

Maine Council of Churches

Seeking common ground, working for the common good

BETSY PARSONS: OPEN TO THE CALL OF THE SPIRIT WHICH GIVES US OUR SONG

In memory of our dear sister in the faith, Betsy Parsons (May 8, 1954 – September 5, 2019), and in celebration of her extraordinary life and witness, we dedicate this issue of our newsletter

By Rev. Jill Saxby, former Executive Director of MCC

Betsy Parsons had a special gift for be-friending. It's been rather amazing over this past year to discover just how many dear friends Betsy had. In her personal Credo (written many years ago for her home church, Allen Avenue UU), Betsy wrote about "the Spirit of Infinite Love that sings to us and never stops, the Spirit that gives us our song and asks us to sing it." Every one of us, at some point, heard Betsy's own unique song, and it changed our hearts, in ways large and small. And hearts can change everything.

She was good at befriending because she had courage. The courage to be open-hearted, to be vulnerable, to trust. And not only with obvious friends and allies: I've heard several stories of times she crossed dividing lines to unexpectedly befriend someone opposing her in the public arena. She was good at befriending because she remained curious and grateful, open to wonder and awe.

She had the courage to risk showing up, as she did for my late husband during his illness, as she did for me, as she did for so many of us -- even if it meant standing close to another's pain that couldn't be fixed. She had the courage to be honest about her own suffering. And through that honesty, in the last months of her life, she connected many of her friends with each other for the first time.

And she had faith that, beyond power and politics, beyond fear and facades, something precious can be

discovered in each person we meet and cherished in ourselves.

Betsy loved Fred Small's song "Everything Possible." And she knew -- as the song says -- "if you give your friends the best part of yourself, they'll give the same back to you. ... And the only measure of your words and your deeds will be the love you leave behind when you're done."



When I was arrested and spent some time in jail following our direct action "pray-in"; in Senator Collins' office on December 7, 2017, after a long and exhausting day, when my friends and I were finally

released from jail well after midnight, guess whose face I saw first upon being released? Yes, Betsy's. There she was, smiling, arms outstretched, waiting to greet us, to offer support (see photo). I don't know if I ever told her just how much that meant to me. We will continue to embody all the gifts we have received from Betsy, and whenever we stand for what is right and true, whenever we witness for justice, whenever we labor for progress, I know she'll be right there among us, cheering us on, whispering a word of encouragement and imparting her strength to bolster our words and actions. Thank you, dear Betsy. Thank you. Well done, good and faithful servant.

Rev. Allen Ewing-Merrill is the UMC representative to the Council and Executive Director of The BTS Center

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

After four years as President of the Board of Directors of the Maine Council of Churches, I am stepping down from that office in January. I know that I am leaving the Board's leadership in good hands, and I look forward to continuing to serve as a member of the Board.

With each passing year, my respect for our board members, executive director and partners has grown; I've been inspired by their profound spirituality, passion and commitment to the fundamental elements of our mission – working in concert, with God's grace, to build a culture of justice, compassion and peace. Although our member denominations have been reduced to seven, vulnerable people and our vulnerable Earth need our organization and its 55,000 congregants now more than ever.

Reflecting on my tenure, there are a few moments that have been particularly meaningful to me:

- Watching newly-minted faith-based advocates call for a moral budget in an impromptu news conference just minutes after the Governor announced cuts to welfare benefits. It was the culmination of our first Interfaith Advocacy Days, where participants learn skills to promote moral values.
- Carrying Maine Council of Churches' placard in this past year's Pride Parade, flanked by Maine's incoming and outgoing Episcopal bishops. It was a sign that times have changed at the Council of Churches.
- Holding a somber State House vigil for the 418 Mainers who died from overdoses the previous year: we held a scroll with 418 silhouettes that stretched from the Senate chamber to the House, afterwards, the sound of our songs and prayers drifted down from the balcony to the Rotunda below.
- Being empowered by Rev. William Barber's fiery call for justice at the Poor People's Campaign rally in Portland this October.

It has been an honor to serve as President and I have drawn wisdom from the people whose paths I have crossed --from Rev. Barber of the Poor People's Movement to Presiding Episcopal Bishop Michael Curry, from balladeers Paul and Mary Stookey, to Betsy Parsons, to whom I will always be grateful for helping save the Rainbow Ball. It was a safe haven for students at my son's school - a weekend of workshops where they could explore their gender identity and sexual orientation, and dance together free from scorn. I have learned that though the styles of religious leaders may differ and their voices may be strident or soft, the message they spread is the same one – God's love is within us and it's our charge to spread God's love to all.



