

Maine Council of Churches

*Seeking
common
ground,
working for
the common
good*

MCC Successfully Advocates for New Mainers, But Challenges Remain

by Rev. Allen Ewing-Merrill, MCC Vice-President

This past spring, the Maine Council of Churches and leaders of faith communities worked collaboratively with partnering organizations like Maine Equal Justice Partners, the Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition (MIRC), and Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project (ILAP), to advocate for the preservation of programs that assist asylum seekers and other immigrants, especially in the Portland, South Portland, Westbrook, and Lewiston communities.

Our efforts were successful. In the end, both the House and Senate passed a bill that provided the necessary affirmative language extending General Assistance for two years to immigrants who are lawfully present in the U.S. or "pursuing a lawful process to apply for immigration relief." Without a veto by Governor LePage, that bill became law, Public Law 324, and officially went into effect on October 15, giving New Mainers continued access to the very basics for survival — warm and safe housing, food to nourish their bodies, and life-

saving medicines — while they complete the arduous process of navigating our complicated immigration system and wait for employment authorization.

We celebrate these positive, life-affirming actions of our elected officials, who did the right and just thing at the very end of a challenging and contentious legislative session. We remember and affirm the words of Scripture which compel us to embrace our immigrant sisters and brothers with a loving and compassionate welcome: "Any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. You must love them as yourself, because you, too, were once immigrants" (Leviticus 19:34). And we are gratified by the groundswell of support for our new neighbors, who bring youthful vitality, deep faith, an incredible spirit of resilience and hope, and a strong work ethic to this aging state.

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Rally in Portland reminds us "We are All Mainers."

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From the Executive Director

This issue of our newsletter is filled with stories of all that the Council has been doing in recent months, the tangible and visible ways that we have carried out our mission to seek common ground and work for the common good. From public policy advocacy to ensuring that the needs of New Mainers are met, from interfaith dialogue about environmental protection to speaking out against racism and incivility, we have been *doing* an extraordinary amount of work and witness. Which reminds me of a sermon I heard in church recently. The pastor asked the congregation, "What would you do if you knew Jesus was coming?" This is a church where members are comfortable speaking up, so a number of different responses were called out right away. Then there was some silence, and the pastor asked again, "What would you do if you knew Jesus was coming?" and a woman in the back row replied wryly, "I'd look busy." The room erupted in laughter and the sermon rolled along.

It is true that sometimes busy-ness can be frantic, pointless, a distraction from doing deeper, more important work—or from doing nothing at all—more about looking busy than about doing the work to which God calls us. But that is not the kind of doing that I see in the work of our Board and its committees. Rather, they are embodying those familiar words from James' letter: "Be doers of the word and not merely hearers." That letter calls believers to live consistently with what we have learned from Jesus, to live what we say we believe, to walk the walk and not just talk the talk, to ensure that "our actions are a proclamation of our faith," as MCC Board member Rev. Ted Campbell puts it in his article on page 6.

I trust that as you read all the articles in this issue, you will agree that the Maine Council of Churches is *doing* a lot, and it's the kind of doing that James is writing about, the kind that brings the Word to life through caring for the most vulnerable, speaking truth to power, and building a culture of justice, compassion and peace.

Blessings,



This newsletter is published twice annually by the Maine Council of Churches. Layout editor: Jennifer Dimond. If you would prefer to receive this publication electronically, please visit our website, mainecouncilofchurches.org, and subscribe to e-news.

Caring for Our Common Home: A Multifaith Conversation About Climate Change

by Bonny Rodden, MCC Board Member

Brought together by the Maine Council of Churches, representatives from nine different faith traditions participated in a panel at Bowdoin College on Sunday, October 25, to discuss climate change and nurturing the environment and to reflect on Pope Francis' recent encyclical "Laudato Si."

Despite the differences in their faith traditions, the panelists shared a commitment to respecting and preserving the earth as a founding principle of each of their religions. Nasser Rohani, a member of the Portland Baha'i community, even joked that the Pope's beliefs and his were so similar that he could have been a Roman Catholic, or, he said, perhaps the Pope was a Baha'i.

However, despite significant agreement, important differences in perspective among the presenters were evident at the outset. The first speaker, Sherri Mitchell, representing the Penobscot Nation, stirred the audience of more than 75 when she challenged the Pope for giving sainthood to Father Junipero Serra. While the Franciscan friar traveled up the California coast in the 18th century establishing missions and spreading Christianity, many Native Americans died of disease from the Europeans and were forced under duress to convert and relinquish much of their own culture. Mitchell also questioned the Pope's choice of the Moses narrative as a paradigm, since it does not consider the effect of conquest of a "promised land" upon the indigenous people who have lived there for thousands of years. When we discuss protecting the earth, she cautioned, we must exercise great care to ensure that our words truly reflect our beliefs and actions.

