

Dollars and signs: NCC revisits the vision thing

by [Jean Caffey Lyles](#) in the [June 7, 2000](#) issue

One figure concentrates the attention of Robert Edgar, chief executive of the National Council of Churches: \$650,000. That's the amount of cash the ecumenical organization must come up with every two weeks to meet payroll. Edgar, who took the helm January 1, reminded the council's 50-member executive board last month that since employees are paid every 14 days rather than twice a month, there are two months each year that contain three paydays—which means a cash demand of \$195,000.

“Cash flow” is the watchword, and summer is usually a dry period for receipts from denominations, which tend to send their checks late in the year (having waited for donations to wend their way from local-church givers to middle judicatories to churchwide coffers). Making the payroll and paying the utility bills are the first priorities when cash is short, Edgar said. Unlike past practice, only unrestricted funds are being used; borrowing from reserves is not an option when reserves are exhausted. Meanwhile, the council remains, in Edgar's words, “fiscally challenged.” He told board members more than once that they should be talking to “persons of wealth” who might be persuaded to make large individual gifts to the council.

Edgar, a United Methodist minister in his mid-50s whose last job entailed pulling the School of Theology at Claremont, California, out of financial quicksand, is a wiry figure of enthusiasm, energy and self-confidence. With the backing of new financial staff and leaders from member bodies, he has acted quickly to cut staff, pare expenses, reduce the space on which the council pays rent at the Interchurch Center in New York, hire a development officer (fund raiser), impose new controls and closer oversight on spending, and curtail travel. Former first-class frequent fliers on staff must now justify the cost and purpose of any trip in terms of its contribution to the council's mission and ministry, submitting a form that requires the signature of two top execs. A 10 percent reserve is to be built into every budget, forcing deeper cuts.

Meeting on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., May 22-23 (one day in a historic House hearing room), the board took two bold moves on proposals that have been in the air for years.

Perhaps most significant was the decision for the NCC—now made up of “mainline” Protestant churches, Orthodox bodies and black denominations—to initiate talks with Roman Catholics, evangelicals and Pentecostals in the U.S., with the aim of creating together a broader instrument of ecumenical ministry. A high-powered “vision team” was named, made up of ecumenical veterans able to speak as peers to top leaders of churches outside the council.

Council leaders said a key contributing factor in making the “vision” feasible was a recent action by the National Association of Evangelicals, which ended the longtime ban on NAE member churches holding membership in the NCC. United Methodist ecumenical officer Bruce Robbins lauded the new initiative for the opportunity it offers to “work with partners with whom we have not spoken at all.”

Episcopal ecumenical officer David Perry noted that “similar conversations” are going on within the World Council of Churches, with a consultation about “expanding the table” scheduled for September at Fuller Seminary. The NCC team is to bring to the board in September a framework and next steps for dialogue, based on initial conversations with both NCC churches and nonmember communions.

Although the resolution does not come right out and say so, the creation of a new ecumenical body or “vehicle” would involve loss of the council’s present name and even the demise of the council itself before resurrection in the hoped-for broader organization. The initial timetable calls for bringing off the miracle by 2003. (Edgar noted that he won’t be signing any five-year contracts with new employees.)

Edgar told reporters he did not want a broader ecumenical table to mean “that we can only agree on mother and apple pie. We don’t want to lose the ability to covenant when we need a prophetic voice,” although he admitted it would be “harder for us to be willing to be prophetic” with a more diverse constituency. The general secretary evidently wants to move quickly toward the new ecumenical expression. “I fully intend,” he said, “to have this career and one more” before retiring to volunteer work.

The other key board action was to separate the financial management of Church World Service and Witness—the council’s large relief agency—from the rest of the

NCC, effective July 1. CWS's desire for more autonomy has been a long-running cause of tension. Representing 85 percent of the financial life of the council, CWS handles highly restricted funds, including U.S. government support of relief and redevelopment efforts. "A matter of great concern," says a background paper on the move, "was the desire to enhance integrity in the use of funds." A resolution says the move will build "trust and transparency, and enable greater accountability and the fulfillment of mission."

The financial functions that each entity will carry out separately include accounting, receipting and payments, budgeting, financial reporting, assets, investment management, auditing, payroll, contracting, and bank accounts. For the immediate future at least, the NCC and CWS will "continue our common ministry," the general secretary will continue to serve as "chief ecumenical spokesperson," and the two entities will "speak with one voice for the purposes of public witness and communication."

In the past, CWS leaders have often felt that their unit was being taxed unduly to support the work of other NCC units. The new agreement calls for "mutual agreement" on the cost to be paid by one entity for common functions and services provided by the other.

A new plan for the Bible Translation and Utilization unit was unveiled. Plans include setting up a new institute near an appropriate educational institution and allowing a staff member to work half-time with the institute and half-time in teaching. Money for the institute would come from "persons of means."

The ongoing work on Bible translation will also be aided by close work with publishers on marketing, since a number of competing translations are coming out. The council will monitor more closely income from royalties and permissions, saving restricted royalty funds for Bible translation (in recent years, these have been commingled with general funds). The council is also encouraging young people to train for Bible translation, with full scholarships being given this fall to three ethnic minority students to work on their Ph.D.s, with a focus on translation.

Edgar reported that his new development officer will be John Briscoe, who served as Edgar's aide during his years as a congressman. Now a dairy farmer who "milks cows" in Michigan, Briscoe will change his job description slightly to give attention to "cash cows."

The board voted to retain the firm of Ernst and Young for the next three years to audit the financial statements of both the NCC and CWS. Given the council's history of chaotic financial management, leaders thought it prudent to make a fresh start.

Barbara Ellen Black, NCC general manager (chief financial officer), cited such money-saving measures as negotiating better prices for equipment, insurance and overnight delivery services, and designating a new, preferred travel agency. The cash flow is "monitored on a daily basis—maybe hourly," Black said.

Denominational donations to retire a \$2 million debt from 1999 (most of which went to the Pappas Group, the firm hired to study NCC management and finances) so far total \$762,625. Pledges not yet paid total \$1.26 million. Other funds have come from Church World Service (\$1.45 million) and the Bank of Bohemia (\$358,590), part of a loss from a large, risky investment that NCC officials have worked for years to recover.

Both CWS and NCC have begun "forensic" accounting and auditing, which will supply more answers about the deficit spending of recent years. "I don't think it was a short-term problem," Edgar said. "The consultants shouldn't have taken two years to find the problem. It took two months to see that controls needed to be in place."

Greg Craig, attorney for Juan Miguel González—the Cuban father seeking permanent custody of son Elián and a swift return to their homeland—made a cameo appearance to thank the National Council for its support of the pair. Describing the secluded guesthouse near Washington where the González family is staying, Craig said, "It's a perfect place to recover from trauma."

Both the NCC and the United Methodist Board of Church and Society have been involved in raising funds for legal representation in Juan Miguel's custody battle, and in retaining Craig, best known as counsel to President Clinton during the impeachment trial.