

THE PENNSYLVANIA COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

Annual Report 2020-21

Advocacy and Ecumenical Activities of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches

The COVID-19 pandemic curtailed some of the advocacy-related activities planned for 2020 which included a statewide tour of Pennsylvania with a solitary confinement cell replica and related programs. Our goal was to provide education about solitary confinement and prisoner advocacy training. We did manage to hold one early “Solidarity Not Solitary” program in early January, and we also held meetings about solitary confinement with key elected officials to advocate for legislation to substantially reduce its use.

Furthermore, in lieu of the planned solitary programming our Episcopal Service Corps fellow, Emily Schmid, planned and carried out online book studies on the books *White Fragility* and *Just Mercy*. She also proposed and helped to facilitate a Lenten devotional guide, *40 Days of Solidarity* to address solitary confinement and other criminal justice reform issues.

We co-sponsored and helped to facilitate a program with the CeaseFirePA Leadership Institute to introduce participants to gun violence reduction legislation and advocacy.

We planned, sponsored, or participated in online prayer events. Prayer gatherings included prayers for: incarcerated persons during the pandemic; legislation to reduce gun violence; valuing Black and Brown lives/peace in our communities; prayers for a peaceful election; prayers for a peaceful transfer of power; and prayers for all people dealing with the pandemic over the holidays. Working with Episcopal Service Corps fellow, Kelsey Reyes, we planned and carried out two discussion events on the 2020 election and COVID-19. We continued vigils in support of immigrant families detained at the Berks County Residential Center and held the 12th annual Commonwealth Interfaith Service: Prayers for Justice and Peace remotely for the first time (view at <https://www.facebook.com/PChurchesAdvocacy/live>).

In an event co-sponsored by the Council, Pennsylvania’s Senior Senator Bob Casey joined clergy and faith leaders from across the Commonwealth on August 28 to answer questions reflecting several concerns within the state’s faith community around the coronavirus pandemic. Topics covered included: efforts to get unemployed persons back to work; disproportionate impact of the virus on persons of color; ensuring adequate nutrition for children when schools are closed; protections against evictions and foreclosures; protecting mail-in voting, considering cutbacks in the US Postal Service, and what will happen as recipients of Paycheck Protection Program loans look to converting them to grants, as envisioned at the creation of the program. Also covered were disparities in Pennsylvania’s public-school funding and what Senator Casey planned to do to make the system more equitable. In a particularly encouraging note—one that spoke directly to dealing with getting people back to work—the Senator announced that he would be introducing a bill to create a new version of the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

On October 7, 2020, the Council hosted “An Evening with Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis,” co-chair of the national Poor People’s Campaign. She spoke of the Campaign’s work to turn out poor and low-income voters and answered questions from the viewers. The Campaign’s groundbreaking report, “Unleashing the Power of Poor and Low-Income Americans,” noted that just a few percentage points change in the turnout of poor and low-income people could change the political maps of this country. The event on the Council’s YouTube channel at: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCunqnFIOcrIn_o715zhITIA.

The Council has spoken out in 2020 through a series of statements that were widely shared (including in the media) and posted on the Council’s website. Statements included: A Pastoral Statement at a Time of Global Pandemic (3/27/20); A Pastoral Call to Dismantle Racism and End Violence Against People of Color (6/2/20); Pennsylvania Council of Churches’ Statement on 6/18/20 Supreme Court DACA Decision (6/18/20); and A

Statement Calling for a Peaceful 2020 Election (10/28/20). All are available at <https://www.pachurches.org/about-us/statements/>.

The Director of Advocacy and Ecumenical Outreach completed a sabbatical where she visited or held Zoom meetings with counterpart state councils across the country. During those meetings she gleaned several ideas that have worked for others and looks forward to working with a newly formed Commission on Unity and Relationships to determine what our own council will do moving forward. More will be shared on the sabbatical within this report.

In this consequential year, the program also provided resources aimed at helping church bodies, congregations, and people of faith (and others) with important issues facing the state and country, building resource pages around COVID-19, the 2020 Census, and the election.

