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UPDATE

Seeking the Common Ground,
Working for the Common Good.

In Mixed Company

By The Rev. Jill Job Saxby, Executive Director

SPRING 2010

Would you like to be part of a world where you will never again need to be bothered by anyone you don't like, or encounter anyone who disagrees with you? This isn't a trick question, but one that is relevant to the way Americans grapple with contentious issues now.

Recently, journalist Bill Bishop wrote a book called *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*. He based his conclusions on four decades of election results and studies of group psychology and successful product marketing (including church growth models). Bishop claims that, even as the U.S. becomes more diverse, Americans are clustering into ever-more-homogeneous groups at the local level, the places where we conduct our daily lives. As the Big Sort continues, he says, we'll see more conformity within these smaller communities, "themed" college dorms, social groups and of course, churches.

There's always been a natural human inclination to be with our "tribe," people "just like us." The freedom, prosperity and new technologies of late 20th century America made it possible, as never before, to spend most of our days interacting primarily—even solely—with "people like us."

The downside of the Big Sort is the effect on our politics and civic discourse. Research confirms the real danger is that like-minded groups tend to become more extreme. Biases are confirmed; the desire to prove one "fits in" intensifies. Groups convince themselves that life is a zero-sum game: win or lose; friend or enemy; insider or outsider.

The trouble is, of course, that we cannot hope to find the common good if we are unwilling to meet each other on common ground.

These days, the ecumenical movement, once as mainstream as other large "common ground" social institutions, is becoming profoundly counter-cultural. Yet, we at MCC, with our colleagues around the country, believe this odd experiment—people finding ways to work for justice together, even when we don't agree on everything—has something of unique value to offer in this cultural and historic American moment.

Ecumenism resists the very idea of the Big Sort. Ecumenism demands that we emerge from comfortable isolation to do the hard work of finding common ground, and when we disagree, to do so in the most respectful way possible.

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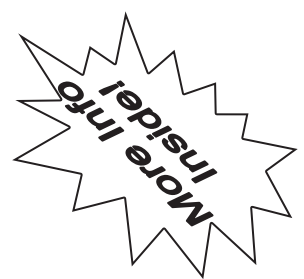
Thank you for your support!

The program is being made possible by the generous financial support from the Maine Community Foundation's York and Cumberland County Funds.

For more information, check out our website www.maineCouncilofchurches.org/earthday or contact Eric C. Smith at esmith@mainecouncilofchurches.org.

Participants will gather for worship to acknowledge how our diverse faith traditions inform our reverence and care for all life. We will have opportunities to share how we are already making a difference in our communities, and learn new ways to get involved with efforts on climate change, wilderness preservation, alternative energy, sustainable food, and more. And there will be time to eat great food and make new connections with other youth who share your concerns and interests. Join us! Bring your youth group! Bring your friends!

Youth in our churches are among the most passionate and committed to caring for creation, faithful stewardship of earth's resources, and building environmentally sustainable communities. That's why Maine Council of Churches is inviting high school youth groups and individuals from across Southern Maine to gather for an ecumenical Earth Day celebration this year at First Parish Church UCC in Saco on Thursday, April 22 from 9:00 am—3:00 pm.



**Young People of Faith
Earth Day Celebration
Thursday, April 22 in Saco**



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Maine Churches and Communities Join Together to Help Their Neighbors in Need

Economic Justice Consultant Dolores Vail spent the last year and a half visiting and working with churches, interfaith and ecumenical councils and community groups on MCC's behalf to gather and share information from those who are working together creatively to address the growing needs during these difficult economic times. If networks did not previously exist, Vail linked religious and community leaders together so they could jointly work on problems facing their communities. **Collaboration is key**" says Vail, who has dedicated much of her career and countless volunteer hours addressing issues of poverty, homelessness and hunger. The following highlights some of the remarkable efforts by Mainers taking care of their neighbors.

The Greater Bay Area Ministerium (GBAM) Interfaith Fuel Fund (IFF)—Over a dozen churches in the Belfast area participated in this effort that addressed the need for emergency fuel deliveries. This fund, administered by the Belfast United Methodist Church, raised \$50,000 and provided critical relief for over 70 families. Fundraising as a community takes a lot of hard work, but it can also be a lot of fun as neighbors work side by side for a cause. Churches joined together for the Strawberry Festival, with volunteers picking and processing 180 quarts of strawberries for a delicious event that raised \$6,000 for the fund.

Dedication and coordinated fundraising is important for success, but a systematic approach to assessing and addressing needs is also required. The administrators of the IFF worked closely with local officials and social service agencies to ensure that the funds and services were provided in the most efficient way possible.

Farmington Warming Centers—Stories of seniors on fixed income, living alone and spending cold winter days huddled under blankets are all too common. To combat this problem, the Farmington Area Ecumenical Ministry, in cooperation with area agencies, devised and implemented a rotating warming center that is hosted by Henderson Memorial Baptist Church, St. Joseph Catholic Church and Old South Congregational Church. Organizations and individuals contribute food, craft supplies, magazines, newspapers, and games. The warming center is much more than a place to stay warm. It has emerged as a social hub for the community with food, fellowship and fun available to anyone living in the Farmington area.

