

Widest-ever ecumenical forum: Christian Churches Together U.S.A.

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With two historically black churches now on board, the nation's largest ecumenical vehicle—Christian Churches Together U.S.A.—is ready to roll.

After being stalled nearly a year ago, the steering committee pulled all the pieces together at a closed-door meeting in Atlanta March 29-31. With representation from five major traditions—mainline Protestants, evangelical and Pentecostal Protestants, and Catholic, Orthodox and racial-ethnic churches—plus some church ministries, the 34 officials termed the meeting a historic one for a constituency of about 100 million Christians.

“This is something truly new in the history of the U.S. church, and through God’s guidance it is really being created,” said CCT moderator Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary of the Reformed Church of America.

The new fellowship, which will determine its directions by consensus decision making, may delay a public celebration of its formation until February 2007 in order to tend to organizational details, including a search for an executive director.

According to its own criteria for membership, the CCT fellowship could have formed last June. “The hesitation had been that we did not have any African-American church body represented,” said Granberg-Michaelson. The body did decide last year that its first focus as a group should be to address poverty in the U.S.

In recent months the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., based in Nashville, and the National Baptist Convention of America, based in Shreveport, Louisiana, became members.

“We wanted to get a feel for the organization to see if there was a commitment to real mission, not just to fellowship,” said William Shaw, a Philadelphia pastor who heads the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. “There are tremendous possibilities for this group because poverty crosses all racial and ethnic lines,” said Shaw, who

was elected one of five presidents for the organization.

Though CCT's annual meetings since 2001 have largely been spent developing mutual trust and understanding, at the 2005 meeting in Los Altos, California, "it was the evangelical Protestant group that made the original proposal to tackle the problem of poverty," said Granberg-Michaelson.

The idea of a group broader than the National Council of Churches, whose membership does not include the Catholic Church or many evangelical church bodies, was broached several years ago by Bob Edgar, NCC's top executive. Edgar was present at the Atlanta meeting, but the NCC and the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) are simply among the umbrella groups and independent ministries that complement CCT activities. The primary leaders are top-level officials of denominations.

The current representatives of the mainline Protestant family on the steering committee are leaders from the United Methodist Church, the Reformed Church in America, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

The nation's largest Protestant body, the Southern Baptist Convention, has indicated that it is not interested in joining the new fellowship. That did not come as a surprise; the SBC has not been a part of the NAE and recently pulled out of the Baptist World Alliance.

Asked if the impetus for the unprecedented alliance grew from the stagnation and declining membership experienced by some churches, Granberg-Michaelson said he has not heard or sensed that sentiment. "It's that we've been separated so long that it has hurt our witness to society," he said.

For some evangelical and Pentecostal church bodies unaccustomed to praying and cooperating with Catholics, mainline Protestants and Eastern Orthodox clergy, he said, the CCT experience has been a "powerful" experience. "We haven't previously had the courage to confront the obvious: we belong to the same Lord."

Roger Haskins of the Free Methodist Church of North America, based in Indianapolis, said he overcame the skepticism he had at his first CCT meeting three years ago. "Each of the five faith families takes turns in leading our worship," said Haskins, a Los Angeles-based bishop for the evangelical denomination. "When the Orthodox

representative here in Atlanta led in the recitation of the Nicene Creed, the words resonated for all of us and gave us a sense of Christian unity.”

Over time, Haskins predicted, the visible cooperation displayed by national denominational leaders will allow the greatest potential for church influence at local levels. “To speak with one voice in local settings will have a huge benefit for the kingdom.”

Granberg-Michaelson, who attended this year’s World Council of Churches Assembly in Brazil, said that Christian Churches Together U.S.A. has been able to accomplish what the WCC has had limited success in doing—bringing Pentecostals and theologically conservative evangelicals together with mainline Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox Christians.