Bishops Brown and Lane and Bonny Rodden at the Portland Pride Parade in June

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE FROM MCC PUBLIC POLICY COMMITTEE CO-CHAIRS



We begin with a **generous THANK YOU** to all the folks who contributed to a very busy legislative season this past year. The first session of the 129th Legislature was packed with so many bills we people of faith care deeply about. Thanks to a team of passionate and prolific committee members, Maine Council of Churches showed up and spoke up on bills related to healthcare, housing, food scarcity, general assistance, prison reform, opioid use prevention and treatment, vaccinations, climate change, responsible gun ownership, conversion therapy, and reproductive health. We look forward to

a short second session where we will follow five carry-over bills:

LD 1429 An Act to Fund Opioid Use Disorder Prevention and Treatment

LD 1410 An Act to Create Paid Family and Medical Leave Benefits

LD 1492 An Act To Reform Drug Sentencing Laws

LD 1572 An Act to Enact the Maine Fair Chance Housing Act

LD 51 An Act to Implement the Recommendations of the Task Force on Health Care Coverage for All of Maine

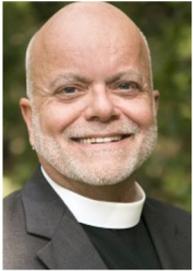
Our faith-based advocacy is a vital part of shaping a moral agenda and ensuring our values are well represented. Together, we keep the faith voice present in the political process and accessible to the elected leaders. If you are interested in joining our committee, we would be thrilled to have you.

Rev. Carie Johnsen, minister@augustauu.org

John Hennessey, jhennessy@episcopalmaine.net

MCC OPPOSES PEOPLE'S VETO OF VACCINE BILL

By Rev. Dr. William Barter, ELCA representative to the Council



It has been a long time since the church has condemned science. We now appreciate the value of gifted and ethical scientists, their advances seen as a gift from God to cure diseases and improve the human condition. Gifted and ethical scientists have created vaccines that prevent potentially devastating and fatal diseases. In 1998, Dr. Andrew Wakefield, a British gastroenterologist, described a fictitious phenotype that he said linked common vaccines to autism. His data were entirely fabricated, and he was eventually found guilty of ethical, medical, and scientific malpractice. The vaccine hoax is described by the medical community as possibly

creating the worst health crisis in 100 years, as parents perpetuate the hoax in refusing to vaccinate their children. In short order, a world that had been made safer and healthier by the eradication of many diseases, is now at risk of losing the vital “herd immunity” that keeps us well. People on chemotherapy, and those with immune disorders, whose childhood vaccines lose their potency, depend on society’s overall immunity to remain healthy and avoid unnecessary sickness or even death. A person with HIV, for example, can usually suppress the HIV virus with daily medication, but HIV still renders vaccines ineffective. A society with immunity protects people with HIV and the millions of others who are similarly compromised.

As a person of faith, I cannot morally reconcile my social conscience with the actions of those who would knowingly harm others to allay fears caused by a hoax. As a child abuse expert, I cannot understand why any parent would allow a child to be vulnerable to a disease that could disable or kill. As a person surviving HIV every day, I cannot imagine a society in which the misguided notions of a few could end my life. I was relieved and very grateful for the action of the legislature and governor in limiting vaccine exemptions. They sent a message that community health matters, and that my life matters. A people’s veto of the legislation is poorly informed and sadly unethical.

(During the recent legislative session, the Maine Council of Churches publicly supported passage of LD 798 “An Act To Protect Maine Children and Students from Preventable Diseases by Repealing Certain Exemptions from the Laws Governing Immunization Requirements,” and we oppose a people’s veto of this bill.)

MAINE'S WELCOME OF ASYLUM SEEKERS CONTINUES TO INSPIRE

By *Martha Stein, Executive Director of Hope Acts, and Rev. Sara Ewing-Merrill, Executive Director of Greater Portland Family Promise*

When more than 300 asylum seekers arrived in Portland last June, faith communities that had quietly started initiatives to assist immigrants several years ago stepped up in a big way to ensure that Maine's newest neighbors will not only survive here but feel that we truly "love our neighbors as ourselves." The Yarmouth



Compassionate Housing Initiative, founded by three churches, and the Mid-Coast New Mainers Group, founded by Bath/Brunswick area faith communities are just two examples among many of faith in action. In Portland, Hope Acts and Greater Portland Family Promise were among the first faith-based groups to take the lead.

