

Family reunion: Christian Churches Together

by [John Dart](#) in the [March 6, 2007](#) issue

The multidenominational Christian Churches Together in the USA has just about got it together—enough at least for a small celebration. From Catholic and Orthodox bishops to Protestant and Pentecostal clergy, representatives of 36 church bodies meeting in California lit candles and one by one signed a document indicating their commitment to advance a common Christian witness.

The February 7 ceremony before 250 worshipers took place at Pasadena Presbyterian Church, a site that symbolized an earlier era of ecumenism. That congregation's pastor in the early 1950s was Eugene Carson Blake, who later became a top executive of the "northern" branch of Presbyterians and then of the World Council of Churches. A Blake sermon in 1960 calling for a merger of Protestant churches marked a high-spirited moment in the ecumenical movement in the U.S., though the merger he envisioned never took place.

But in 2001 Christian leaders began talking about creating something new in light of religious diversity, the emergence of a so-called post-Christian culture and the then-financial weakness of the National Council of Churches.

A broad-based steering committee, led by Wesley Granberg-Michaelson of the Reformed Church in America, devised a plan by which the five "families" of Christians—the biggest being the 67-million-member U.S. Catholic Church—would meet annually in an unprecedented fellowship. The other groupings, aside from mainline Protestants, are evangelicals and Pentecostals; Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Christians; and racial and ethnic-based denominations. Each family includes some independent Christian organizations like Bread for the World and Evangelicals for Social Action.

CCT canceled a planned launch at the National Cathedral in September 2005 to seek the participation of two historically black Baptist denominations. With those denominations involved, the CCT leaders felt they had enough participation for the

February 6-9 celebratory meeting.

Ironically, two major ecumenically minded denominations—the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—have for now chosen to be listed as “provisional” participants. Methodist and Presbyterian leaders have been involved in CCT planning, but they have held back to see if additional black denominations will agree to participate.

Methodist minister Larry Pickens, one of the five CCT presidents featured in the commitment ceremony, said in an interview that the UMC commission on Christian unity he heads “has decided that we should not move forward until we really have explored issues” with the three black Methodist denominations that so far have not seen good reasons to join. “We have a unique relationship with those churches,” Pickens said. The African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion and Christian Methodist Episcopal churches are listed as CCT “observers.”

The Methodists’ quadrennial General Conference and the Presbyterians’ biennial General Assembly both convene in 2008, but there is no indication that those legislative bodies will vote then on the matter. Gradye Parsons, associate stated clerk for the PCUSA, told the Century that his denomination is in “a kind of wait-and-see mode,” partly on the issue of including black churches. “We wanted to see that become a reality before we become a full participant,” Parsons said.

Nevertheless, enthusiasm was high at the Lake Avenue Church, an evangelical congregation where CCT’s daytime sessions were held. They included discussions of evangelism in the light of Luke 4:18’s proclamation of social justice.

“This is a very, very important meeting,” said Stephen Blaire, Catholic bishop of Stockton, California, standing in for ailing Cardinal William Keeler, another CCT president. Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles took part in the evening ceremony, pledging “to draw even closer to all those who call themselves Christian to strengthen our common witness to the world.”

The U.S. Catholic bishops never joined the National Council of Churches, and some Orthodox members of the NCC have threatened at times to leave the council over the often liberal stances of other NCC members.

But many Catholic bishops, several Orthodox clergy and a number of evangelical/Pentecostal leaders have found the CCT approach—focusing on prayer,

fellowship and dialogue and avoiding controversial issues—both pleasing and historically significant.

The low-key approach resulted in little media exposure. Only the *Century*, *Presbyterian Outlook*, Presbyterian News Service and a *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly* video crew were present for the one day open to the press, which included the discussions on evangelism and the inaugural ceremony.

Briefly lamenting the lack of news attention was Martin Risti, the priest-director of the Florida-based Orthodox Christian Mission Center, an agency of the U.S. pan-Orthodox council of bishops. Before delivering his paper on Orthodox missions, Risti said he was struck by the extraordinary television attention given to an astronaut arrested in a love triangle “when we have such a [significant] meeting here.” He added: “Well, sometimes it is better to work in secret. What matters most is not what we say, but the fact that we are together.”

