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World Council of Churches backs dialogue with Islam

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By Tom Heneghan, Religion Editor

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PARIS (Reuters) - The World Council of Churches, which groups the main non-Catholic Christian churches, urged its members on Wednesday to open a dialogue with Muslim scholars seeking inter-faith cooperation to promote justice and peace.

The Geneva-based WCC said it wanted to organize discussions on theology and ethics with signatories of A Common Word, a call for Christian-Muslim dialogue issued by 138 Islamic scholars last October and welcomed by many Christian churches.

The WCC statement came a day after Saudi media reported that King Abdullah had called for a Muslim consensus on a dialogue with Christianity and Judaism to end inter-faith tension.

The Vatican has begun talks with leaders of the Common Word, an unprecedented initiative by scholars of several Muslim traditions, but the Easter baptism of an Italian Muslim by Pope Benedict has put a damper on their initial upbeat mood.

"We are encouraging our churches to consider this invitation offered by the Muslim leaders as a new opportunity for inter-religious dialogue," WCC General Secretary Rev Samuel Kobia said in a statement on the Common Word appeal.

The WCC groups over 560 million Christians in 349 churches around the world, including most Orthodox churches, Protestant denominations and many independent groups.

It said it issued its response to A Common Word after consulting member churches, several of which have already responded to the Muslim appeal and planned meetings.

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"This invitation marks an encouraging new stage in Muslim thinking about relations between Muslims and Christians," the WCC statement said. "Throughout their shared history, followers of the two faiths have too often misunderstood each other."

The two faiths had several irreconcilable differences, it said: "Not the least of these will be the Christian difficulty of appreciating Mohammad as a prophet and the Muslim difficulty of appreciating Jesus as God incarnate."

"Both Christians and Muslims must work hard to develop respect where understanding is difficult and trust where differences do not yield to inquiry," it added.

While King Abdullah's call for dialogue seemed separate from the Common Word initiative, both reflected concern among Muslim and Christian thinkers to avoid a "clash of civilizations" as globalization multiplies contacts between the West and Islam.

Aref Ali Nayed, a leading Common Word signatory, criticized the baptism of Egyptian-born Italian journalist Magdi Allam as "a triumphalist tool for scoring points" but the Vatican daily L'Osservatore Romano said it was not "a hostile act."

While relations with the Vatican are temporarily strained, the Common Word group also plans meetings over the next year with Anglicans, U.S. Protestants and Orthodox Christians in its effort to foster inter-faith understanding.

Another inter-faith effort, the Islam and the West project of the World Economic Forum, published a report on Wednesday saying that fewer than 30 percent of Muslims and Christians polled thought the other faith was interested in better understanding.

(Reporting by Tom Heneghan; Editing by Sami Aboudi)

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