Hope Acts, founded by the Hope Gateway faith community, is the only organization in the state that provides transitional housing for asylum seekers in addition to classes and services. This

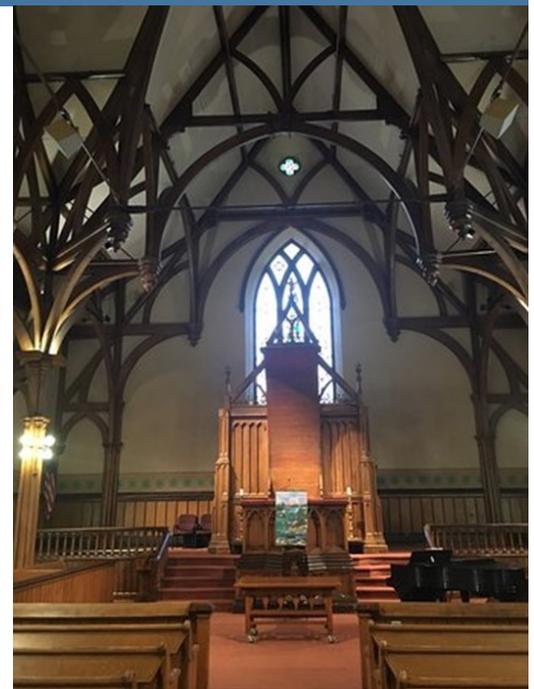
past summer, the residents, volunteers and staff of Hope Acts got involved with offering immediate assistance to the newly arrived asylum seekers. Their staff and volunteers organized English classes at King Middle School and welcomed our newest Mainers to participate in activities and classes at Hope House. Hope House residents, all of whom are asylum seekers who have been in the U.S. for a short time, quickly went to work as translators, cooks, food servers and more.

EXPANDING OUR COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS PROJECT

Thanks to generous grants from the Sam L. Cohen Foundation, the Haney Fund, and First Parish UCC in Brunswick, MCC is now expanding our program of dialogue groups bringing New and Long-time Mainers together in Biddeford, Portland and Westbrook. After human rights educator Steve Wessler trained a cohort of volunteer facilitators, we began the assessment phase of gathering first-person stories of bias and prejudice experienced by our immigrant neighbors in these communities. These will be used as the basis of facilitated dialogues designed to reduce bias, eliminate stereotypes, and strengthen cross-cultural relationships.

In one recent assessment focus group, a New Mainer from Ethiopia shared his experience searching for housing: "There was a vacant sign in the apartment building window, but when I knocked on the door and they saw that I am an immigrant, they quickly said the unit was already rented and they wouldn't even let me see it."

During assessment interviews we also ask for experiences of kindness. One Congolese woman shared this: "When we first arrived, the [local] church gave us money for food. They gave us furniture, sheets, pots, pans, everything. We had been sleeping on the floor during the winter, but when the church members found out, they showed up that day with beds and sheets and pillows. All immigrants come to an empty house, but because of this church, our homes weren't empty for long!"



THANK YOU, FIRST PARISH UCC, BRUNSWICK!

MCC is grateful for a generous grant from FPUCC that will help us expand our Community Conversations project bringing New and Long-time Mainers together for facilitated dialogues.

I CRIED TO YOU FOR HELP: MAINE'S OPIOID AND OVERDOSE CRISIS



MCC Hosts Statewide Symposium on the Faith Community's Response

Lighting candles in remembrance of all those who have died from overdose, Rev. Erica Poellot, Director of Faith and Community Partnerships for the National Harm Reduction Coalition, opened MCC's May 21 symposium with prayer. 40 faith leaders, clergy and lay, attended this all-day workshop held at First Universalist Church in Auburn featuring speakers from the recovery community, faith communities, law enforcement, service providers and public policy advocates, and made possible by a generous grant from Open Society Foundations. Participants received free Naloxone kits after a training in its administration led by Jesse Harvey of the Church of Safe Injection. Five congregations were spotlighted for their efforts to address substance use disorder and overdose: Bangor Interfaith Coalition, The Episcopal Church of St. Mary in Falmouth, First Universalist Church of Auburn, HopeGateWay United Methodist Community in Portland, and Woodfords Congregational Church in Portland.

"We can't arrest our way out of this problem," Kennebunk police Chief Bob MacKenzie and Health Equity Alliance (Bangor) Executive Director Kenney Miller told the assembly. Instead, faith leaders were equipped to reframe the theological conversation away from judgment, stigma and shame and toward a theology of compassionate care.

In her closing remarks, MCC Executive Director Rev. Jane Field encouraged faith leaders to remember that those suffering from substance use disorder may not be able to get compassionate care if we in the faith community continue harboring theologically toxic attitudes toward them—using the language of shame and sin to perpetuate stigma, dehumanizing our most vulnerable neighbors by calling them "addicts" or "junkies," defining them solely by a behavior or a pathology or a disease, rather than as a beloved child of God. "A person is always more than their drug use and distilling someone down to just that one thing is a violation of their humanity. When we Christians do this, we fail to see God in them; we fail to see the face of Christ in their faces."