Looking forward, the Commission on Public Witness is still working on refining advocacy priorities for 2021-22. We will place the strongest emphasis on addressing racism, white supremacy, and Christian nationalism and on educating people of faith about government systems and our call to be faithful advocates. Priority advocacy efforts will focus on addressing racism and the related issues named above that form the core of problematic legislation and policies. We will be looking to more creative approaches to advocacy, and to messaging aimed at government officials letting them know we are holding them in prayer and urging them to tone down their rhetoric and find ways to work together. We will also look to putting together a clearinghouse or bibliography to help congregations/people of faith create the space for respectful conversations and be effective advocates.

On the Unity and Relationships side, we have already held a statewide service for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and we are planning a service/program for Black History Month. We will be activating the newly formed Commission on Unity and Relationships, as noted above, and the reactivated group of local and regional ecumenical executives to consider the ways we can build relationships across Pennsylvania and develop programs that will be helpful to our members and others.

The Service Center of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches

The Service Center of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches provides a significant communication ministry to its member churches and constituents. The Council of Churches Service Department also works with many of the agencies within the United Church Center in addition to faith-based organizations, churches, and Christian fellowship groups outside of the Center, producing print materials inclusive of business cards, letterhead, envelopes, brochures, and flyers. We also handle printed presentations, using GBC punching, binding strips, and O-ring style wire combs, as well as books, church directories and newsletters. We can laminate, fold, saddle-stitch, tab, and provide most functions of business size and traditional cut printed matter in black & white and color print, inclusive of one and two color “spot color” on an offset press.

Our printing operation makes an impact on individuals, congregations, and communities. People who are seeking counseling and spiritual help are supported by printed material from the Service Center through the agencies that we service. We work to ensure that our product and service are of the highest quality.

Staff Sabbatical

The Personnel and Executive Committees of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches created space and resources for Sandy Strauss, our Director of Advocacy and Ecumenical Outreach to take a sabbatical last year to learn about the ecumenical, interfaith and advocacy work that is taking place in other states. The initiative was designed to enable our efforts to learn about best practices that occur in other ecumenical settings. The following represents Sandy’s report to our board leadership:

A Report on My Sabbatical—Fall 2020

The Rev. Sandra L. Strauss

I want to thank the Personnel and Executive Committees for giving me the opportunity to take sabbatical time in late 2020. It was a good time of renewal and learning.

The main purpose of this time was to connect with and interview the executives of state counterparts of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches around the country. I was able to connect this activity with planned travel for follow-up concerning my husband's cancer follow-up in Houston. We took the time to travel first to Houston, but then to do a cross-country trip where I was able to meet face-to-face with five different organizations: the California Council of Churches, Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, the Faith Action Network in Washington state, the Minnesota Council of Churches, and the Wisconsin Council of Churches. While I reached out to all other state counterparts I could identify, I was able to conduct Zoom interviews with the following additional organizations:

- *Arizona Faith Network*
- *Colorado Council of Churches*
- *Florida Council of Churches*
- *Louisiana Interchurch Conference*
- *New Hampshire Council of Churches*
- *New Mexico Conference of Churches*
- *New York Council of Churches*
- *North Carolina Council of Churches*
- *Ohio Council of Churches*
- *Oklahoma Conference of Churches*
- *South Carolina Christian Action Council*
- *West Virginia Council of Churches*

My hope was to submit a truly comprehensive report of all my findings—a summary and analysis of what all the different organizations are doing, and what appears to be working particularly well and what does not. I started to chip away at doing this prior to the end of my sabbatical—though I found much of my time, once I was back in Harrisburg, occupied with work that needed to continue despite my sabbatical inclusive of my effort to provide support for Dai Morgan as he transitioned to become our interim director. Since the end of my sabbatical, I have been pretty much “flat out,” catching up and taking on additional ecumenical activities. I still hope to do this kind of report, but I felt I needed to submit at least some key findings from these meetings.

The findings I cite below are organized based on the questions I posed in my interviews. I will complete this report with some insights and takeaways I gleaned from this work.

