

Maine Council of Churches

Seeking common ground, working for the common good

PROMOTING CIVIL DISCOURSE

New Coalition Formed to Call Out Hate

Because of our deep, faith-based commitment to civility, MCC is concerned that bias-motivated incidents and hate crimes have increased dramatically over the past two years in the United States. According to the FBI, the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Pew Research Center, anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim are the most frequent attacks based on religion. Bias against LGBTQ persons is also increasing. In Maine, the most commonly reported bias motivation is racial.

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ADVOCATING FOR MEDICAID IN THE MIDST OF INACTION

Last fall, with 59 percent of the vote, Maine voters supported Question 2, a ballot initiative requiring the state to provide Medicaid — in Maine we call it MaineCare — for persons under the age of 65 in households with incomes at or below 138 percent of the federal poverty level. With that decision, Maine officially joined 32 other states that had already expanded Medicaid.

After five Governor vetoes, Medicaid expansion is now the law, and about 70,000 additional Mainers are eligible to enroll effective July 2,

pending one final hurdle: the appropriation of funds to fully administer and implement expansion.

On March 27, MCC Executive Director, Rev. Jane Field, and Vice-President, Rev. Allen Ewing-Merrill, participated in a “Countdown to Care” press conference and lobby day in Augusta, and on April 9, President Bonny Rodden testified before the Appropriations Committee, all urging legislators to authorize funding, and urging Governor

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FAITH COMMUNITIES RESPOND TO OPIOID CRISIS

Kenney Miller, executive director of Health Equity Alliance, and Dale McCormack, MCC Public Policy Committee member, urge House Speaker Sara Gideon to help stop opioid overdoses. Story and photos on Page 5.



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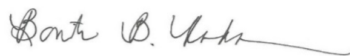
Maine Council of Churches
www.maineCouncilofchurches.org
156 High Street,
Portland, ME 04101
(207) 772-1918

**From the President and
Executive Director**

In an April 23 letter, Bishop Robert Deeley of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland informed us the Diocese will no longer be able to participate in the Maine Council of Churches because our Board “voted to alter a practice that allowed the

Council to work collaboratively on many efforts which were of great importance to the people of Maine, particularly the poor, the needy and those who come here seeking refuge.” The practice to which the Bishop referred was an unwritten policy that the Council would not take public stands unless all eight member- denominations agreed—and although we agree on most issues, there are a few where we don’t share common ground. The practice of remaining silent unless there was unanimity ended February 16, when the MCC board voted to affirm majority rule which is stipulated by our by-laws. Those by-laws also allow any board member to request a unanimous vote on any motion.

Since the Diocese became a member of the Council in 1982, we have worked on many common ground faith-based efforts addressing poverty, hunger, civil discourse, health care, immigration, and protection of the environment. We give thanks for those 36 years of shared ministry. It is our profound hope that as people of faith, we will continue to be able to work with the Diocese on those common-ground issues in the halls of the State House and in the community.



Bonny Rodden
President



Rev. Jane Field
Executive Director



WHAT’S ON YOUR PLATE? PROTECTING EARTH



At a special breakfast where legislators were served re-purposed food, Board President Bonny Rodden showed Rep. Betty Austin environmental legislation the Maine Council of Churches supports with fellow members of the Environmental Priorities Coalition. They include reducing food waste and expanding solar power in Maine. On the federal level, the MCC worked with the National Religious Partnership for the Environment and members of First Parish Congregational Church in Yarmouth to fight oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and off the coast of Maine.

END GUN VIOLENCE NOW

As congregations here in Maine marked the beginning of Lent with the sign of ashes that remind us of our mortality and our need for repentance, Parkland, Florida suffered a horrific, unthinkable tragedy: a young man armed with a semi-automatic rifle and multiple ammunition magazines entered Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and opened fire, killing 17, wounding 14, and profoundly traumatizing the community. We grieve with those who suffered loss and pray for healing, peace and comfort for all. Our Ash Wednesday reminder of mortality was symbolic; theirs was all too real.

MCC calls people of faith and good will to repent from our participation in a culture that fails to take steps to end gun violence, and to renew our commitment to work for sensible solutions to a problem that has plagued our nation for too long. We applaud the students who have led powerful and effective protests demanding that our elected representatives act now. And on March 1, we joined the “Keep Guns Out of Schools” rally at the State House to successfully defeat LD1761, a bill that would have allowed guns in school parking lots in Maine.



Rev. Carie Johnsen, MCC's denomination representative from the Unitarian Universalists, joins a rally in the Statehouse to end gun violence.

POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN: A Call for Moral Revival

This spring Maine joins more than 30 other states and Washington, D.C. in launching The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, a movement uniting tens of thousands of people across the country to challenge the interrelated evils of systemic racism, poverty, the war economy, and ecological devastation.

Led nationally by Rev. Dr. William Barber, known for his leadership of Moral Mondays in North Carolina, and Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis, co-director of the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice, based at Union Seminary in New York City, the campaign renews and advances the original Poor People's Campaign initiated fifty years ago by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. not long before his death.

