

Third Phase of Theological Conversations between the Baptist World Alliance and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity Continues Work in Hybrid Meeting Format

Durham, North Carolina, USA 12/10/2021 – Phase III of the international ecumenical conversations between the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU), which experienced a hiatus in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, continued its work in a hybrid meeting format December 6-10, 2021 for the fourth annual meeting in the five-year series.

The full joint commission met virtually on Monday, December 6 and Friday, December 10. From Tuesday, December 7 through Thursday, December 9, two working groups from the commission pursued a common agenda, but developed in complementary ways related to their respective meeting formats. A North American working group consisting of commission members from Jamaica, the United States, and Canada (joined virtually by commission members from Argentina) met in Durham, North Carolina, where they were hosted by Duke Divinity School and its Baptist House of Studies. A virtual working group hosted by the PCPCU met during the same dates, with participation by commission members from Australia, India, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Poland.

The Baptist delegation was led by co-chair Rev Dr Frank Rees, Associate Professor and Chair of the Academic Board at the University of Divinity in Australia, and the Catholic delegation was led by co-chair Bishop Arthur Serratelli, Bishop emeritus of Paterson, New Jersey, USA. The dialogue took up the theme of “Forms of Common Witness,” giving attention to recognizing ways in which Baptists and Catholics have already been engaging in a shared witness to the dynamic of the gospel and envisioning ways in which the two communions might more intentionally and more fully collaborate in offering the world a common witness to Christ. This discussion built on the first meeting’s consideration of “Sources of Common Witness” in Waco, Texas, USA in 2017, the second meeting’s focus on the “Contexts of Common Witness” represented by six continents of the world in Rome, Italy in 2018, and the third meeting’s examination of “Challenges to Common Witness” in Warsaw, Poland in 2019. (The commission held a two-day continuation meeting virtually in June 2021 to discuss the written record of their work to that point and discuss possibilities for holding their December 2021 meeting.) These sub-themes are dimensions of the overall theme of the third phase of dialogue, “The Dynamic of the Gospel and the Witness of the Church.” The Baptist-Catholic joint commission will meet annually through 2022 for this third phase of conversations. A first phase of international conversations had taken place in 1984-1988, resulting in a report in 1990 titled “Summons to Witness to Christ in Today’s World.” A second phase of the conversations met from 2006 through 2010 and produced a report in 2013 titled “The Word of God in the Life of the Church.”

The Joint Commission will hold its next meeting 12-16 December 2022 in Rome, Italy (barring any unforeseen developments related to the COVID-19 pandemic), hosted by the PCPCU.

The Baptist delegation for this year’s meeting consisted of members and persons specially invited as observers. Participating in this round of conversations were Rev Dr Paul S. Fiddes (UK), Dr Derek Hatch (USA), Rev Dr Glenroy Lalor (Jamaica), Rev Dr Tomas Mackey (Argentina), Dr Elizabeth Newman (USA), Rev Dr Lina Toth (Lithuania/UK), observers Dr Valerie Duval-Poujol (France) and Rev Dr Curtis Freeman (USA), and BWA Director of Integral Mission Rev Everton Jackson (Jamaica/USA).

The Catholic delegation consisted of members Dr Peter Casarella (USA), Rev Dr Stephen Fernandes (India), Rev Dr William Henn OFM Cap. (Italy), Rev Prof Przemslaw Kantyka (Poland), Sr Dr Marie-Hélène Robert NDA (France), Rev Dr Jorge A. Scampini OP (Argentina), and Sr Dr Susan Wood SCL (USA).

The secretaries for the co-chairs are Rev. Dr. Steven R. Harmon, Professor of Historical Theology at Gardner-Webb University School of Divinity, Boiling Springs, North Carolina, USA on behalf of the BWA and Msgr Juan Usma Gómez on behalf of the PCPCU. Msgr Usma Gómez succeeded Rev Avelino González-Ferrer as Catholic co-secretary for the dialogue in July 2021.

[In attached photo, left of screen, front-back: Sr Dr Susan Wood S.C.L. (USA), Rev Everton Jackson (Jamaica/USA), Dr Derek Hatch (USA), Rev Dr Glenroy Lalor (Jamaica), Rev Dr Steven R. Harmon (USA); on screen, top row, L-R: Dr Valerie Duval-Poujol (France), Rev. Dr. Paul S. Fiddes (UK); on screen, middle row, L-R: Sr Dr Marie-Hélène Robert N.D.A. (France), Rev Dr Tomas Mackey (Argentina), Msgr Juan Usma Gómez (Columbia/Vatican); Rev Dr Lina Toth (Lithuania/UK); on screen, bottom row, L-R: Rev Dr Jorge A. Scampini O.P. (Argentina), Rev Dr Stephen Fernandes (India), Rev Dr William Henn O.F.M. Cap. (Italy); right of screen, front-back: Bishop Arthur Serratelli (USA), Dr Peter Casarella (USA), Dr Elizabeth Newman (USA), Rev Dr Curtis Freeman. Not pictured: Rev Dr Frank Rees (Australia), Rev Prof Przemslaw Kantyka (Poland)]

(Communiqué prepared by Rev Dr Steven R. Harmon and Msgr Juan Usma Gómez)