

New ecumenical body aims for 2005 start: Christian Churches Together

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Organizers of a daringly broad coalition of evangelical, Catholic, mainline Protestant and Orthodox Christians say they expect the organization will finalize its formation in May 2005—the first time this variety of U.S. Christians will have joined in a meaningful structure to express a common witness.

Christian Churches Together in the USA (CCT)—mainly made up of denominational leaders, though up to one-fifth will be representatives of independent ministries and organizations—reflects ecumenical models that exist in other English-speaking nations but moves well beyond what U.S. church councils have achieved.

“Never before in the history of the United States has this broad and widely representative group of churches come together in this way,” said a statement issued after more than 50 Christian leaders met January 7-9 near Houston. The closed-door talks began in Baltimore in 2001, followed by meetings in Chicago in 2002 and Pasadena, California, in 2003.

“People realize this has to happen,” said Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary of the Reformed Church in America and chairman of CCT’s 15-member steering committee. “I wasn’t sure going into Houston what we’d be looking at, but by the time we finished there was high enthusiasm.”

Only some of the 25 denominations needed to launch the venture have given their official endorsement so far. The CCT hopes to have roughly equal representation from five church “families,” defining them as evangelical/Pentecostal, Catholic, Orthodox, “historic racial/ethnic” and “historic Protestant,” commonly known as mainline churches. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America endorsed participation at its biennial assembly last year, but Granberg-Michaelson said that some church bodies “have had it approved by a general board.”

Bishop Stephen Blaire, the U.S. Catholic bishops' ecumenical chair, introduced the proposal last November, and the bishops are expected to act on it this November. Bringing the 65-million-member Catholic Church into the fold is considered crucial, as is the presence of evangelical, holiness and Pentecostal bodies such as the Christian Reformed Church, the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana) and the Association of Vineyard Churches, respectively.

Leaders of CCT are also hoping for active participation by historic black denominations and Eastern Orthodox churches, which at times have been unenthusiastic or unhappy members of the mainline-dominated National Council of Churches. Representatives of five Orthodox churches attended the Texas meeting, said Granberg-Michaelson, but black churches had no representative present.

Given that the theological and social spectrum of participants is so wide, CCT leaders readily acknowledge they will tackle at first only those social-moral issues that yield an easy consensus. With consensus voting, rather than yes-no balloting, leaders hope to avoid the perception of having winners and losers, according to a formula worked out by the group a year ago.

The first step, Ronald Sider of Evangelicals for Social Action told Religion News Service, is for groups to simply get better acquainted and find ways to work together. Do not expect policy statements or press releases on hot-button social issues, Sider said.

Those who met last month had agreed to read in advance *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, by Philip Jenkins of Penn State University. Discussion of dire social problems facing Third World countries and churches, regardless of denomination, was useful, Granberg-Michaelson indicated. "We also devoted one afternoon to the issue of prayer from different traditions," he said. "It was a very moving experience. We are trying to establish a spiritual basis at the core."