

CCT E-newsletter

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*Reflections from Executive Director, Richard L. Hamm*

## **What Difference Does CCT Make?**

As executive director, I have many conversations with folks about CCT via phone, e-mail, mail and face to face, and I am greeted with many different attitudes about it. Perhaps the most frequent question I am asked is, “Why do we need yet another organization to foster Christian unity?”

It is a fair question. After all, many of us in church leadership do see each other often in various meetings of Christian unity groups that overlap. The question has become more urgent in the face of the financial struggles of many communions, including some of those that have always been in the forefront of such engagement.

My answer to the question is this: no other national Christian unity organization brings together such a broad range of communions, denominations, and organizations as does Christian Churches Together in the USA. Only CCT brings to the table African American Churches, Catholics, Evangelicals, Historic Protestants, Orthodox, and Pentecostals: not Churches Uniting in Christ (CUiC), the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), nor the National Council of Churches (NCC). This is not an argument against any of these other organizations: each of them has an important and unique role to play in the household of God. But none of them brings the breadth of participation that CCT brings.

It surprises me when veteran advocates for Christian unity don't seem to get this. When Jesus prayed for the unity of the church in John 17:20f, was he praying that only those on the left would recognize their oneness in Jesus Christ; or only those in the middle; or only those on the right? Of course not! When those on the left refuse to engage with those on the right, they soon fall into all the sins of the left. When those on the right refuse to engage with those on the left, they soon fall into the sins of the right. When those in the middle refuse to engage with those on the left or the right, they soon fall into the sins of the middle, which are mostly sins of mediocrity.

CCT still has its challenges. We do not have enough African American communions participating, and there are hundreds more communions and denominations than the 36 that comprise CCT currently. Though we have one of the smallest budgets of any national Christian unity organization (\$142,000 this year), we struggle to meet it. Nevertheless, our participating churches are home to some 116 million American Christians, and our participating Christian organizations are among the most respected in the



world (The American Bible Society, Bread for the World, Evangelicals for Social Action, Habitat for Humanity, Sojourners, and World Vision).

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This year’s annual meeting was an amazing occasion, bringing together as it did so many traditions to engage in an ongoing conversation about evangelism and to engage together in ongoing efforts against domestic poverty on our way toward bringing a measure of healing to Christ’s shattered body. This just must be of the Holy Spirit!

I continue to see the importance and need for CUiC, the NAE, the NCCC, and for various interfaith groups. I certainly do not want to see CCT do *anything* that would undercut any of these bodies or local/regional expressions of unity. I also truly believe that CCT brings gifts that will ultimately bless all of these others as well as the whole body of Christ.

Grace and peace,

*Dick Hamm*

## **Practical advice offered by Pastor Matthew Messner**

Pastor of Eastside Church of Bothell, Washington, Matt served on an Annual Meeting 2010 panel of local church leaders discussing the experience of doing evangelism in the Northwest. He offered the following very practical suggestions for those seeking to do evangelism effectively most anywhere:

- reach out to the surrounding community in relationship;
- make the Gospel understandable through clear preaching and teaching;
- provide hospitality to community groups;
- grace wins out over judgment;
- engage in service to compassion and justice;
- keep the pulpit ‘on fire’;
- share the faith individually.

## Reflections on Annual Meeting

By Heidi Unruh



**Heidi Unruh** is Director of the Congregations, Community Outreach and Leadership Development Project. She has researched, written and spoken extensively about church-based community ministry, faith-based initiatives, and social welfare issues. Books she has co-authored include *Churches That Make a Difference*; *Saving Souls*, *Serving Society*; and *Hope for Children in Poverty*. She has helped develop a variety of ministry training resources for churches (see [www.urbanministry.org](http://www.urbanministry.org)). She also writes a weekly public policy blog for Evangelicals for Social Action. Heidi lives in Hutchinson, KS, with her husband Jim (a Mennonite pastor) and their three children.

### “Words and the Word”

The World Vision chapel presentation on "word, deed, life and sign"—carried out with excellence, like everything undertaken by our host organization—demonstrated how the verbal proclamation of the gospel weaves seamlessly with demonstrations of God's love and power. Yet the church has divided over words, and I confess approaching this year's gathering with some trepidation.

My fears were unfounded. The plenary presentations framed the dialogue by placing us all on equal footing as fellow learners, as well as fellow penitents for our family's share in neglecting and undercutting the spread of the gospel. They also defined our task as engaging an urgent, shared charge for the future, rather than untangling past wrongs and present controversies—though repentance and reconciliation is part of the good news we deliver. I was moved to see this modeled by participants.

