

Still on pilgrimage: Churches uniting in Christ

by [Paul Crow](#) in the [April 7, 1999](#) issue

The months preceding the 18th plenary of the Consultation on Church Union, held in St. Louis in January, were marked by no little anxiety and anticipation. Though by 1996 eight of the nine communions had voted by significant majorities to enter into "covenant communion," the Episcopal Church, which had in earlier years provided extraordinary leadership and influence in COCU, had not signed on. Its hesitancy was due partly to concerns about the basis of the COCU consensus and partly to the church's preoccupation with dialogues with the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

COCU also received a setback from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1996 when it sought to identify who in Presbyterian polity would serve as ministers of oversight or bishops, as called for in COCU's covenanting councils. The PCUSA's General Assembly and later its presbyteries refused the proposed action, anxious to retain the Presbyterian understanding that oversight (episcopate) is provided not by a designated bishop but by the presbytery, which includes the lay office of ruling elder.

Both the Episcopal and Presbyterian hesitancies--not shared by their earlier representatives in COCU--signaled that the next steps in COCU would be something less than the "reconciliation" of the churches' ordained ministries. To the frustrated and impatient, Vivian U. Robinson, the Christian Methodist Episcopal professor who was COCU's president for a decade, spoke a word of encouraging truth: "Our expectations were that in ten years [after the 1988 plenary] all the member churches would have acted affirmatively on the covenant communion proposal, and we would be in the final preparations for inaugurating the Church of Christ Uniting. Needless to say, our patience is being tested and we are learning that faithfulness to God's intentions for the church often require revised timetables and deeper discernment."

But judging from the evidence at St. Louis, all nine denominations still want to move forward, a refrain heard in speeches and the official reports of the churches to the plenary. The St. Louis meeting was noteworthy for the emphasis on prayer and worship. A significant symbol was a prayer for the consultation, authored by Diane C. Kessler of the United Church of Christ, chair of the plenary planning committee. The prayer was used beforehand by congregations and groups throughout the churches and prayed daily during the plenary.

An opening communion service, presided over by African Methodist Episcopal Bishop Vinton Anderson, and the closing Eucharist, whose celebrant was Frank T. Griswold, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, kept the deliberations in a sacramental context. Prayer was offered at morning, midday and evening. At a moment of uncertainty, the agenda providentially gathered the participants for a service of baptismal renewal, symbolizing the unity already given by a common baptism into Christ. One of the most spiritually energizing moments was an ecumenical hymn festival led by an interchurch choir from the Washington Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. "For this I would give up the historic episcopate," joked an Episcopal bishop.

The meeting also broke new ground in seeking to move toward visible unity through a process of discernment. Anyone who has attended church assemblies in recent decades knows that Christians have been constrained by a methodology of debates, power plays and majority votes, which are interpreted as exonerations for some and defeats for others. In contrast, discernment is a form of decision-making that is less political and juridical and more focused on dialogue and spiritual reflection. The clue is to ask not only "What is the majority will of the people?" but "What is God's will?" In biblical terms, discernment involves listening, testing, and judging what is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This model was new for many at the COCU plenary, and it created some tensions and outbursts of frustration, especially among those who felt the process was unproductive and did not permit enough time for public consideration of critical issues. Yet most participants believed discernment was helpful to a new generation of seekers after unity.

The pace for deciding COCU's next steps was set by a report from a theology commission, chaired by Cynthia Campbell, president of McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. The commission proposed that the churches unite on what is

now possible to affirm--sharing one baptism, confessing the apostolic faith, eucharistic sharing, recognizing one another as authentic churches, working for justice, mutually recognizing (not reconciling at this point) their ordained ministries and committing themselves to address together systemic racism, "the most painfully divisive issue in American society."

Implicit in the latter commitment is the formation of common national, regional and local strategies to erase the manifestations of racism and white privilege in the churches and society. Without the eradication of racism, the churches concluded, it is not possible to achieve a morally credible church unity. But through a credible witness to racial justice, COCU may "fashion a new unity of historically African-American churches and European-American churches on the basis of our full and radical equality in Jesus Christ."

After long discussions and creative drafting and redrafting, the essence of these proposals captured the imagination and approval of the plenary. The churches agreed to enter into "a new relationship to be called Churches Uniting in Christ" (CUC) to be inaugurated in public declaration and celebration during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in the year 2002.

The marks of visible unity proposed will sound familiar to those aware of COCU's history. What is new is the intention to implement them in the immediate future. Those marks are:

- Mutual recognition of one another as authentic expressions of the one Church of Jesus Christ.

