

Maine Council of Churches

*Seeking
common
ground,
working for
the common
good*

Advocating for a Compassionate Welcome for New Mainers

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

“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

Maine is at a crossroads. As our elected officials debate Governor LePage’s proposed budget, and as they consider the implications of several bills before them during this session, they will make decisions that determine how well we, as a state, embody the directive of Leviticus 19:34 – how well we will love and care for the immigrants in our midst.

This spring the Maine Council of Churches has been working collaboratively with Maine Equal Justice Partners, the Maine Immigrants Rights Coalition, other social justice organizations and people of goodwill to advocate for the preservation of programs that assist asylum seekers, especially in the Portland, South Portland, Westbrook, and Lewiston communities. These New Mainers are our brothers and sisters, people who have fled their home countries, leaving home and family and livelihood behind, after experiencing unspeakable violence and threat of death,

and who are seeking to rebuild their lives here in Maine. They come not because they have romanticized ideas about getting rich quick, and not because they wish to live off the generosity of the American government. They come because their very lives depend on it. They come lawfully, with visa in hand, and they follow the legally prescribed process of applying for asylum.

The Governor’s proposed budget slashes the budget for General Assistance – an assistance program of last resort, designed specifically to help with shelter and food for those who have no other options – while prohibiting immigrants from applying, simply because of where they were born. Likewise, bills before the Health & Human Services Committee, like LD 369 – “An Act to Align Municipal General Assistance Programs with the Immigration Status Policies of the Department of Health & Human Services” and LD 1037 – “An Act to Establish a 180-Day Residency Requirement for Welfare Benefits” would have the same impact.

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(left) MCC Board President Richard Berman and dozens of new Mainers testify in Augusta.

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From the Executive Director

It is hard to believe I have been “on the job” for about 6 months! It has been a blur of wonderful, challenging, enlightening, frustrating and brilliant work. My days are a combination of administration, prayer, advocacy and education. The Maine Council is a beautiful blend of so many aspects of ministry. Our short-term goal to improve communication has culminated in a newly designed web site, one that will better serve the needs of our congregations all over the state. And, we are finishing up a new database management project to enable us to send out news via email. To complete this job we need YOUR HELP. Please take a moment to go to our web page and sign up for our electronic newsletter. We want to make sure you have up to date information and know about all the wonderful programs and activities that are happening around our state!

There really is an amazing amount of GOOD WORKS happening in Maine and people of faith are making them happen. Sometimes it is not easy, though. As you know, I am also the pastor of a UU church. I have been serving the same congregation for 13 years and understand shrinking budgets and attendance. Despite the changing landscape, I know we are poised on the edge of new and exciting ways of creating valuable ministries.

The same is true as we collaborate with our brothers and sisters in Council work. I recently attended a meeting that brought together the leadership of Councils of Churches all over New England as well as the New England “heads of churches” from some 20 different denominations. I had not heard that exact term before, but it means the highest-ranking church officials in denominations. The wisdom and years of experience in the room was quite amazing. Many of the seasoned leaders have cause to be sad or discouraged as they witness a decline in the religiosity of their states, but that was NOT the prevailing attitude in the room. We started the meeting by covenanting together and rule number one was just brilliant! “No whining about how bad it is for Church. We know. But the conviction of this group is that the Church is eternal, God is doing something new & we want to be a part of it together.” I hold that same mantra for the people of faith in Maine and am looking forward to continuing to be part of the evolution of the Maine Council of Churches.

Blessings,
Rev. Sue

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Public Policy Updates

Suzanne Lafraniere, Public Policy Chair

This legislative session has been busy as usual for the Public Policy committee. We began the session with a letter of introduction to all members of the 127th Legislature with a reminder that we hoped they would create a circle of protection around those programs and supports that are needed and used by the most vulnerable in Maine.

We have focused on 5 bills this session: opposition to the death penalty, drug crime reclassification, cuts to general assistance, SSI and TANF for New Mainers, aging in place for seniors and increasing support of solar energy. We were grateful that Sen. Diamond has withdrawn the death penalty bill, so we can put our energies toward the remaining four. We continue to work towards any effort that would “build a culture of justice, compassion and peace.”



