweden)
- Switzerland (Council of Christian Churches in Switzerland)
- Wales (Cytun – Churches Together in Wales)

North America: 1

- Canada (Canadian Council of Churches)

Oceania: 10

- American Samoa (National Council of Churches in American Samoa)

Cook Islands (Religious Advisory Council of the Cook Islands)
 Fiji (Fiji Council of Churches)
 Kiribati (Kiribati National Council of Churches)
 Marshall Islands (Marshall Islands National Council of Churches of Christ)
 Papua New Guinea (Papua New Guinea Council of Churches)
 Samoa (Samoa Council of Churches)
 Solomon Islands (Solomon Islands Christian Association)
 Tonga (Tonga National Council of Churches)
 Vanuatu (Vanuatu Christian Council)

South America: 5

Argentina (Argentine Federation of Evangelical Churches)
 Brazil (National Council of Christian Churches in Brazil)
 Guyana (Guyana Council of Churches)
 Surinam (Committee of Christian Churches – Surinam)
 Uruguay (Federation of Evangelical Churches in Uruguay)

C. LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AACC	All Africa Conference of Churches
ACC	Australian Council of Churches
ARCIC	Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission
CCA	Christian Conference of Asia
CCANZ	Conference of Churches, Aotearoa-New Zealand
CCC	Caribbean Conference of Churches
CCEE	Consilium Conferentiarum Episcoporum Europae
CEC	Conference of European Churches
CECEF	Conseil d'Églises chrétiennes en France (Council of Christian Churches in France)
CELAM	Latin American Episcopal Conference
CLAI	Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias (Latin American Council of Churches)
CTBI	Churches Together in Britain and Ireland
CUV	Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches
DAP	Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism
EC	Ecumenical Collaboration at the Regional, National, and Local Levels
FABC	Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences
ICC	Irish Council of Churches
LG	Lumen Gentium (Vatican Council II Decree on the Church)
MECC	Middle East Council of Churches
NCC	National Council of Churches
NCCA	National Council of Churches in Australia
REO	Regional Ecumenical Organization
PCC	Pacific Conference of Churches
PCPCU	Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity
SECAM	Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar

UR Unitatis Redintegratio (Vatican Council II Decree on Ecumenism)
YMCA Young Men's Christian Association
WCC World Council of Churches

NOTE

¹ This document sometimes uses the term "Catholic Church" in preference to "Roman Catholic Church." In some regional and national ecumenical organizations, it is the wider "Catholic" family that is represented; this situation may be reflected in the constitutions of some national and regional councils of churches with use of the term "Catholic."