

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Christian Churches Together in the USA has completed its sixth annual meeting (February 14-17, 2012) in Memphis, Tennessee. Some 85 church and organizational leaders (representing 36 African American, Catholic, Historic Protestant, Evangelical/Pentecostal and Orthodox churches and 6 Christian organizations: American Bible Society, Bread for the World, Evangelicals for Social Action, Habitat For Humanity, Sojourners and World Vision) met to discern together how CCT should respond to racism and poverty now. This theme began in last year's annual meeting (which was held in Birmingham) and it was decided to continue the theme this year drawing on the historical resources of Memphis.

The participants visited the National Civil Rights Museum/Lorraine Motel (site of Dr. King's martyrdom), Slave Haven Museum (an Underground Railroad safe house), and the historic Mason Temple where Dr. King delivered his "Mountain Top" speech. We heard an inspiring sermon from Bishop Claire Burkat (ELCA) to begin our time together. Dr. Bernard LaFayette (co-founder of SNCC and Freedom Rider), presented the non-violent underpinnings of Dr. King's movement. Dr. Albert Raboteau (Princeton) provided insight into the Biblical foundations of Dr. King's "Letter From Birmingham Jail". Dr. Virgil Wood (Virginia organizer for the Washington March), challenged the church to go beyond equality to seek equity. David Beckmann (Bread for the World) brought good news regarding the success of the Circle of Protection designed to protect the "safety net" for the poorest Americans. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson (PCUSA) challenged us to understand the bigoted underpinnings of much of the current political rhetoric. Dr. Frank Thomas (Mississippi Blvd. Christian Church, Disciples of Christ), brought a challenge to true sacrifice in the face of the current economic inequities. We together, men and women of many colors and ethnicities, worshiped, experienced, related and sought to better understand and more effectively organize to combat racism and poverty in America.

During the week, there were reports heard from those who had participated in the Sankofa Journey, sponsored by the Evangelical Covenant Church, which pairs riders of different races and ethnicities on a three day bus trip from Chicago to Birmingham, Montgomery, Jackson, Memphis and back to Chicago. The time on the bus between historical sites of the civil rights movement is spent in dialogue and viewing video resources. As one participant, Wendy McFadden of the Church of the Brethren, reported, "It was a journey to the past that begins to free us to move forward together. And that is what Sankofa means."

Dr. Jeff Farmer (Open Bible Churches) and Steve Hass (World Vision) informed us about the anti-malaria work that is being done by Evangelical Pentecostal churches as well as by Historic Protestants and others. There were also reports from leaders of the Global Christian Forum: Nicta LuBaale of Kenya, Larry Miller of France, and Wes Granberg-Michaelson of the U.S. There was a report on the situation in Syria from Archbishop Karim (Syrian Orthodox) and a report on the situation in Egypt from Dr. Sam Wanis and Father John Paul Abdelsayed of the Coptic Orthodox Church on behalf of Bishop Serapion who was in Egypt. Dick Hamm reported on the Christian Unity Summit that took place in January in which participants in four Christian unity organizations attended: Christian Churches Together in the USA, Churches Uniting in Christ, the National Association of Evangelicals, and the National Council of Churches.

CCT meetings are marked by five worship services, each in a form typical of one of the five "families" of churches. Also, in small groups of five, participants share their personal spiritual journey and are each prayed for in turn. These practices, along with casual conversations and more structured encounters, help participants to better understand one another's traditions and to build trust with one another – an essential element in an organization that represents the broadest regular gathering of national church leaders in the country.

Seven seminarians and young church leaders participated in all or part of the four day meeting representing four different traditions.

Bishop Denis Madden (Baltimore) was elected president of the Catholic family. Bishop Sharon Zimmerman Rader (United Methodist Church) was elected president of the Historic Protestant family, and Gary Walter (Evangelical

Covenant Church) was elected president of the Evangelical/Pentecostal family. Dr. Stephen Thurston (National Baptist Convention of America, Inc.) continues as president of the African American family and Father Leonid Kishkovsky (Orthodox Church in America) continues as president of the Orthodox family and as moderator of CCT. The five “families” are simply to insure that each perspective is heard from adequately in dialogue. CCT is governed by consensus decision making.

