

## THE PENNSYLVANIA COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

### Mission

The Pennsylvania Council of Churches is a voluntary association of separate and autonomous Christian churches, within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, through which its members seek to manifest their fellowship (koinonia) with one another, to engage in common ministries of witness and service, and to advance towards the goal of visible unity

The Pennsylvania Council of Churches has marked significant transition and staff change during this past year.

I initiated conversations with judicatory leaders to begin a dialogue about ways in which the Council can be initiative-taking in working with our judicatories and congregational leaders. In my conversations with judicatory leadership throughout the Commonwealth they expressed the importance of the Council of Churches serving as a connection hub where best practices occur. Creating a communication channel is important to leaders as we examine and share what is happening in our various faith communities. There is a need for greater communication and cooperation which represents an opportunity for greater vitality and purpose for both the Council of Churches and our ecumenical partners. The judicatory leaders with whom I talked this year, expressed a desire to have time for spiritual reflection and dialogue with their counterparts. The Council will need to make this happen in 2022. Judicatory leaders are interested in learning about my leadership role at the Pennsylvania Council of Churches. I have communicated that my purpose is to be a catalyst for a 21st Century vision.

The Pennsylvania of Churches is at an inflection point and the zeitgeist requires transformational priorities as we consider the future. The United Church Center is a tremendous asset for ministry and ecumenical engagement. However, aging structures and changing priorities will require initiative-taking leadership on our part.

During this past year, the United Church Center experienced three separate episodes of flooding in the basement. In response to this development, I am initiating the placement of backflow valves in our drainage system to insure against this damage occurring again. We are also moving to replace carpet in the damaged areas which will allow us to rent spaces that have been unoccupied since the flooding occurred this past summer. The flooding has caused upheaval and damage; it also exposes the need for the United Church Center to have a cadre of persons who can serve as consultants and provide guidance on building management issues. Our Finance and Facilities Committee manages the financial issues related to the building and the Service Department, but we need a committee or group that can provide support on brick-and-2 mortar issues within the Center. We will be reaching out to judicatories and local churches for volunteers to help us in this area.

Early into my tenure it became apparent that the transition of our fiscal management was not going well. At that point I began to consult with members of the Finance and Facilities Committee and others to find a solution. In consultation with the Executive Committee and Board of Directors we contracted with the accounting firm McKonly & Asbury to take on our accounting needs. We have worked to establish a stronger relationship between the Pennsylvania Council of Churches and its program entities. The Leisure Campground Ministry, the Fruitbelt Ministry, and the I-80 Truck Stop Ministry. These are ministries through which anticipate building greater outreach and program opportunities. I anticipate other programmatic areas to which we will expand the Council of Churches, as we meet the support needs of our constituents.

The Pennsylvania Council of Churches and Rev. Dr. Dale Bruce Snyder, the pastor of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Pittsburgh, PA. began a partnership last year. Rev. Snyder shared with me the story of Bethel AME Church, established in 1808 which has a long history of significant ministry in the Lower Hill community of Pittsburgh. James Baldwin once said that "Urban renewal meant negro removal." In 1957, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church was torn down, as a part of urban renewal when it was cited as blighted property within the Lower Hill District of Pittsburgh. In that year, the congregation received \$240,000 in compensation for the eminent domain taking which led to the redevelopment in the area. This took place while a nearby white congregation did not experience displacement because of the redevelopment. The congregation is convinced that their church was targeted because of their advocacy and progressive role in the Black community. When the taking occurred, the congregation lacked the legal resources and political connections to advocate for fair compensation. The original church property became part of the Civic Arena which is the home of the Pittsburgh Penguins Hockey Club; this is noteworthy because there are signs that the team's ownership is interested in collaborating with the congregation in seeking repair for the injustices that occurred over 60 years ago. I have decided to support this initiative in promoting justice, reparations, and Bethel's restoration. We also developed a proposal to present a workshop on reparations during the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, "Christ's Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity." This theme will represent the gathering of the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches. The proposed workshop around reparations in an ecclesial context offers the opportunity to promote and discuss repair, justice, and community building, leading to unity. The people of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church are collaborating with developers and white faith communities to create a community platform to address the historic injustice that diminished their ministry. Reparations represent repairing that which has destroyed within the community's social fabric. Reconciliation can only take place in a setting of honesty and repentance. This workshop opens conversations about ways in which white communities can begin purging themselves of white supremacy, which serves as a base for the injustice represented in the Bethel story. Reconciliation is difficult and challenging; it must come from the demanding work of confronting the historical injustices that divide our

communities. Anything short of this would represent what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "Cheap Grace." Love is at the core of reconciliation. The ideal outcome is that we have an interactive conversation about the way in which congregations and Councils of Churches can play a significant role in restoring faith communities and revitalizing neighborhoods. This is also an opportunity to strategize about engaging business, civic, and community groups in the restoration process. Building partnerships to repair communities is critical to the future and is a manifestation of sharing the love of Christ as we build "Beloved Community." We see this as a case study for other contexts. to instruct congregational leaders about the importance of developing community partnerships to address injustice.

- We celebrate the work of Susan Loucks who is leading our Vision and Leadership process. I am asking our judicatory leadership and churches to get involved in this process as we plan work of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches. In relation to our visioning process, it is important that the Council of Churches develops an orientation process for our board members who serve the Council. I am encouraging our Personnel and Executive Committees to develop an orientation process for incoming directors. This will allow us to communicate our expectations and create an atmosphere that will allow both our staff, directors, and volunteer directors to engage their roles effectively in healthy and effective ways. Judicatory and Community Affiliations My work includes my engagement with community and judicatory entities.

The Pennsylvania Council of Churches serves our partner faith communities as we all become most effective in creating unity in the Body of Christ.

Larry D. Pickens , Executive Director