

Pentecostal Leaders Support Formation of New Church Network

Organizers say they hope the new group will bridge the gap between liberal and conservative ministry organizations

Despite critics who fear it will be dominated by liberals, a new ecumenical organization is forming with support from several Pentecostal and charismatic denominations.

After a three-year organizational process, Christian Churches Together in the . (CCT) plans its formal launch next year. Participants will span five major groups: Roman Catholic, Orthodox, racial-ethnic churches, historic Protestant and evangelical-Pentecostal.

Supporters say it will help bridge a longtime gap between members of the theologically liberal National Council of Churches (NCC) and the theologically conservative National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). The group envisions holding annual meetings for prayer, fellowship and theological discussions, and various regional forums.

Organizers foresee participants speaking out on such issues as pornography, sexual trafficking of women, the persecuted church and poverty.

The steering committee includes three Pentecostals: the Rev. Jeffrey Farmer, president of Open Bible Churches; Bishop James Leggett of the International Pentecostal Holiness Church and Bishop George McKinney of the Church of God in Christ.

Representatives at recent meetings have also come from the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, Association of Vineyard Churches and Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn.). The Missionary Pentecostal Churches of God sent an observer. Evangelicals participating included members of The Salvation Army, Free Methodist Church, Church of the Nazarene and World Vision.

"I'm extremely excited about it," said Farmer, who joined the committee in January. "It's an historic thing, and this time it appears it's going to happen."

Leggett agreed, saying CCT will create a group that is broader and more faithful to Scripture than the National Council of Churches. "There are areas of agreement and common commitment to the core of the Christian faith," Leggett said of the two meetings he attended. "I think that is going to be the strong point."

Though acknowledging the criticism that has cropped up because of mainline church involvement, Farmer said he and other Pentecostals made it clear they wouldn't be involved if the NCC played an active role.

Noting that the late David du Plessis founded Pentecostal-Catholic dialogues years ago, Farmer expressed excitement about born-again Christians from various backgrounds coming together.

"Mainline denominations are losing members fast, and evangelicals and Pentecostals are at least holding their own," Farmer said. "They're coming to us and saying, 'We need to hear from you.' I think it would be a mistake not to take the

opportunity.”

CCT, which has sponsored exploratory meetings the last three years, hasn't selected the site of its next meeting or a city for its headquarters. Still, it hoped to reach its target of 25 member organizations by June and start operating in the fall of 2005.

Steering committee chairman Wesley Granberg-Michaelson expects CCT to overcome past divisions between evangelical and mainline Christians. That process has already begun through its preliminary meetings, said Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary of the Reformed Church in America.

In addition to fostering a deep sense of communion and fellowship, the group will help mainline churches gain valuable insights into evangelicals' and Pentecostals' faith, Granberg-Michaelson said. “I think they can learn that the knowledge of faith in Christ really needs to be lived out at a deeply experiential level that allows for personal freedom,” he said. “And how individuals testify to what God is doing in their lives.”

But after growing up in a liberal Presbyterian church where he never heard the gospel, NAE President Ted Haggard doubts that CCT will be able to mesh such divergent views.

Noting that evangelicals and Pentecostals emphasize the born-again experience and a high view of Christ and the Bible, Haggard is wary of the influence of those who don't uphold those positions.

If a group doesn't stake a position on high moral ground, it

inevitably becomes liberal because of the tendencies of the old sin nature, said Haggard, senior pastor of New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colo.

“That’s exactly what we’ve seen with the steady decline in the Methodist Church and so many others,” Haggard said. “Now many in their churches don’t even believe the Bible is the Word of God. Or they may say it symbolically, but they don’t read it and live it as if they believe it.”

“I believe we need to have respectful and cordial relationships, but I’m ... not going to take my time pretending that those who don’t believe in being born again are helpful to the cause of Christ.”

But Farmer, whose family was kicked out of the Disciples of Christ Church in the 1960s after being baptized in the Holy Spirit, thinks CCT will increase networking and empower Christians.

“We can speak louder to our nation at a time when our nation needs to hear from Christians,” Farmer said. “It’s all about relationships and relating to one another.”

Ken Walker