The program was presented in conjunction with the National Religious Partnership for the Environment. MCC Board member Kitsy Winthrop moderated the

event and consultant Anne D. ("Andy") Burt was the coordinator.

The impetus for the gathering came from Pope Francis' call for "the whole human family together to seek sustainable and integral development" that protects our common home. In response to his challenge to people of all faiths to have a new dialogue about shaping the future of our planet, the MCC called together Native Americans, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Hindus, Muslims, Baha'i, Jews and Greek Orthodox Christians to discuss what each of their faith traditions has to say about humanity's relationship with the earth, and to identify the common ground we share when it comes to sharing the common ground of Mother Earth.



The MCC offers special thanks to Kitsy and Andy, to our presenters: Sherri Mitchell, Sister Mary-Jane Ferrier, Rabbi Steve Gutow, Tim Fuller, Kyriacos Markides, Rev. Dr. Steve Hastings, Nasser Rohani, and Sally Chapell, and to our gracious hosts at Bowdoin College, especially Rev. Bobby Ives, Director

Update from the Public Policy Committee

By Suzanne Lafreniere, Committee Chair

By all accounts, the first session of the 127th Maine Legislature was tumultuous. MCC's top five priorities fared as well as could be expected, given the partisan nature of the heated session. The death penalty bill was never submitted thanks to some quick work by MCC's Board member Rev. Bill Barter. The reduction of drug penalties legislation is in direct conflict with another law change submitted by the Attorney General, so it will need to be resolved in the upcoming session. The senior housing funding referendum was approved by voters on November 3 but the amount was much less than needed. Rep. Gideon's solar bills package received bi-partisan support and resulted in a comprehensive study by stakeholders and the Public Utilities Commission. General Assistance for non-citizens was the primary focus of MCC and after many ups and downs, it passed miraculously but implementation issues still abound as well as a possible state wide referendum in November 2016.

We are grateful that so many of you remain engaged with the legislative process, since we consistently hear from our partners and our elected representatives that our voices are heard and our concerns do matter. We are actively underway in discussing our upcoming priorities with our denominations, congregations and committee members. If you are interested in participating in this discussion, please contact Suzanne Lafreniere at 207-773-6471.

MCC Responds to Ballot Initiative

When the proposed ballot initiative pegged as “welfare reform” was first announced in September, the Maine Council of Churches issued a statement, voicing concern that it would jeopardize the safety and well-being of low-income Mainers by making drastic changes to Maine’s welfare policies.

In part of the statement, Suzanne LaFreniere, chair of the MCC’s Public Policy Committee and Director of Public Policy for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland, said “We are committed to addressing the underlying causes that force so many to need our assistance: low wages, inadequate health care, and limited support for families in the workplace.”

The Portland Press Herald quoted her in its September 23 article announcing the proposed referendum: “The answer to these issues is public discourse and constructive policies, in our Maine tradition, and not a willingness to scapegoat the very people who need our support.”

Maine Council of Churches Partners

Bread for the World

Cover Maine Now

Environmental Priorities Coalition

Faith Leaders Against Gun Violence

Maine Association of Interdependent Neighborhoods (MAIN)

Maine Can Do Better

Maine Council on Aging

Maine Equal Justice Partners (MEJP)

Maine Immigrants’ Rights Coalition (MIRC)

Maine Prisoners’ Advocacy Coalition

National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT)

continued from page 1

The debate is far from over. Opponents are now collecting signatures for a “comprehensive welfare reform” initiative that is likely to come before voters as a referendum in November 2016, threatening any and all assistance for non-citizens. In the face of such efforts, we are committed to continuing our prayerful action and witness on behalf of our immigrant sisters and brothers, who are God’s children and our neighbors.

Meanwhile, a group of interfaith leaders, led by Leslie Manning, Bonny Rodden, and Allen Ewing-Merrill of the Maine Council of Churches Board, is meeting monthly to facilitate a more unified response of the faith communities of Southern Maine. Currently this group is focusing on learning from one another what faith communities are already doing to provide support for immigrants, and assessing gaps and needs. The goal of this group is to ensure that faith communities wishing to offer their time or resources will know where to turn to learn about immigrants’ needs and opportunities to be in service.

As faith leaders, let’s continue to remind those who serve in public office that one of the roles and responsibilities of government is to provide for the common good – to care for the most vulnerable and marginalized of our society. Let’s hold fast to the wisdom of the Old Testament prophets, of Jesus, and

of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who reminded us again and again that we are one – that we are brothers and sisters – that we are called by God to care for the hurting and hungry. And let’s walk forward together, hand in hand, heart to heart, united in faith and good works.

