

FAITHFULLY RESPONDING TO MAINE'S HOUSING CRISIS

CHURCHES HELP ENSURE NEWLY ARRIVED FAMILIES HAVE SHELTER



With freezing temperatures approaching and a humanitarian crisis pending, the faith community helped convince state officials this winter to provide emergency funding for housing, keeping desperate families off the streets. Asylum seekers were able to remain in hotels and find temporary shelter in churches that literally responded to the prophetic calling: welcome the stranger.

Through [Neighbors Need ME](#), a call to action organized by Rev. Peter Swarr, of Trinity Episcopal Church in Portland, and Rev. Allison Smith, of Cumberland Congregational Church, faith leaders and

OTHERS MINISTER TO THE CHRONICALLY UNHOUSED

Co-author of this article, Jeffery Logan, has been serving as a street Pastor to the unhoused for the last eight years as one of the three Grace Street Ministry co-pastors.

The challenges of working in the unhoused community are nothing new, but things are now at a crisis point, largely because of the woefully inadequate emergency shelter space available in Portland. The new Homeless Services Center on Riverside Street reached maximum capacity as soon as its doors opened, and there are simply no other options for domestic unhoused people (non-asylum-seekers) other than a tent somewhere on city



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FROM THE PRESIDENT

Last December, as Advent turned the corner toward Christmas Day, I preached a sermon called "On the Threshold." In it, I reflected upon Luke 1:39-45, which depicts a pregnant Mary visiting her kinswoman Elizabeth. As the passage begins, Mary has just learned from the angel Gabriel that she is pregnant. In a matter of mere moments, God's messenger had turned Mary's life upside down and opened the door to a future she had never anticipated. Thus, a shocked and surprised Mary travels to the home of her friend Elizabeth in search of support, retreat, and rest. As I spoke to the congregation, I wondered out loud: Was Mary nervous as she traveled toward Elizabeth's house? As Mary approached the threshold of Elizabeth's home, did she fear a lack of welcome? Little did I know then that the church I serve would soon begin serving as an emergency 24/7 shelter. Just after mid-January, Woodfords opened its doors to over 35 individuals who are made in the image of the Holy and happen to be asylum seekers. Working in collaboration with the nonprofit organization [Greater Portland Family Promise](#), we have been graced by the presence of adults and children whose lives have been turned upside down and who face futures they did not anticipate. In the cold of winter, they courageously dared to approach our threshold, hoping the door would not be barred shut. Of course, Maine's lack of accessible housing doesn't only affect immigrants and refugees ... and *all* of God's children deserve stable, secure homes. Thus, this newsletter contains stories of people who are heeding Divine calls to ministries of hospitality, advocacy, justice, and compassion. In upcoming weeks and months, requests for assistance likely will increase, given our nation's dual immigration and housing crises. As public figures lash out and engage in blame games, we will face choices about how to treat the individuals and families who are standing on the thresholds of our nation, our state, our cities, and our churches. Trying to solve the entire problem may be overwhelming, but as individuals and communities, we can work on our own small pieces of the puzzle. As we minister alongside and in solidarity with one another, may the Force of Love, Justice, and Creativity that Undergirds the Universe accompany us in the journey.

In faith,



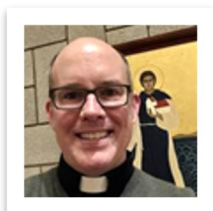
Rev. Alyssa Lodewick



COMINGS AND GOINGS ON MCC BOARD



In January, MCC's Membership Assembly honored **Cushman Anthony** for his long service to this organization, to the State of Maine as an attorney and legislator, and to so many worthy causes, including Restorative Justice Institute, prison re-entry programs, Furniture Friends, and others. Cush is retiring from the Board, where he has served as the UU representative, and more recently as an at-large Director from the Quaker community. His dear friend, and former Executive Director of MCC, Tom Ewell, sent a tribute that was read to the Assembly by Rev. Carolyn Lambert: *"Cush was consistently there to engage on our behalf in our criminal justice and tribal relations work especially, and always with his characteristic optimism and creative suggestions and recommendations, further supported by his many personal appearances for testimony and written support... I am grateful for his faithfulness and service. Thank you, Cush."*