MCC Executive Director Rev. Sue Gabrielson delivers the opening prayer to the Maine House of Representatives.

Maine Council of Churches Energy Savings & Stewardship Program

One of the major public policy priorities of the Maine Council of Churches for 2015 is "**Environmental Stewardship and Right Relationship with the Earth.**"

Recognizing this Policy Priority, the MCC board of directors has voted to, not only advocate on environmental legislation (such as Rep. Gideon's solar bill), but to create a program to benefit our 600+ Member Churches in advancing their efforts to reduce their "Carbon Footprints on the Earth."

Over the last three months a committee chaired by our president, Richard Berman, and our executive director, Sue Gabrielson, along with Corporate Partners Dead River Company, Efficiency Maine, and Maine Interfaith Power & Light have been creating a program with 3 goals in mind:

1. To create opportunities for our Member Churches to **Save Money** in their purchasing of oil/ propane, and electricity.

2. To assist our Member Churches in Conserving Energy by offering free energy evaluations, low cost energy audits, and low interest loans to make **Conservation** improvements such as insulation, weatherization, and window treatments etc.

3. To assist our Member Churches in receiving financial incentives to become more **Efficient** in their energy consumption through the use of high efficiency lighting, heat pumps, on demand hot water heaters, solar installations, and other renewable energy initiatives.

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 that it is creating partnerships of Faith Communities, the State and Private Business to achieve good works.

We are planning on a Fall 2015 offering of this program and look forward to serving our Churches.

Scott Tibbets, Maine State Housing Authority, and Jerry Dewitt, Tri-County Mental Health, recently attended the Maine Council of Churches board of directors meeting in Brunswick, Maine, to inform the churches of the state how they can help in the Point in Time Survey to be conducted January 28, 2015. This annual HUD effort attempts to count those homeless veterans and all people without a place to live in the state of Maine. Pictured here are Scott Tibbets, Maine State Housing Authority, Marci Clark, MCC representative to the Maine Military Leadership Commission, Jerry DeWitt, Volunteer coordinator for the Point in Time survey, Tri-County Mental Health, Rev. Sue Gabrielson, executive director of Maine Council of Churches.



MCC Welcomes New Directors

Cush Anthony, *Unitarian Universalist*

Cush is a retired lawyer, mediator, director of advocacy at Portland's Community Counseling Center, and state legislator, as well as a longtime advocate for peace and justice issues. He spent a month in the summer of 2009 teaching mediation in Rwanda and Burundi in association with the Society of Friends (Quakers). He currently works with immigrants from African countries who have settled in the Portland area.



He is a member of Maine Immigrant Rights Coalition, and also serves on the steering committee of the Maine Unitarian Universalist State Advocacy Network. He is on the board of Furniture Friends as well as the

Restorative Justice Institute of Maine. A graduate of Amherst College and the University of Michigan Law School, Cush lives in Falmouth with his wife, Karen. They have four children who live in Vermont, Virginia, Hawaii, and Moscow, Russia.

Diane Dicranian, *Religious Society of Friends (Quaker)*

Diane is a member of the Winthrop Center Friends Church. She serves on New England Yearly Meeting Ministry and Council, quarterly meeting coordinating committee and New England Yearly Meeting Peace and Social Justice

committee. She is actively involved in fundraising for the Friends New Underground Railroad which courageously assists persecuted LGBTQ Ugandans to flee to safety outside of



Uganda. Diane is a Literacy Volunteer tutor, a member of the Central Maine Time Bank and active in issues of local food insecurity. Her studies at Bangor Theological Seminary, combined with her love of design, led her to a career in stained glass. Diane lives in Mercer, Maine with her partner of 33 years, Jacquie Powers. Together they built a passive solar home which they share with their two great danes, three cats and a pet rabbit.

MCC also extends our thanks to to outgoing board members Donna Yellen and Rev. Angela Tarbox for their service.

Advocating for New Mainers

(continued from page 1)

For New Mainers, General Assistance provides a lifeline, but only for a temporary period, while they are applying for asylum and before they have received employment authorization. Even as they receive assistance, and before they are allowed to work, they are contributing thousands of hours of volunteer service through the workfare program and through dozens of local nonprofits. Those who have work permits are paying taxes. The economic benefits they are already bringing to our state, and will continue to bring, are tremendous.

