

Church unity advocates admit their 'phobias' Fears vary by denomination: Fears vary by denomination

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In recent months, the National Council of Churches observed its 100th anniversary, the World Council of Churches celebrated its 60th birthday, and the new, widest-ever group, called the Global Christian Forum, laid plans for a second international conclave in 2011 with a strengthened secretariat and an effort to get the word out about its existence.

About 50 forum leaders, meeting November 8-11 in New Delhi, continued to emphasize the development of personal trust among Protestant, Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Pentecostal leaders of all stripes, according to spokesperson Wesley Granberg-Michaelson of the Reformed Church in America.

The forum, which held its first full gathering in Nairobi in late 2007, hopes to develop a pan-Christian witness to the world by stressing essential beliefs and moral examples rather than by taking stances on social issues.

The National and World church councils at times in their histories have irked member communions with their moral-political stands and programs. But they have avoided several topics, such as abortion and homosexuality, because of differences of opinion among their denominations.

An unusual panel November 12 at the NCC annual meeting in Denver illustrated that participating denominations still harbor ecumenical phobias after 100 years, reported NCC publicist Philip E. Jenks.

The first of four panelists, Greek Orthodox bishop Demetrios, noted that Orthodox fears stem in part from the fact that many are immigrants and that the Orthodox are

often viewed by others as insistent on “doctrinal purity and canonical exactness.” The bishop asked that ecumenical partners “respect the otherness” of Orthodox Christians.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)—which is very active in church councils—has “a fear of uniformity,” said Sharon Watkins, general minister and president of the Disciples. “A fear of hierarchy, . . . that someone is going to tell us how to act . . . how to worship . . . or how to think,” she said.

The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, according to Bishop Ronald M. Cunningham, fears that nonblack church partners do not sense “the scourge of silent racism that lives in many of us.” He added: “We must talk it out, but we must make it incarnational.”

“The fear of our dying” was named by Mark S. Hanson, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. “We have come to believe in the premature announcement of the death of denominations, and we are beginning to act like we are dying,” said Hanson, who is also president of the Lutheran World Federation.

Hanson warned against misplaced fears: “The process of ‘dying’ depletes ecumenical imagination.”