

Ecumenical NEWS

Bi-WEEKLY DIGEST

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1. United Methodists, Lutherans Look Toward Cooperation

By **Linda Bloom***

April 29, 2008 | FORT WORTH, Texas (UMNS)

Bishop Melvin Talbert felt “a song in my heart” when the United Methodist General Conference approved a full communion agreement with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

For Bishop William Oden, April 28 -- the day the vote was taken -- was a “banner day” for The United Methodist Church.



United Methodist Bishop Melvin Talbert (left) and the Rev. Donald McCoid, head of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations section, answer questions during a press conference at the 2008 United Methodist General Conference. A UMNS photo by Maile Bradfield.

Both bishops were instrumental in shepherding the denomination to the vote. Oden is the ecumenical officer of the United Methodist Council of Bishops and Talbert was co-chairman of the most recent United Methodist-ELCA dialogue team with ELCA Bishop Allan Bjornberg of Denver. The dialogue was facilitated by the United Methodist Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns.

As part of the General Conference's traditional ecumenical day, observed on April 29, ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson preached for morning worship and a number of ecumenical guests from other denominations, faith groups and organizations were introduced.

Clare Chapman, currently the chief operating officer of the National Council of Churches, was presented with the Council of Bishops' ecumenical award for 2008 “in recognition of her exceptional leadership” with both the council and the Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns.

A recognition, not a merger

Participants at a press conference about the full communion agreement pointed out that the new relationship is not a merger of the two denominations, but recognition of each other's ministry and mission. It recognizes that each has “the one, holy, catholic and apostolic faith” expressed in the Scriptures and confessed in historic creeds and the core teachings of each denomination.

Under full communion, the two churches also recognize the authenticity of each other's baptism and eucharist and the full interchangeability of all ordained ministers.

Hanson hopes the arrangement will foster an “ecumenical imagination,” with a focus on how to do things together rather than separately. “I don’t think we’ve begun to imagine what the Holy Spirit might do (through) this deepened relationship,” he said. Talbert noted that United Methodists don’t often use the words “full communion” because “our table has always been open” to those who profess a belief in Christ.

“It’s not merger,” he added about the agreement. “It means we are open to receiving and accepting and acknowledging each other’s ministries.”

‘This was a reunion for me’

The Rev. Donald McCoid is an ELCA executive for Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations, but his grandfather was a Methodist lay preacher. “This was a reunion for me,” he said about the agreement.

Both Talbert and McCoid expressed excitement about future cooperative parish relationships for the two denominations, especially in sparsely-populated areas. McCoid added that the benefit would not just be providing enough clergy coverage for congregations but “the possibility of doing things creatively.”

Bishop Gregory Palmer, president of the Council of Bishops, noted many United Methodists and Lutherans have working relationships at the local level. “We’ll be giving, in some sense, a formal expression to what is happening on the ground already,” he said.

Relationships with other denominations also will be affected. The ELCA has a full communion agreement with the Episcopal Church, while the United Methodists have just entered an interim agreement with that denomination.

Bishop Frank Brookhart, who serves as co-chairman of the United Methodist-Episcopal dialogue with Oden, compared the ELCA-Episcopal agreement to a relationship between close friends. “In some ways, it is just getting started,” he said.

The decision by United Methodists to take the path to full communion was “a miracle,” in Brookhart’s opinion. “It’s real easy for churches to separate. It’s real hard to get back together,” he explained. “This doesn’t happen without the risen Christ among us.”

The ELCA will vote on the full communion agreement with United Methodists at its assembly in August 2009.

*Bloom is a United Methodist News Service writer based in New York.

2. Moscow Patriarchate Believes in Strategic Alliance with Catholics

Sofia, 21 April 2008, Interfax - The Orthodox and Catholic Churches could form a strategic alliance for the protection of Christian values, Russian Orthodox Church Representative to European International Organizations Bishop Hilarion of Vienna and Austria said in an interview with the Bulgarian magazine *Christianity and Culture*.

"We must realize that Orthodox and Catholic believers are no longer rivals. We are allies. The rivalry must be gone once and for all. If we understand that, proselytism will stop," he said.

"The romantic ecumenism' personified by the World Council of Churches and the Conference of European Churches is not viable, the bishop said. In his opinion, it would be much better to form bilateral strategic alliances or partnerships, for instance, between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches.

"I don't mean union, administrative merger or compromise in theological teaching, I mean strategical partnership," the Moscow Patriarchate's representative said.

According to Bishop Hilarion, joint Orthodox-Catholic "front" is required both to oppose to the challenges of secularism and to protect traditional Christianity and dialogue with other world religions.

He believes that many Protestants unlike the Orthodox and the Catholic have created "a light version of Christianity, without apostolic succession, without sacraments, without strict dogmatic teaching and what is also important they don't require sticking to Christian moral norms."

