

Catholics and Anglicans take big step toward bridging differences

Members of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission expressed excitement about a fresh approach to ecumenism outlined in a statement that has taken seven years to produce.

Paula Gooder, a British theologian and an Anglican member of the commission, known as ARCIC III, described the statement reflecting on authority and ecclesial communion as “groundbreaking.”

“We feel that ... we are walking together more closely than ever,” Gooder told Catholic News Service in a July 2 telephone interview. “I think this is a really important document.”

She described the commission’s work as entering “new territory” and that she sees “great potential for future conversations and that is really exciting.”

Archbishop Bernard Longley of Birmingham, England, Catholic co-chair of ARCIC, said he felt the document was “exciting” because it restored ecumenical dialogue after a hiatus caused by the changes within the Anglican Communion, such as the priestly and episcopal ordination of women.

The new statement, called *Walking Together on the Way: Learning to Be the Church – Local, Regional, Universal*, overcomes obstacles to dialogue by inviting Catholics and Anglicans to learn from each other’s differences rather than focusing on what each has in common.

In a process known as “receptive learning,” Anglicans are encouraged, for instance, to learn about models of unity from the Catholic Church, while Catholics are invited to consider how the laity can be better involved in decision-making.

One paragraph of the document suggests ecumenism might advance if the Catholic Church considered women deacons, married priests and lay preachers.

It says: ‘While the commission recognizes that some decisions regarding ministry made by provinces of the Anglican Communion are not open to the Roman Catholic community, others potentially are, e.g. a female diaconate; a fuller implementation of licensed lay pastoral assistants; the priestly ordination of mature married men – viri probati; and the authorization of laypeople to preach.

“Given that the lay faithful already exercise their participation in the tria munera by ministering to the Christian community, there is reason to suggest an enlarged role for authorized lay ministry, including the canonical opening of

the ministry of lector to women," it said.

Archbishop Longley told CNS the document was delineating a program of reform and represented an opportunity to grow in understanding.

"The document itself isn't establishing in any sense a project, but it is saying that in our dialogue, in terms of our relations, these are factors that are part of our relationship with one another," he explained.

"We live with the reality of all of those elements within the Anglican Communion and indeed within the partnership of our discussions there are ordained women who are part of the Anglican representation on ARCIC," he said.

"Those are elements of the Anglican experience that we should continue to reflect on together and how the Anglican Communion has reached these decisions and to continue the dialogue with Anglicans even on the difficult issues," Archbishop Longley said.

He added that the document "will give encouragement to people in both our communions about the status of the dialogue that we have been working together quite carefully in recent years with the support of the Anglican Christian unity office and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity."

"It's not setting out a blueprint by any means for future development in the Catholic Church, but what it is saying is that in our own dialogue these are important issues for us to reflect on together," Archbishop Longley said. "They are legitimate and important to ecumenical dialogue."

Problems of eucharistic sharing between spouses are acknowledged in one paragraph, but in another paragraph, the statement suggests more flexibility might be exercised locally.

It said that "the Roman Catholic Church might fruitfully learn from the Anglican practice of provincial diversity and the associated recognition that on some matters different parts of the Communion can appropriately make different discernments influenced by cultural and contextual appropriateness."

Benedictine Father Henry Wansbrough of the Ampleforth Abbey, near York, England, and a Catholic member of ARCIC, said the latter paragraph was important because it meant that the Catholic Church "is willing to learn from other ecclesial bodies."

"It is willing to learn but doesn't necessarily agree with everything they say," he said. "We have to be open to discussion. I think it goes a long way to show a real desire to learn from one another and to adopt from one another what one can."

"There are a lot of wise things done in the Church of England which are not at the moment done in the Roman Catholic Church," Father Wansbrough said.

"I think the consultation of the laity is more serious in the Church of England than it is in the Roman Catholic Church, though that is progressing hugely at the moment with Pope Francis and with the synods, but I think we are a bit behind," he continued.

The 34,000-word statement was published July 2 on the website of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, with the permission of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

An introduction by Archbishop Longley and the Anglican co-chairman, Archbishop David Moxon, the archbishop of Canterbury's representative in Rome, explains that the statement seeks to develop the issues of authority and ecclesial communion "in a new way."

The document represents a detailed exploration of what structures, channels or practices exist to give all the baptized a voice or a role in how decisions are made.

ARCIC III already has begun work on a second part to the statement, addressing how the church, local and universal, discerns right ethical teaching.

Archbishop Longley said the document will not be ready for publication for at least two years.