

Christian Churches Together in the USA
Simpsonwood Conference and Retreat Center
Atlanta, Georgia
March 28 – 31, 2006

Wesley Granberg Michaelson, chair of the interim steering committee, welcomed the group and opened the meeting with a prayer for attentiveness to each other and to the presence of the Spirit. Those present introduced themselves by expressing their hope for this meeting. Representative of the hopes expressed:

That we will remember the prayer of Jesus that we might all be one;
I've been hearing about this group and want to witness the miracle and see for myself;
My hope and prayer is for the healing of the body of Christ for the healing of the world;
That this journey will move us from ambiguity to clarity;
My hope is that we will give birth to CCT and I'm delighted that we are doing so around the issue of poverty.

Worship and Prayer

Each of the five families had responsibility for a period of worship. Dr Shaw invited participants to reflect on *II Corinthians 8* on Tuesday evening during the introduction to *Poverty in the United States*. He noted that Paul used an economic term to dramatize the love of God; he who was rich became poor that we might become rich. The wonder of what God has done is the challenge of what our life is all about. At the practical level, it should shape our attitude and actions toward others. Love because you are loved. Share, give, and work at changing the predicament of others, because Jesus did it for us.

On Wednesday morning, Wes Granberg-Michaelson led the group in a meditation based on *Rev. 7:9, 10*, noting its powerful image of reconciled diversity. This image of all God's people united as one takes place in the context of worship and prayer. Part of what has enabled *Christian Churches Together* to be on its journey has been a sense that we want to encounter one another first of all at the level of prayer and worship. This pathway is a foundational one into the unity God desires.

On Thursday morning Archbishop Gregory welcomed participants to the archdiocese of Atlanta. He asked the participants to consider the challenge posed by ecumenical marriages. How do we provide the proper pastoral instructions for people who marry one another across Christian denominational lines?

The Orthodox family led the participants in the evening liturgy following the act of commitment to organize formally as *Christian Churches Together in the USA* on Thursday evening.

One of the traditions in the *CCT* agenda is a time of sharing the good things that God is doing in the churches and organizations as well as the difficult and challenging things which participants face. Jeff Farmer led the participants in this time of prayer and praise, opening with a reading from Ephesians. A period of communal prayer followed in small groups.

Poverty in the United States

In Los Altos, the Evangelical/Pentecostal family suggested a focus on *poverty in the United States* for this meeting: how it is understood from different theological perspectives and what God might have CCT do in response. Steve Haas headed the planning committee, working together with Ron Sider, Daniel Vestal, Larry Pickens, Bishop Serapion, Lydia Veliko Jeff Farmer, Sister Joan Delaney, Dr Shaw, Dr Battle of ITC, Bread for the World and Call to Renewal.

Statistics and Stories

As part of the introduction to the reality of poverty in the United States, Steve Haas handed out sheets with recent statistics as well as stories of poor people. Noting “numbers have faces and the faces have names that are precious to the Father,” he encouraged participants, in small groups, to interact with each other on the basis of these stories as a way to begin to understand the context.

Dialogue

Dr Shaw introduced Deacon Joe Beasley, Michael Davis and Michael Capelli, from the Antioch Baptist Church program, and invited the two Michaels to tell their stories. Both had spent considerable time living on the streets, but now, with the help of persons from Antioch Baptist Church, were turning their lives around. They challenged the group by noting “That if there is anything that can be done collectively about poverty, this group could do it.”

Biblical Principles About Poverty and Justice

(a handout sheet composed of 13 statements)

A panel, composed of Larry Pickens, Bishop Dimitrios, and Sister Joan Delaney and moderated by Ron Sider, responded to the question: *How would your tradition speak of poverty? Are there things in these principles that need to be changed so that they can serve as a common foundation? Are there things that are missing that need to be here?*

Later small groups discussed the principles. It was agreed that, rather than reworking the Biblical Principles at this meeting, they could be, in a revised form, a resource for future work.

Biblical Theological Foundations for Overcoming Poverty

(a 35-page paper sent to participants before the meeting)

A panel, with Ron Sider, moderator, Bishop Viken, Bishop Tod Brown, Don Williams, Rachel Medema, wrestled with the following questions: *The paper argues that liberals and conservatives get it partly right: causes include personal choices and unjust structures. Does that framework help move us forward? Do our churches understand both causes? The paper suggests that the solutions are both personal and structural; are there aspects of these solutions to modify or reject or add to?*

Small groups continued the discussion on agreement across the five families in terms of causes and solutions. How much do church members agree on these? To what extent could a broad range of Christians get together on these causes and solutions?

A key question emerged: *How do we hold together affirming personal and structural causes and the right attention to not blaming victims?*

From the discussion:

Personal responsibility should be framed in a wider way; I am concerned about implying blame. We have to be very careful. Responsibility is shared. When in fact you are addressing someone who is poor and has few choices, you challenge him with the best choices. We haven't addressed the people with lots of choices at all. One can confront someone who made a bad choice, as long as we confront others. Rich kids have drugs and sex and have the ability to get out of it through wealth.

