

Catholics join new ecumenical movement: Christian Churches Together

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The U.S. Catholic bishops have given a key blessing to a groundbreaking effort to bring Catholics, evangelical and mainline Protestants and the Orthodox around a common table for the first time.

The bishops voted 151-73 at their fall meeting last month in Washington, D.C., to become full partners in Christian Churches Together in the USA, an ecumenical effort that began three years ago to allow most branches of American Christianity to “build bridges” and eventually speak with a common voice on selected issues.

Organizers hope to have the new organization off the ground by the spring once member churches from each of five “families”—Catholic, evangelical/Pentecostal, historic (mainline) Protestant, black and Hispanic, and Orthodox—sign on. Some church bodies have already done so.

“It’s not to create another kind of National Council of Churches; it’s not to create some kind of mega-body or mega-church,” said Bishop Stephen Blaire, chairman of the bishops’ ecumenical committee, as he tried to allay some concerns that the new group might overtake the bishops’ public voice. “It’s a forum for participation so we can pray together, grow in our understanding together and witness together our faith in whatever way is possible in our society.”

The Catholic endorsement is significant because the bishops have never before linked arms with Protestants in a formal way. Each side has often viewed the other with suspicion, fueled by theological and political differences. The fact that one-third of the bishops voted against membership shows that some reluctance remains.

Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Chicago said the goal of Christian Churches Together should be “full communion” between churches, and questioned whether

CCT is a less-lofty attempt to blur church distinctions and identity in the name of unity. “Christ [prayed] that ‘they may all be one,’ and I understand that to be one Catholic Church, not a bunch of Christians who accept different denominational labels,” Paprocki said in an interview.

Blaire, bishop of the Stockton, California, diocese, tried to assure colleagues that the group intends to move slowly, and all five “families” must reach consensus on major decisions. “Unless we concur in agreement, it will not be done,” he said. In addition to top-level representatives from denominations, the CCT will include officials from a variety of Christian organizations, but the latter’s representation can be no higher than 20 percent in any year.

Cardinal William Keeler of Baltimore, the bishops’ most vocal supporter of ecumenism, said the new group will enable the bishops to deepen alliances with conservatives and evangelicals on issues such as abortion and school vouchers.

The bishops are expected to allocate initial funding of at least \$12,000 per year for Christian Churches Together. The Catholic representatives will be named by the U.S. bishops’ new president, Bishop William Skylstad of Spokane, Washington. The bishops’ conference will decide who will—or won’t—be included in the Catholic “family.”

While Christian Churches Together has received a warmer-than-expected reception from evangelical churches, not all have joined. Southern Baptists, who make up the country’s largest Protestant body, have expressed only limited interest, and some historically black churches have expressed some hesitation.

Another fast-growing group, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons), is ineligible to join because it does not accept the doctrine of the Trinity, which serves as a theological common denominator for membership.

Bob Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, who sparked discussions about “expanding the ecumenical table” in 2001, said he was “delighted” that Catholics would now be involved. But he cautioned against high expectations for the group’s common action.

“The first agenda is to simply be together in a place where we can dispel myths and respect one another as opposed to thinking of each other in categories,” Edgar said.

Earlier last month in St. Louis, at the council's annual General Assembly, Edgar said the NCC and its humanitarian arm, Church World Service, are both "robustly healthy" after teetering on the brink of bankruptcy four years ago.

Delegates to the meeting, which represents 36 mainline Protestant and Orthodox churches, appealed for national unity, bemoaning the "painful spectacle of Christians demonizing one another." NCC leaders pushed progressive issues during the campaign, but the postelection statement said both conservatives and liberals need to abandon "caricatures" of each other. "We do not view the Christian community in our country as being divided into red and blue," they said. "Our view is that we are a mosaic of God's grace and presence."

Delegates also approved a comprehensive statement on children, promising to work for safe schools, affordable health care, arts education in schools and antipoverty programs that combat hunger.

"Fear and uncertainty permeate many of these young lives," the statement said. "Violence, sex and disillusionment can confront them each time they turn on the TV, read a newspaper, walk down the street or go to school. For many, poverty, neglect, inadequate health care, lack of quality child care and education are an all too cruel reality." *-Religion News Service*