

The Next Step for Churches Uniting

Ecumenical rebirth

By Michael Kinnamon

The Consultation on Church Union (COCU), pronounced dead more than once over the past forty years, is indeed about to die. On January 20, 2002, COCU's member communions will stop being a "consultation" and enter into a new, far more substantive relationship called Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC). The Presbyterian Church (USA) has already voted to become part of this new relationship, and decision-making bodies of six other communions will act on the CUIC proposal by the end of July. It is a significant moment in the ecumenical history of this nation.

Churches Uniting in Christ is a revision of a plan of "covenant communion" sent to the nine churches for official action by COCU's Seventeenth Plenary in 1988. That proposal included "the mutual recognition and reconciliation of ordained ministry" on the basis of the historic pattern of bishop, presbyter, and deacon; but it suggested that these ministries, whatever they are called, can already be seen in the various churches. The responsibility of each church, therefore, was "to determine how its present categories of ordained ministry relate to the historic categories."

The proposal insisted, for example, that the churches need a "personalized ministry of episkopos" (oversight) at the middle judicatory level." In the shared life of covenant communion, these persons would be called bishops; but they would not necessarily use that title, or acquire new authority, within their own communions.

Seven of the churches approved the plan and declared their readiness to enter covenant communion. The Presbyterian Church (USA) gave approval in its General Assembly, but that church's presbyteries subsequently rejected constitutional changes concerning the ministry of oversight. The Episcopal Church expressed deep reservations about the proposal, especially the understanding of ministry, and declared that, while wishing to remain in COCU, it was not ready to enter covenant communion.

Against this backdrop, representatives of the churches met in January 1999 for COCU's first plenary in a decade. The CUIC revision, essentially hammered out at that assembly, has eight elements that the member churches are now asked to affirm:

Mutual recognition of each other as authentic expressions of the one church of Jesus Christ. Six characteristics of the church — including such things as faith in the triune God, commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, faithfulness to Scripture, and celebration of baptism and the Lord's Supper— have been spelled out in previous COCU documents.

Mutual recognition of members in one baptism. This has already been done (twenty-five years ago!) through official declaration in each of the churches.

Mutual recognition that each affirms the apostolic faith of Scripture and Tradition which is expressed in the Apostles' and Nicene creeds. The content of this faith is set forth, at least in outline, in the Consultation's basic theological text, The COCU Consensus, which has been formally approved by all except the Episcopal Church. My own denomination, the Disciples of Christ, will be quick to point out that the creeds are not understood in The COCU Consensus as "tests of fellowship" but as "unique, ecumenical witnesses of Tradition to the revelation of God recorded in Scripture."

Provision for celebration of the eucharist together with intentional regularity. CUIC is not a council but a fellowship centered on shared sacramental life.

Engagement together in Christ's mission on a regular and intentional basis, especially a shared mission to combat racism. Are the churches, particularly at the local level, willing to make common mission their first thought rather than an afterthought? That is a key question for the new relationship. (I will say more about the focus on racism in a moment.)

Intentional commitment to promote unity with wholeness and to oppose all marginalization and exclusion in church and society based on such things as race, age, gender, forms of disability, sexual orientation and class. The reference to sexual orientation has, of course, provoked opposition. It is, therefore, necessary to point out 1) that the churches are free to maintain their own standards for ministerial selection and 2) that the CUIC proposal does not necessarily condone homosexual behavior (several of the churches officially regard it as sinful). Rather, it calls on the churches to oppose discrimination against gay and lesbian neighbors. Many COCU supporters no doubt wish that the issue had simply been avoided. But surely the church must stand against "marginalization and exclusion" — and sexual orientation is the unavoidable test case of our era.

Appropriate structures of accountability and appropriate means for consultation and decision making. The 1988 proposal had called for the formation of "covenanting councils" to oversee the new relationship nationally, regionally, and locally. Several of the churches felt, however, that this added a layer of bureaucracy right at a time when church bureaucracy as a whole is suspect. The CUIC plan recognizes the need for mutual accountability, but says that structures developed for this purpose should be "flexible and adapted to local circumstances." The COCU Executive Committee is working on possible models.

