Inspired by speakers, prayers and song at this year’s Faith-Based Advocacy Days, participants closed the final session by writing on a virtual white board what they will do to sway elected officials to support the Maine Council of Churches’ moral agenda. In the past, MCC has sponsored “Faith-Based Advocacy Days,” in Augusta at the beginning of the two-year legislative session. But this year, due to the pandemic, the program was held online.

continued page 6
FROM THE PRESIDENT

This time last spring, I was writing my very first president’s message for the Maine Council of Churches. As I reflect on the year we have been through together, I am amazed at the resilience, flexibility, ingenuity, persistence, and courage that individuals of faith, religious communities, and world-bettering organizations throughout our state have exhibited in the face of global pandemic, economic turmoil, political upheaval, and social and economic injustice.

Think back to what you – and the organizations you are affiliated with – were doing at this time in 2020. Most of us were under stay-at-home orders. We were a couple of months into figuring out how to “do” remote work/church/interpersonal relationships. We were anticipating warmer summer days and opportunities to get outside after what seemed like an interminable winter and spring. And, after only two months of COVID, we were looking forward to getting back to “normal.”

Over a year later, I still hear many people yearning for “normality” – and I understand where the desire comes from. But a few weeks back, I attended a workshop with church consultant Paul Nickerson. He offered this piece of insight: “If we go back and do exactly what we were doing 15 months ago, all we will be doing is managing our decline.”

The comment has stuck with me ever since I heard it. The past fifteen months have offered so many valuable lessons about doing things differently and embracing transformation – and the Maine Council of Churches has worked to support and bolster us, as people and communities of faith, in our learning trajectories. As we look toward the future, I hope that we will address some crucial questions. With over a year of coronavirus under our belt, what might (should?) we consider letting go of? What might (should?) we hold onto?

Regardless of where our discernment processes may lead, let us remember that the Force of Love that undergirds the entire universe constantly accompanies us ... perhaps most closely in the midst of instability and change. Take good care, and keep your senses open for glimpses of the Holy.
Please Consider Remembering MCC
in Estate Planning

Planned giving gives you the opportunity to provide for MCC in your financial planning. We cannot forecast the future, but it is good to know that your legacy will be used to continue the work of the Council for years to come. There are also tax benefits for you and your family in planned giving; it is possible to provide for your family while also providing for MCC. Consult with your legal advisor, bank, or financial planner. Call us for more information at (207) 772-1918 if we can assist you as you make your decisions or if you wish to discuss or explore your options with us.
After a long and challenging year, congregations are eager to gather once again and reconnect in person with their church community, especially as more people become fully vaccinated. As weather improves, outdoor options are re-emerging. But even as we affirm that the church is not a building, the pressure to behave otherwise is powerful—some congregants see returning to an indoor sanctuary that they’ve always found spiritually nourishing to be the top priority.

Exhausted pastors who have been under pressure to become technical production wizards during the pandemic lockdown now face new pressure to create perfectly staged hybrid worship services to meet a wide range of needs and demands, all while ensuring that safety protocols are in place and followed by those gathering in person.

But there are larger questions about the shape of ministry and a pastor’s job description during this transitional time of threshold-crossing. While pastors have learned to become technically adept at creating a once-a-week online service, pastoral care and other important responsibilities have consumed more of their time than ever. The work of all church leaders, clergy and laity, has become more complex and demanding.

So what is the shape of ministry during this phase of COVID-19 and beyond? Church leaders should take time now to reflect and plan for how to be church in the future and how it will be different (even better?) than pre-pandemic.

In her recent article, “This could be the hardest period of pandemic for pastors,” ecumenical clergy and congregational coach Rev. Laura Stephens Reed suggests this is a time for discernment. Reviewing a pastor’s job description and clarifying mutual expectations is a place to begin. Everyone may be tired and anxious to “put this all behind us,” but we need to stick to our commitment to bear one another’s burdens and respect the toll this pandemic continues to take, especially on disenfranchised folks on the margins—the poor, people of color, the homeless, the unemployed.