On Monday, May 14, people were scheduled to gather at the Maine State House in Augusta and at state capitals all over the country, for rallies and what the group calls “nonviolent moral fusion direct action” (civil disobedience) to call for a new “moral agenda” for our nation — one that addresses poverty, racism, militarism, and the global climate crisis.

“Nothing is going to change until we put a face on it, until we drive the public discourse, until we restart the moral narrative,” Dr. Barber said. The Campaign begins with 40 days of moral action, but the movement will gain momentum over the next several years.

Learn more: www.poorpeoplescampaign.org / maine@poorpeoplescampaign.org

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FRUSTRATION AND VICTORIES IN THE CAPITOL

During Maine's 2018 legislative session, people of faith showed they can unite their voices and make a difference. The Maine Council of Churches actively supported passage of a number of bills.

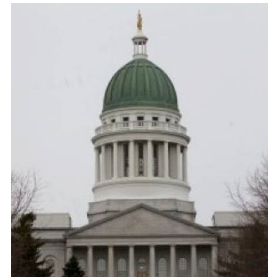
Those addressing the opioid crisis included LD 1711 to establish a pilot project providing low-barrier treatment and housing for homeless opioid users; LD 1707 to fund hypodermic exchange programs; and LD 1430 to fund treatment for uninsured patients with opioid use disorder. These bills all passed but failed to become law when the Legislature adjourned without funding them.

A major victory in the fight against childhood poverty was passage of LD 1774 ("LIFT 2.0") that increases access to education and training for low-income parents. LD 1684 would have forbidden food denial, food shaming and use of food as discipline for children receiving reduced-price lunches in public schools, but it failed to become law when the Legislature adjourned without voting on it.

The Legislature failed to override a veto of the solar energy bill, LD 1444, for the third time in three years. LD 1534, An Act to Address Hunger and Reduce Food Waste, became law without the governor's signature after changes reduced its scope to merely having the Department of Environmental Protection post information regarding food waste on its website.

The Legislature failed to allocate funds for voter-mandated Medicaid expansion, and the governor failed to submit a state plan to the federal government by the April 3 deadline. Litigation is now pending to force the state government to comply with the law.

LD 1694, directing the Department of Education to establish protocols for schools to use in prevention of youth suicide, became law without the governor's signature. LD 1740, making forced labor as part of human trafficking a crime, became law after the Legislature overrode the Governor's veto.



MAJORITY OF MCC BACKS BAN ON CONVERSION THERAPY

Seven of our eight member-denominations supported legislation banning conversion therapy (the practice of trying to change a person's sexual orientation) for children under 18. The bill died after the Legislature adjourned without acting on it.

In written testimony on the bill, LD 912, Executive Director Jane Field stated that the seven denominations—Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran, Unitarian Universalist, Quaker, Presbyterian and United Church of Christ—shared the same beliefs:

- Our LGBTQ brothers and sisters are beloved children of God, created in the divine image, and are among us on the Council's Board of Directors and in the pulpits and pews of our 414 congregations;
- Sexual orientation and gender identity are a gift from God—not a condition that needs treatment, not a choice that needs conversion, not something broken that needs repair, not a sin that needs forgiveness;
- Consigning children and teens to therapy intended to "convert" them causes shame and lowered self-esteem, significantly increasing the risk of depression, drug use, anxiety, homelessness and suicide;
- Subjecting a child to conversion therapy is not a matter of the parents' religious liberty; it is a matter of religious abuse and it is a violation of the child's religious liberty.
- Conversion therapy is psychological and spiritual malpractice and amounts to torture and is discredited by every major medical and psychological organization in the United States.

The eighth member-denomination, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland, opposed the bill, stating it would limit the choice of therapies for a child who "may be operating under a confusion rather than a conviction about sexual identity." The Diocese said it would never advocate for therapy that included "physical torture, seclusion, or isolation methods."

SEEKING HELP IN OPIOID CRISIS WITH SONG AND PRAYER

People of faith unfurled a long paper scroll along the halls of the State House in Augusta on April 11. The scroll revealed 418 silhouettes—one for each life lost to overdose in Maine last year. MCC, HEAL, Preble Street Faith Advocacy Network, Maine Episcopal Network for Justice, MUUSAN, and Moral Movement Maine organized this vigil to persuade legislators to pass and fund bills to reduce harm from opioid addiction and increase access to treatment. (See page 4.) The morning included a time of prayer and singing in the rotunda. Participants were encouraged to raise awareness in their own congregations through sermons and education, opening their buildings for recovery groups, advocating for policies that provide treatment and keep people safe, and turning to sacred texts for guidance, hope and inspiration: “let the oppressed go free... satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.” (Isaiah 58)

MCC is sending faith leaders to three conferences focused on the faith community’s response to the opioid epidemic; they will then offer a workshop here in Maine based on what they have learned.



Photos by Dan D’Ippolito, Preble Street

The voices of people of faith rang out in prayer and song underneath the Capitol dome; 418 deaths from overdoses is 418 too many.