The discussions on evangelism were candid and laced with humor. A Pentecostal scholar said that his tradition has to deal with some failures; a Catholic expert on evangelism noted that 30 years ago there was parish-level resistance to a papal directive on evangelism because it was considered “a Protestant thing”; and John Thomas, who heads the United Church of Christ, admitted that his denomination once had a “fuzzy Christology” that was characterized “by the notion that evangelism equaled fundamentalism.”

Thomas added: “We are in the process of recovering the evangelical mandate.” Noting that the UCC and other mainline churches had been displaced from the center of American religious life, he said that the UCC video and TV campaign called “God Is Still Speaking” has alerted his church to the fact that “our communities are not filled with people indifferent or hostile to the faith” but filled with those eager to find a spiritual home.

Thomas and Parsons joined in praise for a nuanced paper on the gospel and social responsibility given by Grant McClung, a seminary professor of the Church of God in Cleveland, Tennessee.

McClung noted that Pentecostal and charismatic Christians have tended to combine their enthusiasm for evangelism with “the baggage of a preference in our understandings of prophecy for Zionism” and of uncritically pro-Israel stances. The “failure” of both Pentecostals and evangelicals relates to the idea of “justice for all,”

he said. McClung said that Lebanese Christians and other Mideast churchpeople feel betrayed by Pentecostals who see biblical prophecy as mandating unqualified support for Israeli policies. Citing other authors, McClung also noted that Pentecostals were silent in the fight against South Africa's apartheid and U.S. racial segregation until the tides of opinion had changed.

"It was very refreshing to hear about a denomination acknowledging failures and what they decided to do," said Parsons. "This is pretty impressive stuff."

Though the CCT skirts hot-button issues such as gay ordination, former Presbyterian moderator Jack Rogers related that issue to evangelism. "The current struggle over whether people who are gay and lesbian can have the full rights of membership in the church is, in one sense, a conflict over the meaning of one aspect of evangelism," said Rogers, a retired seminary professor.

About 30 seminary students attending the evangelism discussions were invited to give their reactions. Some, like Kirsten Oh of Fuller Theological Seminary, wanted to know what church leaders were going to do once they reach consensus statements on evangelism and fighting poverty.

The church leaders did adopt on February 9 a nearly 800-word statement on domestic poverty. Noting that they are "Christian leaders in the richest society on earth," the endorsers said overcoming poverty in the U.S. "requires both more personal responsibility *and* broader societal responsibility, both better choices by individuals *and* better policies and investments by government." The CCT will not develop its own action programs, it said, but invited all people to embrace the goals as expressing nonpartisan, pan-Christian objectives.

Ryan Baum, from Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, observed that several denominations spend too much time debating whether gay sex is bad or OK. "I would like to hear the churches starting talking about sex and what love is," he said.

After an uneasy silence from church officials, McClung stood up. "I'd like to go on record and say that young people aren't the only people who want to talk about sex!" The room burst into laughter.

The CCT drew part of its original impetus seven years ago from Bob Edgar, then the new general secretary of the NCC, which was struggling to survive financial setbacks. It was then suggested that something like the CCT might replace the NCC.

But Edgar said, “The council still has its value and traction, and is needed alongside the CCT.”

On the lingering question of whether more black churches will participate, Granberg-Michaelson said he is still hopeful, noting that the large Church of God in Christ, a black Pentecostal denomination, was represented as an observer at the meeting by its ecumenical officer, Leonard Lovett.

Larry Pickens said the 8-million-member United Methodist Church will continue to be involved in the CCT, including its steering committee.

The new organization’s focus on core Christian beliefs may increase its appeal to historic black denominations, according to Stephen Thurston, a Chicago pastor who is president of the Dallas-based National Baptist Convention of America, a CCT participant as well as an NCC member.

“The focus that we have with CCT around Jesus Christ is the common link that draws us together,” Thurston said in an interview. That characteristic “separates it from the National Council of Churches, which is more proactive on other agenda items that may not be particularly related to Jesus Christ.”

Both ecumenical organizations are needed, he said. “This group is exciting to me because it helps us to shape and undergird our theology.”