As we move into an uncharted future, here are some questions for clergy and laity to explore together:

- What tasks has our pastor taken on that may now be shared? How do we make that transition?
- What are we hearing from the larger community about its hopes and needs at this stage of the pandemic and how might we contribute in ways that align with our values and gifts?
- What opportunities have emerged to help us be creative in this situation?
- Meeting online has increased accessibility to our worship and programs, especially for those who could not otherwise participate (including shut-ins and even former members who have relocated)—how do we shift resources (including the pastor’s time) to preserve that gain?
- Though many will soon be fully vaccinated, others who may have life-threatening medical conditions and cannot be vaccinated need us to help protect them. How do we ensure everyone’s safety as we begin to re-open our buildings?
An important resource every church leadership team should consult during their discernment process is Wisconsin Council of Churches’ “Returning to Church 2.0” (https://www.wichurches.org/2021/01/14/returning-to-church/). The following charts from that guide are especially helpful when used with data from Maine’s COVID tracking site which is updated every day by 9:30am: https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecd/infectious-disease/epi/airborne/coronavirus/data.shtml

While acknowledging the profound trauma and devastating loss associated with COVID-19, we can also recognize that this season of pandemic has given us a unique and important opportunity to rediscover what it truly means to be the church. In many ways, it has strengthened our conviction that church is not the building; rather, it is the people “gathered” and committed to doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God. And it has revealed resilience, creativity and courage that we had forgotten were ours.

“Planning worship in this time of pandemic is like trying to get an octopus into a paper bag,” quipped one clergy respondent to the re:worship website’s COVID-19 survey. (https://pandemicworshipsurvey.blogspot.com/)

Illustration credit: By permission of Mini Grey (minigrey-blog.com)
“Maine Council of Churches being overt, proactive, and vocal provides a counterweight to the super-conservative religious groups,” State Senator Cathy Breen said during an interview that aired February 23 in the first of four online sessions.

Also in session #1, a panel of faith leaders responded to the question: “Who invited God to Augusta?” They shared the theological and scriptural foundation of their activism and described what gave them hope. Presentations of three real-life case studies—eliminating the religious exemption for school vaccinations; funding to address the opioid and overdose crisis; and banning conversion therapy for LGBTQ youth—showed the impact of the progressive religious voice in recent years in the Maine legislature.

Session #2, on March 16, began with a challenge from keynote speaker Rev. Kenneth Lewis, Jr., senior pastor at Green Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church, to those seeking to put their faith into action: “be radical listeners.” The conversation explored why approaching advocacy through a lens where voices of color and voices of the marginalized are centered is imperative. Carolyn Silvius, representing Homeless Voices for Justice, said legislation, however well-intentioned, that doesn’t center the voices of those directly impacted, risks doing more harm than good. Following this panel presentation, attendees broke into small groups to learn beginner or advanced advocacy skills and strategies.

Session #3, on April 6, included speakers from Maine Conservation Voters and Maine Primary Care Association who offered an in-depth look at bills MCC is supporting and theologians who offered examples of how we might speak with the voice of faith to legislators about tribal sovereignty (LD 1626), eliminating PFAs (LD 1503), and expanding access to dental care for adults through MaineCare (LD 996).

In Session #4, on April 27, three former state legislators – Dick Farnsworth and Council board members Marge Kilkelly and Cushman Anthony—discussed how to speak with legislators. They all emphasized the importance of speaking up at public hearings even if you’re nervous. They agreed that legislators are much more likely to listen to everyday citizens than to lobbyists, and they encouraged faith-based advocates to speak from their hearts about personal stories and experiences related to the bill under consideration.

Each session included prayers, scripture readings and hymns led by Rev. Sara Ewing Merrill, pastor at HopeGateWay in Portland, along with members of her congregation. These moments of centering and reflection grounded the series in our spiritual traditions and inspired participants to take what they learned in this series and use it to become the advocates for justice that our faith calls us to be.

View the Faith-Based Advocacy Series on our YouTube Channel
Four Maine Congregations to Leave UMC

Four local congregations in Maine have voted to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church because of the denomination’s continued stance against marriage equality and prohibiting ordination of LGBTQ clergy.

The four (Chebeague Island, Brackett Memorial (Peaks Island), Tuttle Road, and HopeGateWay) are among the first United Methodist churches in the United States to break from the international denomination. Their decisions follow the 2019 special Conference in St Louis, when delegates from around the world met and affirmed a ban on LGBTQ+ inclusive practices (ordaining LGBTQ+ clergy and performing marriages for same-sex couples) by UMC Clergy and Conferences. Despite the denomination’s official policy on sexual orientation and gender identity, some UMC congregations have welcomed LGBTQ parishioners and some UMC clergy have performed marriages for same-sex couples. However, in recent years division between the factions in the UMC has intensified and, after the 2019 vote, ministers were warned they risked being put on trial by the denomination and losing their clerical status if they did not conform.

Congregations that opposed the policy were told they could leave the denomination but would incur significant financial obligations, in part so they could retain control of their church buildings which are owned by the denomination. “Unfunded pension liability” was another reason given for the high cost of disaffiliation.