We still want to seek personal responsibility as a cause so that we can seek it as a solution. There is a lack of relationship to the poor. How is it that the poor are held responsible by people who have no relation to the poor? 9.2 million who have a full time worker in the house are raising their kids in poverty. Where does the conversation about choices have integrity? On a one on one in a relationship that knows what the system is doing.

While the group worked for a better way to express the inter-relationship between personal and structural causes, it affirmed the overall analysis in the background paper that described the economic and social factors that have entrenched the ongoing reality of domestic poverty.

Additional ideas from the discussion:

Develop Bible study all could use

Mobilize around a national agenda that allows poor to speak, suggest solutions

Leaders lead by preaching/teaching/action

Help congregations enter into relationships

Support, encourage, accountability of peers (plan/meetings/media/politics)

National/Local Assembly to repent

Call to Confession for our failure, despite the many good things we have done, and for the way our disunity has contributed to this.

Foster geographical conversation among people of faith

Visit to Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC)

Participants began their visit at a chapel worship service, which included traditional sermons of James Weldon Johnson, powerfully presented by ITC students. Following lunch, Dr Michael Battle, ITC president, brought greetings and an overview of the formation and work of ITC. Three young women, Kim, Shanti and Winifred, shared their experiences of poverty and how they responded to its challenges. Two academic staff, Mark Ellingsen and Ndugu T'Ofori-Atta, spoke from their perspectives and work on poverty: Participants expressed their very real appreciation for this time together with ITC students and staff.

What can CCT do?

Dr Shaw moderated a panel with Bishop Serapion, Jim Wallis, Bishop Blaire, and Commander Busby in addressing this question: *What can CCT do?*

Consensus

1. Poverty is worthy of this attention
2. We don't have a strategy now, but we need to have one, and have it presented at another annual gathering.
3. Set a time that we would make public who we are.
4. Have the sense of going somewhere -- know where we are going and where we will arrive.

On Friday morning, Bishop Blaire presented a revised *internal memorandum and working document* to which the participants agreed.

A Commitment to one another to address Poverty in the United States

During this time together in which we have organized as *Christian Churches Together*, we have engaged in a discussion about the widespread poverty existing in the United States. The terrible reality of poverty and the suffering of the poor affect us deeply. We have asked ourselves how we could work together to address with renewed energy and urgency the causes of poverty and to bring new hope to the millions of poor people living in a country of great wealth.

We, as participants of *Christian Churches Together*, believe that a commitment to overcome poverty is central to the mission of the church and essential to our unity in Christ. There is an urgency for our new ecumenical coalition to call our churches and our nation to confront the reality of poverty.

The new CCT Steering Committee has named a task force that will draw on the expertise of our respective churches in order to formulate a strategy that will enable us to use the unique resources of the leadership in Christian Churches Together to strengthen our churches' responses to poverty in the United States.

This task force will act in a timely manner to bring a report and recommendations to the 2007 meeting.

Task Force appointed

The task force appointed to put together a wider process on overcoming poverty in the United States: Ron Sider, Dr Shaw, and Bishop Blaire.

Related to Organizational Structure

Question of organizational readiness

Granberg-Michaelson reviewed the history of the formation of CCT beginning with the Baltimore meeting in September 2001 through the Los Altos meeting in 2005. The Steering Committee has been hard at work in the interim and there are now 34 churches and organizations committed to be founding participants, including two Historic Black churches. Several additional churches are considering participation.

One of the decisions participants faced concerned whether to adopt the by-laws and organize. A certain awkwardness was acknowledged as there is already an experience of

life together, but there needs to be some act when certain organizational features come to full development. The Steering Committee suggested that this step be taken at this meeting.

In the discussion that followed there was consensus to move forward and to adopt the by-laws. The membership report and the building of trust and relationship were celebrated. There was hesitancy about the character of an official launch, especially as proposed by the Steering Committee to take place in the National Cathedral. Several voices spoke for a “public moment” that was more provisional, more aware of our incompleteness, more movement oriented. “It is difficult to evoke humility in the National Cathedral.” “Cathedrals are in stone. Tents are provisional. We are at a tenting stage.” Others mentioned the natural tension between ambiguity and structure. Something is lost in the movement from a discernment process to an organization. Future participants will be joining an organization, rather than a discernment process.

By-Laws

Bonn Clayton led the group in a first reading of the revised *By-laws*. A sub-committee (Bishop Blaire, Roberta Hestenes, Michael Trice and Bonn Clayton, chair) was responsible for revising the *By-laws*, following the discussion in Los Altos. Questions were raised about 4.1, 12.5; and 13.1; at a later session these questions were resolved by revised wording. The agreed version of the *By-laws* will be sent to participants.

Financial discussion:

There is a discrepancy between budget and dues; if all participants pay projected amounts, about half of the budget would be covered. Individual/Foundations provide possibilities for additional income. Ron Sider, for example, has gotten \$20,000 for two years for CCT by asking individuals.

