

Church leaders, UN chief discuss Iraq: Greater UN involvement needed

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Hours before President Bush addressed the nation on his plans for a June 30 transfer of power in Iraq, church leaders met with United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan to support a larger role for the international body. In the meeting coordinated by the National Council of Churches, ten U.S., Canadian and European church leaders told Annan that the United States can no longer oversee Iraq's future by itself.

"While most of us were very much opposed to war in Iraq, we believe that those who opposed it and those who supported [it] . . . need to come together to find an alternative way out of the current violence," said Bob Edgar, general secretary of the NCC and a leading war opponent.

The church delegation, which included the heads of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Canadian Council of Churches and the Conference of European Churches, did not offer specific policy proposals but issued general support for Annan's leadership. In the months leading up to the war, the church leaders were largely shut out of White House decision-making. They received warmer welcomes during trips to London, Paris, Moscow, Rome and Baghdad.

"We have had to avoid the temptation to say, 'See, I told you so,'" said Keith Clements, head of the Conference of European Churches. "It would be very easy for us to get self-righteous and say [to the Bush administration], this is the mess you got yourself into, now you get yourself out of it."

Mark Hanson, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, said church leaders remain committed to working with the U.S. but believe the future lies increasingly with the UN. "This was not an act of opposition to the U.S. government, but . . . a recognition that even this government is now publicly saying that only through the UN can there be lasting peace," said Hanson, who also serves as

president of the Lutheran World Federation. *-Religion News Service*