

Maine Council of Churches

*Seeking
common
ground,
working
for the
common
good*

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Bringing New and Long-time Mainers Together



Several MCC board members participated in Community Conversations in Lewiston. Here, organizer Steve Wessler, MCC's Bonny Rodden, and Halima Abdi enjoy a dinner graciously prepared by Somali group members.

On a snowy evening in a Lewiston laundromat, 16-year-old Zara and her mother, recent immigrants from Somalia, were doing their family's laundry. Zara had just moved wet clothes from the washer to the dryer, and walked over to get coins from her mother. When she returned, she found a white woman throwing

their clothes on the floor and kicking them around in the dirt and slush. "Go back where you came from!" she shouted at Zara before running out the door. Shaking, Zara bent over to pick up the wet, dirty clothes. As she knelt down, she felt a gentle hand on her shoulder and looked up to see a grey-haired white woman who said, "Not everyone feels that way. I am glad you are here." Together they put the clothes back into a washing machine. Zara

continued on page 3

WORKING TO ENSURE HEALTH CARE FOR ALL

Organizing a panel discussion on Question 2. Praying in city parks and civic centers. Visiting the office of Senator Susan Collins, again and again. Writing op-eds and letters to the editor. The Maine Council of Churches did all this and more in recent months as part of its commitment to ensuring all Mainers have access to adequate health care.

Question 2 – Medicaid Expansion



On Nov. 2, MCC hosted this panel of clergy who are also medical professionals (pictured: Bonny Rodden, Mitchell Stein, Rev. William M. Barter, Ph.D., Rev. Mia Dyson, RN, Rev. Suzanne G. Roberts, MD, MP) Panelists gave a faith-based perspective on the need for expanding Medicaid in Maine.

continued on page 6

In this issue

From the Executive Director	2
Farewell to Retiring Board Member	2
Successful Advocacy Days Return	3
Faith Leaders from Around Maine	
Stand in Solidarity with Immigrants	4

Speaking Out in Difficult Times	5
Advocating for the Arctic	5
Working to Ensure Health Care for All	6
2017 Donors	7

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From the Executive Director

Jesus taught his disciples, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in the midst of them." This summer and fall, the Maine Council of Churches has been given extraordinary opportunities to experience the truth of these familiar words.

In May, we hosted a luncheon for the bishops and conference minister representing five of our member denominations; during their time together, these faith leaders strengthened their personal relationships and renewed their mutual commitment to shared ministry for the common good. This fall, our Executive Committee and denominational representatives held one-on-one meetings with the leadership of each of our members to continue strengthening "the tie that binds our hearts" together.

During the summer, we participated in a series of prayer vigils followed by meetings with Senator Collins' staff to encourage the Senator to stand strong in her opposition to repeal of the Affordable Care Act, and on October 12, I was honored to be invited by Bishop Stephen Lane (Episcopal Diocese of Maine) to a personal meeting with Senator Collins where we thanked her for her courage in the health care battles, and urged her to oppose cuts to critical safety net programs in the upcoming budget debate in Washington.

Throughout this newsletter you will read more stories of the many places where we have gathered people together to pursue our mission of building a culture of compassion, justice and peace. And as Jesus promised, we have surely encountered the living, embodied and incarnate presence of God in our midst, calling us to do justice and love kindness as we walk forward humbly together.



Rev. Jane Field



FAREWELL TO RETIRING BOARD MEMBER

In October, Rev. Dr. Edward "Ted" Campbell retired from MCC's Board of Directors. Professor Emeritus at McCormick Theological Seminary, where he served on the faculty for 39 years, Ted is well known for his role in the archaeological excavation at Shechem and his authorship of the Anchor Bible Commentary on the Book of Ruth. He has served MCC for many years, and his quiet brilliance, genuine humility, gentle spirit and deep faith have been gifts to all who have had the privilege of serving with him.



COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS (continued)

thanked her and then went to get more coins from her mother. When Zara returned, the older white woman was gone, but she had used her own money to start the machine. “That woman healed my heart,” said Zara.

True stories like this one were shared during the “Community Conversations” project launched in Lewiston this fall by Maine People’s Alliance, Maine Community Integration and Maine Council of Churches. Funded by grants from George Soros’ Open Society Foundation and First Parish UCC, Brunswick, the program brought eleven small groups together for dinner and conversation. Half of each group were New Mainers (immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers) and half were people whose families have been in the U.S. for generations. Each group met twice for dinner and discussion facilitated by Steve Wessler (former prosecutor for the state’s attorney general’s office for civil rights and founder of the Center for Prevention of Hate).

Many of the long-time Mainers were shocked to hear accounts of bias, racism, threats and hate crimes experienced by New Mainers in Lewiston: families targeted by speeding vehicles as they crossed the street; women having their hijabs yanked off in the supermarket; high school students called the n-word; immigrant-owned stores vandalized; people setting their dogs loose on immigrant neighbors.

Designed to reduce the risk of bias and hate crimes, as well as strengthen relationships between people who don’t often interact, the Community Conversations project helped participants develop skills and strategies for reducing the risk of incidents and for speaking up on behalf of neighbors who are new to the United States. All participants were invited to a follow-up workshop offered in late November. The hope is that this project can be replicated in other cities in Maine in coming months.

