

U.S. ecumenical ties strong despite challenges to Christian unity

WASHINGTON – More people profess Catholicism in the United States than any other single religion. There are 64.4 million Catholics, representing close to 22 percent of the nation's total population.

But the overall number of Catholics and other Christians represents an overwhelming majority of the U.S. population, which has now passed the 300 million mark.

Although there are denominational divides and new fissures continue to threaten unity even within faiths considered mainstream, Catholic and other Christian leaders engaged in ecumenical relations continue to see its importance.

The U.S. Catholic Church's ecumenical efforts include dialogues with Lutherans, Methodists and evangelicals and a consultation with Anglicans. It also belongs to Christian Churches Together in the USA, founded in March 2006 and considered the broadest, most inclusive ecumenical movement in U.S. history.

That's the ecumenical landscape Pope Benedict XVI will find during his mid-April visit to the United States.

On the pope's itinerary is an April 18 ecumenical prayer service in New York with leaders of other Christian denominations at St. Joseph's Church, which was founded by German Catholics. The meeting comes a day after he gathers with 200 religious leaders at an interfaith prayer service in Washington.

Father James Gardiner, a member of the Society of the Atonement, an order founded to foster ecumenical dialogue, said these are "very challenging and very encouraging" times for ecumenism.

"One of the most interesting things we just did was for the (annual) Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (in January). We asked people to tell us what they were doing. The stuff was coming in fast and furious," he said in a telephone interview with

Catholic News Service. His order's headquarters are in Garrison, N.Y.

For example, he said, the Diocese of Brooklyn, N.Y., "had a Week of Prayer service, but they're also having a prayer service around Pentecost for the same thing. They're not limiting themselves to one time a year."

The Episcopal Church, the U.S. branch of the worldwide Anglican Communion, has seen tensions rise within the denomination over the 2003 ordination of an openly gay bishop and a move to bless same-sex unions. One Episcopal diocese voted in December to secede from the Episcopal Church and align itself with an Anglican branch it considers more orthodox in adhering to Anglican teaching.

Because of these tensions, "what we want from our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters is patience and to keep the conversation going," said Episcopal Bishop Christopher Epting, who since 2001 has been his denomination's deputy for ecumenical and interfaith relations. "We're very encouraged that things have not broken off. We continue to stay at the table."

After 40 years of Catholic-Episcopal dialogue in the United States, the task of unity is "not easier. I think it's increasingly difficult," Bishop Epting said.

In times past, he added, "we'd begun to develop our own identities apart from one another - and sometimes not even in conversation with one another. When we make decisions (now) we know it affects the other church. We have consulted with the Rome and the U.S. Catholic Church in our struggles."

The Catholic Church is, ecumenically speaking, "the elephant in the living room," Bishop Epting said. "If we can't (work with) the Roman Catholic Church ecumenically, we can't really be ecumenical at all."

Addressing the impact of U.S. religious pluralism on ecumenical dialogue, the Rev. Doug Mills, the United Methodist Church's chief ecumenical officer, said: "I don't know that it makes it easier or more difficult. I think that religious diversity in the U.S. gives a different context, a context we're very familiar with, but a context that has its own complexities."

Rev. Mills said Methodists may have some issues with Catholic belief and practice,

but after 40-plus years of dialogue, it's still hard to define one issue as insurmountable.

"I don't know that we've really said there is one issue that we cannot get over," he told CNS. "I think there are some significant issues we have not yet begun to grasp.

"I know for United Methodists one of those issues might be the role of the bishop of Rome and possibly the place of Mary – probably more, devotion to Mary – might be one of those," he continued. "I'm guessing, but I suspect that for Catholics one of those issues that need deeper discussion is the ordering of ministry, especially the role of women, and the episcopacy."

Many Protestant denominations in the 20th century began to allow the ordination of women. The Catholic Church has repeatedly said its teaching that it does not have the authority to ordain women is definitive and that the issue is not open to debate among Catholics.

"I think everybody has a different way of dealing with the ordering of ministry," Rev. Mills said. "For some people it's important, for some people it's not so important. For the people who feel it's not so important, what's more important is the product of the ministry."

"It's not surprising" that new wrinkles appear in the ecumenical fabric at the same time church representatives are conducting dialogues about greater unity, according to Bishop Epting. "The world is moving very fast. ... Issues change very rapidly and we are confronting things we never would have thought about 40 years ago."

If he had a chance to brief Pope Benedict on ecumenical relations in the United States, Father Gardiner said, "I'd tell him to trust our experience. ... It's OK, it's consonant with the workings of the Holy Spirit. Take us seriously. We're a very faithful lot. And I'd say we're proud of being a faithful lot, but pride is a sin.

"Then I'd say to him, 'Come with me and I'll show you,' because I'm not so sure that when people come from overseas they're ... familiar with what happens here," the priest said. "Sometimes they can't believe it. There are people from all over the place. They're all mixed together now in ways they weren't before. We have prior

experience in that. It takes a little doing, but it all works out. It's very challenging and very encouraging."

"Thank God for the ecumenical movement," echoed Bishop Epting. "We do have relationships that allow us to be ... not quite so separate."

While Catholics and Protestants are on the same path to unity, nobody can say for sure what's at the end of the path.

"I think that we don't yet know what it is that God is calling us to," Rev. Mills said. "We don't know yet what the Spirit is leading us to actually looks like. And so we just keep moving on faith that at the right time it will be revealed."

"My guess is - and it's just a guess - that 'one church' does not look like the current United Methodist Church," he said. "It will look like something else. But what that is, I don't know yet."