Reflections from Executive Director, Richard L. Hamm

Annual Meeting: Low Lows and High Highs!

The lyrics, “Oh, the weather outside is frightful…” took on new meaning in Birmingham this January 11-14! Some people got stranded in Atlanta, some in Charlotte, others elsewhere. In the end, 55 of the 96 expected participants made it to the meeting. We give thanks that, so far as we know, no one was injured in the effort to get home after an aborted attempt to get to Birmingham! But a lot of people were greatly inconvenienced. We deeply regret this. The decision to go forward was made on the basis of weather forecasts that indicated the weather would be improving on Tuesday, the 11th. We were reminded that meteorology is part science and part art.

Nonetheless, among those who were able to make it, it is generally agreed that it was an outstanding meeting. All but one speaker was able to make it and the experience of the Civil Rights Institute and the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church are highly appreciated in the post-meeting evaluations. On a number of occasions during our four days together, I saw evidence of people being deeply moved.

We decided on a brief initial response to Dr. King’s letter (see below), but also committed ourselves to a more substantial response over the course of the next two years. We are inviting everyone in our churches and beyond to join us in a deeper engagement with the “Letter From Birmingham Jail.”

“Seeing Poverty through the Lens of Racism” turned out to be a very powerful theme: one that will provide us with insight and direction for some time to come. Enjoy the pictures (including the link to Wendy McFadden’s great video piece) and take a look at the excellent reports on the meeting that are below. It was a rich time. I’ll admit, I was terribly frustrated Tuesday afternoon as we began to realize how many would not be able to make it to a meeting that for me had been a “labor of love” to prepare, but I finally gave it up to God and came to peace about it. God took it from there and did marvelous things.

Again, we do regret that so many could not get there, but we also give thanks that so many tried so hard to get there! The addresses and sermons offered at the meeting will soon be available on the CCT website in the form of downloadable documents and audio files.

Grace and peace,

Dick Hamm
The Initial Response from the Annual Meeting to Dr. King’s Letter

A Letter from Birmingham January 14, 2011

We have gathered this week in Birmingham as representatives of the churches and organizations that make up Christian Churches Together (CCT). We came to examine poverty through the lens of racism.

After experiences at the Civil Rights Institute and the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, we have felt compelled to make a response to the "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous letter was an answer to a message from a group of clergy in Birmingham. So far as we know, no one has ever issued a clergy response to Dr. King's letter.

Remembering. We begin by expressing profound gratitude to the leaders of the civil rights movement whose sacrifices have moved us closer to God's justice. Those leaders and thousands who followed their lead accomplished more than many could imagine, and demonstrated the power of Christian, nonviolent action. We celebrate the remarkable strides made through their courageous witness.

Repenting. We recognize, however, that some of us have not progressed far enough beyond the initial message from the Birmingham clergy. Though virtually all our institutions have formal statements against racism, too often our follow-through has been far less than our spoken commitments. Too often we have elected to be comfortable rather than prophetic. Too often we have chosen not to see the evidence of a racism that is less overt but still permeates our national life in corrosive ways.

Renewing. Though chastened by the unfinished nature of the work before us, we are inspired by the witness we saw reflected in both the history and the present-day ministry of the organizations we have visited in Birmingham. Dr. King's letter speaks powerfully to us today, even as it did in 1963.

We remember two windows in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. In one window, the face of Jesus had been blown away by the bomb that murdered four girls in 1963. The other window, a gift to the congregation after the tragedy, depicts a Christ figure who with one hand rejects the injustice of the world – and with the other extends forgiveness.

In the spirit of this loving Jesus, and in the spirit of those who committed their very lives to that love, we renew our struggle to end racism in all forms. We begin by taking time on Monday, January 17, to reread the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" – along with the message from the Birmingham clergy that prompted Dr. King's letter – and to reflect on its meaning for us today. We urge all within our churches to join us.

King's letter:  
http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/liberation_curriculum/pdfs/letterfrombirmingham_wwcw.pdf

Clergy letter:  
Church leaders make response to "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

BIRMINGHAM, Jan. 14, 2011 – Participants at the annual meeting of Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. (CCT) have issued a response to the "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

The CCT church leaders, who were in Birmingham Jan. 11-14, 2011, to examine the issue of domestic poverty through the lens of racism, noted that apparently no one has ever issued a clergy response to Dr. King’s famous letter.

Martin Luther King Jr.’s letter was an answer to a message from a group of clergy in Birmingham in 1963. In their "Call for Unity," the clergy appealed for restraint and "common sense," and a withdrawal of support for the civil rights demonstrations.

In their one-page letter, the church leaders remember with gratitude the sacrifices of the leaders of the civil rights movement, who demonstrated the power of Christian, nonviolent action. They also express repentance that "some of us have not progressed far enough beyond the initial message from the Birmingham clergy."