Mission/Vision

All organizations had some stated mission, vision, or both. Several had boiled them down to a catchphrase that could easily be incorporated into every communications platform and easily remembered. Examples include:

- *Wisconsin Council of Churches—Justice, courage, holy imagination*
- *North Carolina Council of Churches—Peace in unity*
- *Louisiana Interchurch Conference--Living the faith we hold in common.*

Those that seemed to be clearest on their mission and/or vision appeared to view what they were doing through that lens and in general, seemed much more focused on moving their organization in a direction that was in line with their mission.

Strategic Plan

I found a mixed bag when it came to employment of a strategic plan by the organizations interviewed. It ranged from one organization executive stating that he did not believe in strategic plans. At the opposite end, the Arizona Faith Network had engaged in a comprehensive planning process that is posted on the website at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5948361b4c8b0338cd1b65c9/t/5d93cd4dbf92054de9888445/1569967438121/AFN+Strategic+Plan+2019.pdf>. It should be noted that Arizona's executive came from a nonprofit management background. Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon specifically noted that it had hired a facilitator to help in the process, and they continue to work with that person, who was called "very skilled."

Other organizations have either been trying to engage in more comprehensive planning, while others are looking to update existing plans. Most noted that the constantly changing environment of their work made planning beyond a year or two difficult, and that plans needed to be somewhat flexible. However, it was my impression that most felt some level of planning was important to help focus and direct the work.

Membership

Many have maintained a more traditional state council membership profile much like the Pennsylvania Council of Churches, which is primarily judicatory bodies. Many, like the Council, also have categories for associate or "covenant partner" type memberships as well, but typically voting is limited to judicatory members in this profile. Others include congregational membership, some include individuals. Still others have become interfaith entities, and organizations representing other faith traditions are members. Roman Catholic membership varies from state-to-state; most interesting, however are New Mexico, which plays an integral role because it is the dominant tradition there, and South Carolina, where they are a minority but the largest contributors to the organization. Others try to maintain a working relationship and do some things together, much like Pennsylvania. At least one has "affiliated partners" that are secular organizations with common interests.

It seems like memberships have evolved based on what each state feels have become the right mix for the organization based on what the organization is doing.

Nearly all organizations did not have a set dues structure for members; like PCC, they are asked to contribute something to be able to be a member. Also like the PCC, the contributions have been declining for several years. Oklahoma did specify that it asks for \$100/month, or \$1200 per year, though this struck me as unfair when some bodies are exceptionally large, and others are exceedingly small. Arizona is experimenting with a structure where contributors would have access to special events, newsletter, etc. They are discussing limiting the newsletter to contributors.

Governance

Those with more traditional membership tend to have boards where every judicatory member is included, though some have moved in the same direction as the Council, with one representative for each denomination. Typically, the representative to the board can be the executive or a designee, like the PCC's current representation. Many also have at-large positions, and/or commissions/committees. For those that have moved to interfaith, representatives from other faith traditions are also on the board. Some also include members that represent specific expertise, like legal, financial, communications, etc., and one said there was a sense that this was essential. The bottom line is that each organization has their own twist on board representation.

A number noted that attendance has been greater over the last year as boards have been meeting on Zoom and suggested that they may continue to do more work via Zoom.

Many have standing commissions or committees. Again, it varies according to what the organization believes is needed. Identified committees included executive, personnel/human resources, finance/fundraising/facilities, planning, nominating, program, and communications. Identified commissions included social justice, theological reflection, relationship building, and faith and order. Nearly all said they were taking a new look at these structures with an eye to reform. A couple even suggested that they were looking at eliminating all these groups and moving completely to task forces or ad hoc groups that would be formed to address a specific need at a specific time and dissolve when it was no longer needed.

A couple expressed dismay that getting their boards to participate in meaningful ways has been difficult and frustrating. A couple of others noted that their boards were highly active and proactive. Most appeared to be somewhere in between. Some noted that they were dealing with the fallout of previous executives.

