

Ecumenical group limps as two churches cut ties: Churches Uniting in Christ

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An ecumenical group of Christian denominations that was determined to address racism inside and outside the church is facing an uncertain future after officials of two of its three black member churches stopped attending its meetings.

The group, Churches Uniting in Christ, successor to a similar effort that began in 1962, has eliminated the position of director and is facing budgetary constraints after representatives of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church halted their participation.

Officials of those two denominations, who have not been at meetings for more than a year, say the group has failed at its essential mission—addressing racism—and CUIC leaders acknowledge that is true.

“There is hand-wringing,” said Suzanne Webb, the group’s president and pastor of a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) congregation in St. Louis. “We have not lived up to what we thought we could do and the commitments we made around racism.”

Other denominations affiliated with CUIC besides the Disciples and the historically black Christian Methodist Episcopal Church are the Episcopal Church, International Council of Community Churches, Moravian Church Northern Province, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), United Church of Christ and United Methodist Church. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is a partner in CUIC’s dialogues but not an official member.

George W. Walker, senior bishop of the AME Zion Church, confirmed that his denomination has withdrawn from CUIC, although some CUIC members may not have received official notice. He said the withdrawal was a collective decision of AME Zion bishops and came after misunderstandings and at least perceived

mistreatment of some black leaders in CUIC.

“There seems to have always been skirting or drawing away from being direct as relates to issues such as racism,” said Walker, who oversees AME Zion churches in North Carolina.

Bishop E. Earl McCloud Jr., ecumenical officer for the African Methodist Episcopal Church, said his denomination’s Council of Bishops has affirmed the suspension of its membership in CUIC.

“We were concerned that the organization had gotten away from its original mandate, which was to deal with some of the issues of racism and racial discrimination and white privilege,” said McCloud, who is based in Atlanta.

McCloud charged that CUIC has not supported black leadership within its work—tending to offer African Americans vice presidential posts—and sometimes has not placed people on its racial justice task force who have the authority to act on behalf of their denominations.

Webb said the first president of CUIC, which formed from a previous consortium in 2002, was a black United Methodist. But the task force members, she added, are chosen by individual denominations.

“We floundered on what it is that we can be doing around racism, so in that sense, Bishop McCloud is absolutely right on,” she said. “At the same time, we need to remember how slow change comes and especially in the church. It doesn’t make it right.”

Patrice Rosner, a clergy person whose director’s post was eliminated as of May 31, said the organization has been in a budget crunch because three churches—including the two absent from recent meetings—had reduced their pledges, causing a \$40,000 reduction in annual revenues of \$115,000. Other member organizations have maintained or increased their budget contributions, she said.

Rosner said CUIC programs have been put on hold while leaders try to reconcile with the AME Church and the AME Zion Church. “They didn’t want to be perceived that they were moving ahead with business as usual when actually it is not business as usual,” she said. *—Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service*