When Christian community starts "revising theological or moral teaching of Christianity in order to make it more "modern" or "politically correct", it's a direct way to spiritual death," Bishop Hilarion said.

3. Nation's Oldest Ecumenical Council of Churches Installs New Head

By Katherine T. Phan
Christian Post Reporter

NEW YORK – The Rev. A.R. Bernard, founding senior pastor of Christian Cultural Center, was officiated as the new president of the Council of Churches of the City of New York Thursday night, during an installation service where speakers called for the revival of the Church.

Bernard takes the reigns of CCCNY, the nation's oldest ecumenical council of churches, from the Rev. Dr. Calvin O. Butts III who served as president for the past 10 years. Butts is pastor of the historic Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem.

Speaking from the stage of his Brooklyn megachurch, Bernard said the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, who by aligning his opinions with that of the black church, has sparked a dialogue on what the church truly is.

"It's an opportunity for us to clearly define who we are," he told a responsive and enthusiastic crowd. We are not the white church, black church, or Asian church but "The Church," said Bernard.

His words echoed a rousing sermon given earlier in the three-hour service by the Rev. Elder Bernice A. King, daughter of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who received a standing ovation before and afterwards.

She said it was no coincidence that it was her first time delivering a sermon since she visited the site of her father's assassination 40 years ago.

Reading from Scripture, King said it took 40 years for the situation to overturn for the beggar at the Beautiful Gate in Acts 3. It also took that long for the Israelites to enter Canaan Land from the time of Moses to Joshua.

King pointed out that it has been 40 years since God spoke through "prophet King" and challenged "the church" to posture themselves so that God can bring change to the status quo.

To "bring Christ into culture" is what this installation is about, she said.

Joining Bernard on the executive seats were vice presidents of the Council G. Morris Gurley, attorney/banker; Bishop Norman N. Quick of the Church of God in Christ; and the Rev. Arabella Meadows-Rogers, executive presbyter of the Presbytery of New York City.

The Rev. N. J. L'Heureux, Jr., executive director of the Queens Federation of Churches, was re-elected as secretary. The Rev. Dr. Adolfo Carrion III, superintendent emeritus of the Spanish Eastern District of the Assemblies of God, was elected treasurer.

Each of newly installed officers received a certificate of installation, Bible, constitution of CCCNY, and a map of New York City. Bernard was additionally bestowed the presidential stool, which Executive Director Emeritus Dr. John Hiemstra described as representing "the yoke of Christ" as he placed it over Bernard.

Several elected officials, including two legislators and two Borough presidents, attended Thursday's service and gave congratulatory remarks to Bernard.

Bernard, who founded CCC in 1978, also founded Brooklyn Preparatory School (BPS) in New York City in 1993. He also sits on the current New York City Economic Development Corporation Board.

He is recognized by several New York publications and magazines for his work in African American and Christian communities in New York. Bernard is the host of two weekly television broadcasts, "Faith in Practice with A.R. Bernard" and "The A.R. Bernard Show," and nationally syndicated radio broadcasts.

4. Irish Church Leaders Barred from Jerusalem's Western Wall

By Steve Weizman
Associated Press Writer

JERUSALEM (AP) - Leaders of Ireland's main Christian churches were barred from praying at Jerusalem's Western Wall Thursday because they refused to remove the crosses

they were wearing.

Roman Catholic Cardinal Sean Brady, Church of Ireland Archbishop Alan Harper and Presbyterian and Methodist Moderators John Finlay and Roy Cooper arrived at the wall, Judaism's holiest prayer site, without giving prior notice to Israeli authorities, Brady told the Irish broadcast network RTE.

"We encountered some difficulty in gaining access. There was a difficulty about us wearing our crosses," he said. "We were under constraints of time ... and we decided to move on."

Shmuel Rabinowitz, the rabbi of the Western Wall, said that while the site is open to all faiths, worshippers are expected not to offend the sensitivities of Jews by displaying symbols of other religions.

"They were asked to remove the crosses, but they refused," he told The Associated Press. "I think it is important that they visit the Western Wall, but they should have covered up the crosses to respect the place, just like Jews wouldn't wear their ritual prayer shawls when entering a Christian holy place."

The prelates are on a four-day visit to Israel and the West Bank to promote peace and show solidarity with Christians in the Holy Land, a statement from Ireland's Catholic Communications Office said.

The Western Wall, in Jerusalem's walled Old City, is a remnant of the Second Temple compound built by King Herod in the 6th century B.C. and destroyed by Roman conquerors in A.D. 70.

Israelis on Thursday were observing an annual day of remembrance and mourning for the 6 million Jews killed in the Nazi Holocaust of World War II.

On a historic visit in 2000, Pope John Paul II prayed at the Western Wall, and pictures clearly show the pontiff wearing a large gold cross while praying there. He was accompanied by Michael Melchior, an orthodox rabbi who was an Israeli Cabinet minister at the time.