Staffing

Nearly all have small staffs—the only organizations with large staffs are those that are providing social services, which most do not. Oregon and Minnesota both have reasonably large staffs for that reason. A couple are one person operations, perhaps outsourcing for part-time financial and administrative duties. Many permanent personnel doing this kind of work are part-time. Contracts were often used particularly for someone to do financial/bookkeeping work, rather than a hired employee. Nearly all said that staffing levels have fallen over the years, along with declining revenues. Some hire based on contracts received, so such positions are time-limited based on when funding is available.

Office Space

Only one other organization owns the building it is based in—Minnesota. Most are in either judicatory or congregational office space, and most pay some rent, but typically low. One is in donated space. Many have tried to locate in space that is close to the state's capital to have easier access for advocacy efforts.

Several noted that they have not been working in their offices since the beginning of the pandemic and suggested that they may explore models where most work is done at home with regularly scheduled meetings to coordinate work and/or build relationships—but something that may eliminate the need to maintain permanent office space.

Annual Conference/Annual Meeting

Many of those interviewed no longer have a separate annual conference. Those that do have noted that attendance has been dropping for some time. Many do program in conjunction with an annual membership meeting—a keynote speaker, a panel or panels addressing a specific topic, or an advocacy event were among the activities identified.

A number noted that they are doing programming around specific issues that are priority issues for the organization, and many are grant funded—many are focused on racial justice, but several other issues were identified as well. Some had moved to more regional programming as well.

As programming has moved to Zoom, many noted that their reach has expanded as travel is not required. The cost is reduced because there is no travel and no cost for use of facilities, etc. Programming done this way may turn out to be the way of the future, though I do not believe anyone felt virtual meetings were a complete substitute for the connections that can be made when meeting in person.

Several of these organizations also hold annual fundraising events, some in conjunction with their annual meetings. There is typically some cost to participate, and the program typically features a keynote or some program of interest. Some sell advertising, some have done things like silent auctions to boost revenues.

Many have either instituted or expanded virtual gatherings to help build relationships among members—regular online gatherings of clergy and/or judicatory heads, often referred to as check-ins.

Funding

For many, the main source of regular funding is membership, primarily judicatory members, supplemented by contributions from affiliates/covenant partners and individuals. Annual meetings, conferences and fundraising events provide additional funding for some. A couple are doing other things—Arizona is opening an on-line store to sell items, including Christmas and Hanukkah cards; South Carolina is part of an effort that produces a calendar with descriptions of different religions and featuring children's artwork—she said they sell enough that the calendar is sent to every school.

All interviewed accept grants, but the amount of support they provide varies widely. Some accomplish the bulk of their work with grant funding, while others are minimally dependent on grants.

Many noted the need to find a dependable source of funding, and the need to diversify so that they are not dependent on sources that may not be consistent.

Website/Social Media

Websites varied based on resources available. Most expressed that their websites were not as good as they might want them to be, and a couple noted that they were not happy with their websites but did not have the resources to do more. A handful used professional web designers to set up their websites and manage the maintenance in house. Others set them up internally and maintain them internally. A couple felt that their websites were highly effective in communicating to members and the public.

Most are using social media in some way. Facebook is the primary social media outlet, with Twitter being used by some as well. Instagram is not typically used. Some felt that they were able to communicate effectively through Facebook, less so through Twitter. Most felt that they were not using these platforms as well as they could.

Several do regular newsletter, either print or online/e-mail.

Direct Services/Social Services

Oregon and Minnesota are the only two organizations that provide these kinds of services as a large portion of their work. Refugee resettlement is one of the larger areas. Oregon also engages in refugee resettlement agency, domestic violence, and food service delivery. A couple of other organizations noted that they had done some of this kind of work in the past, but no longer do.

Advocacy

Advocacy appears to be a significant part of the work of all organizations interviewed. Priority issues varied, but nearly all were considering the impacts of racial injustice on the issues addressed. A couple explicitly noted that they were looking at being a prophetic voice, realizing that they may have been somewhat out in front of some of their members. Most also work in coalition with partners, both faith and secular, to amplify their voice.

Interfaith Efforts

A handful of organizations had become interfaith in recent years. All organizations interviewed engaged in coordination, dialogue, or connection with faith traditions beyond Christian.