Rev. Russell Meyer, Executive Director of the Florida Council of Churches, led the meeting in a discernment process that was rooted in the question, “*How might the Holy Spirit use the witness of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and his Letter from the Birmingham Jail to help the church live the Gospel more fully and proclaim it more faithfully?*” The result was the statement below, which is issued by consensus of the participants.

**STATEMENT FROM THE ANNUAL MEETING OF
CHRISTIAN CHURCHES TOGETHER IN THE USA**

February 17, 2012

One in Christ for the Sake of All

Representatives of the churches and organizations of Christian Churches Together in the United States assembled in Memphis, February 14-17, 2012, to respond to one question:

How might the Holy Spirit use the witness of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and his Letter from the Birmingham Jail to help the church live the Gospel more fully and proclaim it more faithfully?

In our time together, our hearts and our minds have been engaged by Jesus’ announcement that:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’

Companions of Dr. King have shared with us their first-hand experience in the Civil Rights movement and of their continuing work. We reconnected with the story of the students on the Freedom Ride. We journeyed to Slave Haven Museum and confronted the national memory of the slave trade, the millions Africans who lost their lives or their freedom in the forced journey from Africa to the New World. We visited the Lorraine Motel and the National Civil Rights Museum, coming face to face again with the things that necessitated the Civil Rights movement and the Poor People’s Campaign. We recognized our call to the “fierce urgency of now” that Dr. King named.

We declare unequivocally that racism, extreme wealth disparity, injustice and poverty, and violence are inextricably linked together. Dr. King said that “the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered” when “profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people.” We call upon the church to say and act unambiguously for people. An anti-racist church advocates for equity, pursues justice and embodies non-violence. We know this. We have experienced the reality of God’s in-breaking kingdom in our relationships with each other. Gathered by the Spirit, as children of Our Father, in the name of Christ Jesus, we have known both truth and trust in the presence of each other. From the perspective of an outsider looking in on our gathering, we may seem like unlikely partners - Christians of African, European, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific, Native American, Middle Eastern descent meeting in friendship;

Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Catholics, Orthodox, Historic African American, and Historic Protestants exchanging ideas and living in mutual hope. We belong together. We have heard God's "Yes" to our relationships and we say "Amen to the glory of God."

Our gathering as Christian Churches Together is a joyful fellowship for which we give thanks and pray is pleasing to God, for in gathering together we experience Christ tearing down the walls that otherwise divide us.

With Dr. King, we affirm: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

From our unity in Christ, we say to everyone in the United States that there is room for people from any land or language in this country. The color of one's skin is a gift from God; to welcome the other is an act of our common humanity. The relationships that one has and the possibilities that one is extended are how we each realize what God promises for all. There are many ways in which our society limits the kinds of relationships people have and the possibilities for advancement people are given. We who met together in Memphis call upon the church to resist these socially imposed limits by engaging in new relationships with those who seem different and creating possibilities for people in poverty to acquire equity and experience economic security.

Our common humanity and our witness to the Christ of all peoples summons our churches to act for the wellbeing of all, to advocate for equity for the poor, to pursue justice, and to practice the love and nonviolence that Jesus teaches. Therefore we commend to our churches and organizations that they:

1. Examine their participation in the structures and personal choices that ignore the reality of poverty and perpetuate the effects of racism.
2. Embrace one or more of the initiatives from the *CCT Statement on Poverty* as a church wide priority which seek the elimination of poverty in this nation.
3. Partner with another church who is representative of being an "unlikely partner" in our anti-poverty work, so that our common witness may be to the God who reconciles us in Christ.
4. Proclaim publicly, in their own ways and in alliances of joint action, that the new forms of racist and unChristian behavior toward the immigrant, the impoverished and the non-Christian are abhorrent to God and a denial of the grace which God in Christ Jesus offers to everyone.
5. Seek ways to collaborate in their anti-racism and cross-cultural ministries and to share their resources and experiences in this work with each other and, as appropriate, with multi-religious partners.
6. Be mutually accountable to each other by regular reporting of their actions on these recommendations through a forum identified by Christian Churches Together.
7. Finally, working in collaboration through Christian Churches Together, develop an appropriate public witness and presence in Birmingham on April 16, 2013, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of The Letter from the Birmingham Jail and publicly report what the church is doing to overcome the sin of racism and to ensure economic "justice for all."

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