

An expanded table: Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A.

From the Editors in the [May 8, 2002](#) issue

The ecumenical tables in the U.S. are too small. None is large enough to encompass the full diversity of Christian life in this country. The National Council of Churches includes 36 Protestant and Orthodox bodies, but the member churches account for only one-third of U.S. Christians. Glaringly missing from its ranks is the nation's largest Christian church, the Roman Catholic.

Meanwhile, the National Association of Evangelicals formed in opposition to the NCC, includes Pentecostal, Wesleyan, Reformed and parachurch groups, but it constitutes a smaller slice of American Christianity than the NCC. Glaringly absent from the NAE is the nation's largest Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention.

For several years some ecumenical leaders have been wondering whether it is possible to create a larger table—to bring together Roman Catholic, Orthodox, mainline and evangelical Protestant, Pentecostal, holiness and parachurch Christians. Conversations of this sort have happened at local levels, and such diversity has been approached at meetings of the NCC's Faith and Order Commission. But no national forum exists for all strands of Christian life in the U.S. to converse, to pray and worship together, to consider common concerns and to contemplate a common witness.

Creating such a forum is the dream of Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. The group, which has been organizing quietly over recent months, formally issued an invitation on April 6 to "all Christians in the U.S." to join an expanded Christian conversation that moves beyond the structures created in the mid-20th century.

The group acknowledges that the details of the way forward are unclear. "We have only just begun to explore how to walk together. The questions for conversation, the ways to talk together and the paths to take all remain to be fleshed out."

In this undertaking, the devil is truly in the details. As soon as questions of organizational structure are raised—how would such an ecumenical forum be funded? how would decisions be made and leaders elected? how would representation be apportioned? whose agenda would be most obviously served?—the project begins to unravel. The key to creating such a forum, as the organizers keenly recognize, is to find ways of relating in which prayer and worship, mutual fellowship and support—not voting on resolutions or funding programs—are the primary activities.

The CCT statement speaks of strengthening “the prophetic public voice of the Christian community.” Clearly, a group as diverse as CCT aims to be would be very, very slow to agree on a prophetic word. Yet there are advantages to such reticence: when it does speak, such a group would speak much more powerfully than any existing ecumenical organization. It is not impossible to imagine some social concerns, such as pornography or poverty, which could be the focus of a common Christian witness despite an intense intra-Christian debate on strategies of response.

The future of Christian Churches Together is uncertain, but the question it is asking is crucial to Christian life and vitality in this or any other century: Can “all those who confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the scriptures . . . talk together about how to share with the world our common confession of Jesus Christ”?