The rise and fall and rise of the NCC

By Jacob Lupfer
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Like many mainline Protestant institutions, the National Council of Churches has had a rough couple of years. Once the public face of American Protestantism, the NCC is now just another face in the crowd. Yet with new leadership and a retooled mission, the NCC is poised to rebound from its low ebb of influence and carries a great deal of promise into the future.

In recent years, an NCC Task Force on Re-envisioning and Restructuring made several difficult but necessary decisions that would not only enable the council's survival, but also position it for vital engagement and ministry in the future. The NCC retained and retooled its historic focus on advocacy and ecumenical dialogue, but it significantly reduced staff and expenses. The NCC moved its headquarters from a Manhattan office building known as the "God Box" to a suite of offices on Capitol Hill.

Last year, the NCC elected Jim Winkler, a veteran United Methodist D.C. lobbyist, as general secretary. The council's top-heavy institutional structure has been pared down to four "convening tables" with two issue emphases: promoting peace and ending mass incarceration.

Winkler has been busy leading the newly restructured organization and re-engaging leaders from NCC member communions in the council's work.

Even the NCC's critics have been quiet. The Washington-based Institute on Religion and Democracy, founded in the early 1980s to combat the left-leaning politics that prevailed among many mainline church elites, criticized Winkler relentlessly in his previous position. Yet the IRD, a fierce NCC critic for three decades, seems to be taking a wait-and-see attitude.

Winkler and the NCC face several key challenges and opportunities moving forward.

The NCC's unity is sometimes fragile and made more so by some member communions' acceptance of gay clergy and same-sex marriage. Though officially silent on issues that divide its constituent denominations, the NCC will struggle to maintain unity as some Christians decide how vigorously to oppose what they see as the excesses of the sexual revolution, if not the revolution itself.

Activists who came of age during the Vietnam era have led mainline institutions for several decades, but the dominance of aging white liberals is nearing an end. Whereas white evangelicals have deliberately cultivated young leadership and have many people under 35 in key positions, mainliners lag badly in this area.

Particularly given its emphasis on peace, the NCC will need to deeply and critically plumb the Christian ethical tradition for insight about how to promote peace with justice in a hostile world. The de facto pacifism that permeates much of liberal Protestantism may prove too idealistic to influence defense and counterterrorism policy.

The NCC also needs effective symbolic and substantive advocacy efforts. Issuing press releases about clergy being arrested in protests may have grabbed attention in the 1960s, but that kind of witness is ineffective today.

As the NCC declined, Catholic and evangelical organizations became more sophisticated, professionalized and influential. They bring a great deal of energy and creativity to ecumenical Christian engagement. The NCC must thoughtfully and strategically discern when to support existing ecumenical and interfaith efforts and when to forge new ones.

Perhaps the NCC's influence was overinflated a half-century ago, but it is a mistake to ignore the National Council of Churches. Its 37 Protestant and Orthodox communions encompass 45 million members. Though imperfect, the NCC has been a faithful, prophetic witness for poor, vulnerable, and dispossessed people, boldly standing for justice when too many others were silent. We should commend the NCC for its corrective actions and wish the council well in its vital mission.