

2023 Report to the Susquehanna Annual Conference The Pennsylvania Council of Churches

We celebrate the work of the Penn West Conference of the United Church of Christ. We affirm your commitment to creating spiritual transformational leaders, equipping congregations for vital worship and growth and global ministry.

Addressing the Future

In the past year, the board of directors of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches, and I have grown concerned about the future effectiveness of the organization. This has been a particular focus for me as the executive director. This led our leadership to initiate a vision process which included guidance from consultant, Susan Loucks. This was a significant step for the Council of Churches. The executive director has been intentional about reaching out to member churches and constituents to engage in conversations about the future of the Council. We made significant strides in this endeavor.

Reflective Leadership Grant

When I find myself in a frenzy it is important for me to pause, reflect and assess. This has been a time of discernment for me, personally. I decided to also enter a period of discernment about the future of the Council and my leadership role within it. In 2023 I sought and received a Reflective Leadership Grant from the Duke University Divinity School; this grant is designed to create reflection time with respect to the organization and my leadership role moving forward with the future and objectives of the Council of Churches. I have the conviction that the Pennsylvania Council of Churches must take a deep dive into the question of who we are and what our future is to be. Integrity requires me to take a transparent approach to this subject. The Pennsylvania Council of Churches will not have a future if it is enmeshed in the status quo. For me to equip myself, I am seeking a 30,000-foot view of my work and the Council of Churches to ascertain the vision steps that must be taken going forward.

The Reflective Leadership Grant is an opportunity that can be spread out over an 18-month period. I am availing myself to learning opportunities to enhance my scope of vision and assist in the formation of strategies for moving forward personally and as a Council of Churches. The Reflective Leadership Grant also assists in any coverage needed when I would be traveling. This allows for a stipend for a chief of staff, who is available at times that my travel would take me away from the Council of Churches for extended periods. The grant allows me to experience the work of other organizations as we consider best practices that we can implement within the Council of Churches. I plan to visit the Wisconsin Council of Churches, the New York Council of Churches, the Minnesota Council of Churches, the Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, and the New Mexico Council of Churches.

Conversation on Policing

In May of 2023, in partnership with other community advocates, we spearheaded a [Summit on Policing](#) sponsored by the Pennsylvania Council of Churches, the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission and Penn Live. This effort was designed to do three things: 1. enter into a scholarly discussion about the policing of Black men, 2. present the experiences of local citizens and law enforcement and 3. address the development of strategies for community policing that respects people of color. Our speaker was Mr. Paul Butler, the Albert Brick Professor in Law at Georgetown University Law Center, and a legal analyst on MSNBC. He is also a contributing opinion writer for The Washington Post. Professor Butler is a significant contributor on issues of race and criminal justice. His work has been profiled on 60 Minutes, Nightline, and the ABC, CBS, and NBC Evening News. His book "*Chokehold: Policing Black Men*" was published in July 2017. W.E.B. DuBois wrote about the double consciousness of being Black and he asked this question: "How does it feel to be a problem." The essence of this question is grounded in the Black experience. This served as a backdrop for our conversation on policing in communities of color. Living in the miasma of the extrajudicial killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tyre Nichols, and others there is a gap to which our faith communities and people of good will are called to fill. This was a conversation about public safety, policing, and the culture of law enforcement. We advocate for a policing posture that is community friendly and does not impose a terroristic threat grounded in violence and brute power over persons because of the color of their skin.

This was a forum that sought problem-solving action. The Pennsylvania Council of Churches is committed to playing a part in creating policy and solutions whenever possible and needed in relation to criminal justice reform. This was merely a beginning, and you will be hearing more from us as it relates to this work.

Participation in the GEM School

Co-organized by the World Council of Churches, World Communion of Reformed Churches, Lutheran World Federation, World Methodist Council, and Council for World Mission, the Ecumenical School for Governance, Economics and Management responds to recommendations outlined in the “Sao Paulo Statement: International Financial transformation for an Economy of Life” and in the document “Economy of Life for All Now: An Ecumenical Action Plan for a New International Financial and Economic Architecture,” which identified as a priority the development of competencies in economics within churches. Presently churches’ ethical, moral, and theological perspectives on the workings of the global economy have minimal impact on financial and economic policies, business practices and ways of thinking. To address this gap, the GEM School aims to build economic literacy within churches by equipping participants with the tools and languages to effectively advocate for urgent transformations in the global financial and economic realm. This was a two-week course that took place in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The All Africa Council of Churches General Assembly- Abuja, Nigeria-2023

The executive director participated in the assembly as a guest representing the African diaspora. Ecumenism involves making connections. With respect to this journey engaging people of the African Diaspora, making the connections is critical. I attended the 12th All Africa Conference General Assembly in Rwanda in 2018, where conversations began in about working together on common issues of concerns that we share as Africans and people of the African Diaspora. This also connects with my participation in the two forums of the United Nation’s Permanent Forum for People of African Descent. I also plan to participate in the third session that will occur in April 2024 in Geneva, Switzerland. This has provided an important framework for our work as we jointly face the impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonialism, and apartheid. Our conversations have included the importance of reparatory justice as it relates to the development needs necessitated by this history of oppression and economic exploitation.

Attending the Ecumenical School for Governance, Economics and Management was also quite pivotal in relation to the All Africa Conference of Churches. This school was held in tandem with the gathering of the New International Financial and Economic Architecture. This work was spawned by the work of the All-Africa Council of Churches. Through the leadership of the All-Africa Conference of Churches the Zacchaeus Tax (ZacTax) campaign, which formed part of the New International Financial and Economic Architecture (NIFEA) initiative was promoted by the All-Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), Council for World Mission (CWM), Lutheran World Federation (LWF), World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), World Methodist Council (WMC), and World Council of Churches (WCC). The participation of the executive director was to create mission relationships with United Methodist and other Methodist congregations and leadership in West Africa.

Community Engagement

The director took part in the celebration, along with Pastor Dale Snyder (Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church), bishops Cynthia Moore-Koikoi (United Methodist) and Kurt Kusserow (ELCA), of a historic agreement between the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church of Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Penguins Hockey Club. More than 60 years ago, Bethel Church was forced to give up its sanctuary, compensated for what it says was a fraction of its value, to an urban renewal project that wiped out the heart of an African American neighborhood known as the Hill District. Now, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church is poised to recoup some of that loss and reclaim a spot near its former home. It has reached an agreement with the Pittsburgh Penguins — the NHL franchise that now holds development rights to the site near its current arena — for the church to use a 1.5-acre parcel that it envisions using for housing and other revenue-generating development. This is amazing history that is

being made. The Council of Churches has been proud to provide accompaniment in this process of reparatory justice.

The executive director also participated in the following events: the annual meeting of the Atlantic Northeast District of the Church of the Brethren, the Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, the Saving Lives: Ending Gun Violence Prayer Service and Dialogue held at the St. Stephen Episcopal Cathedral in Harrisburg. The Juneteenth Heart, Love and Action demonstration at the Dauphin County Prison that focused on prisoner treatment and transparency at the institution and the Christian Unity Gathering of the National Council of Churches in Nashville, TN. The executive director attended and gave greetings to the Annual Council of the Upper Susquehanna Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Conclusion

The Pennsylvania Council of Churches celebrates its partnership with the Penn West Conference of the United Church of Christ. We hope that there will be even greater opportunities for further collaboration in 2024.

Rev. Dr. Larry D. Pickens, Executive Director