

Report of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches

April 12, 2023

Recently, in preparation for a Board of Director's meeting we received a gift of confirmation for why it is so important that the Pennsylvania Council of Churches exists. Upon answering the phone call a caller on the other end asked: "how do you feel about the way the Jews and 'niggers' are dividing this country." When I heard it the first time, I thought that I misheard the caller. So I twice asked him to repeat what he said, the same question was forthcoming.

This call produced sadness, alarm, and anxiety, all at the same time. It was a reminder that our faith journeys and ecumenical commitment are grounded in the real-life challenges facing our nation and congregations. As a people we face communities that are divided, strife torn and filled with contempt for those who are "othered."

The Pennsylvania Council of Churches is organized to create a space for faith communities to organize, strategize, and engage in common ministry. This continues to be a challenging time of transition for the Council and in this context, we are all being challenged to transform the way that we do our work if we are to exist in the future and remain relevant.

Programs

The Council of Churches sponsored a workshop and panel discussion on Christian Nationalism that was held at the Cumberland Avenue United Church of Christ. Our keynote speaker, Robert Jones, author of White Too Long, unpacked the theology behind Christian nationalism as a vessel for white supremacy, xenophobia and anti-LGBTQI+ sentiment. This discussion was well received by pastors and academics. We anticipate doing these types of forums in the coming year around themes of community interest and importance.

We have provided significant accompaniment to the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in its quest to receive reparations. In 1957 Bethel Church had its property taken by eminent domain. The Church was not adequately compensated for the property and was forced to move. Bethel began seeking reparations from the City of Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Penguins Hockey Club which owns development rights in the area where Bethel Church was previously located. The church is negotiating reparative steps with the Penguins that will include economic development and a relocation of the church to the Lower Hill District of Pittsburgh. The pastor of Bethel Rev. Dr. David Snyder and I did a presentation on Bethel's story in a workshop at the World Council of Churches Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany. This is an exciting ecumenical effort that has involved my ecumenical and interfaith partners.

Development

One of the realities of our times is that we are facing shrinking dollars that communions can make available for ecumenical endeavors. Therefore it is incumbent upon the Council of Churches to create opportunities for fund development. I see this happening through fundraising, grant writing- seeking both government grants and foundation support. We are also exploring ways to offer estate planning opportunities.

Program Development

Program Development is critical to the future of the Council of Churches. There has to be intentional work done to develop programs and initiatives that are responsive to community and congregational needs and realities. Looking forward the Council seeks to create a program staff position that would enable the Council to create and sustain programs that further promote its ministry and footprint throughout the Commonwealth.

Social Media and Web Footprint

It will be important for the Council of Churches to develop its Website by making it more contemporary and interactive for the public. We need a redesign of our website and a greater social media footprint. Staffing this initiative will be important for us as we consider our ability to share our story.

Interfaith Relationships

The world of "othering" in which we live requires the Council to begin conversations and create relationships with people of other faiths. The Council will take the lead in developing interfaith prayer experiences and conversations designed to create understanding between Christians and people of other faith communities. We will explore the potential of having board members from interfaith communities, and other settings; this will enhance our opportunities for dialogue and the ability to work across the barriers that often separate our faith communities. This is also how we all can work together to combat the evil and sin that plagues our world.

The Future Has to Be Creative

Our future calls us to be creative and think outside of the box, as we consider the future use of our assets, our mission, and the way in which we order the life of the Council. There is a great deal of potential in the Pennsylvania Council of Churches.

Blacks and Jews are not dividing our country, but hatred is, fueled by antisemitism, racism, misogyny, homophobia, and othering. It is incumbent upon the Council of Churches to strike a blow against hatred and division. We celebrate our partnership with the Penn West Conference of the United Church of Christ. We join you in enabling the people of God embrace ministry in a 21st century world. We are the light that the world has been waiting for, we will allow it shine as we all boldly show the way.

Larry D. Pickens,
Executive Director