After an intensive discernment process, the four congregations in the Greater Portland area chose to disaffiliate and their decision will be presented to the New England Conference of the UMC when it meets in June. (In 2016, the New England Conference voted 445-179 to no longer conform to The United Methodist Church’s discrimination against LGBTQ persons, but that vote was later ruled Conference by Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar to be in violation of the denomination’s Book of Discipline.)

Brackett Memorial UMC, now known as New Brackett Church, was the first congregation in Maine to decide to break from the denomination and the second in the United States. The church will be required to pay the denomination about $200,000—which is more than its entire annual budget. They have decided to adopt a new dual denominational affiliation with both the United Church of Christ and the Unitarian Universalist Association. (The other three churches who have voted to disaffiliate from the UMC have not yet decided on any future denominational affiliations.)

With more than 150 congregations in Maine, the United Methodist Church is the largest Protestant denomination in the state and one of the seven member denominations of the Maine Council of Churches.

Recommended reading:

The Church Cracked Open: Disruption, Decline, and New Hope for Beloved Community by Stephanie Spellers

This book will make a profound difference for the church in this moment in history.

-- The Most Reverend Michael B. Curry
This past year has forced us to look at the inequities that exist in our state and ask what we, who are people of faith, are willing to do in order to change this reality. As we study legislation this year, we seek to do so through a racial equity lens with input from those most affected by such policies. We have also joined with over 50 organizations and individuals to support a Vision for an Equitable Maine. We give thanks for our partner organizations and faith-based justice committees who share a similar moral agenda and help us to discern where voices of faith are most needed to speak up.

This is a legislative session like none before it. Hundreds of bills were left over from last year as everything shut down. Committees meet and hear public testimony remotely via Zoom. While this limits in-person relationship building with our legislators, it has allowed those who live a long distance from Augusta to more easily give testimony.

These are some of the bills MCC is supporting this session:

**Racial Equity**
- LD 2 Requiring the inclusion of racial impact statements for all legislation
- LD 1626 Tribal sovereignty
- LD 1034 Fully funding the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations
- LD 342 Permanent appointment of a member of the Wabanaki tribes to Marine Resources Advisory Council

**Climate Care**
- LD 125 Prohibit aerial spraying of glyphosate
- LD 489 Pine Tree Amendment
- LD 1503 Protect Mainers from exposure to PFAs

**Criminal Justice Reform**
- LD 546 Implement the recommendations for Juvenile Justice System improvements
- LD 1175 Prohibit excessive telephone, video and commissary charges in Maine's jails and prisons
- LD 967 Decriminalization of Drug Possession

**Health Care**
- LD 718 Closing coverage gaps in MaineCare and CHIP (Children's Health Insurance Program) coverage
- LD 996 Improve access to dental care for adults with low income
- LD 759 Amend the Child Endangerment Law to include certain unauthorized access to loaded firearms

And MCC is opposing LD 926, 1401, and 1238, bills that would allow discrimination against transgender persons; and LD 96 and LD 833, bills that would reinstate religious exemptions for vaccinations.
When the Penobscot Indian Nation established Four Directions Development Corporation twenty years ago, many of Maine’s churches and denominations supported the effort through the “Giving Winds” Campaign, extending loans to Four Directions that could be used to increase home ownership among tribal members, and to invest in tribal ventures and Native entrepreneurship. Many of these loans are now coming due, which presents an opportunity for churches who gave so generously two decades ago to give again—this time by forgiving the loan.

MCC Board Member Diane Dicranian is a member of the Midcoast Friends Meeting in Damariscotta, one of the congregations whose loan was up for renewal or forgiveness this year. “I wondered how others in the Meeting would feel about forgiving the loan,” she recounts. “We asked ourselves if we had needed the money while it was out on loan—had we gone without anything? The answer was no, we really had done okay not having that money available. Did we have a present need for that loaned money that could not be allocated in any other way? No, we did not. Could we forgive repayment of this loan as a way of giving to our Native friends again? Yes, we not only could, but we wanted to, and the sense of Midcoast Friends Meeting was to give again by forgiving the loan they had made.”

Diane, along with MCC Executive Director Jane Field and MCC Public Policy Committee Co-Chair John Hennessy, is currently serving on an advisory committee to Four Directions, helping them reach out to churches as loans come up for renewal, making sure those congregations know how much the gift of forgiveness would mean during this 20th anniversary year. If you have a loan outstanding, we look forward to speaking with you in the days ahead and hope you’ll consider forgiveness. If your congregation is interested in making a first-time loan, please let us know, as that gift would be greatly appreciated, too!

