

Hopes for an 'ecumenical spring'

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [April 4, 2012](#) issue

For years, advocates for greater unity among Christian churches have wrung their hands and talked of an "ecumenical winter." But now, ten years after leaders took the first steps toward forming the broad-based group Christian Churches Together in the USA, some have hopes that U.S. churches may be entering a new season of closer relations.

At this year's CCT meeting in Memphis, Tennessee, 85 Christians—Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox, white and nonwhite—made pilgrimages to historic sites of the civil rights movement. They also made plans to use next year's 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" to pursue antipoverty projects with houses of worship unlike their own.

"I would like to think of it as an ecumenical spring and that we do not yet know what will break forth," said Stephen J. Sidorak Jr., ecumenical staff officer of the United Methodist Church. "I think that there's potential for the ecumenical movement to be more alive than it's ever been because it will be more inclusive."

In many ways, the movement that has grappled with theological differences, leadership struggles and finances—and even what to call itself—is in the midst of major downsizing—which it hopes will lead to wider engagement:

- The National Council of Churches, the flagship agency of ecumenism, has shrunk from some 400 staffers in its heyday in the 1960s to fewer than 20. It is seeking a "transitional general secretary" after its executive, Michael Kinnamon, stepped down on December 31.
- Churches Uniting in Christ, a network that dates to the 1960s, closed its office doors in 2010, and one of its nine affiliated denominations—the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church—has suspended its membership. CUIC's remaining leaders hope to continue to address racism and shared ministries.
- CCT is looking for new leadership after its part-time executive director announced his retirement. Though it includes "families" of Catholic, Orthodox, historic and evangelical Protestant faiths, it has struggled to find acceptance

among the "historic racial/ethnic" churches.

Ecumenical veterans say a movement that was built on slow-moving bureaucracies needs to find a way to stay nimble in the 21st century. "It's a little bit like keeping the post office running," said Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, the outgoing president of CCT's Protestant family.

Part of the new approach includes a move away from the word *ecumenical*. Some Christians who had been hesitant about interchurch relations equate the word with liberal stances or fear that it could be linked to surrendering some of their theological distinctives.

"We've tried to shift away from that ecumenical language toward Christian unity language," said Richard Hamm, the retiring CCT executive director.

Neville Callam, the general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, said some Baptists have bristled at the term. "Many still don't like the word, but many are growing into an understanding of the importance of the concept," he said.

The presence of evangelicals—and particularly Pentecostals—is growing in the organized networks and ad hoc partnerships that develop over issues like poverty.

"If you take sex out of the equation in all of its expressions, it turns out that we actually have a lot in common as we look at issues," said Hamm, the former president of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

He and others point to the influence of the Circle of Protection, which last year urged Washington to maintain programs for the poor amid federal budget cuts. That initiative included the presidents of the NCC and the National Association of Evangelicals, as well as leaders of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and black and Hispanic groups.

"I would give priority to ecumenical meetings that are driven by mutual purpose rather than just getting together to talk," said Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals.

In the early days of his ecumenical work, Cecil Robeck Jr. faced resistance from fellow Pentecostals. But in late March, the professor of church history and ecumenics at Fuller Theological Seminary was scheduled to speak to executives of his Assemblies of God denomination about his interchurch experiences.

"God did something, I would say," said Robeck, who was a keynoter at the CCT's 2010 meeting which focused on evangelism.

Assemblies of God General Superintendent George Wood, however, said Robeck's talk was "not an indicator regarding the Assemblies of God USA moving forward to membership in the ecumenical movement."

While black church leaders have long been part of Churches Uniting in Christ, some have little interest in CCT. Christian Methodist Episcopal Church Senior Bishop Thomas Hoyt Jr. said it's not a priority for his denomination. "I think it's so broad right now," Hoyt said of CCT, an organization whose leaders "don't vote on anything unless everybody can say yes to it."

Robina Winbush, president of Churches Uniting in Christ, said her organization is "wrestling" with how to conquer racial divides between Protestant denominations. Despite some "serious missteps" along the way, the ecumenical officer for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) said CUIC remains part of the ecumenical movement because member churches demanded it.

"Primarily our lesson learned is that when you prematurely begin to dismantle something before the churches say that's what they want to have happen, you have to spend the energy to put stuff back together," she said. —RNS