

Ecumenical wobbling: The NCC reversal on marriage

by [John Dart](#) in the [December 13, 2000](#) issue

When Robert Edgar of the National Council of Churches suddenly told the NCC's General Assembly that he was removing his name from an evangelical-mainline-Catholic statement on marriage, it appeared he knocked a leg off the much-discussed wider ecumenical table he was in the process of building. At the very least, his reversal embarrassed a vital ally in forming such an unprecedented pan-Christian voice in the U.S.

A joint statement urging churches to redouble efforts to strengthen marriages and discourage divorces seemed like a good idea to Edgar and a congenial new friend, Kevin Mannoia, president of the National Association of Evangelicals. Both men are relatively fresh in their executive positions, looking to spur their respective umbrella organizations into new ventures. Both are Methodists—Mannoia a bishop in the theologically conservative Free Methodist Church, and Edgar a liberal minister in the United Methodist Church.

With Mannoia steering drafts through a committee that had input from the NCC, ecumenical veteran Cardinal William Keeler of Baltimore and others, all parties agreed that the "Christian Declaration on Marriage" would discuss only heterosexual marriage, with no mention of same-sex partnerships.

But the declaration did say that "marriage is a holy union of one man and one woman," with an unstated implication that homosexuals cannot be "married." Richard Land of the Southern Baptists made the point explicit at a news conference held November 14 in Washington, D.C., when Edgar was occupied with the NCC's annual assembly in Atlanta.

"By their very nature, broken marriages and counterfeit alternative relationships such as cohabitation and same-sex unions fail to impact and benefit society in the manifold ways that society is blessed by intact, committed heterosexual marriages," said Land, president of the SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

Edgar soon got questions from church leaders. They wondered why the NCC general secretary, known for his personal support for same-sex union rites despite his denomination's stance to the contrary, would put his name on a statement some said would feed antigay sentiments.

Edgar first told delegates the statement should not be construed that way. The next day, November 17, he announced that he was removing his name, saying he had not adequately consulted with NCC member churches.

Reactions to Edgar's turnabout ranged from Mannoia's surprise and disappointment to the charge that Edgar was catering to "a small extremist minority within the NCC that is campaigning to legitimize extramarital sex"—the words of Dianne Knippers, president of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, a perennial NCC critic.

How could such a blunder occur? How badly damaged were the NCC's hopes of being a credible player in "Expanding the Ecumenical Future"? A resolution so titled was adopted unanimously in Atlanta, asking the NCC's 36 communions to support a proposed meeting next year with leaders from evangelical, Pentecostal and Catholic churches. Mannoia, Edgar and two others interviewed for this article provided some details on the formation of the declaration, Edgar's change of mind and what the future may hold in light of the "told-you-so" reactions of some conservative critics.

"I was amazed that Mr. Edgar signed the declaration in the first place," said Parker Williamson, executive editor of the *Presbyterian Layman*, quoted on the conservative newspaper's Web site. "Now having heard from his constituency . . . Mr. Edgar and his associates have alienated themselves from the Christian tradition," Williamson said. James V. Heidinger II, president of the United Methodist Good News organization, said: "It is little wonder the NCC is struggling to survive."

Mannoia and Edgar have met face-to-face three times. About a year ago, both were either moving into or out of Southern California. The NAE board had approved in September 1999 Mannoia's request to relocate its headquarters from Wheaton, Illinois, to Azusa, California. He and his staff work there in temporary offices in a storefront building near Azusa Pacific University. Sale of the Wheaton facility is pending, said Mannoia.

"We want to play a prophetic role, calling the church to unite on key issues that are important to the kingdom," Mannoia said. "The key is being in two centers of influence." One is the nation's capital, where the NAE Office of Governmental Affairs

has long been active. The other, he said, is Hollywood, the entertainment capital. "It's going to take time, but we are making progress."

Meanwhile, Edgar, elected NCC general secretary in November 1999, was leaving as president of Claremont School of Theology and preparing to relocate to the New York area. As their paths crossed, Edgar and Mannoia talked about areas of common interest.

When Mannoia invited Edgar to a meeting April 6 in Washington to discuss a possible joint statement, Edgar passed because of duties at the Claremont seminary. He delegated NCC research director Eileen Lindner, editor of the *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches*, to attend. Others at the meeting included Cardinal Keeler, Southern Baptist official William Merrell, and syndicated columnist Michael McManus and his wife, Harriet, who head a movement called Marriage Savers.

