

Ecumenically challenged: Expanding the table

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Leaders of the National Council of Churches have at various times over the past decade floated the idea of seeking a new, more inclusive kind of ecumenical organization. Last month the NCC made its most concrete move in that direction by appointing a team of top church leaders to explore the idea with Roman Catholics, evangelicals and Pentecostals.

At one level, the logic behind the idea of an expanded organization is obvious. The NCC's 35 member churches account for only about one-third of U.S. Christians. A body that does not include Roman Catholics, evangelicals and Pentecostals does not represent the breadth of Christianity in the U.S. and in that sense is not very ecumenical. The scope of official intra-Christian conversation in the U.S. seems especially limited if one compares the NCC to church councils in such countries as Great Britain, Canada, Australia and Sweden, where Roman Catholics participate.

The problems of creating an expanded conversation are huge, however, especially if questions are raised about who would pay for such an organization, how it would be structured, and what its express purpose would be. Disagreement about what ecumenism means is one of the many issues that divide Christians. And to the extent that an expanded ecumenical body is seen as representing a particular set of churches or a particular agenda, it will never achieve its goal or even get off the ground. That's why, at this stage, there can be no talk of organizational details. The proposal is simply for a "forum" or "expanded table"—some loose structure involving minimal organization and commitment.

Friends as well as critics of the NCC are well aware that this initiative has emerged at a time when the NCC is pondering its identity and financial viability. But necessity may be the spark for creative action. In any case, we applaud the council's decision to look outward rather than inward.

The ecumenical movement began, it is often pointed out, on the mission field. In light of the mission to spread the gospel, the division of the churches seemed pragmatically ineffective and theologically scandalous. No such common passion now exists; the definition of mission is itself one of the most divisive issues among Christians.

Is there any issue today that could possibly bring together the full range of U.S. Christians—from Roman Catholics to Southern Baptists to United Methodists to Episcopalians to African-American Pentecostals to Greek Orthodox? To ask the question is to be immediately overwhelmed by the scope of theological and ideological differences. Nevertheless, one wonders: Could churches agree to hold a joint day of prayer? Or perhaps even hold a joint meeting simply to share their vision of witness for the next century? On this front, to think small is to think very large indeed, and to act in a very simple way may be an enormously creative and energizing act of the Spirit.