MCC has created a free resource packet for communities of faith, available for download (<http://mainecouncilofchurches.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Overdose-Crisis-event-resource-packet-as-pdf.pdf>) that includes program ideas, adult education resources, prayers, liturgies and a sample sermon.

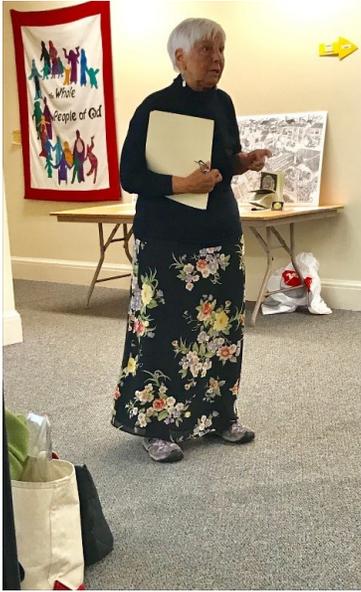
"WE MUST DO MORE!"

National Leaders of Poor People's Campaign Come to Portland

"Forward together, not one step back!" chanted the more than 300 people who gathered in Portland's Lincoln Park October 10 to march down Congress Street with Rev. Dr. William Barber and Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis, co-chairs of the National Call for Moral Revival. Portland was the third stop on the Campaign's national tour, which is designed to unite people across the country to challenge the evils of systemic racism, poverty, the war economy, ecological devastation and what they call "the nation's distorted morality." Members of MCC's Board of Directors, along with leaders and laity of our member denominations joined the march, destined for First Parish UU Church where the evening's music and message emphasized that the Hebrew and Christian scriptures are clear: God will judge every nation by how they care for the most vulnerable and those on the margins. The Campaign is looking forward to a national gathering in Washington DC on June 20, 2020.



ANDY BURT HELPS CHURCHES GET “DOWN TO EARTH”



Maine Council of Churches’ environmental justice advocacy volunteer and former staff member Anne D. (“Andy”) Burt has created a climate justice ministry in storytelling and filmmaking that she is bringing to congregations throughout Maine and beyond. Her ministry is supported in part by a grant from New England Yearly Meeting (Religious Society of Friends) Legacy Fund.

Andy has produced two films focused on Maine climate activists and climate solutions that inspire hope and action, as well as complementary materials and resources for reflection, discussion and action that lend themselves to religious education classes and/or workshops for middle school through adults. The free films and materials can be downloaded from the Down to Earth website (www.downtoearthstories.org).

Andy is available to present the films and relevant materials and lead discussion in a workshop setting. She may be contacted at downtoearth145@gmail.com or at 380-5387. She would gratefully accept an honorarium to cover her travel expenses. In the photo, Andy Burt leads a climate justice workshop at First Congregational Church, South Portland.

MCC SENDS A MAINE MILLENIAL TO BREAD FOR THE WORLD FLY-IN

By Ophelia Hu Kinney, Worship Coordinator at HopeGateWay, Portland:

On September 24-25, I had the opportunity to attend the Interfaith Working Group’s advocacy fly-in with Bread for the World and speak with the staff for Representative Chellie Pingree and Senators Angus King and Susan Collins in Washington, D.C. Twelve millennial faith leaders flew in from around the country to state the case for increased support of U.S. foreign assistance for food and nutrition. With Bread’s Regional Organizer Margaret Tran as my guide, I spoke about our moral imperative to help ensure the thriving of those around the world who experience hunger. Even while those in our own state experience food insecurity and hunger, Maine people of faith recognize the need to advocate for a world where the circumstance of one’s birth do not determine one’s well-being, especially when the cost to ensure a person’s nutritional and food needs are so low. And yet, hunger still plagues our neighbors near and far.

The fly-in was a humbling and encouraging experience. I shared with Maine’s congressional delegation that I’m the daughter of two immigrants who relied on federal benefit programs during their first years in the United States in order to feed our family (help for which we are eternally grateful), and I shared stories of Mainers who are experiencing hunger right now.

With both Maine’s senators and Representative Pingree in support of strengthened U.S. support for foreign food assistance, Maine is well positioned to continue acting as a leader in the realm of U.S. foreign assistance to those experiencing the deepest need.



Senator Angus King speaking with Ophelia Hu Kinney



Margaret Tran of Bread for the World and Ophelia Hu Kinney

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