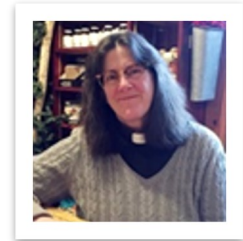


Pastor Christophor Gilbert will be leaving the Board at the end of June as he accepts a new call to ministry in Massachusetts. His wit, wisdom, professionalism, and creativity have been gifts to MCC that will be sorely missed. Godspeed, Christophor!

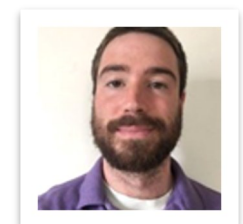


Rev. Jackie Brannen has served for the past 18 months as the United Methodist Church denominational representative to our Board. Jackie will be retiring from ministry on July 1 and we wish her every happiness in new adventures!

In January, we welcomed **Rev. Arlene Tully** as the new United Methodist Church denominational representative to the Board. Arlene is the District Superintendent for the Many Waters District of the New England Conference. She is greatly appreciated for her ability to jump right in to the work of MCC, recruiting UMC clergy and laity for our strategic planning listening sessions, participating in judicatory leadership meetings, and assisting with efforts to pass tribal sovereignty legislation.



Jake Fahey is the newest at-large member of the Board, elected at the Membership Assembly in January. He is an interfaith chaplain and organizer living in Portland (Abenaki/Wabanaki territory) and working with [Community Change Inc.](#), Showing Up for Racial Justice, and the Racial Equity Institute, and serves as a chaplain to majority-white faith communities to bridge interfaith spirituality with racial justice, as well as providing one-on-one spiritual support through the Spiritual Care Services of Maine. Jake attended Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts, served in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps in the northwestern United States and was a teacher at the St. Charles Mission School in Pryor, Montana, before moving back home to Maine.



OTHERS MINISTER TO THE CHRONICALLY UNHOUSED

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property—like the tent city along the Bayside Trail in Portland where the city did a “sweep” on May 16th (a euphemism for bringing in a front loader and throwing everything away that people couldn’t carry out on their backs).

Even as the availability of emergency shelter space decreases, the number of folks needing shelter increases. There were over 80 tents on the Bayside Trail and many others secreted under trees, alongside highways, and under bridges throughout Greater Portland. These numbers will continue to increase as motels that provided emergency shelter during the pandemic close between now and the end of June. That’s why Grace Street Ministry is being inundated with requests for tents and sleeping bags.

Add to this the large number of asylum seekers arriving in Portland needing emergency shelter, and it’s a perfect storm of catastrophic need and completely overwhelmed systems with two very different groups of impoverished people competing for the same limited resources.

Those of us in the faith community are uniquely positioned to confront an issue arising from this tension: we must call out and refuse to perpetuate the all too familiar (and very harmful) false distinction between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor.

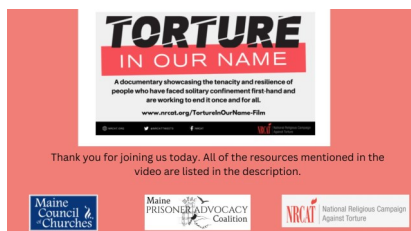
We in the faith community must be clear with municipal leaders that we expect them to allocate resources (as inadequate as they are) fairly between two groups of folks with real needs: asylum seekers and the domestic unhoused. And we must practice what we preach by embodying a similar commitment to equitable treatment in our own faith-based programs of charity, outreach, and advocacy.

Currently, the lion’s share of emergency shelter resources is going to asylum seekers and very little is being directed to the domestically unhoused.

