

NCC envisions itself as smaller, more agile

by [John Dart](#) in the [October 31, 2012](#) issue

With yearly budget problems bedeviling the National Council of Churches, the ecumenical body recently finished taking a six-month look at what structural changes would enable the organization to concentrate on theological dialogue and interreligious relations as well as on issues of social justice.

The council's governing board approved the blueprints for change created by its 17-member task force on September 18, but one foregone conclusion had already been implemented—another sharp reduction in payroll.

In the NCC's halcyon days of the 1960s, some 400 people were employed. But by the end of 2000, the full-time staff was down to 59, according to NCC officials. On July 1 last year, 26 full-time employees worked at its New York and Washington offices. By September 1 this year, 16 staffers remained, of which 12 were full-time.

The council finished its 2011-12 fiscal year June 30 with a \$1.1 million deficit that was covered by the NCC's diminishing reserve funds. Clare Chapman, the NCC financial officer, told United Methodist News Service that the deficit was due to staff separation costs and lower-than-anticipated revenue.

While NCC officials have expressed optimism about the task force recommendations, Chapman told UMNS that "streamlining and staff reductions are so painful."

NCC president Kathryn Lohre, in an interview October 4 with the *Century*, said, "The significant staff changes made over this summer were very deep." It was "a real loss," Lohre said, that media relations head Philip Jenks retired September 1, though he said he would continue to assist on some projects. As for the coming months, Lohre said, "I don't anticipate another major staffing restructure."

From October through next May, existing programs will be evaluated to, among other things, "determine which are ripe for sunset or spin-off" and to "decommission the current commissions," as described by the task force. The report also underlined

a goal to move “from a structure that is rigid, silo-ed and outmoded to one that is agile, integrated and flexible” within an atmosphere of trust and transparency.

The first detailed plan for implementation will go before the NCC governing board on November 14-15 in Washington, D.C. At the previous board meeting, some members balked at a plan to have only heads of denominations on the board, at least temporarily, to honor their roles in setting the directions for ecumenical fellowship and actions.

Another objection was raised by the report’s description of the future NCC staff as “a small group of theologically trained community organizers.” NCC officials later explained in a FAQ sheet: “This does not mean that staff will BE community organizers per se,” but simply that the report was borrowing a term for linking people and resources.

One recurring problem for the NCC is that little or no money is being contributed by some member denominations. “A dues structure for the categories of affiliation will be created,” the report said. Whether some very large congregations with national presence would be invited to affiliate is uncertain, said Lohre. “I hope and anticipate it will be, but I think there will be considerable conversation about that.”

Lohre, who directs ecumenical and interreligious relations for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, said there was broad affirmation at the last board meeting for the overall plan. “That was also true for the Orthodox churches,” she added.

Bishop Mary Ann Swenson, the new ecumenical officer for the United Methodist Church, the largest mainline member of the NCC, said she was impressed by the plan. “I think it is a real time of hope,” she said.

Wes Granberg-Michaelson, a Reformed Church in America general secretary emeritus who chaired one of the early task force discussions, said the NCC path is the only one that can make the 72-year-old organization sustainable and effective. “They are aimed at changing organizational culture,” he said. “Any involved in similar efforts know that this is the most difficult, but also the most important, kind of change.”