Learnings, Insights, Takeaways

Mission, Vision, Planning

My impression was that the organizations that appeared to be most successful and moving in a positive direction were those that had a clear understanding of mission/vision, and that it was helpful to be able to summarize in a tagline or catchphrase that could easily and quickly be referenced when explaining the organization to others. While not expressed explicitly, I would add that a clear understanding of mission must begin with a clear understanding of who/what the organization is meant to serve—who is our audience (or audiences)?

But it was more than this—it meant the clear mission should drive a planning process, where everything gets viewed through the lens of the mission and the audiences being served. It wasn't absolutely clear that this requires the entire process reported on in the [Arizona plan](#), but I think it would be instructive to look at what was done, because it was a comprehensive process. I particularly liked the elucidation of core values. I also appreciated that having a detached, objective professional to guide a planning group (whether the board, task force, or other) would be helpful in developing a plan that is not driven by the vision of a single person or group. I also heard that while having a plan/path is important (not knowing the direction means you may not get there!), it is also important that we not be a complete slave to the document and that there be some flexibility to accommodate changing conditions.

Membership

Our current configuration of membership as outlined in our bylaws is not significantly different from most of the organizations I spoke with. The main difference is that we have done little to promote membership among congregations, individuals, and other ecumenical organizations. Where we are different is that a number now have members from other faith traditions, mostly as affiliate or covenant partners. Our bylaws preclude membership, even as affiliate members or individuals, because those who want membership must profess Christ. A conscious decision was made in this direction in recent years, even while members of the Board expressed a desire to work more closely with other faith traditions. (I should note that I do, in fact, work on an interfaith basis about advocacy and some common worship.) Is this something to revisit?

At a minimum, it strikes me that, like some of our counterparts, we need to promote not just membership, but opportunities for participation and an understanding of what membership will provide.

However, it also should be noted that membership contributions from judicatory members have been falling for years. I think it would be helpful for part of the planning process to consider making clear what being part of the Council can mean to them. Are we offering added value to their work in a meaningful way? What can we offer that provides that value—can we reach out to ask for participation in a process to determine what they would value? Then, would it be possible that some might even consider increasing their contributions?

Question—would we want to have affiliation with appropriate secular partners as one state organization has done?

Board/Governance

The current configuration of our Board falls within the broad representation of board configurations described by other organizations interviewed. There are some things that might be considered, however, as possible enhancements to the Board.

At least a couple of groups have a structure where a president would have a three-year term defined by one year of service as vice president or some title that applies incoming president, one year as president, and one year as past president. This provides a year of preparation, a year of top leadership, and a year where learnings can be shared with those serving in the two earlier years.

Others have sought to ensure specific expertise on the board—legal, financial, communications, personnel, etc.—either through seeking that expertise in those appointed by their denominations or judicatories, or by creating at-large or lay positions for persons with the desired experience/expertise. Another thought was having youth representation as a way of helping to reach youth.

As for meetings, some expressed surprise that the Council's board only meets twice per year. Others met much more often—but it also seemed that some were more working boards than others (or ours). There seemed to be some consensus around continuing to make virtual participation more available, as many found attendance had grown during the pandemic. There are good reasons for this regarding stewardship of time and resources. One state alternate between business meetings and consequential conversations. Also, should there be retreat for Board members to build relationships and perhaps training or special programming?

Regarding commissions and/or committees, most still have standing groups that vary from organization to organization. However, there also seemed to be significant questioning about the need for a cumbersome structure with multiple bodies that require regular filling of seats and expectations for ongoing work and meetings that may or may not be warranted. There was some thought that moving to more task forces or ad hoc groups was helpful in that it required (typically) shorter commitment timeframes for members and that there was significantly more flexibility in administering such a structure.

Staffing/Office Space

Staffing varies widely, but there are some models that might be worth considering.

Even solo executive directors typically had some support, usually part-time and very often under contract. The most contracted position appeared to be that of bookkeeper/finance person. Many of these were part-time, working roughly 10-25 hours/week. Where there was significant need for greater management—Oregon and Minnesota are good examples, where in one case, there are many programs, and the other, programs and ownership of a building.