Concern was expressed about the dues schedule; it will not be possible for all churches to pay what is asked. Many churches did not pay as much as was indicated by the fee schedule for last year.

The Steering Committee is asked to get a firm commitment from churches and build a realistic budget on that. Expense for an audit is to be included in the budget. Participants differed about whether it was realistic to ask churches for commitments for three years. There was a suggestion to move from an invoice model to a letter asking for a dollar commitment.

Some expressed concern about moving away from the fee schedule, noting that CCT will require a level of administrative and executive attention beyond the level of someone simply adding it on to other tasks, as has been done up to now.

There was consensus on the Safeguard Statement and Hardship application.

Faith Family Groups

Faith Family Groups reflected further on a way to organize officially that is a credible public witness. They also suggested three steering committee members from each faith

family, with one to serve as president. The Steering Committee has suggested a model of a fellowship around five distinguished and experienced leaders whose presence symbolizes CCT's unity. They are the public face of CCT; one of the presidents will serve as moderator for the Steering Committee.

New Steering Committee:

Orthodox

Bishop Dimitrios Couchell (1 year)
Archbishop Cyril Karim (2 year)
Father Leonid Kishkovsky (3 year) Pres.

Evangelical/Pentecostal

Bishop Roger Haskins (1 year)
Rev. Jeff Farmer (2 year)
Bishop James Leggett (3 year) Pres.

Catholic

Bishop Stephen Blaire (1 year)
Cardinal William Keeler (2 year) Pres.
Rev Ron Roberson (3 year)

Historic Protestant

Rev Dr Daniel Vestal (1 year)
Rev Wes Granberg-Michaelson (2 year)
Rev Larry Pickens (3 year) Pres.

Racial/Ethnic

Rev Dr Seung Koo Choi (1 year)
Dr William Shaw (2 year) Pres.
Dr Stephen Thurston (3 year)

At Large

Steven Haas
Ron Sider
Don Williams
Anna Maria Pineda
Lydia Veliko (has since declined)
(places for Lutheran and Episcopal women)

Commitment to the Vision

Participants acknowledged in a prolonged standing ovation for Wes Granberg-Michaelson that his passion and vision have been crucial in creating this table and bringing this moment about. He extended thanks to all those who had contributed by serving on the steering committee or other special committees, John Busby, who had served initially as interim moderator, Sharon Browning, Bonn Clayton, Jeanette Salguerro, Sharon Van Gelderen and Jean Stromberg.

Act of Commitment

Wes Granberg-Michaelson posed the question: Do we have consensus in adopting the by-laws and thus constituting *Christian Churches Together in the USA*? The theological affirmations were read to which participants responded, "We do". The 7 purposes of CCT were read to which participants responded, "We agree". The moderator then asked, "Is there any objection to adopting these by-laws and forming *Christian Churches Together in the USA*? If not, it is so done. The Orthodox led the evening liturgy.

New Steering Committee Report

The new Steering Committee met briefly over breakfast on Friday morning and established a search committee for an executive director: Roger Haskins Chair, Don Williams, and Ron Roberson. The search committee will work with the general description of the position within the budget possibilities, possibly a half time position. If the presidents carry the public face and role of CCT, than the executive director will be an implementer/administrator, able to help carry out the things that need to be done. It could

be a recently retired person or a younger person, able to grasp the vision, who has managerial skills.

NEXT MEETING DATE 2007

February: convene Tuesday 6 evening and conclude Friday noon 9

Venue and direction for the meeting will be decided by the Steering Committee.

Press Release

A press release was discussed and agreed.

Closing

Following the tradition that has developed at CCT annual meetings, participants were invited to share what the meeting had meant to them. Among the comments:

CCT was born of heaven. Amazing that it exists to the glory of God. It seems as though it has huge movement qualities; when we move to an organization will we lose the movement quality? I am ecstatic, hopeful and perhaps worried about organization.

At a distance, one tends to be negative. This can't work. Just like we talked about the need to have a face on poverty, so getting to know one another has an extraordinary impact. I can go back and refute all the things I said in May.

The presence of God here is powerful.

I am excited about our broad table. When it is narrow there is only so much we can talk about it. I hope we get beyond definitions and get serious about things that separate us. We can agree on the war on poverty. It is a great day; my recommendation to my church is that we immediately apply for membership.

The excitement of this meeting has been that we are engaged in a dialogue of life. The world so divides us and plays us. I think that as we engage in a common task, we engage in a theological dialogue. Sometimes the goal seems to be just keeping ecumenism, but a dialogue of life is exciting.

I was stunned by how well things have gone. They have exceeded my expectations. This is a gift beyond what I can say. My conviction is that the church gets in trouble when we talk about us. It is never about us; it is about the Spirit. Ecumenism is not just about theology; it is about relationships. Seeing real people in their interconnection with the Holy One. Thank you for allowing me to be part of this.

The meeting ended with "Thanks be to God."