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Evangelicals, Vatican reach accord on proselytizing

by Francis X. Rocca by Religion News Service

WASHINGTON -- Christian missionaries should renounce all "deception and coercive means" of winning converts, according to an agreement released Tuesday (June 28) by a broad coalition of evangelicals, the World Council of Churches and the Vatican.

The document, "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct" represents the latest attempt to assuage sometimes violent tensions over proselytizing in non-Christian societies.

The WCC, the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) together "represent over 90 percent of the world's total Christian population," according to a WEA statement, which hailed the accord as the "first document of its kind in the history of the church."

The document calls on individual Christian churches to develop guidelines for proselytizing "among those of different religions and among those who do not profess any particular religion."

Christian missionaries are to "reject all forms of violence ... including the violation or destruction of places of worship, sacred symbols or texts," the document says.

Instead, they should "acknowledge and appreciate what is true and good" in other religions, and make any criticisms "in a spirit of mutual respect."

The document also calls on missionaries to respect the "full personal freedom" of their converts by allowing them "sufficient time for adequate reflection and preparation" before they adopt a new faith.

Noting the importance of faith healing in many ministries, the document instructs missionaries to ensure

the 'vulnerability of people and their need for healing are not exploited.' Likewise, the document denounces proselytizing with the use of 'financial incentives and rewards.'

Though not a full-throated apology for such practices, the injunctions are 'tantamount to an admission that they have been going on,' said the Rev. Daniel A. Madigan, an expert on Muslim-Christian relations at Georgetown University.

While the document recommends sensitivity in missionary work, it also affirms religious freedom as a fundamental human right, 'including the right to publicly profess, practice, propagate and change one's religion.'

Preparation of the document began in 2006, largely in response to accusations of 'unethical methods' by Christian missionaries, according to the WEA statement. The document does not name specific countries or regions.

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'In some cases these objections have led to anti-conversion laws and violence,' the WEA noted.

According to a 2009 study by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, the highest levels of legal and social restrictions on religious freedom are found in non-Christian countries, including Iran, Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, India and Saudi Arabia.

The governor of Pakistan's Punjab province was assassinated in January after publicly supporting a Christian woman who had been sentenced to death under the country's anti-blasphemy law.

In Nigeria, where both Christianity and Islam have been spreading quickly among former adherents of traditional African religions, interreligious violence has killed hundreds in recent years.

According to John L. Esposito, director of Georgetown's Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, objections to the document are likely to come from 'arch-conservative' Christians and Muslims, with 'both saying, 'Hey, wait a second.''

'How much are (Christians) going to say that witness in today's world should be witness of one's Christian life and one's service, rather than an aggressive form of preaching and proselytizing?' he said. 'It still needs to be worked out. And that's also an issue on the Muslim side.'

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