However, 13 visiting Austrian bishops who tried to pray at the wall last December while wearing crosses were made to stand behind a fence several yards from the ancient site.

Cardinal Brady told RTE he and his colleagues later met Israeli Cabinet minister Isaac Herzog, whose grandfather was Ireland's first chief rabbi.

"Minister Herzog gave us an apology, which we accept," Brady said. "We think the matter should rest there."

Associated Press writers Shawn Pogatchnik in Dublin and Ian Deitch in Jerusalem

contributed to this report.

5. Pray for Peace and National Unity, says Bolivian Lutheran Leader

ENI-08-0358

La Paz/Geneva, 5 May (ENI)--The head of Bolivia's Lutheran church has appealed for peaceful demonstrations to pray for the South American nation's peace and unity, as residents of its richest region of Santa Cruz voted overwhelmingly for autonomy from the central government.

"As a prophetic church, we also reject all separatist agendas; we therefore call for dialogue and peaceful negotiations to bring about a speedy resolution to this dispute," said the Rev. Luis Cristóbal Alejo Fernández, president of the Bolivian Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Local exit polls showed that 85 percent of voters in prosperous Santa Cruz supported autonomy in the 4 May vote. This was widely interpreted as a rejection of reforms introduced by President Evo Morales, the first indigenous person to lead his country.

Morales has pledged to give a greater voice to Bolivia's indigenous population, who are estimated to make up more than half of the country's 9 million people.

Three other regions are planning similar referendums on autonomy in the coming weeks. Opponents of the referendums say they will split the country apart.

The Lutheran church in Bolivia has about 22 000 members, the majority of whom are part of Bolivia's indigenous population. More than 90 percent of the country's 9.2 million people are Roman Catholics.

Alejo, in an appeal he had issued before the Santa Cruz vote, said that institutions, churches and social groups should speak out with one voice for Bolivian unity. He called on the Bolivian people "not to allow violence and discrimination to take us away from the project of life given us by our Lord Jesus Christ".

In an open letter to the church, the general secretary of the Geneva-based Lutheran World Federation, the Rev. Ishmael Noko, said he hoped that through dialogue, a solution would be found that transcends economic, political and ethnic interests and serves the welfare of all the people of Bolivia.

"In the midst of political confrontation such as that currently being experienced in Bolivia, the true path of that ministry can be more difficult to pursue, especially when political actors seek to manipulate diversity for short-term political purposes," said Noko, whose statement was reported by the Lutheran World Information service.

On 30 April, representatives of Lutheran, Methodist and Reformed churches, as well

as Pentecostal churches and ecumenical organizations in Bolivia, issued a joint statement about the dispute in Bolivia.

"This situation could be exacerbated if we let ourselves be won over by disinformation, an absence of dialogue and the interests of individuals and groups that are damaging the harmony and peace of our country," the church leaders stated.

6. Anglican Head, Pope Discuss Christian-Muslim Relations

By Nathan Black
Christian Post Reporter

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams, met privately with Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican where the two religious leaders discussed Christian-Muslim relations.

The 20-minute meeting on Monday came months after Williams, the spiritual leader of the 77-million member Anglican Communion, drew fire for suggesting that it was "unavoidable" to adopt some aspects of Sharia law in the British legal system.

An Anglican spokesman said the visit with the pope, who also discussed in the meeting interfaith dialogue and his impression of his visit to the United States last month, was "warm and friendly."

Earlier this year, Williams had sparked a storm of criticism when he suggested in a speech that it was "unavoidable" that some aspects of Sharia law would be adopted in the British legal system. His comments were made at a time when the Muslim population has reached 1.8 million in Britain and continues to grow.

Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, the Vatican's top official for relations with Islam, had criticized the Anglican head as mistaken and "naive" for his Sharia remarks.

While many religious leaders did not agree with Williams' comments, some – including the Rev. Joel Edwards of the Evangelical Alliance – came to his defense calling Christians and wider public to join the debate on how faith should operate in the political and legal sphere.

Edwards urged a "ceasefire" in the row between people of faith and those with no faith over the place of religious belief under the rule of law.

Monday's meeting was the first with the pope since the Sharia law storm.

During the visit, it was announced that Cardinal Ivan Dias, the Indian prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, will participate in July's Lambeth Conference, which brings Anglican bishops together in London once every 10 years.

Cardinal Walter Kasper, head of the pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, may also attend the conference.

Williams is in Rome to convene the 7th Building Bridges Seminar, an annual series which brings together a range of internationally recognized Christian and Muslim scholars for an intensive study of relevant Biblical and Koranic texts.

The seminar, which is organized in partnership with Georgetown University, is scheduled for May 6-8. The theme for this year's seminar is "Communicating the Word: Revelation, Translation and Interpretation in Christianity and Islam."