To listen to the Maine Public radio story about this project, go to: <http://mainepublic.org/post/initiative-aims-clear-stereotypes-misconceptions-about-new-mainers>.

SUCCESSFUL ADVOCACY DAYS RETURN TO AUGUSTA IN 2018

Mark your calendars for the 2018 Interfaith Advocacy Days March 19 and 20th in Augusta. The theme will be “Faithful Citizenship.”

The program will include ways people of faith can become involved in the 2018 election process as well as advocacy training on issues likely to be considered in the next legislative session. Possible topics include the opioid crisis, racism/immigration, child poverty, health care and environmental justice.

The format will be similar to Interfaith Advocacy Days 2017 when more than 100 laity and clergy gathered at the South Parish Congregational Church on the first day for worship and workshops led by policy experts and theologians. The following day they met with legislators in the hallways of the Statehouse.

Registration will open in January and sponsors include: Maine Council of Churches, Maine Episcopal Network for Justice, Maine Unitarian Universalist State Advocacy Network, and Preble Street Faith Action Network.

On Thursday, October 12, Episcopal Bishop Stephen Lane (pictured on right in photo) invited MCC Executive Director Rev. Jane Field (at left in photo) to join him in meeting with Senator Susan Collins to thank her for her courageous stand in protecting access to health care. They also discussed concerns over the proposed budget resolution and tax cut proposal and the impact they could have on funding for crucial social safety net programs. (Also pictured: Commander Todd Bassett, Salvation Army).



FAITH LEADERS FROM AROUND MAINE STAND IN SOLIDARITY WITH IMMIGRANTS

On June 7, Maine Council of Churches leaders were among more than 100 clergy and other faith leaders gathered from every corner of the state, to fill the grand stairwell in the Hall of Flags at the Maine State House, all there to stand in solidarity with our immigrant, refugee, and asylum seeker neighbors.

Out of deep concerns over a rise in xenophobic policy and posturing, a group of Portland clergy developed and distributed a statement of solidarity and support and then collected signatures from over 200 clergy representing many different faith traditions and every county in Maine. At the press conference and rally they went public with the statement and invited all people of faith and conscience – to join them in affirming this statement:

As faith leaders of Maine, we affirm the worth, dignity, and human rights of all persons, regardless of their nationality, religion, or legal status. We stand with the immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in our state, as well as those yet to come. We commit to love our neighbors and to advocate for policies that protect the most vulnerable among us. We oppose the arrest, detainment, and deportation of undocumented immigrants. We call upon people of faith and conscience to join us.

“I signed on to this initiative having become deeply aware of the Christian obligation and call to welcome the stranger, particularly those fleeing persecution and in need of protection,” said Rev. Thom Blackstone, Ph.D., pastor of Pleasant Street United Methodist Church in Waterville. “Compassion is what unites the faith communities of our state.”



Rabbi Darah Lerner of Bangor speaks at the Immigrant Solidarity press conference.

LOCAL CONGREGATIONS CONNECT WITH MCC

MCC is grateful for the many ways local congregations across the state support the Council's efforts:

- South Parish UCC in Augusta hosted Interfaith Advocacy Days (and will again in 2018)
- St. Charles Borromeo Roman Catholic Church in Brunswick, the Unitarian Universalist Community Church in Augusta, and St. Ansgar Lutheran Church in Portland provide space for Council meetings
- HopeGateWay United Methodist Community and First Parish, Unitarian Universalist, in Portland both designated Sunday morning offerings as gifts to support our work
- St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Brunswick invited the Council to participate in its annual Outreach Fair, and also used our resource packet, "The Faithful Call for Civility," to hold an adult education program on civil discourse
- Woodfords Congregational Church in Portland hosted our Medicaid Expansion panel discussion
- Trinity Episcopal Church in Lewiston invited MCC Executive Director Rev. Jane Field to visit and talk about the work of the Council
- The Deacons of Midcoast Presbyterian Church in Topsham designated the Council to receive a financial gift in support of our work to eradicate poverty
- The Outreach Committee of First Parish UCC, Brunswick, provided a generous grant that paid for translators for the Community Conversation project
- Many other local congregations are faithful donors and we continue to be most grateful for their generous support (see a complete list on page 8)

Part of MCC's mission is "to inspire congregations to unite in good works," and it is our hope that these examples will inspire more congregations to join with us in building a culture of justice, compassion and peace.

SPEAKING OUT IN DIFFICULT TIMES

MCC occasionally issues public statements in response to current events. In recent months, we have spoken out about the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, the threat to end the DACA program, and the Las Vegas shooting. More than 3,000 people viewed these statements on our Facebook page, and we hope that our words offered comfort and challenge to those seeking a faithful response. Here are some excerpts:

On Charlottesville:

In the wake of events in Charlottesville this weekend, as we stand vigil, pray, and put our faith into action opposing hatred, racism, bigotry and prejudice, it is essential that we remember our own history, acknowledge the painful reality that racial hatred is still alive and well not only in Virginia but here at home, and accept that white privilege must be examined and dismantled as part of our faith-based response.

