

NCC draws faith groups to antiracism event

The ecumenical National Council of Churches has also launched a Truth and Racial Justice Initiative, “a nationwide accounting of how churches and their leaders have been complicit in, and have perpetuated, racism in America.”

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [May 9, 2018](#) issue



Margaret Holland, left, and Lily Quintero at an event April 3 connected to the A.C.T. to End Racism Rally in Washington, D.C. RNS photo by Adelle M. Banks.

In one of the largest events ever planned by the National Council of Churches, more than a thousand people gathered in Washington, D.C., on April 4 for the ACT to End Racism rally, seeking to “awaken, confront, and transform” society.

The NCC, an ecumenical network of 38 church groups, including mainline Protestant, Orthodox, black Protestant, and Quaker denominations, planned the demonstration to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination.

“It was Dr. King who talked about the three evils that stand in our way, and we can call them the three weapons of mass destruction,” said Toussaint King Hill Jr. pastor of West Hunter Street Baptist Church in Atlanta and a cousin of King. “We can say racism. We can say economic inequality, and we can say militarism. Those three evils still permeate our land.”

Speaker after speaker throughout the day said King’s vision had not been realized and that it was up to leaders of houses of worship to act directly to achieve his goals, most especially on combating racism.

Participants described next steps for addressing racism. For example, Bill Spangler-Dunning, Upper Midwest regional minister for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), talked about recruiting people of color as ministers.

“Everybody’s got to be at the table,” he said. Otherwise, “it’s not the whole body of Christ.”

Leslie Copeland-Tune, an organizer of the gathering and the director of Ecumenical Advocacy Days, said the rally was part of three days of events, including training sessions at Washington churches on how to lobby politicians on issues related to racial disparities and economic justice, environmental justice, clean water, and immigration. She hopes for a sharing of resources among denominations so congregants can take a “deeper dive” on issues such as white privilege and racial injustice.

“Often they think they’ve done what is needed if they can say ‘I’m not using the N-word and I’m nice to people,’” she said. “Really, it takes a lot more than that.”

Although the NCC was involved in the civil rights movement in the 1950s and ’60s, its recent past financial struggles suggested that organizing this kind of event might not be possible. In 2013, it left its longtime headquarters in New York for offices on Washington’s Capitol Hill and dramatically reduced its staff and operations.

Jim Winkler, NCC president, said his agency is past “that near-death experience,” and its member denominations are ready to jointly take on what he called “the toughest issue in the entire history of North and South America. That is the legacy of slavery and racism, and we’re going to do it fearlessly.”

The night before the rally on the Mall, participants sat beneath the Byzantine dome and icons of Washington's St. Sophia Greek Orthodox Cathedral and were told that the notion of ending racism should not be considered an impossible task.

"Ending racism might seem like an aspiration but, like the very first disciples, we followers of Jesus are called to bear witness to something that the world cannot yet believe is possible," said Sharon Watkins, director of the NCC's Truth and Racial Justice Initiative. "We are called to say this can happen. Racism can end."

Watkins took up her NCC post after 12 years as the general minister and president of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The NCC described the initiative as "a nationwide accounting of how churches and their leaders have been complicit in, and have perpetuated, racism in America."

Fifteen-year-olds Lily Quintero and Margaret Holland, who traveled from Vermont with their United Church of Christ youth group, said they were impressed to hear white people such as Watkins addressing a cause that is a concern for them as teenagers with multiracial backgrounds.

"I don't know any of these people," Holland said, yet they're "fighting for my cause with me." —Religion News Service