Those engaging in significant grant-related work often hired with the clear understanding that someone was being hired for a set period, spelled out in contracts. This is what gives these organizations the ability to accept grants that benefit the organization and its members. Our Council has viewed grants only to try to cover the expense of existing employees, but such a view severely limits what the Council can accept.

We are an outlier as the owner of the building where we are located. Others have been able to keep office expenses low by occupying space provided by member bodies or local congregations—space that is often unused or underused in those locations. They have often been able to have this space close to the halls of power in capital cities. This has been a win-win because it provides some income for the landlord and significant reduction in the cost of space.

Annual Conference/Meeting

Most no longer hold a stand-alone annual conference but do have an annual meeting that is a vehicle for a keynote or presentation like what would have been done in a conference. Our Council has not had any such event for around ten years. It seems that most law around non-profits requires this kind of meeting, and even if it does not, it can provide an opportunity to reach members and others if there is a compelling program.

Other Programs

Many—most—like the Council, have undertaken to hold smaller, more specific programs, sometimes regionally, most in the 1–2-hour range. Attendance has not always been what would have been hoped for or expected, but many have seen the move to Zoom or similar platforms as an opportunity—and have found that attendance in many cases has been boosted from in-person meetings. It strikes me that shorter, more focused meetings/presentations may begin to attract more people and provide places for them to “plug-in” to work on issues of interest/passion. Also, Zoom meetings/presentations are less expensive, environmentally conscious (no travel required, no printing, etc.) and less cumbersome generally to put together and run.

Several states have implemented regular check-ins for clergy and/or judicatory executives—primarily a supportive platform to connect folks in prayer. Some have implemented book studies and statewide worship opportunities.

Would it be worth considering some “faithful days”—weekends or Sundays—where we could provide resources and encourage all to preach or include some identified issue or prayer in congregations across the state?

Additional Funding Considerations

All organizations interviewed spoke to the constant need to address the need for adequate funding to support their work and the need to diversify. Those that are larger and appear to be moving in a positive direction generally receive revenues from a variety of sources, while those that are small and struggling are primarily dependent on what they receive from members. Those that provide direct services receive significant government funding, but that is not the case for those that do not. Some receive funding to do work specific to their states from funders interested in seeing that work done—farmworker ministries in North Carolina, preservation of the Grand Canyon and work with native populations in Arizona, for example. North Carolina has been fortunate to have a connection with the Duke Endowment, and they have gotten significant funding from this source—some of it for capacity building. Another is a relationship the Faith Action Network in Washington has with Rick Steves (travel writer). A couple of folks mentioned that there are specific sources available to support work around racism and racial justice—and given the interest raised in making this a priority, this is probably worth exploring.

Considering shrinking judicatory funding, it is particularly important to diversify sources. However, as noted above, providing “value-added” programming might help in boosting this funding, at least to some degree. Once a clear sense of mission is established along with a plan to move it forward, it may also be a good time to launch an effort to build membership/contributions from congregations, other organizations, and individuals. It may help as an interim measure to explore funding to do some capacity building, and/or to find funds to do some programming that could raise awareness and provide some of the value-added work that can be used in any fundraising efforts. Also, having a clear sense of direction can help in identifying and applying for grant funding to support those efforts that have been identified as clear priorities.

Some more creative approaches might include creating an endowed speakers' program, perhaps named after someone whose name is recognizable and who might even be interested in helping to attract the funds. For example, I am aware of Bishop Nathan Baxter helping Lancaster Theological Seminary to raise funds for an endowed chair—and he is a friend of the Council and might be a good person to consider for something like this. A couple are producing calendars or other items that might be offered for sale, but that would be an “iffier” proposition. However, if done as an opportunity to showcase artists or children's art, teach about ecumenism or other faith traditions, and/or provide critical dates for religious holidays of all types, it might be worth a try, and having something like a calendar would put the Council's name in front of a wider variety of folks. It could also provide advertising opportunities for others for a price, and perhaps enough that it could cover much of the cost of production.