I (Jeff) have nothing but compassion for the asylum-seeking families and individuals that are fleeing circumstances I can’t even begin to comprehend. And I think that the inequitable allocation of resources points to our willingness to fall for the temptation of believing there are deserving poor and undeserving poor. It’s easier to see intact families fleeing chaos and violence as “deserving” of our time, money, energy, and compassion, and to see the domestic unhoused who suffer disproportionately from poorly managed mental health issues and/or substance use disorder as “undeserving.” One group has cots at the Expo; the other sleeps along the Bayside Trail in tents the city continually threatens to throw away.

Jesus never made this distinction. He understood the “least of these” to be all people in need of material resources and emotional support, not just the ones who are less challenging to work with. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “God is not ashamed of the lowliness of human beings. God marches right in. God chooses people as God’s instruments and performs wonders where one would least expect them. God is near to lowliness; God loves the lost, the neglected, the unseemly, the excluded, the weak and broken.”

Mainers of faith: Let’s do our level best to remember those words and not leave any of the lost and excluded out in the cold, neglected, overlooked and abandoned.



TORTURE IN OUR NAME Thanks to a generous grant from our partner organization, National Religious Campaign Against Torture, we were able to host a panel discussion of their new documentary film that highlights the work of faith leaders around the U.S. who are working with survivors to ban the practice of solitary confinement in our prisons and jails.

[View on YouTube](#)

CHURCHES HELP ENSURE NEWLY ARRIVED FAMILIES HAVE SHELTER

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laity signed a petition and prayed together in the halls of the State House on December 7, urging the Governor and Legislature to respond quickly to the imminent housing crisis. Besides an influx of asylum seekers moving to Maine, federal housing subsidies were set to expire and families were facing eviction.

Less than a month later, the Legislature held a public hearing on the Governor's proposal for emergency action, hearing testimony from Rev. Jane Field, executive director of the Maine Council of Churches, and other faith-based organizations. With unprecedented speed, \$21 million was made available for grants.

"We in the faith community appreciate how quickly the Legislature was able to pass LD 3 and then get the funds out to groups on the ground working to keep people safe and housed during the winter months. We are also relieved that the State acknowledges it would be unrealistic to expect that churches have the capacity on their own to address a humanitarian crisis of this magnitude. Working together, in collaborative partnerships between government, nonprofits, and faith-based organizations is essential for success," Field says.

Rev. Bryan Breault of State Street Church in Portland said he realized there was a crisis when the number of immigrants looking for winter coats and boots at the church's Clothes Closet suddenly jumped from 20-30 to 100. Asylum seekers who had fled to Maine to escape violence and persecution in their homelands in southern Africa weren't prepared for the cold. With quick and unanimous approval by church members, State Street was able to use a grant from the state to reconfigure space so 12 members of 3 families could stay there overnight. But there weren't enough parishioners to run the shelter so Rev. Allison Smith helped organize a coalition of churches, synagogues and the Baha'i community that quickly recruited enough volunteers to staff the shelter from evening through the night.

"We are richly blessed with this beautiful, historic building that we can now offer to the community in the true act of our ministry," Rev. Breault said.

Rather than relying on volunteers for an overnight shelter, Greater Portland Family Promise, a non-profit that finds housing within the interfaith community for homeless families, used state funding for a different model that enables families to live in their own quarters day and night. GPFPP rents space at Woodfords Congregational

Church in Portland and provides professional staff to help families negotiate the social services system and, hopefully, find permanent housing. Their staff, along with volunteers from Woodfords Church and area faith communities, are able to provide 34 individuals from 6 families with a 24/7 shelter.

The response was also quick and generous when MCC sent out an alert that MaineHousing needed bedding for 52 asylum-seeking families who were moving into the newly constructed Avesta West End II apartments in South Portland. In just a matter of days, donations poured in and every bed in every home had sheets, blankets and pillows when the families moved in.