"Too often our follow-through has been far less than our spoken commitments. Too often we have chosen to be comfortable rather than prophetic. Too often we have chosen not to see the evidence of a racism that is less overt but still permeates our national life in corrosive ways."

In their experiences at the Civil Rights Institute and the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, the church leaders, who were of multiple races and represented a wide range of church backgrounds, found inspiration and renewed commitment. They describe two windows at the church – one where the face of Jesus had been blown out from the bombing in 1963 that killed four girls, and the other that depicts a Christ figure who with one hand rejects the injustice of the world and with the other extends forgiveness.

"In the spirit of this loving Jesus, and in the spirit of those who committed their very lives to that love, we renew our commitment to ending racism in all forms. We begin by taking time on Monday, January 17, to reread the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" – along with the message from the Birmingham clergy that prompted King's letter – and to reflect on its meaning for us today. We urge all within our churches to do the same."

Formed in 2007, CCT is the broadest Christian fellowship in the country, with members from the Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Historic Black, and Evangelical/Pentecostal families. In addition to 36 national communions, its membership includes six national organizations – the American Bible Society, Bread for the World, Evangelicals for Social Action, Habitat for Humanity, Sojourners, and World Vision. For the full letter and a list of the member communions, go to www.christianchurchestogether.org.

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Contact: Dick Hamm, 317-490-1968

Birmingham letter
Photo caption

The Wales Window for Alabama, created by artist John Petts, was a gift to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church from the people of Wales, U.K., after the 1963 bombing. The Christ figure is rejecting injustice with one hand and extends forgiveness with the other. (Photo by Wendy McFadden)
From Wes Granberg-Michaelson

Folks in Birmingham said it was the worst weather they could remember. Snow and ice, along with temperatures in the teens, shut down the airport at the beginning of this week, just as representatives of the member churches and organizations of Christian Churches Together (CCT) were making their way to Birmingham for the annual CCT meeting, scheduled to begin on Tuesday night. I was stuck in Chicago for more than a day on Monday, and others making their way to Birmingham slept in airports in Atlanta, Georgia, and Charlotte, North Carolina, as a severe winter storm crippled much of the Southeast.

But participants from CCT's member churches and organizations--Catholic, evangelical, Pentecostal, historic Protestant, Orthodox, and the historic black church--began arriving, and by Wednesday a solid group representing our full unique diversity was present, even though about 34 of the planned participants were unable to make it to Birmingham due to the weather. CCT's strength is that it's the only place where leadership from all the faith "families" that comprise Christianity in the U.S. gather together, and we experienced the power and enrichment of this reality once again.

We gathered in Birmingham in order to focus on the church's response to the issues of racism and poverty. Birmingham, of course, was the epicenter of the civil rights movement in the early 1960s, and a powerful exhibition at its Civil Rights Institute vividly recalls these days. I had visited the exhibition once before while on an RCA Sankofa trip, and found myself once again in both lament and inspiration as the whole CCT group went through the museum. We then crossed the street to Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, where four young girls were killed in a Sunday morning bombing in 1963. There we heard presentations on the state of poverty and race relations today, surveying what has changed and what challenges still remain.

After the bombing, a church in Wales gifted Sixteenth Street Baptist Church with a new stained glass window that powerfully depicts Jesus with one outstretched arm resisting oppression and the other open hand offering forgiveness.

Back in our hotel, we gathered in small groups to reflect and pray.

Before we arrived in Birmingham, we each read Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." During our time together in Birmingham we crafted a response. As far as we could tell, no church leaders had ever responded to Dr. King's letter, and the issues it raises require a response in our own day. That became our "Letter from Birmingham." (Visit www.christianchurches/together.org to read our letter of response.)

Important voices enriched our time. David Beckmann, president of Bread for the World, tethered our aspirations to the realistic political challenges we face for assisting the needs of hungry children within our own land--one out of five children in the U.S. don't have enough to eat. Albert Raboteau, an African-American professor at Princeton University who belongs to the Orthodox Church, gave what I and many others experienced as the most powerful presentation I've heard on "Seeing Christ in the Poor." He drew on the traditions of Christian faith as practiced by slaves as well as the writings of church fathers from the fourth and fifth centuries to enlarge our understanding. (Both of these resources will be available on the CCT's website.)

On our last day together, Joshua Dubois, who directs the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships, shared excerpts from the sermon Dr. King delivered at the funeral of the four young girls killed in the Sixteenth Street bombing, as well as from the speech given by President Obama on Wednesday at the memorial for those killed in Tucson on January 8. A Pentecostal minister, Joshua spoke to us in ways that were insightful and inspiring.
Each time CCT meets, I come away enriched anew by sharing in the fullness of the body of Christ. We worshipped together in Birmingham's Orthodox Church by celebrating an Epiphany liturgy, worshipped with the Catholic bishop and a choir, and were led in contemporary worship by Bert Waggoner, national director of Vineyard U.S.A., and members of his church. We gathered for a Protestant worship service in the Episcopal cathedral, and Dr. Stephen Thurston, president of the National Baptist Convention of America, concluded our time with a sermon in his tradition. These times always stretch and deepen all of our faith.