In the words of Rev. Dr. King: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” As people of faith and goodwill who know that God’s abundant love is for all, let’s keep bending.

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Maine Council of Churches Welcomes New Executive Director

The Rev. Jane Field is the Maine Council of Churches' new Executive Director.

She serves as the public "face and voice" of the Council, cultivating and maintaining partnerships with faith communities and other organizations, and working alongside the Council's Board of Directors to carry out its mission of seeking common ground to work for the common good.

"Jane has a long history of uniting religious organizations in the work of service and justice. She is energetic, well-organized and compassionate. We are grateful to have her as our new Executive Director and look forward to her leadership," said Richard Berman, president of the Council.

Rev. Field, an ordained Presbyterian minister, has served Presbyterian, Methodist and Episcopal congregations in rural Maine, New York City, and suburban Connecticut, and worked for a number of non-profit organizations, primarily serving victims of domestic violence and the homeless.

Her educational background is well-suited to her new role. She has a master of divinity degree from Union Theological Seminary (NY) and a master's degree in public policy and international affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University. Her family's roots in Maine stretch back for centuries in the Berwick, Saco and Sanford areas, and her daughter is a freshman at UMaine Orono.

"I am looking forward to working with our Board and member congregations to continue to build a culture of justice, compassion and peace. I can think of no better place to do this work than in Maine," said Field.

Jane can be reached at jfield@mainecouncilofchurches.org.



MCC, in Partnership with Dead River Company, Offers Member Churches Discounts on Oil and Propane

by Richard Berman, Board President

In partnership with the Maine Council of Churches, Dead River Company offered special pricing for propane and heating oil this fall to benefit our 600+ member churches.

Churches were offered special three-year fixed propane pricing and favorable pricing options for heating oil as well as free consultation by an energy advisor.

It was the first part of the MCC's program announced last spring to help our churches reduce their carbon footprint on the earth. The three goals of the program are:

1. Cost savings on energy purchases
2. Conservation of energy
3. Efficiency of consumption

Dead River will offer another round of saving opportunities in the spring, so if your church did not take advantage this fall it is not too late. Watch for spring offerings in the mail.



The next phase in the MCC's energy-saving program also is planned for the spring. Energy workshops will include presentations by energy experts and a marketplace of products and services. Representatives will be available to answer questions and suggest energy-saving solutions that will, above all, lead to a reduced footprint by our faith communities.

This is a very exciting program that shows great promise in achieving our policy of "Environmental Stewardship and Right Relationship with the Earth." It is also unique in creating partnerships with the faith community, the state and private business to achieve good works.

Reflecting About Why We Act

by Rev. Ted Campbell, PCUSA Representative to MCC

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world. James 2:27

No resident alien shall you ever oppress, for you all know what it is like to be one.... Exodus 23:9 (paraphrase)

Central in these verses, and in hundreds of biblical verses, is something so nuclear to our calling as humans as to become basic to what we do at the Maine Council of Churches. We reflect about why we act; we strive to put faith into action. They link and intertwine. We yearn that our action will enact our faith – quietly or noisily, but effectively. On each matter, acting connects to needs, “to care for orphans and widows,” to “resident aliens,” to slaves, to fostering justice. All of these are short-speech for the ignored, oppressed, powerless, impoverished. That leaps out when you are reading biblical law codes or commandments or praise of deity or lament or wise advice. Caring with and for persons is the veritable test of our faithfulness. Such passages state or at least infer a reason why, a motive: You all know what it is like from your own experience – actually or by empathy. By reflection, you know.

Our action is a proclamation of our faith. We will not work on behalf of asylum seekers without knowing what it is like or would be like to be an alien. We imagine or remember. And we are likely then to reflect upon who/what requires us to care. We will not work to feed the hungry without knowing or sensing what hunger is, that food is essential to the well-being of all – and why we emphasize that notion of “all-ness.” We cannot challenge environmental degradation without reflecting upon why, and to whom our world belongs. We will not effectively call for “Civil Discourse” until we believe that the other deserves respect, that the other is given us as neighbor – and acknowledge where we get that idea. We will not go to Augusta to challenge unjust laws and immoral budget-making unless we believe that just-dealing and fairness are foundational to human life, and that this belief has origins. Reflection demands action; action requires reflective faith. The Maine Council tries to hold them together, do them in tandem.

