

Churches Uniting in Christ takes a major step forward

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (1/28/11) — Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC), launched by 10 communions in 2002 to foster visible unity and combat racism, took a major step toward those goals during a recent three-day meeting in Fort Lauderdale.



Representatives of nine CUIC member communions participated in the January 18-20 plenary. The heads of several communions were present, including Presiding Bishop John Bryant of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; Rev. Sharon E. Watkins of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ); Senior Bishop Thomas L. Hoyt, Jr. of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church; Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori of the Episcopal Church; Rev. Gradye Parsons of the Presbyterian Church (USA); Rev. Geoffrey Black of the United Church of Christ; Bishop Sharon Z. Rader Ecumenical Officer for the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church; and, Bishop Mark Hanson, of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (as a CUIC “Partner in Mission and Dialogue”).

African Methodist Episcopal Bishop John F. White, chair of CUIC’s Steering Committee, welcomed the gathering of around 40 church leaders. The first day concluded with an ecumenical worship service at Hollywood Hills United Methodist Church in Hollywood Hills, Fla. Representatives from all 10 CUIC member communions shared in leading the service, which focused on the healing and rebuilding in Haiti. An offering of \$1,358 was collected to support Church World Service and its ongoing work there.

On the second day of the plenary, participants returned to Hollywood Hills UMC for panel discussions on the intersection of race and church in three contexts: international policy, civil discourse, and CUIC’s efforts to move toward full recognition and full reconciliation of ministries, which would allow clergy from CUIC member communions to serve in each other’s churches.

The first panel, moderated by Rev. Mark Harris of the Episcopal Church, examined the impact of racism on U.S. foreign policies toward Haiti throughout its 200-year history. The panel also explored CUIC member communions’ involvement in establishing churches, building schools and hospitals. Panelists advocated for equal partnerships that give Haitians a voice and a stake in development projects as the country rebuilds.

The second panel, moderated by Dr. Cynthia Holder Rich of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and Dr. Jacqueline Dupont-Walker of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, looked at the Tea Party movement’s impact on civil discourse in the United States. Rich presented research on the Tea Party’s use of language and imagery with religious and racial overtones. Discussion centered on the need for churches to speak out in ways that model civility and truth telling in social discourse.

The third panel, moderated by Bishop Thomas L. Hoyt, Jr. of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, revisited the CUIC goal of mutual recognition and reconciliation of ministries. When CUIC was inaugurated in 2002, its member communions hoped to have

a plan by 2007 for interchangeability among ordained clergy. Discussions were put on hold as CUIC realized the need to address issues of race and racism inherent in how member communions order ministry. Hoyt suggested that the group take a different approach to these discussions by using the various ministry traditions found in the Bible — priestly, prophetic, teaching, sacramental, and others — as a starting point to define their own understanding of ministry and to examine the commonalities and differences with others' understandings.

The final day of the plenary included consideration of recommended actions CUIC member communions might take to address racism in the three contexts used for the prior day's panel discussions. The plenary concluded with a service of recommitment to CUIC's initial goals and marks of visible unity. United Methodist Bishop Sharon Rader led in the closing worship service.

The group also elected officers to lead its Coordinating Council for the next two years: Bishop Ronald Cunningham of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church was elected president; Rev. Robina Winbush of the Presbyterian Church (USA), vice-president; Rev. Jean Hawxhurst of the United Methodist Church, secretary; and James Tse, of the Presbyterian Church (USA), treasurer pro-tem.

One member communion, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, did not send participants to the plenary in Fort Lauderdale. The historically Black denomination suspended its participation a few years ago over its concerns that CUIC was not doing enough to combat racism. Since that time, CUIC committed to taking these concerns seriously and reconciling with the AME Zion Church.

Those efforts to reconcile led CUIC to invite Rev. Staccato Powell, pastor of Grace Church, an AME Zion congregation in Raleigh, N.C., to deliver the sermon during the opening worship service on January 18. Preaching on Acts 2:42-47, Powell challenged the group to focus on transformation, not just information. "It's not about what [God] is going to do, but what he's already done," Powell said.

Rev. Robert Welsh, ecumenical officer for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), gave leadership throughout the event as chairperson of the Planning Committee for the January 18-20 plenary. "Disciples have been part of CUIC and its predecessor, the Consultation on Church Union, since the very beginning. I am delighted with our recommitment to this important relationship, and to the focus on seeking racial justice as an expression of the goal of visible unity," said Welsh.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was represented at the plenary by Rev. Sharon E. Watkins, general minister and president; Rev. Timothy James, associate general minister and administrative secretary for the National Convocation; Rev. Rebecca Hale, interim regional minister for the Christian Church in Florida; Katie Sexton, chair of the Disciples' Young Adult Commission.; and Robert Welsh.

CUIC member communions are the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, the Episcopal Church, the International Council of Community Churches, the Moravian Church Northern Province, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Methodist Church, and the United Church of Christ. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America participates as a partner in mission and dialogue.

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