CIVIL DISCOURSE (CONTINUED)

We are proud to be part of a new coalition, “UnifyMaine,” whose purpose is to speak out with one voice against hate and bias. The Maine Human Rights Commission invited statewide non-profit and advocacy groups, including MCC, to come together to develop an effective and rapid unified response when incidents occur anywhere in Maine. After just one meeting, the coalition was activated to respond to a possible bias attack against a Muslim family in Troy who had just opened a halal butchery.

MEDICAID (CONTINUED)

LePage to file paperwork to initiate the 90% federal match.

“The great faith traditions differ in many ways,” said Rev. Field, “but when it comes to the mandate to protect our vulnerable neighbors, to stand up for those who are ill, those who are living in poverty, we all agree: God calls us to love our neighbors, each of whom is made in the image of God and is loved by God.”

The issue of Medicaid expansion remains unresolved, but with \$140 million in surplus, the funds are available, and litigation is pending to force the matter.

Please Consider Remembering MCC in Your Estate Planning

Planned giving is an opportunity for you to provide for MCC in the future while enjoying tax benefits for you and your family. Your legacy will be used to continue the work of the Council for years to come. Call us for more information at (207) 772-1918.

SENATORS SHOULD REJECT TORTURE SUPPORTERS

The Maine Council of Churches wrote letters this April to Senators Collins and King, both of whom serve on the Senate Intelligence Committee, urging careful attention to our concerns about torture as they consider appointing a new CIA Director. On the evening of May 9, MCC Executive Director Rev. Jane Field was one of four faith leaders who were the first people to speak to Senator King when he emerged from the closed hearing on the nomination of Gina Haspel. The Senator mentioned that the MCC letter was part of his briefing binder, and in fact he had asked the nominee some of the questions we had urged him to consider. Later that night, Senator King announced that he would be opposing the nomination.

In our letters, MCC challenged the Senators to ask direct and tough questions during hearings to assure clarity about any potential nominee's history and attitudes about torture. As a non-partisan organization, MCC does not oppose or support political nominees, but we join with partners through the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT) to encourage our Senators to seriously and effectively challenge all potential appointees to affirm their unwavering commitment to oppose torture. It is our view that anyone with a history of being involved with torture, permitting torture to take place or destroying documents that provide documentation of human rights violations should be disqualified for public service.

This effort continues MCC's legacy of steadfast leadership in opposition to all forms of torture and reaffirms our longstanding partnership with NRCAT. In the past, MCC's effective advocacy on this issue has included:

- Sponsoring an ad signed by more than 100 Maine clergy calling for the release of the 500-page Executive Summary of the Senate Intelligence Committee Report on CIA Torture.
- Advocating for the McCain-Feinstein law strengthening the ban on torture.
- Promoting awareness of the impact of solitary confinement as a form of torture.

WELCOME REV. CARIE JOHNSEN

In January, we were delighted to welcome Rev. Carie Johnsen as the newly appointed representative of the Unitarian Universalist Association. She is the Minister of the UU Community Church of Augusta,



where she has served since 2009. A graduate of Harvard Divinity School, Carie is deeply committed to congregation-based community ministry and to building interfaith relationships. She has worked for the humanitarian rights organization UU Service Committee, is an active leader in the Augusta and Winthrop clergy groups, serves on the board of MUUSAN, and is one of the original members of Moral Movement Maine. She enjoys spending free time on Cape Cod and in her home state of South Dakota.

FAREWELL SUZANNE LAFRENIERE

With gratitude and appreciation for her service, we bid farewell to Suzanne Lafreniere, who stepped down from the Maine Council of Churches Board of Directors this year. Suzanne, the director of the Office of Public Policy for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland, was an at-large member.



A board member since 2013, Suzanne chaired the Public Policy Committee from 2015-2016. Her skills as a lawyer were evident in her efficient meetings. She was appreciated for her insight about legislative matters, her passion for helping those in need and her delightful sense of humor.

The board is deeply grateful for all that we have accomplished together, particularly staving off proposed cuts to programs for those families in need of food and temporary income.

THANK YOU TO OUR 2017 DONORS*

Your Contribution – Why It's Important

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 Conference United Church of Christ
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

Churches

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Brunswick Friends Meeting
Congregational Church in Cumberland
Durham Monthly Meeting of Friends
Episcopal Church of Saint Mary
Falmouth Quarterly Friends Meeting
Farmington Friends Meeting
First Congregational Church, Wiscasset
First Parish in Portland
Hammond Street Congregational Church
Hope Gateway
Lewiston Friends Meeting
Mid-Coast Presbyterian Church
Mid-Maine District NEC United Methodist Church
Portland Friends Meeting
Raymond Village Community Church
Sandy Point Congregational Church
Second Congregational Church, Kittery
South Congregational Church
Southern Maine Friends Meeting
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Brunswick
Somesville Union Mtg House UCC
State Street Church UCC
The Portland New Church
Trinity Episcopal Church, Lewiston
United Parish Congregational Church of Harrison & North Bridgton
Vassalboro Friends Meeting
Woodfords Congregational Church

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Cushman Anthony
Andree Appel
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Richard Berman
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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, 156 High St.,
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