

Endings and beginnings: The NCC celebrates—and regroups

by [Jean Caffey Lyles](#) in the [December 1, 1999](#) issue

The National Council of Churches, its existence threatened by persistent deficits, inept financial management and denominational apathy, approved plans at a November 9-12 meeting to eliminate 34 staff positions, mandated a gaunt new structure, and OK'd the framework for a balanced year 2000 budget that would include a built-in 10 percent surplus.

The New York-based council of 35 Protestant and Orthodox bodies also elected a new general secretary to a four-year term. Robert W. Edgar, 56, is a minister in the United Methodist Church and a seminary president with a reputation for rescuing institutions in distress—most recently Claremont School of Theology in California. He succeeds Joan Brown Campbell, 68, who became the target of sharp criticism for the council's woes in the latter years of her nine-year tenure.

The week also featured the installation of a new president, former Atlanta mayor and former UN ambassador Andrew Young, a United Church of Christ minister, who now heads an Atlanta-based consulting group that advises corporations and governments operating in the global economy. Archer Daniels Midland Company presented the NCC with a check for \$100,000 in honor of Young, and Thomas Nelson Publishers added a check for \$10,000. Young, 67, sits on the boards of both companies.

Chosen as president-elect to succeed Young in two years was laywoman Elenie Huszagh, a Chicago attorney and a member of the Greek Orthodox Diocese of North America.

The actions by the NCC's executive board and assembly came amid a concurrent celebration of the council's 50th anniversary, which drew approximately 900 full- and part-time registrants for four days of worship, forums, panel discussions, concerts, caucus meetings, speakers, special luncheons and dinners, art exhibits and historical displays. Treasurer Margaret Thomas reported, with no little

frustration, that despite earlier reports to the contrary, the 50th-anniversary event would likely finish with a deficit somewhere between \$50,000 and \$150,000. She referred to earlier strong statements by the board that "there must be no deficit" for the event. Some members had opposed the idea of even holding such a celebration at a time when the council is strapped for cash.

While other participants attended an array of forums, council decision-makers wrestled with how to pull the council out of its malaise. Episcopal Bishop Craig Anderson, the outgoing president, likened the task of transforming the council to "riding a bicycle while trying to build it."

The finance group offered a framework for a "year of transition" rather than a fully worked-out 2000 operating budget. More precision will be impossible until other decisions are in place—decisions, for example, about relations between the NCC and its largest component, Church World Service and Witness, which accounts for more than three quarters of council budget and staff. The budget also cannot be fleshed out until the new general secretary and a recently hired interim general manager make decisions about their own office staffing and until staff reductions are carried out. Although 44 positions are affected, overall the reduction in the council's work force totals only 20 positions.

Questions arose again about possible mismanagement of the Burned Churches Fund to rebuild torched black churches, most of which are in the South. A finance group representative said that despite the clean bill of health issued to the fund after a Pappas Group investigation, "a few issues needed resolution. [There is] \$113,000 that we believe may have been misused."

The council is still seeking responses from some of the burned churches as to whether they will apply for a grant, but leaders hope to achieve closure of the project by year's end. Remaining funds will be applied to the fees owed to the Pappas Group and to a community building and reconciliation fund. This use was deemed not to be in conflict with the intent of donors.

A transition management team (TMT), directed to devise a financial recovery plan addressing the council's almost \$4 million deficit, reported that commitments from denominations were approaching \$3 million. Two chief executives of member churches were asked to lead in soliciting other churches to kick in. In corridor conversation, one ecumenist confirmed that top leaders were exhorting one another

to help wipe out the deficit. Still under negotiation was the question of whether the powerful Church World Service and Witness unit would accept being taxed a \$1.4 million share of the shortfall.