- Mutual recognition of members in one baptism.

- Mutual recognition of each church's ordained ministry.

- Mutual recognition that each church affirms the apostolic faith of scripture and tradition expressed in the Apostles and Nicene creeds and seeks to give witness to the apostolic faith in its life and mission.

- Provision for the celebration of the Eucharist together with intentional regularity.

- Engagement together in Christ's mission on a regular and intentional basis, especially in shared mission to combat racism.

Intentional commitment to promote unity with wholeness and to oppose all marginalization and exclusion in church and society based on race, age, gender, forms of disability, and class.

Developing appropriate structures of accountability and appropriate means for ongoing consultation and common decision-making.

Engaging in a continuing process of theological dialogue to deepen an understanding of the evil of racism, to strengthen their shared witness to the apostolic faith, and to provide a process by which the ordained ministries of these churches can be reconciled as one ministry in Jesus Christ. ("The ministry of oversight needs special attention so the churches with corporate or personal oversight and those with oversight in the historic succession of bishops can be reconciled in a way that invites universal recognition.")

In unanimously approving this part of the report the plenary expressed the hope that such a reconciliation of ministry might happen by the year 2007.

Besides stressing these signs of visible unity the COCU plenary named commitment to racial justice and combating racism as "a primary hallmark of this new relationship." The churches' search for unity in faith, sacraments and ministry and the struggle for racial justice in the life of the churches and society were decisively linked. "Our quest for visible unity is irrelevant--in fact, fraudulent--unless that unity embodies racial solidarity and produces a vital public witness for racial equality and fairness."

In the concluding session all nine churches individually--one vote per communion--officially approved this new relationship.

Most of the delegations assumed this revised proposal would need to be taken to their national body. Unfortunately, in casting the Episcopal Church's affirmative vote, the presiding bishop reported that the proposals could not be taken to their General Convention until further clarification is made about the role of the historic episcopate and the threefold ministry of deacons, presbyters and bishops in the Church of Christ Uniting. This demur was caused by the fact that the penultimate draft of the proposal made no mention of the historic episcopate. This omission was the unfortunate result of a too tightly compressed agenda and drafting schedule that did not allow enough time for honest dialogue.

However, this pivotal matter will be addressed by a commission to be set up by the new COCU executive committee. The Episcopal Church and all Anglicans need assurance that there has not been a seismic shift in COCU's vision of a church "truly catholic" and that any future reconciliation of ministries will involve the sharing of the various gifts which the churches bring, including the historic episcopacy and its witness of continuity with the faith of the ancient church.

COCU has suffered much from caricatures, misinformed judgments and denominational arrogance. COCU has shown the capacity to listen to the people in the pews, to modify in healthy ways its goal and timetable, and still to press the issue of what faithfulness means for those whose churchly identity is given by God. The unity of Christ's church is too fundamental to the gospel to be cast aside.

Yet the destiny of this pilgrimage depends on several critical capacities. It depends on the churches' capacity to repent of their Laodicean lukewarmness toward the biblical mandate about the unity of the church and the unity of the human family, and their capacity to reenergize younger members about ecumenical witness. This will require exceptional, creative attention to ecumenical formation, deliberately calling and equipping ecumenists with passion and talents.

COCU's viability also depends on the capacity to make the case for visible church unity in a society dominated by a radical individualism and localism that is suspicious of any identity beyond clan or region; by a dramatic pluralism that accepts division as normative and is skeptical about any limits to diversity; and by a seductive secularism that encourages the church to define its life and witness by values other than those given by the gospel. All of these forces thwart the church's sense of reconciling love and erode the basis of ecumenism.

Princeton theologian Daniel L. Migliore observes that when individualism, pluralism and secularism become our god, the church becomes something other than "the body of Christ" or "the people of God." It becomes an agency of special-interest groups, social philosophies, political or quasi-religious organizations. Its language becomes perfidiously pious, lacking any sense of costly discipleship. Little wonder that people with such an ecclesiology shrink back in fear when the church (not the churches) is described as God's community whose identity and mission are given by the triune God who reconciles, redeems and sends forth to an unrepentant and divided world. Any chance of becoming a united and uniting church lies in becoming the community committed to God's reign, shaped by God's nature and mission.

Those gathered in St. Louis sung an African-American hymn by Curtis Burrell:

I don't feel no ways tired.

I've come too far from where I started from.

Nobody told me the road would be easy.

But I don't believe God brought me this far to leave me.

Those who can sing that song surely are in touch with the future God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit wants for the people of God.