"Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness" is a report from the Fourth Phase of the international dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and an ad hoc group of Pentecostal leaders. It highlights the remarkable progress achieved during almost thirty years of seeking common understanding in matters of Christian faith and practice.

The term "unity in diversity" is an apt rubric covering these historic talks. Most of the inter-confessional dialogues currently underway have structural unity as their goal. However, the Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue has concentrated on developing "a climate of mutual respect and understanding in matters of faith and practice" between classical Pentecostals and the Catholic Church. This approach celebrates diversity in the body of Christ, yet maintains fidelity to the prayer of Jesus for the unity of all who would own his name and acknowledge his lordship. It is notable that the Dialogue reached agreement with the Second Vatican Council on two crucial points: 1) divided witness is a scandal, and 2) what the two traditions share in common is more important than matters separating them.

The locus of the unity to which Dialogue members subscribe is found "in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, who died and rose from the dead, [through whom] salvation is offered to all humankind as a gift of God’s grace and mercy". This affirmation is what New Testament scholar James Dunn has called the "integrating center." Agreement on what constitutes the center establishes parameters for accommodating wide ranging diversity in belief while preserving the unity endowed by the Holy Spirit. It is an important reminder that unity in the one church does not necessarily mean uniformity in doctrine and practice.

Although the concept of a unifying center has not been articulated by Pentecostals, it is well established in the Catholic understanding of ecumenism. The bishops of Vatican II rejoiced because Protestants "look to Christ as the source and center of ecclesiastical communion". From the inception of Pope John Paul II's pontificate the idea of a center of faith figured prominently in his ecumenical vision. His first encyclical stated, "Jesus Christ is the stable
and fixed center of the mission that God himself has entrusted to man. We must all share in this mission and concentrate all our forces on it, since it is more necessary than ever [for humankind] (Redeemer of Man, 11). The thought of a common center of faith continues to permeate the Pope’s public comments as well. By allowing the “center” to dictate terms of the discussion, Dialogue participants created space to build the mutual understanding and trust required for them to find common ground. As a result, they were able to bracket outstanding differences and address problems that would have seemed beyond them at the onset of the international Dialogue.

The work on proselytism (Section V) was acknowledged as the most intractable issue the participants faced. That a measure of consensus was reached is significant not only for Pentecostals and Catholics, but for broader evangelical-Roman Catholic relations as well. The report traces the underlying source of tensions to the absence of a common understanding of church (69-75). The ecclesiological gap perpetuates isolation of the two faith communities. The manner in which each engages in mission frequently leads to mistrust and suspicion. This outcome is especially true when faith is shared across community boundaries. The result is “a general state of hostility between us in which we even question the Christian authenticity of each other” (77). Alienation has profoundly influenced the way the gospel imperative for mission is understood and carried out, especially in its evangelistic aspects. Therefore, the report encourages the two traditions to distinguish between legitimate evangelism, i.e., “the right to bear witness to the Gospel before all people” (94), and examples of unethical activities which may fairly be considered proselytism (93). A willingness to balance the right to religious freedom with the responsibility for maintaining unity as mandated in Scripture would appear to be an essential ingredient for resolving long festering issues.

No doubt dialogue participants were able to navigate around traditional barriers because a high level of mutual understanding and trust were already in place. It is significant, however, that only two of thirty Pentecostal participants are nationals from countries of Latin America and Southern Europe, where Pentecostal-Catholic tensions have been most acute. This lack of representation is probably a good indicator of the extent to which Roman Catholics and Pentecostals are alienated in these historic Catholic countries. While the report offers some concrete actions Pentecostals and Roman Catholics are encouraged to implement (114), the absence of established relationships will make the process of reception long and arduous.

1See for example, Information Service, 1992/II, 3 and Information Service, 1993/I, 30.