

Time for new wineskins?

The National Council of Churches and the ecumenical future

by [Wesley Granberg-Michaelson](#) in the [November 10, 1999](#) issue

Often I hear it said, "If the National Council of Churches came to an end, church leaders would gather and decide to create something like it again." I agree. And that might be the best thing that could happen. The NCC's immediate financial crisis is but the symptom of a deeper crisis. Trust in the NCC by the leaders and constituency of many of its member communions has been severely eroded. Further, much ecumenical momentum within the U.S. churches no longer flows through the structures of the NCC.

In short, even if it is capable both of balancing its current books and persuading its member communions to raise the additional funds essential for its financial viability, the NCC would still need to answer an underlying question: What vision of an ecumenical future drives the council, and can it be realized through its present institutional life?

A persistent administrative dysfunction is the cause of the NCC's crippling financial crisis. Some of the causes are systemic. As with most denominations, designated funds can be found for the service of human need and support of cooperative mission. But resources to support particular advocacy for social, racial and economic justice, as well as the traditional ecumenical work such as that of the Commission on Faith and Order, the core of the NCC's historic vocation and witness, are more difficult to secure.

Additionally, money essential to support the infrastructure of the organization and the public witness of the general secretary and related staff comes from undesignated funding from the member churches and taxes on those parts of the council which have predictable revenue streams. As the core financial support from member churches shrinks, tensions between the funded and unfunded parts of the council escalate.

None of this is new. In the past, ways have been found to navigate through these troubled waters and keep the ship afloat, mostly on course. But in the last few years, this ship has been taking on more and more water. Passengers and crew no longer focus on where it is heading. The concern, instead, is whether the ship can be kept afloat. The result: even as meetings of governing bodies, committees and groups of the NCC have become focused more on issues of institutional survival than on ecumenical vocation, member communions turn less to the NCC as a resource for enabling their ecumenical engagement. Concerns over the financial instability and administrative incoherence of the NCC now seriously weaken its most fundamental asset—the trust and confidence of its own member churches.

What are the options? We need to begin with the right questions. First: What are the current and future ecumenical challenges facing the churches? And second: How can the U.S. churches and communions best be enabled together to address these challenges? Clear answers to these questions will then clarify the NCC's institutional future. The fellowship of the NCC includes most of the historic (or mainline) Protestant churches, the Orthodox churches and the historic black churches. Absent are the Roman Catholic Church, the evangelical churches and most Pentecostal churches. The initial challenge at the beginning of a new millennium, then, is to ask whether a table of ecumenical fellowship inclusive of all these groups can be created.

In this respect, institutional ecumenism in the United States lags behind developments in much of the world. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, is now a member of the councils of churches in about 55 countries throughout the globe. At some regional levels, ecumenical bodies such as the Middle East Council of Churches are now structured to include representatives of the Orthodox churches, the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant and evangelical churches. Within several countries, national councils have gone through a process of re-creating themselves to become more inclusive ecumenical bodies. One recent example is Great Britain, where the old British Council of Churches was dissolved in order to create a new ecumenical vehicle including the Roman Catholic Church and other churches previously outside such a fellowship. Within the U.S., ecumenical bodies at state and local levels frequently are more inclusive than is the composition of the NCC. And at the global level, the World Council of Churches has identified the challenge of creating a forum beyond its own present membership, to include historic Protestant churches, evangelical and Pentecostal churches, Orthodox

churches, the Roman Catholic Church and other groups in the global Christian family. At its Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe, last December, the WCC established a new consultative group with Pentecostals, and its Joint Working Group with the Roman Catholic Church has maintained at least an official point of dialogue between Geneva and Rome over the past several years.

While such ideas are talked about from time to time in the NCC, they have not been central to motivating its daily agenda. Rather, a smorgasbord of programs, overextending its staff, has left little room in the NCC for exploring creative alternatives to the ecumenical future.

The difficulties facing such explorations must not be underestimated. One cannot expect that the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops or churches belonging to the National Association of Evangelicals can be persuaded to join an expanded version of the present NCC. (In fact, the constitution of the NAE still prohibits member churches from having membership in both the NAE and the NCC, although it is now considering changing that provision.) Rather, an intentional dialogue would need to be initiated between the present churches of the NCC and churches outside its fellowship about a vision for a new ecumenical vehicle. That would take enormous energy and commitment. But it would also capture again the ecumenical imagination of many churches within the U.S.

