

Ecumenists examine ethical, moral issues seen as hurdles to unity

WASHINGTON - Anyone who follows the news knows that new hurdles regarding ethics and morals have been raised in recent decades on the track leading to Christian unity.

So it was no surprise that the theme of the 2009 annual meeting of the North American Academy of Ecumenists was "The Ethical Horizon From an Ecumenical Perspective."

"Two perceptions dominate the discussion," said Michael Root, dean of the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, S.C., during the Sept. 25-27 meeting at the Washington Theological Union.

"One (is) that the need for an ecumenical discussion of ethics is more important than ever. And two, that the ecumenical dialogues have avoided such moral and ethical questions," he said in a keynote talk on "Ethics and Ecumenism: Unity, Diversity and Search for Criteria."

The latter perception is not really accurate, he said, indicating that his research had turned up nearly 50 international or national dialogues between various churches that have addressed issues such as abortion, contraception, end-of-life questions, homosexuality, marriage and divorce, environmental questions, political ethics and human rights, racism, and war and peace.

Root's presentation pinpointed an important focus in dialogues on ethical and moral issues: the search for criteria to discern when an ethical difference is church-dividing and when it is not.

He cited a 1994 report of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission on "Life in Christ: Morals, Communion and the Church," which said that "we believe our two communions share a common vision and values."

The report took the position that if differences are on the level of derived

conclusions or pastoral applications rather than fundamental values, then the differences need not be seen as church-dividing.

This approach, observed Root, is a good example of “differentiated consensus,” i.e., permitted or acceptable diversity.

“But the weakness of the ARCIC argument,” he said, “is the privileging of the ‘general’ over the ‘particular.’ This is the only dialogue to present an argument as to why a specific difference need not be church-dividing.”

Root observed how different churches work with authority. For example, he said, Protestant authoritative statements tend to be less binding and allow for more variants, while Anglicans want to ascribe the greatest possible freedom, simply commending a teaching rather than imposing it, out of a desire to respect the freedom of conscience of individual Christians.

But for Catholics, Root said, “the church has a duty to teach clearly because it sees itself as responsible for the salvation of its members. When Catholic instruction takes the form of canon law, it is seen as appropriate. Laws are the function of theology and of pastoral concern. They are intended to introduce Christian values into the life of the faithful.”

Regarding marriage and divorce, he said most churches have largely achieved a common view of marriage. The disagreement arises, he said, over whether or not it can so break down and die as to permit divorce and remarriage.

The Catholic Church doesn’t permit it, but the Orthodox Church does allow it. A second marriage in the Orthodox Church has a penitential aspect but it is permitted.

Root called the two churches’ approaches to divorce and remarriage an example of differentiated consensus.

“At what point,” he asked, “do differences of practice compromise claimed agreement on fundamental values?”

The subject of war and peace is another example of a differentiated consensus. Churches agree that war is to be avoided if at all possible. At the same time, there is

a gap between the historic peace churches, such as Mennonites, who reject all participation in warfare, and other churches whose position is more nuanced, allowing for the limited use of force, or the use of arms in a “just war.”

For the peace churches such “nuances” stand in the way of fundamental values and call into question churches’ unity on the issue, he said.

Root noted that the U.S. Anglican-Catholic dialogue – following Pope John Paul II’s 1993 encyclical, “Veritatis Splendor” (“The Splendor of Truth”), on Catholic moral teaching – argued that “even if basic areas of agreement exist very diverse applications of practice do indeed constitute an obstruction to unity.”

“Ecclesial communion requires not only a common vision of Christian life but also common recognition that rules and practices constitute unity,” he said. “Practices show the nature of one’s understanding and commitment. Specific practices can embody a community’s commitment far more than general visioning.”

“In the end,” Root said, “ecumenism is not about the relationship between concepts of theology, but between churches which have the goal of actual ecclesial communion and which seek to live out their common commitment to Christ.”

“That unity will be complex – marked by differentiated consensus – but in the end, we can’t just float away from concrete people doing actual things. It is the actual things we do that show whether we have a common faith or not,” he said.