An ongoing process of theological dialogue aimed, among other things, at providing a foundation for the reconciliation of ministries by 2007. Ministry is simply bracketed in the current proposal and made the focus of intensive discussion once the new relationship is established. The COCU Executive Committee has made clear, however, that his dialogue will not start from scratch since all previous COCU documents have affirmed a three-fold ministry with "bishops who stand in continuity with the historic ministry of bishops as that ministry has been maintained through the ages." Doesn't this just postpone inevitable

stalemate? Perhaps. It may be, however, that recent ecumenical developments (e.g., the Episcopal-Lutheran Concordat) will provide new insights. It may be that new partners at the table (and several churches have expressed interest in joining this round of conversation) will offer new models. It may be that truly intensive discussions will lead beyond the former impasse.

In my judgment, the current shape of Churches Uniting in Christ rests on four crucial assumptions or affirmations.

1. The delegates to the last COCU plenary might well have echoed this famous statement from the early years of the WCC: “We may not pretend that the existing unity among Christians is greater than it in fact is; but we should act upon it so far as it is already a reality.” These nine churches are not yet at the point where they can live in “full communion” with one another, but they are surely beyond the stage of occasional cooperation. All theological issues need not be resolved before the churches give formal expression to the life that, in some places, they are already beginning to share. Indeed, it may be that shared life will provide the context for deeper theological understanding.
2. From its beginning, COCU has envisioned a church that is “truly catholic, truly evangelical, and truly reformed” — a vision that demands (at least) the participation of all nine communions. It would be easy to say, “If the Episcopalians or the Presbyterians don’t want to join, let them stay behind.” That, however, would betray the vision and lessen the possibility of renewal through the sharing of gifts. All are needed, even if that means returning (yet again!) to the question of ministry.
3. Since the 1960s, COCU’s special significance and promise has been that it includes three predominantly African-American denominations and, thus, challenges the color barrier that has so divided U.S. Christianity. CUIC goes beyond previous COCU proposals to make “combating white skin privilege” the mission core of this new relationship. “There can be no authentic Christian community in CUIC,” said the 1999 plenary, “if, by their unquestioning acceptance of unjust gains granted by an unjust system, white members of the community continue their tacit complicity in this unjust social order that denies the fullness of life to black members of the community.” Is this simply rhetoric? CUIC is a real chance to find out.
4. CUIC is not so much a new structure as an officially-sanctioned invitation to live with one another differently. It is a framework for growth in relationships centered around sharing in sacraments and service. The CUIC proposal will drive certain Myers Briggs types crazy because it depends so heavily on local initiative!

If congregations take this invitation seriously (and that “if” is the great danger), then their baptisms, installations and ordinations will include the participation of neighboring CUIC churches; local mission will be done together whenever possible; their prayers will regularly lift up the concerns of these sisters and brothers in Christ; education programs will draw on each other’s resources and teach about the other churches; the Lord’s Supper will be celebrated together on various special occasions.... The real test, however, will be whether attitudes begin to change. From now on, when the local CME congregation struggles against discriminatory housing or police harassment of African-American youth, will the others see it as their struggle?

Imagination is the key. We have lived so long with denominations acting like competing corporations that it will take time and effort even to imagine alternatives.

Ecumenical prediction is always risky, but there is good reason to be hopeful that all nine communions will vote to enter Churches Uniting in Christ. The PC (USA) presbyteries have voted in favor by a 2-1 margin. The Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations of the Episcopal Church has recommended “with enthusiasm” that the General Convention approve the proposal when it meets in July; and that church’s Standing Commission on Social Justice has endorsed CUIC as the highest ecumenical priority because of the strong position on racism. The other churches seem firmly committed. Meanwhile, as hinted at above, leaders of at least four other denominations have expressed interest in becoming “partners in dialogue and mission” — if not full participants in CUIC.

And I expect that interest and excitement will grow as Christians recognize that CUIC is, in potential, an anticipation of the future church being born in our midst. Not an undenominational church, but a church that values the particularity of our heritages without absolutizing them; a church that sees identity in the sacramental and missional sharing of local congregations as well as through national, denominational structures for mission; a church that regards differences as intrinsically enriching rather than threatening; a church that vigorously challenges discrimination without undercutting the distinctive gifts of the African-American community. COCU is dying; a new thing is being born.

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