



CCT is formally launched in Pasadena; Stresses evangelism and an end to poverty

Pasadena, Calif., February 9, 2007 – A consensus on the importance of evangelism and the need to eliminate domestic poverty marked the official formation of Christian Churches Together (CCT) meeting here February 6-9.

The CCT is composed of 36 churches and national organizations from virtually all U.S. Christian groups who have been seeking to come together for fellowship, worship and opportunities to share in important ministries.

“Remember that you belong to God and God does not belong to you,” said the Rev. Dr. Larry Pickens, quoting his mother’s early admonition. That, said Pickens, is the wisdom that will hold CCT groups together.

“CCT is good news for American Christians,” said the very Rev. Leonid Kishkovsky of the Orthodox Church in America. “Our gathering of the wider spectrum of U.S. Christian churches is succeeding in building mutual trust and overcoming stereotypes. Our common hope and expectation is that CCT will enable our churches to offer a strong and united Christian moral voice and vision in the public square.”

Christian Churches Together (CCT) began in 2001 out of a deeply felt need to broaden and expand fellowship, unity, and witness among the diverse expressions of Christian faith today. Over the past five years, with a focus on praying together and building relationships, CCT has become the broadest most inclusive fellowship of Christian churches and traditions in the USA, including Evangelical/Pentecostal, Orthodox, Catholic, historic Protestant and Racial/Ethnic churches among its participants.

A Celebration and Commitment Service Wednesday highlighted the gathering that included over 150 participants and observers and a group of seminary students and young leaders. The 36 founding members includes the most recent groups to become official participants in CCT: the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America were warmly welcomed. Other groups are currently investigating membership, said the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson of the Reformed Church in America, chair of the CCT steering committee.

“Seeing the leaders of all the participating churches and organizations standing and praying together in their commitment to this vision was a powerful, visible sign of hope,” Granberg-Michaelson said. “We have said from the beginning that our purpose is to grow closer together in Christ in order to strengthen our Christian witness in the world. In Pasadena we all experienced how this is truly happening and this fills us with joy for the future.”

Evangelism and the need to eliminate poverty in the U.S. were major topics at the meeting.

Dr. William Shaw of the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc., declared that poverty in the United States to be a

"scandal."

Poverty "will not be redressed without intentional and painful effort by the total U.S. community," Shaw said. "CCT calls the country's conscience to that effort and commits itself to being a part of that redressing."

CCT participants continued discussions from the 2006 annual gathering in Atlanta on the topic of domestic poverty. A committee was appointed in Atlanta to find common ground and propose ways for CCT to challenge U.S. Christians and the whole country to address the tragedy of poverty in our own neighborhoods. CCT considered the committee's proposals and approved a statement on poverty while agreeing to continue addressing domestic poverty in the future, including a strong focus at the 2008 annual gathering in Washington, D.C.

The text of the statement on poverty is below.

The discussion on evangelism Wednesday was made open to a group of seminary students and young leaders "so that they might learn about the exciting movement for unity in the CCT as well as adding their challenges and perspectives," Granberg-Michaelson said. The group of students represented the diversity of the five faith families of the CCT. "Their excitement and contributions were welcomed and CCT leadership expects to look for ways to include these perspectives in the future," Granberg-Michaelson said.

Further enhancing the learning and fellowship of the gathering, worship services included liturgies from all of the five faith families and musical contributions from a Korean choir of pastor's wives. At the invitation of His Eminence, Archbishop Hovnan Derderian, CCT participated in Evening Prayer and dinner at the Armenian Orthodox Center of Los Angeles on Thursday. Prayer and meal fellowship adds to the formal discussions in creating the CCT movement and building relationships.

For the first entire day of the gathering, participants addressed the theme, "Is Jesus' Proclamation Our Proclamation?", responding to Luke 4:18. Participants in CCT discussed evangelism in their church and faith family contexts and how evangelism shapes or includes actions towards social justice and the healing of the deep hurts in our world.

Bishop Stephen Blaire, Catholic Diocese of Stockton, noted that one of the common threads discovered in this day-long discussion was an understanding that evangelism is rooted in personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Shared learning is a crucial part of the fellowship of the CCT. As each family shared some history, perspectives and practices related to evangelism with vulnerability and humility, the other churches listened intently. Participants wrestled with the challenge to consider future cooperative possibilities while recognizing and affirming the common efforts and cooperation that already exists on many levels.

The service of celebration and commitment included words of welcome from Cardinal Roger Mahoney of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and Rev. Dr. Barbara Anderson, co-pastor of Pasadena Presbyterian Church, host of the service. The Coptic Orthodox Choir of the Diocese of Los Angeles and other musical contributions complimented scriptural readings and words from the five presidents on the importance of joining this movement for Christian unity.