On DACA:

The Maine Council of Churches calls upon Congress to pass legislation quickly to protect Dreamers from deportation. ... President Trump's decision Tuesday to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program was denounced by the nine denominations that comprise the Maine Council of Churches, from Roman Catholics to Unitarian Universalists... Protecting the vulnerable, particularly children, is at the core of our faith's teaching.

On Las Vegas:

As people of faith, we are called to pursue peace. In the wake of this tragedy, let us recommit ourselves to the task of ending gun violence, in the name and spirit of the One who calls us to beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks.



ADVOCATING FOR THE ARCTIC



MCC Board President Bonny Rodden and John Hennessy, director of Maine's Episcopal Network for Justice, met with Senators Angus King and Susan Collins in Washington, D.C. in September urging them to continue their steadfast opposition to allowing oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. They were joined by the Rev. Martha Kirkpatrick, formerly King's environmental commissioner. Days later Senator King and Senator **Collins voted to protect the refuge but the amendment failed. Senator Collins was the only Republican to vote** against drilling. The two Maine advocates were guests of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, which represents Jewish and Christian organizations intent on protecting God's creation.

WHY SHOULD YOU CONSIDER PLANNED GIVING?

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 if we can help you with making decisions or provide more information.

WORKING TO ENSURE HEALTH CARE FOR ALL (continued)

Health care for vulnerable Mainers has been threatened at both the state and federal level, but Question 2 on the November ballot provided the opportunity to expand Medicaid (MaineCare) to thousands. MCC's Board of Directors voted to support passage of Question 2, and hosted a panel discussion, "A Faith-Based Perspective on the Need for Medicaid Expansion in Maine," featuring clergy who are also medical professionals: Rev. Dr. Bill Barter, Rev. Mia Dyson, RN, and Rev. Dr. Suzanne Roberts, and policy analyst Mitchell Stein. Voters approved the ballot question November 7 which authorizes the state to accept federal funds to pay for health care for approximately 70,000 Mainers not currently eligible for Medicaid (adults earning less than \$16,643 for a single person or \$22,412 for a family of two). The primary beneficiaries will be low-wage earners, such as working mothers, and older employees near retirement who can't get jobs with health benefits. Rural hospitals will have an infusion of funding, saving some of them from closing.

Defending The ACA

When misguided attempts were made to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act, faith leaders from different religious traditions gathered at Lobsterman Park in Portland and offered prayers for the health and well-being of all. Working with national partner Faith in Public Life, and Mainers for Accountable Leadership, they collected signatures on a Moral Declaration to Protect Health Care. Following each vigil, participants crossed the

street to visit Senator Collins' office, each time engaging in productive, respectful conversation with Congressional staffers. They called upon Senator Collins to remain firm in her opposition to unjust policy. She did, and the

Council is grateful she remained steadfast despite tremendous pressure from her party. "My faith leads me to this conviction: that as a society, we have a moral and ethical obligation to ensure that everyone – everyone – has access to health care," said Rev. Allen Ewing-Merrill, Maine Council of Churches Vice-President and organizer of the vigils. "We must come to see health care as a basic human right, available to everyone, as it is in every other industrialized country on earth — not a commodity to be doled out to those who are lucky enough and wealthy enough to be able to afford it, for the benefit of obscene financial profit for insurance companies and the pharmaceutical industry."

Protesting DHHS Medicaid Waiver

In June, Maine's Department of Health and Human Services requested a waiver from the federal government to drastically restrict its Medicaid program, known as MaineCare. If approved, it would remove thousands from Medicaid eligibility. Among the proposed changes are requirements that recipients work for their health coverage, pay premiums, and pay \$10 for visits to emergency rooms that are not deemed an emergency. Deeply concerned about the impact on those already struggling to feed their families and pay their bills, the Maine Council of Churches organized prayer vigils at Cross Arena in Portland and the Civic Center in Augusta where DHHS was holding public hearings on the waiver request. The request, slightly modified, is pending.

The fight over health care is far from over. With your support, the Maine Council of Churches will continue to be vigilant in advocating for universal access to health care.



Faith leaders from the Portland area gather for one of three prayer vigils during recent health care battles in the Senate.



Faith leaders from the Portland area gather for one of three prayer vigils advocating for universal health care.

THANK YOU TO OUR 2017 DONORS*

Your Contribution – Why It's Important

By Ed Rea, MCC Treasurer

You can see in this newsletter the good work that the Council is doing to find common ground among our denominations to promote social justice and civility in public life. This is only possible through the hard work of our Board, other involved volunteers and Executive Director, and through your support. One third of our budget comes from individual and parish contributions. Please consider a gift now.

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Maine Episcopal Missionary Society
New England Conference United Methodist Church
New England Region Unitarian Universalist Assn.
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
Union Church, Biddeford Pool
United Parish Congregational Church of Harrison & North Bridgton

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Hope Gateway
Lewiston Friends Meeting
Mid-Coast Presbyterian Church
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Somesville Union Mtg House UCC
Unitarian Universalist Community Church
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