"Michael was quite forceful in discussing his program and other programs for counseling and mentoring married couples, as I recall," Lindner said. "It was a good, congenial meeting, and we did agree to develop a statement on marriage." The committee later had two telephone meetings, then one face-to-face in Washington September 11, Mannoia said. Lindner faxed regrets for missing the meeting, but "the next day we went through the draft line-by-line over the phone and she made some suggestions, and those changes were later accepted by the committee," Mannoia said.

Lindner said Mannoia "was very diligent in getting drafts of the statement to us, but I'm not sure of what changes I suggested." At an NCC office worried about finances and staff reductions, Lindner said, "I lost the thread of the issue at that point." And Edgar would later admit, "I didn't do my homework" on the wording of the marriage declaration.

The plan was to announce the statement while the U.S. Catholic bishops met in Washington, even though this meant that the concurrent NCC meetings in Atlanta would keep Edgar from attending. Mannoia, Land and Keeler held forth at the news conference on November 14. (Keeler was substituting for Catholic Bishop Anthony O'Connell of Palm Beach, Florida, who signed the declaration as chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Marriage and Family Life, but who was ill.) That's when the issue of same-sex unions came up.

“For the best of reasons, we sought to address what is undoubtedly a troubling reality in our culture—the high divorce rate,” Lindner said. “My sadness is that what started out to be a new chapter of Christians working together instead extracted pain from quite a lot of quarters.”

In Atlanta, Edgar was getting calls and notes from people who had heard about the declaration and about comments on same-sex couples. On November 16, C. Wilson Gaddy, executive director of the Interfaith Alliance, raised the issue of the statement’s effect on nonheterosexual couples. Gaddy was the speaker at an annual breakfast, attended by Edgar, sponsored by a gay and lesbian group which is not part of the official NCC program.

Later that day, Edgar wrote an eight-paragraph letter to delegates saying he believed that churches must support husbands and wives, especially “in our ‘disposable society’ where marriage is often diminished and undermined.” But, he added, “I would not want this statement to be misconstrued as if it were an oblique comment on same-sex unions.” He vowed to “resist any attempt to interpret support for one beleaguered segment of society as an attack on another.”

That evening, when Edgar held his nightly open forum, Gwynne Guibord, chief ecumenical officer for the predominantly gay Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches and the only UFMCC visitor at the NCC assembly, told Edgar, “What everyone will remember is the statement and not what you said here in the justification letter.” Guibord said that Edgar was “absolutely grief-stricken when he left that meeting,” which included delegates from several mainline churches. He did not indicate whether he would take any further steps, she said.

The next morning Edgar told delegates about a letter he had just sent to declaration sponsors asking them to remove his signature. He wrote that a number of communions interpreted the declaration “more as a condemnation of same-sex unions than as an affirmation of marriage.” He said that he feared the text “could be used by some as a pretext for attacks on gay and lesbian persons.” He added, however, that his decision should not be seen as weakening his commitment “to building the larger ecumenical table about which we have talked.”

Mannoia voiced disappointment in a news release on November 20, but invited any member communions of the NCC who “would be in strong agreement” to endorse the marriage declaration and “work with us in its implementation.” That same day,

Edgar said he telephoned Mannoia with his regrets and reiterated his respect for the NAE leader's work. Both men said the phone conversation was cordial.

Adding to the news release a week later, Mannoia said, "If the NCC is incapable of making and remaining committed to such a fundamental Christian principle as marriage, it raises serious questions about the ability to engage with integrity in serious discussions about other issues in the future."

However, in interviews on November 28, Mannoia declined to evaluate future possibilities, and Edgar continued to hope for cooperation. The NCC and the NAE both have had representatives on a national council against pornography, Mannoia noted. But Edgar's "wide ecumenical table" has yet to be created, "and there is no agenda or forum other than this discussion around marriage," he said. "At this point, I can't say that the door is open or closed," Mannoia said.

Edgar remained optimistic. "Christians have had disagreements for 2,000 years; the questions that divide us are not the questions that are going to bring us together," he said. "I don't think this step will harm our long-term chances for addressing a few issues, such as the interests of the poor." n