Both the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures remind us 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. Both Jesus and Martin Luther King 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. In the words of Dr. King, “We are caught up in an

inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all of us indirectly.” The decisions we make in the months ahead will affect not only the immigrants in our midst; they will affect all of us. These decisions are not simply a matter of dollars and cents. In the end, these decisions are about who we are as a state, and the values we hold.

As people of faith, we must remind our elected officials that a budget is a moral document. Their decisions have moral and ethical implications. Cutting off GA for the most vulnerable, high-potential members of our society, simply because of where they were born, will not make their need for food or shelter evaporate. It will simply leave them homeless, hungry, and destitute. The results would be catastrophic.

Please join us in this important advocacy effort. Contact your State Senator and Representative and let them know that these issues matter to you, as a person of faith and goodwill. Urge them to make the right and just and compassionate decision: to preserve General Assistance for New Mainers.

THANK YOU TO OUR DONORS 2014-15*!!

Denominations

Maine Conference United Church of Christ
 Maine Episcopal Missionary Society
 New England Conference United Methodist Church
 New England Synod Evangelical Lutheran Church of America
 No. New England District Unitarian Universalist Assn.
 Synod of the New England Presbyterian

Churches

American Baptist Churches of Maine
 Bartlett Memorial UMC
 The Cathedral of St. Luke Church of Universal Fellowship
 Falmouth Congregational Church
 Falmouth Quarterly Friends Meeting
 Farmington Friends Meeting
 First Congregational Church, Wiscasset
 First Parish Church Brunswick
 First Parish Church, Gorham
 First Universalist Church, South Paris
 Foreside Community Church UCC
 Hammond Street Congregational Church
 HopeGateWay

Lewiston Friends Meeting
 South Congregational Church
 St. Michael's Parish, Auburn
 Somesville Union Meeting House UCC
 United Parish Congregational Harrison
 Vassalboro Friends Meeting
 Woodfords Congregational Church

Individuals

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 Sara Bancroft
 William Barter
 Richard Berman
 Merrill Bittner & Nancy Noppa
 Margrethe & William Brown
 Richard Bullock
 William & Karen Burke
 Janie Clark
 Faith & Roger Comstock
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*Gifts received
 11/8/14 – 4/27/15

Every effort has been made to ensure the completeness and accuracy of this list. Please send any corrections to sgabrielson@mainecouncilofchurches.org. Thank you!

Moving Toward Peace

On Sunday, May 3rd, the Maine Council of Churches presented its annual ecumenical service. MCC gathered with neighbors and friends for music, prayer, and a time of reflection to celebrate the way God's love unites us as one human family. Clergy and laity from several different faith traditions participated, with Rev. Allen Ewing-Merrill, co-pastor of HopeGateWay United Methodist community, preaching.

Moving Toward
PEACE:

Learning to love those we do not like

an ecumenical worship gathering
 sponsored by the Maine Council of Churches

Sunday, May 3, 2015 | 3 pm
 at Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church
 524 Allen Avenue, Portland



Standing Shoulder to Shoulder

Maine Faith leaders stand in support of Muslim community in the wake of vandalism



The following is a statement by Maine faith leaders who gathered at the University of Southern Maine on Tuesday, April 7 at an event called, "**Neighbors Standing Shoulder to Shoulder**," to speak against hate and violence and celebrate the values of the Golden Rule:

We live in an environment of increasing uncertainty and fear for the future. At times like these, it is not uncommon that hearts turn in fear towards those whom we perceive as different. In response to the offensive anti-Muslim graffiti spray-painted on the Portland Halaal Market on Sunday morning, we, as people of faith who live in Greater Portland, stand in support with Mr. Mahdi Ahmed and the local Muslim community. That act is not simply a crime against Portland's Muslim community or people of other ethnicity in our city, it is an act against all who stand for the basic tenets of freedom, justice, and peace no matter what our religion, our race, our ethnicity, or our country of origin. We refuse to be complicit in the commission of such acts by remaining silent. "We invite supporters from our many traditions to stop by the market to offer words of support. Put a face to those who were wronged and extend a hand in peace. Let this incident open us to a conversation about our changing world and how we can live together as neighbors who share values. Let us demonstrate to Mr. Ahmed, his family, and his community that Mainers support Mainers."