TMT was also charged with designing a new structure, approved at this meeting by the executive board. The most radical change collapses most ministries other than CWSW into one segment to be called "Unity and Justice." That includes the programs in Christian unity, faith and order, interfaith relations, ecumenical networks, justice ministries, educational ministries, and Bible translation and utilization. Only four program staff and three support staff, overseen by a deputy general secretary, would be retained in the Unity and Justice division. (Officials added that offices whose funding is assured—such as the AmeriCorps program, which runs on federal money—will survive.) The CWSW-NCC negotiating team will specify cuts for CWSW. Also, a few new positions will be created, including two for the Washington office. None of the changes are expected before Edgar becomes general secretary January 1.

Support-service units will, at least for now, provide assistance to both Unity and Justice and CWSW. These units include communication, public witness, administration and finance, and—added by floor amendment—"inclusiveness and justice," to ensure adequate racial, ethnic, gender and church body representation.

The latest organizational chart shows both a solid line and a dotted line connecting the CWSW board to the renamed NCC board of directors. Just how much autonomy the relief and redevelopment agency will have is still on the negotiating table, with legal and accountability issues under study. The CWSW report indicated that many decisions have yet to be made, but it did recommend that CWSW be owned and managed as a separate nonprofit organization under the authority of its own board.

Ignoring the advice of the Pappas Group, the consulting firm that has worked with the council for more than a year and a half at a cost of \$2.5 million, the TMT decided that the general manager—responsible for human resources, financial management and business services—should report directly to the general secretary rather than to council officers. The managerial post is designed to free up the general secretary from day-to-day financial management oversight—a need that became evident during Campbell's tenure.

Despite the frequent use of the word-of-the-month "transparent" in Cleveland, the structural designers describe the new staff configuration in rather opaque terms: freestanding "silo" offices will be replaced with "matrix staff" who can take on diverse assignments. The report underscores that although old structures and positions are abolished, the program work they have done is not being abandoned.

In a kind of "living in tents" arrangement, "working groups" representing denominations will oversee the ministry priorities, but the board will periodically review priorities and eliminate or add ministries and working groups.

After leaders from historic African-American churches charged that their denominations have been underrepresented in high-ranking staff posts, a recommendation was added that "inclusiveness" goals be followed in filling any vacant staff positions, two key posts scheduled to become open in the next 18 months, and a new deputy general secretary. A contributing factor in the black leaders' frustration may have been the election of a white male as general secretary and a black male from a predominantly white denomination as president. (Two African-Americans were among five finalists interviewed for general secretary.)

The executive committee approved a plan for the federally chartered, 200-year-old Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Foundation and a related corporation, New Covenant Funds, to manage gifts and endowment funds for the NCC. The funds are collectively called the Ecumenical Trust—the successor to a mismanaged joint fund-raising campaign of the NCC and World Council of Churches called the Ecumenical Development Initiative. The two councils, agreeing that EDI had failed abysmally, negotiated its demise late last year, and separated out each council's share of the funds.

Although the board rejected a proposed policy on "employee perquisites," it appeared that a provision codifying how many airline club memberships frequent-flying NCC officials are entitled to might turn up later—not in the new employee handbook but in a separate travel policy. (Some board members seemed shocked at the NCC's practice of paying for club memberships.)

A bilingual event, held in cooperation with the National Council of Churches in Korea, was a good example of the NCC's activity on public issues, though only tangentially related to the Cleveland gathering.

The service "of reconciliation and remembrance" at the Old Stone Presbyterian Church brought together U.S. Korean War veterans and Korean survivors of the July 1950 No Gun Ri massacre in which hundreds of fleeing refugees were killed by U.S. troops.

Worshippers prayed, sang hymns, heard testimony from a survivor and a U.S. veteran and a joint statement issued by the two church councils, and witnessed the lighting of candles to symbolize the healing and reconciliation called for in the joint statement. Five survivors encountered three U.S. veterans for the first time since the tragic incident. A 77-year-old Korean survivor said he believed God would forgive the U.S. government and the soldiers who carried out the massacre if they repent, accept responsibility and issue an official apology.