The Maine Council of Churches was the first religious organization to make a loan and then to forgive that loan. Our tribal siblings, the original stewards of this land we now call Maine, would greatly benefit if you would join us by forgiving your loan, too.

MCC: PROUD TO BE PART OF MAINESHARE

You may have noticed we always include the MaineShare logo in our newsletters, social media, e-news, and program PR—but what does it mean? It means we are one of 40+ MaineShare member organizations: forward-looking Maine nonprofit organizations who believe that an equitable and just Maine is worth working for. MaineShare raises funds for us through giving campaigns in more than 150 workplaces around the state. Since 1989, they have raised over $6 million of flexible, unrestricted operating funds for its member groups. This critical and rare unrestricted money makes organizations like ours more responsive and nimble, enables innovation, and provides fuel for growth. We are profoundly grateful for the support we get from MaineShare every year. If your workplace participates in MaineShare, please consider designating your gift to MCC. For more information, go to maineshare.org
Thank you to our 2020-2021 donors:

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Falmouth Quarterly Friends Meeting
Maine Association of New Jerusalem Churches
Maine Conference UCC
New England Conference UMC
New England Synod, ELCA
New England Yearly Meeting of Friends
Presbytery of Northern New England
Synod of the Northeast PCUSA
Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations
Vassalboro Quarterly Friends Meeting

Churches and Organizations
Acadia Friends Meeting
Brunswick Friends Meeting
BTS Center
Cathedral Church of St. Luke
Congregational Church in Cumberland UCC
Durham Monthly Meeting of Friends
Farmington Friends Meeting
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Hammond Street UCC
Midcoast Monthly Meeting of Friends
Mid-Coast Presbyterian Church
Narramissic Valley of Friends Meeting
Nasha Presbyterian Church
Portland Friends Meeting
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South Congregational Church UCC
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St. Paul's Episcopal Church
State Street Church UCC
The Episcopalian Church of Saint Mary
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Vassalboro Friends Meeting
Winthrop Center Friends Church
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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, 202 Woodford St., Portland, ME 04103.

*Gifts received 1/1/2020–5/1/2021
COMINGS AND GOINGS ON OUR BOARD OF DIRECTORS

MCC BOARD BIDS FAREWELL TO TREASURER MAC McCABE...

In January, Mac McCabe completed his two-year term as MCC’s Treasurer. His gentle spirit, humor, and love of a good story served the Council well during the difficult days of the pandemic. His expertise in helping non-profits navigate choppy financial waters was a Godsend when it came to guiding MCC through the PPP process. We wish him well as he pursues his vocation of coaching and consulting with entrepreneurs of color, non-profits, and businesses seeking to do good as they do well. Find out more about his work at macmccabe.wordpress.com

AND WE WELCOME BACK ED REA

We are delighted to welcome Ed back to our Board of Directors, where he will once again serve as Treasurer and Chair of the Finance Committee. The wisdom and expertise he gained during his years at the Office of Management and Budget in DC, and as an Executive Director of several non-profits, are gifts he brings that help MCC’s Board use our financial resources as tools to accomplish our mission—a means to an end, rather than an end in themselves. Ed is a member of St. Alban’s Episcopal Church in Cape Elizabeth, where he helps lead the Celtic Evening Prayer Services on Sunday evenings.

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The Maine Council of Churches is a 501(c)(3) organization. Contributions are tax-deductible to the full extent allowed by law.

Please mail this form with your gift to: Maine Council of Churches, 202 Woodford St, Portland, ME 04103. Thank you
YOUR SUPPORT MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE!

Again this year, rather than sending you a separate spring fundraising appeal letter, we have chosen to let our work speak for itself through our newsletter. The articles tell the story better than any fundraising letter ever could: the Maine Council of Churches makes a difference—in the life of our congregations, in the lives of people of faith and good will, and in the lives of our most vulnerable neighbors who need trusted allies and advocates to stand with them for justice, compassion and peace.

To do this work, we rely on your partnership, your prayers…and your pledges (annual or monthly donations). Generous donations from individuals and local congregations make up more than half of our operating budget (the remainder comes from member denominations’ annual support and from grants we receive for programs like Community Conversations and civil discourse symposia).

Inside, you will find a small white envelope with some BIG potential: When you use it to send us a tax-deductible donation, we will take your gift, combine it with the others we receive, and put it to work building a world where peace is built with justice and justice is guided by love.

Thank you for your generosity!