The United Way of the Tri Valley Area published "**So... You Might Want to Start a Warming Center in Your Community?**," a resource that outlines the steps the Farmington group used to develop and implement their program. The document notes that "part of the success of the Warming Center was the synergy generated by volunteers from many walks of life coming together to make this happen. Volunteers from every church in town helped at each host-site." *(continued on page 4)*



The Maine Council of Churches is a proud member of:



Fishes and Loaves: A Study of the Covenant Between Land and Sea

Maine Council of Churches Environmental Justice Consultant Anne D. (Andy) Burt and Associate Director Eric C. Smith have developed a special program for churches: **Fishes and Loaves: A Study of the Covenant Between Land and Sea**. This four week program asks participants to reflect on the issue of ocean changes and fishing as the nexus of environmental and economic justice.



Fishes and Loaves features films and speakers, and opportunities for personal and biblical reflection and action. The program concludes with a **community seafood supper** featuring Maine seafood and locally produced foods. As part of this project, MCC will share a short film we created that showcases a Rockland, Maine congregation that has formed a covenantal relationship with a local farm family and fishing community as part of its local foods ministry for environmental and economic justice.

Fishes and Loaves will be offered as a pilot project after Easter at three churches: St. Saviour's Episcopal Church in Bar Harbor, Midcoast Presbyterian Church in Topsham, and St. David's Episcopal Church in partnership with First Parish UUA in Kennebunk. **After the pilot project is completed, Fishes and Loaves resources will be available to other interested churches.**

MCC is grateful to the **Presbyterian Hunger Program** and other financial supporters of Fishes and Loaves.

Special thanks to our 20 -20 Supporters

Over three years ago, the Maine Council of Churches asked churches and individuals to show their support of MCC during our transition from a 10+ person to the 4 person staff remaining today. A single bequest that funded much of the Council's work from the mid 1970's to the mid 2000's was nearly depleted and more than ever, MCC would need church and individual "20-20 Visionaries" to sustain our work. We are grateful to the following churches that committed to a gift of at least \$1,000 per year for at least three years:



- First Congregational Church UCC, South Portland
- First Parish Congregational Church UCC, Gorham
- First Parish Church UCC, Brunswick
- First Parish Congregational Church UCC, Saco
- Immanuel Baptist Church, Portland
- South Congregational Church UCC, Kennebunkport
- St. Charles Borromeo Roman Catholic Church, Brunswick
- United Methodist Church, Brunswick
- Woodfords Congregational Church UCC, Portland



The Maine Council of Churches also thanks our individual 20-20 supporters. Your faith and financial commitment allow MCC to continue in our mission.

Thank you!

In Mixed Company

(cont. from pg. 1)

Two thousand years ago, Paul saw the church in Corinth going through its own version of the Big Sort. Corinthian Christians argued over a variety of issues which Paul tried to settle in his letters to them. Then, at the heart of his message, Paul handed them a key to unlock the doors that divided them.

He reminded them that in this new kind of community within the Empire, no member is inferior, none is unnecessary. All are needed if the whole is to thrive (1 Cor 12). Instead of clustering into ever-narrower sub-groups, each with its claim on the best way to follow Jesus, Paul said he would show them a “far better way.”

Of course, we’ve all heard about it ourselves, many times. It is Paul’s famous, beautiful paean to self-giving love in 1 Corinthians 13: **“...Love does not insist on its own way . . . or rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things....”** (vv. 5-7).

To survive, to prosper, the church must be that place where humans, in all our giftedness, with all our flaws and differences, still come together to do this improbable thing: reject tribalism and embody instead the ecumenical spirit: One Body, One Spirit, many gifts.

Here at the Maine Council of Churches, we work every day with our nine denominational members, with local congregations, other religious groups and secular justice advocates to “seek common ground and work for the common good.” It isn’t always easy. It doesn’t mean we never disagree. It does require us to practice speaking the truth to one another, in love, and to persevere, even when we get it wrong on the first try.

What keeps us going is the daily evidence we see in the lives and work of so many—like you, the supporters of MCC—who are committed to both the life of the ecumenical church and the work of justice. These are the ones who understand that Paul had it right: **“faith, hope and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love.”**

Our shared faith traditions tell us that this is true, and sufficient, even in these times. Against the power of that love, no demographic trend, no politics, no tribalism, no empire, not even fear or despair, stand a chance.

Covenant for Civil Discourse

The Board of the Maine Council of Churches believes the fate of our democracy depends upon truthful and respectful interaction among us all, especially when we hold differing views. To express this belief, we created and adopted a **Covenant for Civil Discourse**. MCC encourages and invites our member denominations, political leaders and others to endorse and use this covenant. It is available at: [www.maineCouncilofchurches.org/downloadable resources](http://www.maineCouncilofchurches.org/downloadable%20resources).