MCC Responds to Racial Attack in Lewiston Mayoral Race

On October 20, after racist signs appeared attacking Lewiston mayoral candidate Ben Chin, MCC Board members Rev. Bill Barter and Bonny Rodden, along with Executive Director Rev. Jane Field, coordinated efforts to issue a public response from the Council. As a result, on October 23, the following letter appeared in the *Lewiston Sun Journal*:

To the Editor:

While the Maine Council of Churches neither endorses nor opposes any candidate for elected office, we must speak out when a line is crossed that violates the spirit of civil discourse in elections. Further, we must take a stand when the nature of a political attack is unmistakably and purposefully racist in nature. The display of racist signs in Lewiston that attack one mayoral candidate has no place in the public process. The Maine Council of Churches believes in keeping our dialogues and disagreements respectful and dignified. The council decries any attack motivated by racism. We join the voices in Lewiston and beyond who call for an end to that sort of attack on a candidate for office. We pray that, despite our differences, we may all see one another as children made in the image of our creator.

The Rev. William Barter

MCC Co-Sponsors Panel Presentation: “Interreligious Dialogue In A Time of Conflict”

As part of our commitment to civil discourse, MCC joined St. Joseph’s College, the Jewish Community Alliance of Southern Maine, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland, the Abbey of Hope, the USM Office of Multicultural Student Affairs and others to bring Rabbi David Sandmel, Bishop Arthur Kennedy, and Imam Yahya Hendi together on November 10 to consider how Christians, Jews and Muslims are searching for interreligious understanding. All three speakers are known nationally and internationally for their efforts to create a climate of interreligious cooperation that challenges the forces of religious extremism, violence and hatred. Jennifer Rooks of Maine Public Broadcasting served as Moderator.

Your Contributions Make a Difference

by Ed Rea, MCC Treasurer

The gifts of individual and congregational donors make up over a third of our budget, and half of those contributions are received at the end of the year. The Council cannot survive without your faithful support. We will shortly send out our fall appeal, but you can get a jump on your giving by using the form on the back of this Newsletter. We are also launching a planned giving campaign; contact us for more information about creative ways that you can provide for the Council in your estate planning. Please help us to continue to build a culture of justice, compassion and peace in Maine.

THANK YOU TO OUR 2015 DONORS*!!

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Maine Conference United Church of Christ
Maine Episcopal Missionary Society
New England Conference United Methodist Church
New England Synod Evangelical Lutheran Church of America
New England Yearly Meeting of Friends
Roman Catholic Bishop of Portland Synod of the New England Presbyterian

Churches

American Baptist Churches of Maine
Church of Universal Fellowship
Falmouth Congregational Church
Falmouth Quarterly Friends Meeting
Farmington Friends Meeting
First Congregational Church, Wiscasset
First Parish Church, Gorham
First Universalist Church, South Paris
First Universalist Church, Yarmouth
Lewiston Friends Meeting

Portland Friends Meeting
South Congregational Church
United Parish Congregational Church of Harrison & N. Bridgton
West Auburn Congregational Church
Woodfords Congregational Church

Individuals

Roger Addor
Cushman Anthony
William Barter
Constance Baskett
Carole R. Beal
Richard Berman
Edward & Phyllis Campbell
Sally Chappell
Lois Dennett
Christine DeTroy
Diane Dicranian
Thomas Ewell
Sara & Allen Ewing-Merrill
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Bequests

Anne Matthews Morlan estate

Every effort has been made to ensure the completeness and accuracy of this list. Please send any corrections to finance@mainecouncilofchurches.org or mail to MCC, 156 High St., Portland, ME 04101.

*Gifts received 1/1/15 - 11/7/15

Reflections on a Year of Progress From the Former Executive Director

Dear Friends:

This week, I am finishing up my tenure at the Maine Council of Churches (MCC). It has been a wonderful experience to serve you as the executive director. As I reflect on the year, the MCC has made great strides. We created and launched a new web site, created a new and efficient database that allows us to reach out to the more than 600 member churches, developed new and regular social media presence and streamlined many other administrative procedures.

While all of this was happening “behind the scenes” the Council continued to be a formidable presence in advocating for justice in Maine. This work included many letters to legislators, hours of testifying at the state house, meetings with state, city and national representatives including Susan Collins, Angus King, House and Senate Leadership, Mayors and

Councilors around the state and others. The MCC also had the privilege of partnering with many other powerful organizations in advocating for asylum seekers and other new Mainers. It has been a year of building strong partnerships and establishing priorities.

It has also been a year of reaching out beyond the confines of our denominations and partnering with interfaith organizations with similar missions. I have complete confidence that next year will bring the same kind of momentum and presence.

I am looking forward to staying involved with the Council as I invite the churches I will be serving to support and work with the Council in all future endeavors. I am also looking forward to reconnecting with all of you when I return from my sabbatical in January!

Warmly,
Sue Gabrielson

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