The table conversations, as always, advanced mutual understanding and constructive consensus while honoring authentic distinctions. I am thankful for my dialogue partners who patiently answered my questions while graciously overlooking my ignorance. Interestingly, the sticking points at our table had largely to do with terminology. Each family has its own way of talking about the gospel, and there are things we struggle to say together in good faith. These differences are not merely semantic; the words represent dearly held elements of theology, history and culture that help define us, and letting go can be painful. The greatest challenge I took home from the conference was posed by Dr. Robeck: “Am I willing to free this other group to become who God created them to be, rather than try to remake them in my image? Do I sufficiently trust this group to entrust the evangelization of my children to them?”

In relation to building trust, my one regret is that we did not have more opportunity to engage the topic through a personal lens, as well as scholarly and theological ones. I wish time had allowed us to ask one another around the table, “How has an evangelistic experience influenced your faith, either in receiving or in sharing the Good News of Christ?” I have found from past CCT gatherings that when we exchange personal stories, our theological dialogue grows deeper. We listen better when there is trust; and we trust better when we have made a personal connection.

While we wrestled with terminology, unfamiliar words of faith also proved an unexpected gift. The prayer, "Lord, have mercy" featured prominently in the service led by our Orthodox brothers. Repeated three times, twelve times, forty times, it sank into my soul, and reemerged as I groped for an appropriate response to the disaster unfolding in Haiti. In leading worship the following Sunday at my own (non-liturgical) congregation, I shared this experience and invited others into this prayer.

This is what I love most about CCT—how it transforms the unknown “other” into a gift. What gifts in the body of Christ might we have yet to encounter? I believe this beautiful fellowship is still missing some vital relationships. Immigrant congregations and non-denominational congregations are examples of important groups within the five faith families that could add to the richness of CCT's diversity—and help guide its future. Within my own affiliation, Mennonite Church USA, recent research highlights that the most dynamic church growth is occurring among urban racial/ethnic congregations,

with many of these worshipping in other languages. To sideline this stream is to miss the locus of God's missional activity in our cities. Similarly, the growth in nondenominational churches may point to a missing piece of the evangelism puzzle. Denominational structures tend to reflect growth trends of the past generation more than these current realities. I trust that CCT, with its inclusive, creative and dynamic DNA, will find ways to capture these shifting trends and continue to embrace all who proclaim Christ as the Word of God.

As we grow in unity with one another, we also reaffirm the wholeness of the gospel. I cannot imagine divorcing the church's work of ending poverty from the proclamation of salvation, any more than I could now imagine celebrating in heaven without the company of all five faith families. Each time I am privileged to gather with CCT, I am more motivated to continue the work of evangelism and justice on earth, and more filled with longing for our heavenly union.

## **Poverty Action Report On Line**

A Poverty Action Report, detailing what CCT participants are doing to combat domestic poverty, is available on our website. Go to [www.christianchurchestogether.org](http://www.christianchurchestogether.org) to see the link to this report on the front page. Thanks to Bread for the World's David Beckmann and Sarah Turner for preparing this report.

## **DUES NOTICES HAVE GONE OUT FOR 2010!**

If you are the person who should receive the notice for your church or organization and you have not received it, please contact Dick Hamm as soon as possible and we will get the notice to the proper place ([dhamm@ddi.org](mailto:dhamm@ddi.org)).

If you know of individuals or organizations that might like to help support CCT with a gift, please send that information to Dick also. Thanks for all the ways in which you support CCT!

## **Video Series Created by Leadership Education at Duke Divinity**

Gradye Parsons, Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), is interviewed in a video at <http://bit.ly/9JNjmi>. Previous interviews were with Wes Granberg-Michaelson, Reformed Church in America, and Bruce McLaren of the emergent church movement. The entire series can be viewed at <http://bit.ly/5nMrnE>.

## **Three Task Forces To Be Formed**

Three task forces are being formed currently: 1) an "Outreach Task Force" to encourage more communions/denominations to join in CCT participation; 2) a "Funding Task Force" to develop more sources of income for CCT beyond church and organization dues; 3) a "Communications Task Force" to develop more effective communication between and beyond CCT participants, including the media.

If you have an interest in serving on one of these task forces, please contact Dick Hamm at [dhamm@ddi.org](mailto:dhamm@ddi.org).