Rev. Sue Gabrielson

Executive Director, Maine Council of Churches
Minister at Unitarian Universalist Churches in Saco and Sanford

Rev. Lori H Whittemore

Abbey of HOPE

Mr. Reza Jalali

USM Multicultural Student Affairs

Rt. Rev. Stephen T. Lane

Episcopal Bishop of Maine

Rev. Jeannette A. Good, PhD, Pastor

State Street Church, United Church of Christ

Ms Samaa Abdurraqib

ACLU Maine

Rev. Lyn Marshal

Unitarian Universalist Minister

Rev. Mykel Johnson

Unitarian Universalist Minister

Mr. Steve Brinn, Board President

Ellie Miller, Interim Executive Director

Jewish Community Alliance of Southern Maine

Rev. Carolyn U. Lambert

Pastor, Woodfords Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

Rabbi Jared H. Saks

Congregation Bet Ha'am

Rev. Mia Dyson

Wellspring Multifaith Center

Mr. Dazu Kodo Justin Park

Emergent Zen (Portland, ME sangha of Hollow Bones Rinzai Zen Order)

Fr. Richard E. Senghas

Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, Diocese of Portland

Rabbi Gary Berenson

Congregation Etz Chaim

Rabbi Carolyn Braun

Temple Beth El, Portland

Rev. Sara Ewing-Merrill

HopeGateWay UMC

Rev. Allen Ewing-Merrill

HopeGateWay UMC

Rabbi Darah R. Lerner

Congregation Beth El, Bangor

Rev. Patricia Ellen

The Chaplaincy Institute of Maine



Faith in Action

“Love Your Neighbor, Feed the Hungry” Testimonial

Love Your Neighbor Feed the Hungry is a program developed collaboratively with Catholic Charities Maine, the Episcopal Diocese of Maine, and Hannaford Supermarkets. This program is a “Study Circles” modeled program. It comes with detailed instructions, videos, and suggested research and press articles and suggestions for prayer and can be lay or clergy led. Details about the program can be found on our website or by calling Rev. Sue for more information. Here is what one participant in the program had to say:

Starting this past January a group of parishoners from St Andrew's Episcopal Church met with members of Winthrop Center Friends to discuss the problem of food insecurity using the Feed Your Neighbor program. We met for a simple meal once a week, watched the video and were guided in our ensuing discussions by Maggie Edmonson, pastor at Winthrop Center Friends Church. Our group averaged 7-8 people, winter often made scheduling difficult. During the first week we had JoEllen Cottrell from the Winthrop Food Pantry visit to share her outlook and insights. Jeni Lewis invited State Representative Craig Hickman (D-Readfield) to an evening to hear his thoughts on how government is responding to

the food insecurity problem in Maine. It was not encouraging to hear how little government is doing to solve this problem. Ideas of next steps have been discussed, some organizations such as Bread For the World and Food Democracy Now are being investigated as items for action but we are really more concerned with our neighbors. Jacquie Powers has contacted her town to set up a possible distribution in town of excess garden produce this summer, and we are working to find opportunities to glean already picked fields as a source of quality produce. Some of the other ideas were edible landscapes, encouraging more home gardens and freezing/canning of produce, and increasing awareness of available local food.

MCC Launches New Web Site

Take a look at our dynamic new website, www.maineCouncilofchurches.org, recently revamped to better serve churches, donors, denominations and the public at large.

It shows programs sponsored by the Maine Council of Churches and our partners, legislation we're following in Augusta and news tips about events that fulfill our mission “to inspire congregations and persons of faith to unite in good works that build a culture of justice, compassion and peace.”

It also includes a directory of Maine churches in all nine of our denominations.

We want the website to showcase compelling programs and events by individual churches so they can be shared by other churches around the state. If your church has something to share, notify us at info@mainecouncilofchurches.org or 207-772-1918.

AND DON'T FORGET: go to the web page to sign up for our weekly email blasts!

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