The question now is: where will the asylum seekers go when the emergency funding runs out in the coming weeks? The Salvation Army has agreed to take in families overnight from State Street. Amy Johnson, a Family Promise board member and a parishioner at Woodfords, said Family Promise is dealing with the dilemma day to day. She hopes they can move into the old furniture manufacturing building on Blueberry Road in Portland

which is expected to provide temporary housing for 280 people when the conversion is finished this spring.

Johnson made a broader appeal to churches affiliated with MCC. She said some churches, including Woodfords, First Parish in Gorham and Williston Immanuel United Church in Portland, are creating permanent housing by converting under-used space in their buildings with the help of partners such as developers and the state.

"The take-away," Johnson said, "is we need other churches to ask, 'What can we do?'"



More donations arrive at
West End 2 Apartments



Alan Baughcum, Pastor
Diane Hoppe Hugo, and
Nadia of Avesta Housing

MAKING GOOD TROUBLE

MCC's Faith-Based Advocacy Series 2023

The late Honorable John Lewis loved to tell a story about visiting his aunt as a child when a severe windstorm suddenly blew in. He remembered his Aunt Seneva bringing all the children inside her little house and instructing them to clasp hands and walk to the corner of the house that the wind was lifting. The children and their aunt moved from corner to corner as the wind shifted, holding the house down with their weight until the storm was over.

The image of these children, holding hands and counteracting the wind was the inspiration for “Sacred Work: Clasping Hands and Using the Weight of Our Bodies to Make Good Trouble,” Rev. Dr. Marvin Ellison’s keynote address during the opening session of MCC’s 2023 Faith-Based Advocacy Series in January. The lecture inspired participants to envision how best to do advocacy work for justice, compassion and peace, holding hands with those who do not run away and together walking with the wind, holding down our house against the forces of injustice, oppression, and hate.

Each of the three subsequent legislative workshops in the series was led by an expert policy analyst, a person who provided participants with theological grounding for doing faith-based advocacy with legislators, and individuals with lived experience who had been directly impacted. The three workshops addressed bills currently before the Maine state legislature:

Tribal sovereignty - Presenters from the Wabanaki Alliance coalition were Ambassador Zeke Crofton-Macdonald of the Houlton Band of Maliseets and Quaker activist Shirley Hager, co-author of *The Gatherings: Reimagining Indigenous-Settler Relations*.

“Reverse St. Francis Prayer”

Lord, make me a channel of disturbance.
Where there is apathy, let me provoke.
Where there is compliance, let me bring questioning.
Where there is silence, may I be a voice.
Where there is too much comfort and too little action,
grant disruption.
Where there are doors closed and hearts locked,
grant me the willingness to listen.
When laws dictate and pain is overlooked,
When tradition speaks louder than need,
Grant that I may seek rather to do justice
than to talk about it.
Disturb us, O Lord,
To be with, as well as for, the alienated;
To love the unlovable as well as the lovely.
Lord, make me a channel of disturbance. Amen.



The use of solitary confinement in Maine’s prisons and jails -

Jan Collins of Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition, Rev. Jill Saxby from the National Religious Campaign Against Torture, and Lori Swain, whose son survived solitary confinement in a Maine prison helped us understand the harm and trauma caused by solitary confinement.

Maine’s housing crisis – Staff from Preble Street along with Lisa Franklin and Rick Lamere of Homeless Voices for Justice, and Rev. Peter Swarr of Neighbors Need ME provided information about bills addressing the need for emergency shelter, affordable housing, and rental assistance.

Recordings of all four sessions are available on our [YouTube channel](#) and we encourage groups to view them as part of education programs, social justice committee meetings, or in worship. After viewing, decide on one or two action steps, write testimony, contact your legislators to ask them to support a particular bill, write a letter to the editor or an article for your church’s newsletter.

As we clasp hands with each other, let’s use the weight of our bodies to make good trouble!

