



The Pennsylvania Council of Churches is church bodies and agencies representing Anabaptist, Episcopal, Orthodox, Pentecostal, and Protestant communions in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania working together for Christian unity for the sake of the world. [John 17:23]

IMPORTANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Future Planning Work. The Future Task Group completed its work in 2018. The group recommended changes in the composition of the Council's Board of Directors to reduce the size of the Board by having a single member representing each member denomination in order to improve efficiency—a model much like the National Council of Churches. The Board voted to make this change in October 2018, effective for meetings beginning in 2019. The group also recommended the formation of a Strategic Planning Committee to lay the foundation for the Council's future, with consideration to be given to members with the skills needed to address many of the Council's perceived needs, which might include persons with gifts and experience, such as: similar work working with and coaching other religious organizations; fundraising/development; communications; and legal, among others. The Board will name this group at its first 2019 meeting, with work to be completed by the end of 2020.

Conferences and Meetings. The Council did not hold a single statewide conference in 2018, but conducted workshops around the issues of criminal justice reform and gun violence.

Continuing from 2017, the Council held an event in Lancaster in April 2018 called "Faithful Advocacy for Criminal Justice Reform: Principles and Practice." This session was designed to educate participants about the criminal justice system/mass incarceration at the federal and state levels, "Clean Slate" legislation (designed to remove a barrier for formerly incarcerated persons for qualified offenses at the state level), and how to advocate effectively for this legislation. Participants were asked/encouraged to participate in advocacy visits with their Pennsylvania representatives with support from the Council's Public Witness program. This effort was supported in part by funds from the Mennonite Central Committee. The Clean Slate legislation passed in May 2018, supported by these significant efforts by the faith community.

The Council held another session in Pittsburgh in August 2018 called "Faithful Advocacy for Gun Violence Prevention: Principles and Practice." This session followed the same format of the Clean Slate sessions, but focused on gun violence prevention legislation designed to remove guns from domestic abusers and others who could be a danger to themselves or others. Legislation aimed at domestic abusers passed in October 2018, and like Clean Slate, was supported by significant efforts by the faith community. More workshops are planned for 2019.

The Council also presented to various congregations seeking to learn more about the Berks County Residential Center, used to detain immigrant families, often for long periods of time. It also presented two sessions on climate change using slides and information provided by the Climate Leadership Program attended by the Director of Advocacy and Ecumenical Outreach in 2017.

Finally, the Council conducted a Healing Communities training in Bethlehem in June for over 20 participants from the Lehigh Valley. Healing Communities aims to train congregations to be welcoming and supportive of formerly incarcerated persons.

2018 was a year of gearing up for additional "School-to-Prison Pipeline" sessions around the state, using a trauma-informed lens to help participants understand the role of funding to ensure that all students have the resources they need to overcome barriers to learning, including poverty, race, disabilities, and language, among other things. The newer sessions will focus more on how racism plays a role in the distribution of school funding by the state in Pennsylvania. Given the high correlation between students facing traumatic conditions without sufficient support and those who end up in prison, these sessions will continue to make the case for a fair school funding formula and adequate funding in order to bridge the gap. These sessions are being supported by funds from the William Penn Foundation through a collaborative grant from POWER in Philadelphia (a PICO organizing group).

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's (MCC) East Coast Office has again reauthorized 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 2020. It is the Council's hope that this funding will continue to be renewed. There has been a continuing focus on building a Healing Communities network in PA, and on calling for closure of the Berks County Family Detention Center that is holding refugee families far in excess of the time they should be held. Additional efforts in 2018 included the "Faithful Advocacy" events described above, continuing to build networks among stakeholders active in work around immigration/immigration reform, conversations with groups involved with reducing gun violence, including Heeding God's Call and CeaseFirePA.
- A grant of \$16,000 from the William Penn Foundation (through POWER; \$8,000/year for 2 years—an increase from the previous grant amount) continues to support the Council's efforts to reform school funding in PA. The funds have been used to do basic education on equity and adequacy of public school funding in PA, and to support the "school to prison pipeline" sessions described above.

These grants have continued to support part-time efforts by an Advocacy Programs Coordinator, John-Michael Cotignola-Pickens.

During the summer of 2018, the Council was invited to apply for a substantial grant from the Van Ameringen Foundation, in conjunction with the Abolitionist Law Center, to do work in the area of criminal justice reform, particularly with regard to the use of solitary confinement and treatment of incarcerated persons with mental health conditions. While not as much as was hoped, the Foundation awarded a three-year grant to be divided between the two organizations: \$75,000 in Year 1, \$100,000 in Year 2, and \$125,000 in Year 3. Work will begin in 2019.

Other Activities

- The Board of Directors adopted one resolution on gun violence reduction in October 2018.
- The Council:
 - Issued a public statement: [A Statement on Separation of Families at the Border](#) (June 19, 2018); and
 - Offered official greetings to: (1) the Western PA Conference of the United Methodist Church; and (2) Church Women United.
- Both of the Council's websites, www.pachurches.org and www.pachurchesadvocacy.org, have continued to evolve.
- The Director of Advocacy and Ecumenical Outreach participated in an editorial board meeting with the Harrisburg Patriot News with Bishop Audrey Scanlan of the Episcopal Diocese of Central Pennsylvania to discuss media coverage of the faith community and interfaith relations.

COUNCIL MINISTRIES

Commission on Public Witness & Public Witness Ministry. The Council's advocacy efforts in 2018 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 POWER.
- Criminal justice reform.
- 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, and for ending the separation of families at the border.
- Environment, primarily climate change and protecting water resources, in coordination with several organizations.

The Commission continues to work on efforts aimed at improving the lives of people on the margins, and addressing problems with our political system.

Commission on Unity & Relationships. The Council, working with Lancaster Theological Seminary intern Teman Cooke, worked on refining an approach for conducting "difficult" conversations within and between congregations. These are conversations designed to bring people with widely disparate beliefs/opinions together to hear each other's stories and discuss their differences in a safe environment. One session was held in December 2018 at Community Mennonite Church in Lancaster, and others are being planned for 2019.

Commission on Common Ministries. The Council has continued to provide support to its Trucker/Traveler Ministry, Campground Ministries, and Farmworker Ministries. Work continues 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.