News



by James Dearie

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The National Council of the Churches of Christ is gearing up for a rally against racism to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., while launching a new effort to combat racism throughout the country.

The idea for the rally and a new church-based initiative to fight racism grew out of a visit between the National Council of Churches, which is composed of 38 communions around the country, and an international delegation from the World Council of Churches a few years ago, Jim Winkler, president and general secretary for the National Council of Churches, told NCR. Members of both groups noted the increasing racially motivated animosity of the U.S.

"They said 'we all know about racism in the United States,' " Winkler said, " 'but this just feels different; it feels worse.' "

After considering possible responses, the council chose to launch what Winkler called "a multi-year, racial justice truth-telling initiative" on the 50th anniversary of King's death.

"But we don’t want to just remember Dr. King and mourn his loss," Winkler added, "rather, we really want to finish the work" that King helped begin.

The council and its partners plan to gather in Washington, D.C., April 3 for a Holy Week service at St. Sophia Greek Orthodox Cathedral (Protestant and Catholic churches sometimes have a different date for Easter than Orthodox, due to differences in the liturgical calendar), followed by an interfaith service focusing on the week's events. The Greek Orthodox Archbishop of America Demetrios will give a homily.

On April 4, 50 years to the day since King was fatally shot on a Memphis hotel balcony, the A.C.T. to End Racism Rally will take place (A.C.T. is an acronym for Awaken, Confront, Transform). The council hopes that its efforts will help in awakening Americans to the reality of racism, confronting it, and transforming "the hearts, minds, and behaviors of people and structures that shape society."

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> — Jim Winkler, National Council of Churches

The day will begin with a silent, prayerful walk near the Martin Luther King Jr. memorial to the National Mall behind a team of drummers, with King himself as the symbolic leader. "If you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice," he said in a sermon just weeks before his death.

After a brief service, the rally will begin at 9 a.m., and go until 3 p.m. Speakers will include bishops and preachers from a variety of churches including mainline Protestant pastors and a Jewish rabbi, actor Danny Glover, and Gospel performers.

Winkler said that the council is anticipating tens of thousands of people to join the rally. Eighteen bishops from member communions, churches that are members of the council, are expected to appear and have been exhorting their congregations to attend. Two of the council's member communions plan to send 5,000 people each from their own congregations. While the Catholic Church is not a member of the council, the Arlington diocese also "has been spreading the word," and anticipates a strong showing from Catholics, Winkler said.

The day after the rally will be a "day of advocacy and action," during which representatives from the council will meet with members of Congress to discuss their concerns about racism in the U.S. Workshops and training sessions will also be held.

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The council said that the rally and the subsequent activity will be just the beginning of a nationwide movement to combat racism through its Truth and Racial Justice Initiative. The week's events "will be followed by an extensive program that will address racism in the areas of church life and practices, criminal, economic and social justice, civil and human rights, environmental justice, immigration, media, and education," the council said on its rally website.

"There's a lot of systemic racism that the white community needs to grapple with," Winkler said, noting that government and business policies to build wealth in the nation after World War II frequently excluded African-Americans. While race is still a very serious issue in the U.S., he said he has been heartened by other efforts to promote racial equality currently underway, including one by the U.S. Catholic bishops to revisit their 1979 pastoral letter on race.

"People of faith need to be the ones in the forefront of this effort," Winkler said. "I've been gratified by the amount of support we've received as we push down this road."

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