Yet ecumenical fellowship never should exist for the sake of itself. It always should be established in response to the work of the Spirit within the churches for the sake of the world. The common experience facing all churches in the U.S. is their radically changed missiological setting within American culture. Mission now defines the relationship between congregations and their local context. It is also redefining the role of attentive regional and national denominational structures.

This missional reality should also shape the vision for an inclusive, ecumenical vehicle. In this way, all the challenges posed by global and local mission in today's world—the challenges of witness, evangelism and dialogue in a pluralistic society, and the challenges of acting together in pursuing God's purposes of justice and in discerning the relationship between gospel and culture—could provide a common outward focus for renewed ecumenical fellowship.

Two paths present themselves. One is to move the NCC gradually from its present troubled condition into a financially viable, simplified organization which can be

reclaimed and owned by its churches. The other is to pursue the orderly, intentional dissolution of the NCC as part of a process which enables a new ecumenical vessel to be established and set on its course.

That discussion cannot even begin without considering the future of Church World Service and Witness, the arm of the NCC that accounts for about \$60 million of the total budget of slightly over \$70 million. Church World Service effectively carries out emergency disaster response, immigration resettlement programs and other cooperative efforts in service to needs around the world on behalf of participating denominations. Congregations are directly linked through the annual CROP walks.

This ministry of the NCC is funded through contributions as well as government funds and donated materials for particular programs. A perpetual tension exists around the issue of how much CWSW pays to the rest of the council in support of infrastructure and other activities. This conflict ended Arie Brouwer's tenure as NCC general secretary and is now the source of extreme distrust and controversy. Member churches want to see the ministry of Church World Service sustained. That may best be done through separating it from the rest of the council, providing it with at least financial autonomy. Current discussions are moving in that direction.

Will it be evolution or dissolution for the NCC? The answer, in my judgment, comes from determining which way offers the most promise and potential for responding to the emerging ecumenical challenges. And I believe those challenges can best be met through a careful but clear process of bringing the NCC as presently constituted to an end so that a new ecumenical vehicle can be born.

Getting from where the NCC is now to where it should be through an evolutionary process seems nearly impossible. Confidence in the institution, its most valuable currency, is critically deflated. Further, the weight of its present institutional bureaucracy and governing structures seriously overloads its carrying capacity. Finally, particular concerns and constituencies—whether they involve Bible translation, environmental justice or faith and order—create expectations far greater than what can be delivered, placing them into bitter competition for their own survival rather than a shared commitment to a common future. In this case, we cannot simply pour new ecumenical wine into old ecumenical wineskins. It is more promising to explore how we might start a new chapter with fresh wineskins.

Choosing such a path, however, has its own dangers. It will not solve the immediate financial crisis of the NCC. Funds needed this year by the council are essential even to enable a transition into a totally new future. There simply is no jubilee for these debts.

Moreover, serious discussions about the shape of a future ecumenical vessel will take intense effort, consultation and discernment over many, many months. Enormous legal questions need exploration, and commitments must be kept to the staff faithfully serving the NCC. Thus, a decision to embark on this path could take two to three years to implement in a responsible, fair, orderly and creative manner.

Nevertheless, simply by placing this issue on the table before all the churches, the NCC would open an imaginative ecumenical space. It would be the catalyst for a creative, promising search. We could ask with fresh voices, listen with attentive ears and wonder with open hearts: Where and how is God's Spirit calling the churches together in this time for their common mission and shared ministry?

By the time these words are in print, the NCC will probably have selected a new general secretary. Perhaps that person would do well to think of the NCC as a troubled and conflicted congregation. Most of us know the experience of dealing with a congregation that has gone through strife, faced an economic crisis, and experienced an evaporation of trust. What often proves most helpful for these congregations is an interim minister who can assist in a process of healing and enable the congregation to reconnect to its shared mission and ministry. An effective interim can build the bridge to a new future. Often that happens as evolutionary revitalization of its life. Sometimes that comes through institutional death and resurrection.

Whatever path is chosen by the NCC and its member churches, the new general secretary will face challenges similar to those of an interim minister of a troubled congregation in major transition. He or she will need to be guided by shared discernment, upheld with earnest prayer, and supported by whatever blank checks of trust those who lead member communions feel able to write. And in return, the general secretary must have the courage to persistently refuse to ask, How can the NCC survive? and instead keep asking, What is the ecumenical future that God is creating for the churches, and how can we best embrace it?