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

MCC Advocacy at the State Legislature



MCC E.D. Jane Field joins Gov. Mills, Speaker Talbot Ross and Rep. Moonen at a press conference in the Cabinet Room.

Photo credit : Dania Bowie

The 131st session of the state legislature started off very slowly with long delays in bills getting before committees. But there have been significant opportunities where the prophetic voice of faith for justice and compassion has been essential: anti-vax bill opposition, supporting parole, and standing up for reproductive justice. MCC countered the Christian Civic League and other conservative faith voices on many of these bills.

We have also shown up to support solutions to the housing crisis, expanding access to MaineCare and Medicaid, passing the Pine Tree Amendment, and recognizing Wabanaki tribal sovereignty.

As statutory adjournment on June 21st draws closer, bill hearings and work sessions have shifted to a quicker pace. Over the next several weeks MCC will continue to be engaged as we speak to our legislative priorities, including speaking against bills that would harm the LGBTQ+, and supporting gun safety, environmental, and tribal sovereignty legislation.

John Hennessy, the co-chair of MCC's Public Policy Committee, shared these wise words with the committee: "The work of faith-based public policy is not easy. In fact, it seems to be getting harder as we are all influenced by the toxic political landscape in Washington and sometimes even here in Augusta. The public debates are getting edgier and sometimes very personal to the extent that people are openly questioning others' motives or agendas. We need to always set the example for arguing principles and positions, not politics or partisanship, and never holding up our opponents to scorn or disdain."

And so we continue to bring a prophetic faith voice to this work, on behalf of justice, compassion, and the well-being of all our neighbors here in Maine.



Welcome Book Groups!

We're so glad you're a part of this follow-up conversation with Professor Heyward. We'll get started in just a moment.



CARTER HEYWARD BOOK GROUP EVENT

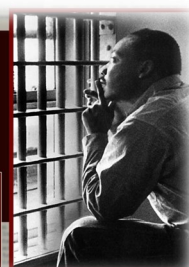
As a follow-up to our September author talk with Rev. Dr. Carter Heyward, eleven book groups formed all around the country to study her newest book, *The 7 Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism*, and on February 8, they were given the opportunity to meet with Professor Heyward to ask her questions arising from their study and discussion.

[View on YouTube](#)

COMMITTED to LISTEN

a public reading of
Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s
Letter From a Birmingham Jail

January 16, 2023 • Online
MARTIN LUTHER KING DAY
www.thebtscenter.org



MLK "COMMITTED TO LISTEN"

On MLK Day, MCC and the BTS Center hosted a noontime reading of MLK's Letter from A Birmingham Jail featuring the voices of: Dustin Ward, Shirley Hager, June Cooper, Marpheen Chann, Maya Williams, Phil Walsh, Andie Giraso, and Rabbi Gary Berenson. The event raised \$5,500 for the Maine Initiatives [Outdoor Equity Fund](#), a fund that makes grants to organizations that are led by Black, Indigenous, and people of color and address the nature gap and improve outdoor equity.)

[View on YouTube](#)



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MCC COMMITTEE STEERS US FORWARD



For the past 18 months, a Steering Committee appointed by MCC's Board of Directors has been hard at work developing renewed mission, vision and values statements that will point the organization into the future God is calling us toward. We are grateful to the 75 people who generously shared their time and wisdom in 9 different focus groups hosted by the Committee last fall and winter, and to our partner organizations and member-denomination leaders who sat

down with us to reflect on the value MCC brings to their work and witness, and what new possibilities might lie ahead. The Committee—Rev. Christophor Gilbert, Evelyn Johnson Moore, Marge Kilkelly, Ed Rea, and Rev. Jane Field—has been guided by strategic advisor, Rev Stewart Lanier, of LAOS Consulting who will lead a retreat for the Board on June 22 that will launch the next chapter of a story that has been unfolding for 85 years.