The week's much-anticipated "Great Conversation" on ecumenism turned out to be, at best, a "Pretty Good Conversation"—more monologue than dialogue. The three panels of three speakers each included two active NCC leaders: Orthodox priest Leonid Kishkovsky and Angelique Walker-Smith of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc. The others were mostly Roman Catholics and evangelicals—the two segments of U.S. Christianity with which the council hopes to build stronger ties. They included two priests, a Catholic laywoman, Harvard University-based preacher Peter Gomes, John Akers from Billy Graham's leadership team, National Association of Evangelicals president Kevin Mannoia and *Christianity Today* executive editor David Neff. Several panelists offered useful reflections on their experience with and hopes for the ecumenical movement. Mannoia said evangelicals desire unity, but it must be "a unity that propels us toward mission." It must not be "achieved at the cost of truth." He termed "ecumenism for ecumenism's sake" a "human exercise in futility."

Gomes described an ecumenism of ignorance among university students. "The 'ecumenical movement' is something their parents or clergy do. They don't know much, but they don't need to 'bury the hatchet' because they didn't know there was a hatchet or how to use it." Still, something might be gained if such young people "infect" their religious communities.

Kishkovsky lamented that theological discussions all too often explicitly or implicitly turn on overcoming the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. "This is not our inner theological problem," said the Orthodox churchman. "It's as if the whole Eastern tradition in its fullness never existed."

During the brief time for audience comments, one young woman said fervently, "I pray for the day when my grandchildren will not be denied communion in any church." Building on a panelist's remark about pious, quiet Methodist clergy visiting a Catholic retreat center, one man quipped, "I pray for the day we will be able to drink, smoke, dance and gamble together."

Despite its shortcomings, the "Great Conversation" did serve to plant the idea in many minds that U.S. ecumenism is larger than the NCC and that the council must reach out to other partners and eventually help form a stronger ecumenical coalition that includes Pentecostals, evangelicals, Roman Catholics and other Christian groups.

The council's 200-member assembly approved the eligibility of the Alliance of Baptists for NCC membership, paving the way for the 60,000-member denomination to join next November. The young denomination, formerly called the Alliance of Southern Baptists, resulted from moderates splitting off from the giant Southern Baptist Convention after ultraconservatives seized control.

In a farewell speech, Campbell said the good-bye was "neither a sad leave-taking nor a great relief—though it is both." Outweighing the "strains and stresses" were the friendships made during her nine years in the post. But now, "I shall learn to become Joan Campbell again. I like her a good bit."

The general secretary's job is "not for the fainthearted," Campbell said, recalling her progression from early years of garnering praise to years like the one Britain's Queen Elizabeth called "my annus horribilis."

Campbell praised member churches, reviewed council accomplishments, and thanked members for "showing equality" to her, the NCC's first ordained female general secretary. "You have viewed me as strong enough to take all criticism," she said, admitting that "I value courage and imagination more than caution and efficiency."

The council "in essence is struggle," she added. "It has never been flush [with funds]. We are nonprofit—we don't need the IRS to tell us that." Campbell warned listeners not to let the council die without replacing it. "We have no right to play fast and loose with this organization."

"Our deficit," she concluded, "is not only in dollars but also in our failure to see the possibilities in each other. We must forgive and embrace one another. The ecumenical calling is for the ages. It is our challenge." Afterward, church leaders lined up at microphones to praise Campbell's leadership, spirit and achievements--in some cases, leaders who had wanted her to leave even sooner.

Worship planners chose British hymnwriter Brian Wren's 1978 text "This is a day of new beginnings" for one morning service. Those present in Cleveland realized that the National Council is at a pivotal point of both start-ups and endings. Wren's text says, "Time to remember and move on," and goes on to urge, "Step from the past and leave behind our disappointment, guilt and grieving"—sentiments that were sometimes evident. But participants seemed to draw cheer from the imminent change of leadership, the hope of a solvent treasury and a viable structure, and the belief that, as Wren's hymn says, "Our God is making all things new."