CCT is a young, growing fellowship. We're seeking to build new bonds of fellowship in Christ's body in order to strengthen our witness in the world. These frigid days in Birmingham were filled with the warmth and light of Christ's presence as we experienced the promise of our unity.

A Photo Gallery of Annual Meeting 2011

Opening worship was at the Cathedral Church of the Advent, the beautiful Episcopal Cathedral next door to our hotel. The staff, including organist Dr. Charles Kennedy, and Vice-Dean the Rev. Canon Heidi Kinner, made us feel very welcome. Half of our first-night gathering is pictured here in the choir loft.

The Civil Rights Institute proved to be a place of significance both for younger and older participants. Through powerful media, it both reminded us of the brutality of the era and the courage that was manifest among so many.
We crossed the street from the Civil Rights institute to visit the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church where four young girls were killed by a bomb blast in September, 1963. There we learned about the girls, Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson and Denise McNair. We heard about the stain glass window of Jesus and how the bomb blew the face of Jesus out of the window, an image that haunts us all.

Dr. Cheryl Sanders of Howard University (and pastor of Third Street Church of God, Washington D.C.) and Ronaldo Cruz, Executive Director of the Secretariat for Hispanic Affairs of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, brought powerful keynotes on Wednesday morning.

Alejandro Aguilera-Titus, Assistant Director of the Secretariat for Cultural Diversity (USCCB) and Jim Wallis, President of Sojourners, each responded to Dr. Sanders and Mr. Cruz.

After our return to the hotel, we entered into a time of sharing and prayer in our small groups.
The Catholic Bishop of the Diocese of Birmingham, the Most Rev. Robert J. Baker, led us in worship on Thursday morning assisted by a wonderful choir.

David Beckmann, President of Bread for the World, delivered a marvelous keynote entitled, “Calling the United States to Join the Exodus from Hunger.” Don Williams, Bread’s Coordinator for African American Church Relations, moderated the discussion which followed.
Dr. Albert Raboteau, Orthodox Church in America and Putnam Professor of Religion at Princeton, provided an excellent keynote on the theme of “Seeing Christ in the Poor.”

Family Group discussions were lively as we reviewed a draft of a letter in response to Dr. King’s “Letter From Birmingham Jail.”

Dr. Ron Sider chaired the drafting team, reported on the Lausanne meeting and performed “other duties as assigned.”

Dr. Jo Anne Lyon, General Superintendent, represented the Wesleyan Church, which was officially welcomed as a new participant in CCT. In Moderator Father Leonid Kishkovsky’s absence (for medical reasons), Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, General Secretary of the Reformed Church in America, was pressed into service as moderator pro-tem.

The Inverness Vineyard, a local congregation, provided the Evangelical-Pentecostal worship service on Thursday evening. Bert Waggoner, National Director of The Vineyard, led us in a time of testimony and thanksgiving.
Joshua DuBois, head of the office of Faith Based and Neighborhood Partnerships in the Executive office of the White House under President Barack Obama, provided a powerful address Friday morning that drew on the funeral Dr. King preached for the four girls at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in 1963.

A lesser preacher might have felt challenged to follow Joshua DuBois, but Dr. Stephen Thurston, President of the National Baptist Convention of America, brought a dynamic message in the African American tradition.
Some of the women in ministry participants in CCT: Jennifer Kottler, Wendy McFadden, Sister Anna Maria Pineda, and Colleen Burroughs.

Dr. Joseph Crockett represents the American Bible Society.

Father Costopoulos and Father Daniel Habib greet one another after the Orthodox worship service.

Bishop Melvin Talbert (Ret.), United Methodist Church, and Herman Harmelink, International Council of Community Churches Ecumenical Officer, share conversation.
Keynotes and other addresses will soon be published on the web site in both document form and in audio files!

We have just learned that The Tutwiler Hotel will be refunding the full room deposit paid by those who could not attend because of weather. Our thanks to The Tutwiler for working with us under these difficult circumstances. The staff was marvelously hospitable and helpful and the hotel is a beautiful property. Also, we are grateful to Mary Pennino of Hospitality Performance Network Global for her assistance in finding and booking The Tutwiler (go to www.HPNGlobal.com).

CCT will refund a significant portion of the registration fee to those unable to attend as soon as we are able to close the books on this event – likely within a month or less.

Three Task Forces To Be Formed

Three task forces are currently being formed: 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.

For more information or to make a donation to CCT-USA, please contact:

Dr. Richard L “Dick” Hamm, Executive Administrator
P.O. Box 24188, Indianapolis, Indiana 46224-0188
Email: dhamm@ddi.org; Ph: 317-490-1968; Fax: 484-231-7467


Know someone who would like to be on the list to receive CCT’s e-newsletter? Please send their name and e-mail address to Val Ruess, administrative assistant at ValCCT@att.net.