

Methodist merger not in view: Smaller denominations won't be "swallowed up"

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Bishops from six U.S. Methodist denominations have pledged to work together on common social-justice goals. But they quashed the notion that a merger or union is likely.

Representing the United Methodist Church and the historically black African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion and Christian Methodist Episcopal churches, the bishops gathered in Atlanta March 11-13 for their quadrennial meeting.

Two new members also joined the meeting: the Union American Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Union Methodist Protestant Church.

Noting that the gathering's goals do not include a "union" of the churches, the bishops agreed to change its name from "Commission on Pan-Methodist Cooperation and Unity" to "Pan-Methodist Commission," according to United Methodist News Service.

Bishop William Oden, the ecumenical officer for the United Methodist Council of Bishops, said several obstacles are blocking a merger, including pension structures, how bishops are elected and concerns that the smaller denominations would be "swallowed up" by the 8-million-member United Methodist Church.

Still, Oden said, "we have more in common than we do differences. . . . We have the same services of ordination, communion and baptism."

The Methodist denominations have been working toward greater cooperation recently, with representatives from African-American churches serving on boards in the United Methodist Church.

Nevertheless, commission president Nathaniel Jarrett of Chicago, who is a bishop in the AME Zion Church, said to the group of 62 bishops that the commission had decided “some time ago” that “organic union” was neither feasible nor desired.

The launch in February of the multi-denominational Christian Churches Together was discussed by the bishops, but bishops in the black churches said they were not interested in taking part in CCT. The United Methodist Church has remained a “provisional” member out of respect for the black Methodists’ reluctance to join.

The new ecumenical body was seen as detracting from the National Council of Churches, an organization more focused on issues of social justice, reported United Methodist News Service.

“Why join a group that just wants to talk?” said CME bishop Thomas Hoyt of Hyattville, Maryland, a former NCC president, in referring to CCT.

United Methodist bishop Ann Sherer of Nebraska acknowledged the misgivings about CCT, but suggested that her denomination also believes it is important “to have some form of conversation with persons of Pentecostal, Roman Catholic and nondenominational” background who are not NCC members.

The pan-Methodist bishops meeting appointed a committee to draft a statement calling for an end to the Iraq war; agreed to write letters in support of groups working on wage, health care and HIV/AIDS issues; and asked for research on AIDS in the U.S. -*Religion News Service*