Development Update

If you are a regular reader of MCC’s newsletter, you know that we include an appeal in each issue, reminding you of our mission and asking for your financial support. Every newsletter includes a small business reply envelope for you to mail in your donation. This time, you’ll notice a larger envelope. If you carefully pull down the panel along the perforations, you will see a short description of MCC and our work, as well as the self mailer.

Why the change? First, we realize that not everyone is familiar with the basic structure of our organization and how we work in a complementary manner with religious and secular groups throughout Maine. Second, we don’t have room in every newsletter to mention everything we do. The new envelope gives us room to describe our mission, and list the issues we work on.

Perhaps you will notice we are involved with an issue you care about and would like to work on or learn more about. If this is the case, please call us at (207) 772-1918. We would be glad to talk with you about any of the justice issues we support. You can also sign up for our email news alerts that are published about twice a month. Log onto MCC’s website www.maineCouncilofchurches.org, and click on the menu item “Join Our Mailing List.”

We rely on the generosity of individuals and churches to do our work. If you agree that MCC plays an important role in the quest for justice in Maine and beyond, please consider a financial gift today. Use the new envelope to enclose a check to the Maine Council of Churches. You may also donate with a credit card by mail, over the phone, and via our website, www.maineCouncilofchurches.org and click on **“Donate to MCC.”**

In the Public Square

Health Care Reform—In December MCC Associate Director Eric C. Smith organized a candlelight interfaith vigil in Portland for *Affordable, Quality Health Care for All*. While we may not agree on every aspect of health care reform, our members stand committed to the goal of ensuring every American has *affordable* access to quality health care.

MCC Executive Director Jill Saxby submitted testimony to support *L.D. 1620, An Act to Protect Health Care Consumers from Catastrophic Medical Debt*. This legislation, if passed, will eliminate annual and lifetime caps on health insurance in Maine. Without caps, families that pay insurance premiums could still face financial ruin should a family member become chronically ill.

Economic Justice—Hard times require difficult decisions. MCC is often called upon to testify in Augusta when lawmakers grapple with budget cuts and legislation that might negatively impact the lives of our neighbors. In January, Eric C. Smith testified at a “*Maine Can Do Better*” event, asking our state leaders to consider the moral implications of eliminating services relied on by the poor, elderly, children and those with physical or mental health issues.

Human Rights—As an active member of the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT), MCC is actively supporting *LD 1611, An Act To Ensure Humane Treatment for Special Management Prisoners*. This bill, if passed, would limit the amount of time that Maine prisoners can be held in solitary confinement. The bill would also prevent people with mental illness to be confined in this manner. While we support the necessary precautions for the

Maine Churches and Communities. . .(cont)

Best Practices for Food Pantries—While most churches are involved with feeding the hungry (operating soup kitchens, sending volunteers to community programs and/or providing money and goods), some groups have more experience than others and it can be helpful to learn from others.

When Falmouth was setting up its first formal food pantry, Dolores realized the organizers could learn from others’ experiences. Dolores knew that the York pantry operated efficiently and she asked York’s director to meet with the Falmouth staff to share experiences. Thanks to the information sharing sessions, Falmouth saved many hours on their way up the learning curve. Falmouth’s pantry is up and running with the help of churches, service clubs and individuals.

Getting Started—Dolores has helped start ecumenical or interfaith groups in communities where active groups are not already in place. In a recent case, Dolores identified members of the religious community and invited them to a meeting to discuss how they could join together to address hunger and poverty in their city. The group is now meeting on its own, working to address the growing homeless population in the community. MCC invites you to share successful collaborations with us and we will continue to highlight the good works of Maine’s faith communities.

MCC is grateful to the **Presbyterian Hunger Program**, the **Simmons Foundation** and the **Hudson Foundation** for supporting our Economic Justice Program.

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well-being of corrections officials, the overall prisoner population and others, MCC along with mental health professionals and other experts believe that long-term solitary confinement is inhumane, counterproductive and tantamount to torture.

MCC, along with the Maine Civil Liberties Union and others, co-sponsored a “**Day of Action for People of Conscience**” in Augusta on February 23rd. MCC’s Eric C. Smith testified that inappropriate use of solitary confinement “does not serve the interests of society nor prison staff, and certainly not of prisoners, to push them beyond a physical, mental or emotional precipice from which they cannot recover.”

Interested in learning more about Economic Justice?

Information on all of the groups featured here are available through our website,
www.maineCouncilofchurches.org/economic_justice.

Interfaith Fuel Fund Pastor Dave Abbott and Betty York- Co-coordinators of the Interfaith Fuel Fund at Belfast UMC, 338-5575, pastor@belfastumc.org.

Farmington Warming Center: Rev. Susan Crane, Henderson Memorial Baptist Church, cranewolcott@myfairpoint.net or 778-2163. Guide to starting a warming center is linked via MCC’s website.

Food Pantries – throughout Maine
<http://www.maine.gov/agriculture/co/tefap/bytown.shtml>.