

Unity journey energized

by [Jean Caffey Lyles](#) in the [January 30, 2002](#) issue

For years premature rumors circulated about the demise of the Consultation on Church Union—the 40-year-old theological dialogue in which nine U.S. church bodies have sought to break down the barriers that divide them. On January 19 in Memphis it took only a couple of minutes for church representatives to lay the consultation to rest, voting unanimously that COCU’s work “is now concluded.”

But by no means has this long-running ecumenical drama struck the sets, turned off the lights, or ended its run. In fact, the action to dissolve COCU was a recognition of how extensive its achievements have been—including influential theological studies, ecumenical liturgies for the Eucharist, and new approaches to what “unity” might mean.

In the same resolution, delegates decreed that “the legacy and witness of the Consultation, including its historical documents, are carried forward through [the] Churches Uniting in Christ,” which was inaugurated the next day. The participating churches have a total of about 22 million members.

Other resolutions affirmed the theological marks of the new relationship and adopted a provisional structure and procedures for a transitional period. Michael Kinnamon, a Disciples ecumenist and scholar who has served as general secretary for three years, has announced that he will leave that post to concentrate on his full-time job at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis. CUIC is advertising for a full-time director to replace him. Retired United Methodist Bishop Melvin Talbert, ecumenical officer of his church’s council of bishops, will convene CUIC’s interim steering committee.

The three-day gathering of about 325 people included three energy-filled events—COCU’s final Eucharist, CUIC’s inaugural liturgy, and a Martin Luther King Day march, swelled by the attendance of hundreds of Memphis residents, culminating in a ceremony in which top church leaders signed an “Appeal to the Churches” to join in combating racism. United Church of Christ President John Thomas, standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel where the civil rights leader

was slain in April 1968, took off his shoes, saying, "If anywhere in America is sacred ground, this spot is."

The end of COCU and the start-up of CUIC is more than a name change, leaders say, though that alone seemed to lend the unity efforts a new burst of energy. The point, said leaders, is to move from talking and consulting to adopting a way of life that manifests unity. The choice of "Uniting" rather than "United" suggests the unfinished, fluid state of the new relationship, which will continue to welcome new participants. (The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America became the first "partner in dialogue and mission," a step short of full membership.)

"We cease being a consultation and start being a movement," said a United Methodist delegate. "It's a 'living-into.'"

Already, a proposal has been floated that local churches update their signboards, adding below the congregation's name, "A member of Churches Uniting in Christ." In the new relation each denomination will retain its own identity and structure.

The word "Uniting" also signals the unfinished state of the dialogue, which must still iron out a perennial impasse on orders of ministry. The main disagreement involves Episcopalians, whose bishops claim a succession by laying-on-of-hands dating back to early Christianity, and Presbyterians, who reject individual bishops as the bearers of *episcopé* (oversight) and have a corporate *episcopé* of decision-makers (the presbytery), half clergy and half "ruling elders." An impending Presbyterian-Episcopal dialogue will augment CUIC's multilateral efforts.

CUIC's discussion of ministry is scheduled to take five years, allowing full communion to be declared by 2007—though some predict it will take longer.

Critics soberly warn that CUIC's form of ecumenism could endanger the whole movement. The emotional highs of the inaugural events in Memphis—the organ, brass and timpani fanfares; the joyous tears and damp hankies; delegates' perfect harmony on the "Doxology" after the vote—all were part of an event that "jumped the gun," in some people's eyes, for CUIC may yet disintegrate or lose either Presbyterians or Episcopalians before ministries are reconciled and interchangeable. But CUIC-lovers felt that not to celebrate "how far we've come" might slow momentum; a stalled COCU might die on the vine.

CUIC's origins date to 1960, when Presbyterian leader Eugene Carson Blake issued "A Proposal Toward the Union of Christ's Church" in a sermon at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. Blake urged four mainline bodies to form a united church that would be "truly catholic [and] truly reformed" (the words "truly evangelical" were added by the consultation later).

Over the years, as more denominations (including three historically black churches) joined the original four, two mergers involving member churches were consummated, bilateral dialogues proliferated, and attitudes toward organic structural union shifted. The consultation's goal morphed into a different kind of unity—a "covenanting" that would commit the churches to "marks" of unity, including mutual recognition of each member church as an authentic expression of the church of Jesus Christ, mutual recognition of members and ministries, interchangeability of clergy, regular occasions of worshiping and celebrating the Eucharist together, joint mission work, and common efforts to abolish racism.

The two major worship services—one at St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral, the other at Mount Olive Christian Methodist Episcopal Cathedral—were emotional, full-house occasions. Service planners dared to invite both a woman preacher (United Methodist Kathryn Bannister) and a woman eucharistic celebrant (UCC ecumenical officer Lydia Veliko) for the COCU "Service of Dissolution"—a choice that would have been unthinkable a decade ago. "You have been talking together longer than I have been alive," said Bannister, the young Kansas pastor who has been a leader in the World Council of Churches. Two black clergy (CME Bishop McKinley Young and Episcopal Bishop Benjamin Williams Jr.) were the preacher and celebrant, respectively, at the "National Act of Worship Inaugurating" CUIC. (Earlier, a photo-op at a luncheon honoring leaders starkly reminded participants that all seven of COCU's general secretaries have been white male clergy.)

Both services featured commissioned hymn texts about unity and division written by participants. At one service the smoke of incense rose from the altar area; at the other tinkling handbells rang before the service; and black composer Andrae Crouch's "The Blood Will Never Lose Its Power" had toes tapping, as a jazz trumpeter from the Canadian Brass wailed in the upper octaves. Worshipers could not resist joining the choir as John Ness Beck's festival anthem "Upon This Rock Will I Build My Church" segued into "The Church's One Foundation."

Welcoming worshipers to the CUIC inaugural service, COCU president Jeff Newhall, of the Community churches, said, “We’re on a new journey, and we don’t know where it will take us. But when we arrive, we will arrive together.”

During prayers, worshipers called out the names of respected individuals, many no longer alive, who played crucial roles in the consultation over its 40 years of theological work. One deep voice boomed out, “The apostle Paul,” generating a ripple of laughter.

In a moving prayer of confession, each top official representing one of the nine communions named aloud his church body’s besetting sin that has hindered the unity of the churches. “Anger,” said the leader of one black denomination. “Our refusal to be healed from hurts,” said another African-American bishop. An Episcopal leader named “the sin of apathy.” A Presbyterian leader confessed “living with too-easy conscience as wealthy Christians in an impoverished world.” United Methodist Bishop Elias Galvan, a native of Mexico, confessed in Spanish and then English his church’s “sin of racism.”

Bishop Young, preaching on “epiphanal moments,” or sudden perceptions of essence and reality, told worshipers that the inaugural service was one such moment. “This is our finest hour. . . . Don’t blow it,” he concluded, turning abruptly from the pulpit.