Looking at advertising opportunities in general may be useful—where could such opportunities be made available?

Another thought—not exactly shared by interviewees but provoked by these meetings—is the possibility where a body that does not feel it has the wherewithal to become members in the traditional sense might be willing to underwrite the cost of specific programs and become members through this kind of vehicle.

One state was looking at donor advised funds.

I think this is an area where we could be particularly creative.

Communications

All organizations had websites and used social media to some degree, primarily Facebook, followed by Twitter. Many also had regular newsletter or way of getting information out. It seemed that none were totally satisfied with what they had, but some were better than others.

Most managed these communications internally. However, some worked with web developers to put together websites that are attractive and efficient prior to taking over maintenance.

I cannot say that there were specific recommendations suggested by those interviewed, but the conversations provoked a few thoughts:

- *The Council's website(s) need a facelift—something that makes them more compelling to anyone who visits.*
- *More pictures, videos would make the site more dynamic, but we need to build getting these into everything we do and have someone prepared to do it.*
- *Could there be more integration between the website and social media? I know there are ways of ensuring that there is some connection among the platforms, and it might make communications more efficient.*
- *It would be good to release regular materials to the media and members—statements, programs, important announcements, etc. However, we need to have a procedure for ensuring this happens and directs how it is done.*
- *We should consider producing regular op-eds and letters to the editor from senior staff and when it makes sense, in collaboration with board members/judicatory heads.*
- *The WV Council is doing “public service announcements” that go out on Facebook, and FB advertising is relatively inexpensive. They have enlisted judicatory heads to participate in PSAs on COVID and other issues important to the state.*
- *Building a video interview archive with Pennsylvania-based faith leaders and others that could be released to our network and to the media might enhance our profile as well.*

I believe it would be well worth earmarking funds to hire a professional web developer to help with the website. I learned in a recent conversation with my counterpart in UU Justice PA that they went to Indeed and found someone to do this work—someone who even had already evaluated their website and sent a mockup showing what they could do. It is going to cost them in the range of \$3,000-4,000, but they will have the site remaining on the WordPress platform they were using, and it will be able to be maintained internally.

I did learn, as mentioned earlier, there is a foundation that funds some of this kind of work for religious organizations. It is not clear whether it could be used for website development, but it did sound like it could be used for things like the PSAs and video interviews mentioned above.

There is a lot more that could be done—creative, imaginative efforts. It might be worth convening a group of communications experts to help. But more than anything, I think we need a plan, driven by mission and whatever plan evolves for moving forward.

Advocacy/Interfaith Efforts

Advocacy was a significant and essential piece of the work of all organizations interviewed. Many, like the Council, once held annual advocacy days at the capital but discontinued them because attendance had dropped. However, most provide mechanisms and resources to help people engage. There was some suggestion, again, that Zoom may provide previously unrecognized opportunities to connect people virtually with legislators. Many—especially those with interfaith representation, are connecting to do this work on an interfaith basis. We are already doing that to a degree in Pennsylvania, but discussions are underway about how we can do this better and be more inclusive.

General

- *Executives in neighboring states have expressed interest in collaboration.*
- *This is such an important point in history, and it seems there is an important role for us—people looking for vision. There has been lots of deconstruction—we could help rebuild. How can we hold sacred stories, how can we be healers?*
- *Should we consider working more closely with labor?*

Conclusion

Our experience in 2020 was exceptional and challenging. The Pennsylvania Council of Churches, however, adjusted and worked to remain relevant in promoting ecumenical engagement and advocacy throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. As a foundation for our work going forward, we will take an intentional look at our future as an organization. In some ways our experience with Covid-19 is forcing all our organizations to transform our work and seek new ways of expanding our opportunities for mission and engagement. We appreciate our partnership and look forward to doing even more with you in 2021. The Council has also welcomed a new executive director, The Rev. Dr. Larry D. Pickens. He brings a great deal of ecumenical and interfaith experience to this experience. Dr. Pickens looks forward to working with all of the member bodies of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches as we partner to make a difference in the world around us.

Larry D. Pickens, *Executive Director*