Bishop James Leggett of the International Pentecostal Holiness church proclaimed that we must follow Jesus in his prayer "That all might be one." Along with Dr. Shaw, Rev. Pickens, Bishop Leggett and Father Kishkovsky, Bishop Richard Sklba of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (representing Cardinal William Keeler of the Archdiocese of Baltimore) joined together as the presidents of the five faith families of CCT and, in a symbolic action of lighting candles, committed "to grow closer together in Christ in order to strengthen our Christian witness in the world."

Christian Churches Together's Statement on Poverty

As Christian leaders in the wealthiest society on earth, we are called by God to urge our churches and nation to strengthen and expand efforts to address the scandal of widespread poverty in the United States and around the world. The Gospel and our ethical principles place our service of the poor and vulnerable and our work for justice at the center of Christian life and witness.

Our common faith compels us. Christ our Lord teaches us that when we serve and stand with “the least of these,” we serve and stand with Him. Our Bible teaches us in hundreds of places that the God we worship has a special concern for the poor. God judges individuals and societies by how they respond to the needs of the poor. As leaders in Christian Churches Together, we believe that a renewed commitment to overcome poverty is central to the mission of the church and essential to our unity in Christ. Therefore in order to obey our God, respect the dignity of every person, and promote the common good of society, we must act. Our focus here is domestic poverty, but we reaffirm our commitment to overcome poverty all around the world.

Widespread and persistent poverty challenges us to action. The painful truth is that about thirty-seven million people in our country live below the poverty line. Tragically, 18 percent of all our children struggle in poverty. The sad reality is that millions in our nation work hard and still cannot escape poverty. We lament this ongoing poverty.

Our faith in Christ who is the truth compels us to confront the ignorance of and indifference to the scandal of widespread, persistent poverty in this rich nation. We must call this situation by its real names: moral failure, unacceptable injustice. Our faith in Christ drives us to call our churches and our society to a more urgent, united response.

We are grateful for the vast array of ways our churches are already helping millions of struggling people. We want to build on these efforts, learn from each other, and collaborate more closely. But we can, we must, do more.

We also recognize and encourage leaders in community, economic and public life who seek justice for poor people in our land. But we can, we must, do more. Our goal must be the elimination of poverty in this land.

As we as Christians renew and strengthen our efforts to overcome domestic poverty, we will seek to work with people of other faiths and all persons of good will in this urgent task.

Unfortunately, partisan and ideological divisions too often promote one-sided solutions and prevent genuine progress. We believe substantial success in reducing domestic poverty requires an overall framework that insists that overcoming poverty requires both more personal responsibility and broader societal responsibility, both better choices by individuals and better policies and investments by government, both renewing wholesome families and strengthening economic incentives. We believe that genuine success in reducing American poverty will require greater commitment and concrete action by all four of the following: churches, neighborhoods, communities, and faith-based and other organizations; government that implements better public policy at local, state, and federal levels; individuals and families; the market and private sector (employers, unions and other economic actors).

We are leaders of the Christian community, not an interest group. We have no partisan political agenda. We are conservatives and liberals, Independents, Republicans and Democrats. Together we believe that our faith demands and the people of this land yearn for concrete proposals that transcend divisive political divisions.

We give thanks to God for bringing together at one Christian table in Christian Churches Together for the first time in our history representatives of almost all the families in Christianity in the United States:

Evangelicals/Pentecostals, Catholics, Racial/Ethnic, Orthodox and Historic Protestants. As a united voice of Christianity in this country, we pledge to strengthen our efforts to end the scandal of widespread poverty in the richest nation in history.

Four Objectives.

CCT will promote its commitment to overcoming domestic poverty by inviting all Christians and all people, especially our leaders in public life, to embrace and implement the following objectives:

- a. to strengthen families and communities; because they are essential bulwarks against poverty;
- b. to reduce child poverty; we seek to cut child poverty by 50 percent in the next ten years;
- c. to make work work; by combating racism and guaranteeing that full time work offers a realistic escape from poverty and access to good health care;
- d. to strengthen the educational system in our country with particular attention to the public schools; because access to quality education offers perhaps the best way out of poverty.

For up-to-date information, see www.christianchurchestogether.org

Media and press inquiries may be directed to:

Philip E. Jenks, pjenks@councilofchurches.org. 212-870-2228

Jean Stromberg, jsstromber@aol.com

Sharon van Gelderen, svangelder@rca.org