



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

Looking Ahead. The Board of Directors made the determination to move ahead with a search for a new executive director. The Personnel Committee will be working to develop a job description and to conduct a search during 2020. Director of Finance and Facilities and Interim Executive Director Jan Gulick has announced that she plans to retire at the end of January 2021, and a search will also be taking place for this position later in 2020 to provide time for overlap/training before she retires. The Board has also authorized new contracts for Gulick and for Rev. Sandra Strauss, Director of Advocacy and Ecumenical Outreach, and Personnel Committee will be working to develop those contracts.

Conferences and Meetings. The Council did not hold a single statewide conference in 2019, but conducted workshops around the issues of criminal justice reform, gun violence, and public education funding.

The Council held a session in Lancaster in November 2019 called "Faithful Advocacy for Gun Violence Prevention: Principles and Practice," following a similar but updated format to an initial session in 2018. The session focused on gun violence prevention legislation designed to remove guns from domestic abusers and others who could be a danger to themselves or others (Extreme Risk Protection Orders, already law in a number of other states) and universal background checks. More workshops are planned for 2020.

Work has also proceeded on solitary confinement, funded by a grant from the Van Ameringen Foundation. The first was held in Harrisburg in June with the Abolitionist Law Center to introduce the audience to solitary confinement, how it is used in Pennsylvania, why it needs to be reduced, and why it is an issue for the faith community (it is viewed as torture as defined by the United Nations). This session included stories from individuals who had experienced solitary confinement and their families. A second and somewhat different approach was employed with a selected group of advocates in November, involving experiential techniques from "Theater of the Oppressed" that involved the audience in activities to help them understand incarceration and solitary confinement. It also included information with statistics and how solitary is used, as well as stories of several reentrants who had experienced solitary. A number of sessions are planned already for 2020, and more are in the works.

A joint session with POWER in Harrisburg in May helped to introduce participants to equitable public education funding, educating them about existing gross inequities in funding from the state and how this fuels vastly different outcomes for students based on where they live. They also learned that this is a justice issue for people of faith. They were introduced to legislation that would work to ensure that all state-based education funding (not just a small portion, as it is now) will be run through the state's education funding formula to ensure more equitable funding in the future.

Council staff led two interfaith vigils at the Berks County Residential Center, an immigrant family detention facility that the Council and other coalition groups are seeing to have closed.

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

Support for Collaborative Efforts. The Council has worked collaboratively with other organizations based on grant funding received.

- The Mennonite Central Committee's 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. The MCC viewed their multi-year granting as an experiment in state-level advocacy, and has said it is unlikely to renew the funding for another year. On the other hand, they are eager to continue in partnership, and have expressed willingness to provide support for joint programs in the areas of mutual interest to ensure that they are able to continue.
- 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.

These grants have been used to support part-time efforts by John-Michael Cotignola-Pickens, former Advocacy Programs Coordinator (now working for the MCC), and for nearly full-time efforts (since September) by Emily Schmid, and Episcopal Service Corps Fellow in Harrisburg through Sycamore House, a project of St. Stephen's Cathedral in Harrisburg and associated with the Episcopal Diocese of Central Pennsylvania. Emily will be with the Council through July 2020, and is eligible for renewal if desired.

- A third grant from the Van Ameringen Foundation, received in late 2018, is shared 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. Some of the work underway has already been described above. This grant is supporting the lion's share of Emily's work.

Report on the Council's Work in 2019

Other Activities

- The Council offered official greetings to the Middle PA District of the Church of the Brethren.
- Both of the Council's websites, www.pachurches.org and www.pachurchesadvocacy.org, have continued to evolve.
- The Director of Advocacy and Ecumenical Outreach was named to the Governor's Census 2020 Complete Count Commission.

COUNCIL MINISTRIES

Commission on Public Witness & Public Witness Ministry. The Council's advocacy efforts in 2019 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, primarily in coordination with the Abolitionist Law Center and other partners.
- Immigration, particularly around calling for the closure of the Berks County Family Detention Center that is holding refugee families 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 joined with other faith partners to present a session on Civil Conversations in Harrisburg in May, modeled on the Civil Conversations Project related to Krista Tippett and On Being.

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.