

Kinnamon's NCC: Frugality and fellowship

by [John Dart](#) in the [October 30, 2007](#) issue

If ecumenical veteran Michael Kinnamon is ratified next month, as expected, to be the top executive of the National Council of Churches, look for a stylistic shift on social justice issues and appeals to member denominations to become mutually supportive.

“One of my jobs will be working for justice, but also to see us growing fully as a fellowship together,” said Kinnamon, a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) minister and professor at Eden Theological Seminary, St. Louis.

Already respected for articulating ecumenical goals in the areas of theology and church order, Kinnamon chaired for four years the NCC Commission on Justice and Advocacy, which successfully worked to raise minimum-wage levels, among other accomplishments.

Kinnamon, 58, will have to work under financial restraints at the Manhattan-based council. The NCC backed away from a budgetary precipice a few years ago, but it has operated with deficits for the past two years—last year’s was \$1.2 million.

The NCC’s governing board announced on September 27 a staff reorganization that eliminates 14 jobs, replacing eight senior staff positions with four newly created posts. Cutbacks planned for the Washington office have caused some consternation about reducing the council’s presence in the nation’s capital.

Days later, the NCC announced that its nominee to succeed Robert Edgar as general secretary is Kinnamon, a longtime leader in church unity movements at the national and international level. Kinnamon will begin a four-year term in January if he is approved by the governing board and General Assembly delegates at the NCC General Assembly November 5-8 in Woodbridge, New Jersey.

Kinnamon was general secretary of the Consultation on Church Union, which became Churches Uniting in Christ, from 1999 to 2002. He served as executive

secretary of the World Council of Churches' Commission on Faith and Order from 1980 to 1983. He has taught at Eden Seminary since 2000 and was previously at Lexington (Kentucky) Theological Seminary and Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis.

Edgar, a United Methodist minister and a former member of Congress, said earlier this year that he would not run for a third term in the post. He later took the post of CEO at Common Cause, a nonpartisan advocacy organization based in Washington.

The NCC, with 35 member communions, faced financial disaster at the end of 1999 when Edgar was elected as general secretary. Former president of the Claremont School of Theology, Edgar used his fund-raising skills to rescue the council, rebuild its reserve funds and obtain grants for special projects and programs.

"Bob pushed the council to do more in justice and advocacy, and he was very vocal and was effective," said a governing board member who requested anonymity. "There were some in the council family, however, who began to worry about whether issues of Christian unity were being slighted," said the source.

"But nobody said a lot because he was our savior," the source continued in an interview. "One of the things Bob didn't do was the 'pastoral calls' with member denominations." What developed was a plan to work for better collaboration even while speaking to social issues.

That balanced vision, called the Strategic Plan, is largely a reflection of Kinnamon's thinking. "I was the chief writer for that," he told the Century by telephone. "Sometimes the justice issues are played off against the faith and order issues, but I see them both as part and parcel of the ecumenical work of the church," he said.

He hopes to effect a shift in the NCC social-advocacy emphasis— away from a primary focus on promoting or opposing political agendas in Congress. "I would like to see us also identify that prophetic and alternative vision of life in the U.S.—life as we think God would have it," he said. "I think more progressive churches have a word to speak to this society."

The person filling a new director's post in the Washington office will oversee justice and advocacy work as well as communications, according to Dan Webster, New York-based media relations director, who said that he will be returning to Episcopal parish ministry. His is one of three eliminated communications posts in New York.

Three positions in Washington were cut—the top staff position for justice and advocacy held by Brenda Girton-Mitchell, that of assistant director Lesley Tune, and the faith and order job held by Ann Riggs, Webster said on October 10.

Those who lost jobs may reapply for reconfigured posts, he said. At any rate, the NCC office in Washington will not close. Six “eco-justice” staffers are not affected by the reorganization and will remain there.

“The decision to force current NCC staff to reapply for their positions is most unfortunate,” said Jim Winkler, general secretary for the United Methodists’ social action agency in Washington. The NCC “works alongside the Washington offices of the major Protestant denominations to speak truth to power on Capitol Hill,” Winkler said by e-mail.

Another mainline social lobbyist, however, said that Edgar’s activism had its limits. “Many of us felt that Bob’s speaking out on a multitude of issues resulted in NCC impacting none of them,” said the source, who did not wish to be identified.

Outgoing NCC president Michael Livingston said in a statement that he welcomed Kinnamon’s nomination. “We have always appreciated his ecumenical commitment and knowledge, his commitment to the visible unity of the body of Christ, and his unwavering dedication to social justice,” said Livingston.

Barbara Brown Zikmund, a governing board member and former president of Hartford Seminary in Connecticut, noted that “Michael Kinnamon is very much an academic.” But she added that Kinnamon’s energy “astonished” colleagues at the NCC. “He deeply wants commitment to justice to be central” and also wants members to talk “about our common calling and to keep the unity of the church in mind.”

The 22-member search committee, which had representatives from the NCC’s mixture of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, historically black and peace churches, interviewed two finalists. The executive committee of the board chose the nominee from that pair, according to Webster.

Asked if a new NCC president will be a bit handicapped by staff cutbacks, Kinnamon said, “Yes.” But he also said that council officials want to be “fiscally responsible” in light of the steadily diminishing contributions to the NCC by denominations that support the council’s operations annually.

“We don’t want to eat into the reserves that Bob [Edgar] built up,” Kinnamon said. “This is a difficult time for all ecumenical bodies, and by going in this direction now we will return to the balanced budget Bob had in many of his years.”

A lover of baseball and opera, Kinnamon will be moving with his wife, Katherine, a Disciples pastor, to the New York area. He said that though he will enjoy going to the Met, he is no fan of the Mets.

“I’ve been a Cubs fan ever since I was at the University of Chicago Divinity School,” where in the late 1970s he earned master’s and doctoral degrees. “It has taught me the meaning of hope as opposed to optimism,” he said—before the Cubs began playoffs against the Arizona Diamondbacks, in which they were eliminated by three straight losses.