

Ecumenical negotiator

by [Jean Caffey Lyles](#) in the [November 10, 1999](#) issue

At the end of the year Joan Brown Campbell will conclude her nine-year tenure at the helm of the National Council of Churches. But she won't be relinquishing her role as a champion of the ecumenical movement. She will become director of religion at the Chautauqua Institute in New York state, overseeing religious programs and interfaith services. Campbell, who has had excellent relations with the NCC's historically black churches, is expected to help Chautauqua attract a more diverse constituency to its summer programs.

Campbell, who turns 68 this month, says being NCC general secretary is a "24-hour-a-day" commitment. But she clearly has relished the hectic schedule of preaching, lobbying, organizing and traveling. She estimates she has given 400 speeches and sermons—about one a week.

Her final trip as general secretary took her to Latin America. "One of the council's great gifts," she says, "is to tell the story of churches in other countries." Recently, meeting privately with Fidel Castro, NCC leaders persuaded him to allow Cuba's Protestants to hold a large public assembly, just as Catholics had been allowed to do during Pope John Paul II's visit earlier this year. More than 10,000 Protestants showed up for the event—"and Castro was there."

"The diplomatic role of general secretary is not well understood," she said. "You work with disparate forces that don't agree and find the common ground, pushing each side as far as it can be pushed without breaking fellowship. If you settle for bland, least-common-denominator statements, you haven't accomplished anything."

Campbell has had a close relationship with Jesse Jackson, and she helped him find representatives of the major faiths for an April trip to Yugoslavia, which resulted in the release of American prisoners.

Campbell is especially proud of the affirmation she has received from African-American and Orthodox churches. Her efforts were instrumental in persuading Orthodox bodies to remain in the council. She has also helped the council speak out

on issues of civil rights for gays and lesbians.

Campbell, who is the NCC's first ordained female general secretary (she holds ministerial credentials in both the Disciples of Christ and the American Baptist Churches), cites two landmarks in her tenure: a rapprochement with the National Association of Evangelicals and a growing relationship with the Roman Catholic hierarchy. For the first time, an NAE president spoke before a council meeting. "He got five minutes of applause just for walking into that room." Since then, there has been joint work on shared concerns by the two groups' Washington offices, and the current NAE president has been invited to the council's 50th anniversary celebration in Cleveland.

Recently, for the first time, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops sent official greetings to an NCC meeting. The council dispatched a similar message to the bishops. "There is a yearning among our members for the inclusion of Roman Catholics, evangelicals and Pentecostals" in the council, she said. But right now she cannot foresee Roman Catholic membership. For one thing, with 60 million members, the Catholic Church is larger than all the NCC member communions put together (they total 55 million people).

Any new structure of ecumenical relations, she suggested, will "emerge out of relationships. That's very different from sitting around the table and designing. It's slower, but more durable."

She believes that under incoming president Andrew Young the council will add another large African-American church to its roster--the Church of God in Christ, a holiness group with 5.5 million members.

Asked about the proposed restructuring proposals for the NCC, Campbell said she thinks it's good the council has decided to redefine the general secretary's position. "The general secretary cannot both carry the vision, interpret and teach—and be the manager." She acknowledged the validity of some of the Pappas Group's criticisms about "sloppy" accounting rules and procedures, but said some of its comments were not helpful because they "created an aura of suspicion."

Campbell acknowledged the difficulty of running an organization that includes seven African-American churches, 11 Orthodox bodies and several small denominations like the Swedenborgians and Moravians, along with the larger mainline churches that pay most of the budget. "The churches are not organized in the same way, and

their understanding of order is more of a problem than any difference in faith."

One reason mainline denominations are in a time of malaise, she suggests, is that they succeeded all too well in teaching people to "live ecumenically." Christians move easily from one denomination to another, and they lack distinctive theological or confessional identities. Unfortunately for the NCC, "when denominations get a cold, we get pneumonia."