

Lack of black churches delays launch of new ecumenical group: Both interest and skepticism among black leaders

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The launching of a new group that aims to bring Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Christians in the U.S. together for the first time has been postponed because the effort has received little interest from black churches, leaders said.

The fledgling group, Christian Churches Together in the USA (CCT), has struggled to recruit historically black churches, which have been skeptical that their issues would be addressed in the ecumenical organization.

At a meeting June 1-3 in Los Altos, California, 67 leaders from some 31 church bodies decided to postpone a formal launch that was scheduled for September to allow more “productive and positive conversation” with churches that have not yet joined.

The delay—which officials insist can be overcome—highlights the difficulty of undoing decades of mutual suspicion and political differences between churches that have kept them from speaking with a unified voice.

“Frankly, we felt this was so historic and promising that we want to be sure that we get it right,” said Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, chair of the CCT steering committee and general secretary of the Reformed Church in America.

The effort to build a broader “ecumenical table” started four years ago as a loose-knit forum for U.S. Christians to work together, including Catholics, evangelicals and Pentecostals who have been reluctant to join other ecumenical groups.

When it finally launches, CCT will be organized into five church “families”—Catholic, Orthodox, mainline Protestant, racial/ethnic and evangelical/Pentecostal—and will

take action only when all five families agree by consensus.

The nation's largest Protestant body, the Southern Baptist Convention, has said it has no intention of ever joining CCT.

So far, no predominantly black denominations have joined, although several have expressed interest. Currently, the only racial/ethnic groups to sign on as members are a Korean Presbyterian body and an evangelical Hispanic group.

"We really want to wait and all move forward together," said Bishop Christopher Epting, who oversees ecumenical talks for the Episcopal Church. "We don't want to do some sort of big public event when one or two of the families aren't at the table yet."

Thomas Hoyt, the Christian Methodist Episcopal bishop of Louisiana and Mississippi, said black churches wonder why a broader "table" is needed when most are already part of the National Council of Churches. What's more, he said, they are not convinced that a new body would address the social, economic and political issues important to them.

The bishops of Hoyt's CME Church voted earlier this year not to join CCT. "It was not so much a vote against [CCT], but against another meeting that does not speak to our priorities and spends too much money and time in addition to the work we already do," said Hoyt, who is also president of the National Council of Churches.

In an interview, Hoyt expressed concern that some member churches would push "before-birth" issues like abortion and others would push "after-death" issues of eternal salvation, while the social and economic questions of life between the two would be brushed aside.

"Those are critical issues of survival for us, that in-between time . . . of jobs and food and clothing, . . . and some people don't want to deal with those issues," he said. Hoyt also pointed out that many black churches now being courted were not involved in the initial talks to form CCT.

Catholic bishop Stephen Blaire of Stockton, California, said CCT would increase opportunities for black churches to engage with new partners. "It is very important that we have the full spectrum of representation," he said. "That is what the plan has been from the beginning."

Granberg-Michaelson said he wants to meet with black church leaders this fall to discuss their concerns. He said he has received positive responses from the National Baptist denominations, noting that National Baptist Convention U.S.A. president William J. Shaw took part in the Los Altos meeting. Though the board of the predominantly black Church of God in Christ heard a Churches Together presentation in May, it was not expected to take a vote until July.

“Churches that are new in the process are going to ask hard questions, and they should,” Granberg-Michaelson said. “But what we’ve discovered is that there are very good answers to those hard questions.” *-Kevin Eckstrom, Religion News Service*