



The Pennsylvania Council of Churches is the state-wide ecumenical presence in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Formed by 42 church bodies and agencies representing 20 Anabaptist, Anglican, Orthodox, Pentecostal, and Protestant communions (denominations), the Council works for Christian unity for the sake of the world. [John 17:23]

IMPORTANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Future Planning Work. The Council formed a task group that began work on planning for the Council's future, with an initial focus on redefining the Council's vision and mission, and offering recommendations for what is needed for the Council to live out its mission. The group includes: Rev. Dr. D. Michael Bennethum, Executive Associate of the Bishop and Director for Evangelical Mission for the Northeast PA Synod of the ELCA; Pastor Yvette Davis, Secretary of the Board of Directors of the Council; Most Rev. Craig J. N. de Paulo, Primate of the Old Catholic Confederation, Archbishop of the United States and Bishop of Pennsylvania; Rev. Liz Bidgood Enders, President of the Council and chair of the Commission on Public Witness; Rev. Dr. Warren Eshbach, former district executive for the Southern District of Church of the Brethren and chair of the Commission on Unity and Relationships; Rev. Dr. Frank Frischkorn, Regional Executive Minister of the American Baptist Churches of PA and DE; Ms. Janet Gulick, Interim Executive Director and Director of Finance and Facilities for the Council; Rev. Dr. Thomas Johnston, former synod executive for PC(USA) Synod of the Trinity; and Rev. Sandra Strauss, Director of Advocacy and Ecumenical Outreach for the Council. This group began its work in June 2016 and made its initial recommendation to the Board in October 2016 to adopt a revised mission statement:

The Pennsylvania Council of Churches is a fellowship of bodies responding to the gospel of Jesus Christ by sharing in the ministries of building harmony, justice, and shalom, and seeking to unite the varied expressions of the church through interfaith dialogue, openness to other traditions, and worship.

A tagline/vision is "Being together in mission across Pennsylvania."

The group will continue meeting to review and determine changes needed to the Council's Constitution/Bylaws and structure in order to live into the Council's mission.

Shalom Conference. The Council held a Shalom Conference in September 2016, with the theme "Building a Culture of Peace." The event brought together peacemakers from all across PA to hear keynote speaker Shane Claiborne's talk, "Another World is Possible," and Muslim scholar Saadia Ahmad's talk about the importance of community in interfaith conversations and peacemaking. Four panels opened the door to discussions on environmental justice, militarism, criminal justice reform, and community justice efforts. The hope is to build a statewide peacemaking network that can share information and coordinate work when possible.

Planning efforts for the conference were spearheaded by John-Michael Cotignola-Pickens, an intern from Lancaster Theological Seminary who joined the Council in January 2016 to do this work.

Support for Collaborative Efforts. The Council has received support from several different sources aimed at supporting collaborative efforts involving the Council and other denominations and coalitions.

- The Mennonite Central Committee has given the Council a \$10,000 grant to support advocacy in areas that are particularly important to Anabaptist traditions: criminal justice reform, immigration, gun violence, and education. The grant runs through March 2017, and is expected to be renewed. Initial focus has been on building a Healing Communities network in PA, and on calling for closure of the Berks County Family Detention Center that is holding refugee women and children far in excess of the time they should be held.
- A grant of \$10,000 from the William Penn Foundation (through the Coalition for Fair Education Funding) is supporting the Council's efforts to reform school funding in PA. The funds will be used to do basic education on equity and adequacy of public school funding in PA, and sessions will be scheduled in 2017 aimed at helping the faith community understand the "school to prison pipeline"—how PA's funding system has shortchanged many schools so that they cannot adequately prepare students to function fully in our society after graduation (if they graduate at all).
- The National Religious Campaign Against Torture gave a grant of \$2,500 to support the Council's criminal justice work, good for the first six months of 2017. It will be used to support the work started through a visioning effort involving a range of organizations involved in criminal justice reform—determining how the groups can work together to forward a reform agenda for PA. Initial efforts were supported by the United Methodist General Board of Church and Society by providing a person to facilitate two visioning sessions in April and October of 2016.

The funding has supported the hiring of a part-time Advocacy Programs Coordinator, and the Council hired Cotignola-Pickens following completion of his internship. The Council is seeking additional funding via foundations and others in the hope of expanding the position to full-time.

Other Activities

- The Board of Directors adopted two resolutions—one on climate change, and one on school funding.
- The Council issued its first of what is planned to be a series of public statements—**A Statement and Lament on Racism and Violence**.
- The Council prepared and distributed an issue of its newsletter, **Ecumenical News**.
- The Service Department of the United Church Center has purchased new equipment that will make its operations more efficient.
- Both of the Council's websites, www.pachurches.org and www.pachurchesadvocacy.org, were moved to a Word Press platform and reorganized to be easier to use. The main website, www.pachurches.org, is now secure and nearly ready for accepting online contributions to support the Council's work.

COUNCIL MINISTRIES

Commission on Public Witness & Public Witness Ministry. The Council's advocacy efforts in 2016 focused on the following areas:

- Advocacy for a Pennsylvania budget with sufficient revenues that addresses the concerns of people of faith.
- Human needs/poverty-related work.
- Efforts to raise the minimum wage, primarily in coordination with the Raise the Wage PA Coalition.
- Public education funding, primarily in coordination with the Campaign for Fair Education Funding.
- Criminal justice reform, including an op-ed published concerning housing of persons in solitary confinement at the Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary.
- Immigration, particularly around calling for the closure of the Berks County Family Detention Center that is holding refugee women and children for long periods of time.
- Environment, primarily climate change and protecting water resources, in coordination with several organizations.

The Commission set the direction for the Council's advocacy efforts during the 2017-18 legislative session to focus on addressing "upstream" issues (such as many of the issues named above) in order to improve the lives of people on the margins, and addressing the role of money in our political system. Significant attention will be given to racism, xenophobia, misogyny, and homophobia—attitudes that create many of the problems that the Council is working to address.

Commission on Unity & Relationships. The Chair of the Commission and Council staff met with Bishop Ronald Gainer of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Harrisburg to explore reviving efforts to work together on issues of shared interest and concern. It continues to seek funding for work on Christian-Muslim understanding.

Commission on Common Ministries. The Council has continued to provide support to its Trucker/Traveler Ministry, Campground Ministries, and Farmworker Ministries. Work has begun on building a Healing Communities network in Pennsylvania.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Council staff continue to discuss activities and areas where the Council might engage to be of service to our members, the wider faith community.