
Reflections from Executive Director Rev. Kerri Parker

A Commitment to Presence

May 25, 2019

Spring is judicatory meeting season around here. (Those who are not church nerds or engaged deeply in wider church life sometimes stumble over the word *judicatory*. It simply means a regional governing body of a church.)

Many (but not all) of these regional bodies of the church which relate to the Wisconsin Council of Churches have major gatherings this time of year. That means you'll regularly find us packing up materials to visit with a Conference, Presbytery, Synod or District as they gather to be the church. We bring a display filled with flyers, brochures, and study-action guides. People stop by our table looking for pens and chocolate. (That's what they're there for... please take them. Don't be shy!) We take the opportunity to share the word about the [End Child Poverty](#) campaign and how they might practice interfaith neighborliness by participating in the [#BlessedRamadan](#) project or stretching their local church's awareness using the [Loving Our Interfaith Neighbors](#) guide.

What we're really about, in attending these meetings, is the ministry of presence. We come to listen, and to bear witness. Sure, we bring our materials out to the meeting, and we're ready to tell you about what we have to offer. But more importantly, we want you to know that you are part of the Council of Churches. We are bringing ecumenical relationships, perspectives, and connections. Because your judicatory is a member, you are [in relationship with the other Christian traditions that make up the Council's membership](#). Twenty Christian traditions, two thousand congregations, one million Christians...and a variety of faith-based organizations...those are the relationships we carry with us when we come to visit with you.

Pastors and leaders: these are not easy issues you struggle with. All of our courage is called for as we seek out God's call for us today. We have been listening as we visit, and we know that the work is hard. We see you. We want you to know that you are not alone.

Because we are committed to deploying our resources for presence with the communities we serve, the Council's Board of Directors recently made some strategic decisions regarding our staff structure. As of May 1st, the Council said goodbye to longtime administrative coordinator Lori Denoyer, who had served the Council faithfully since 2005. Dr. Peter Bakken, who has been Public Policy Coordinator since 2005 will continue to shepherd our work in public witness and legislative advocacy, as we make some revisions to how that work is best accomplished.

In mid-2019, we will launch a new staff position for the Council: Curator of Content and Ecumenical Innovation. This staff member will take the lead in managing our social media presence, website and newsletter; make new connections with diverse communities; and help lift up creativity in ministry throughout the state. We anticipate making an announcement regarding this new hire in June.

As church and society change ever more rapidly, so must ecumenical life. We are re-evaluating programs and practices, making commitments to being present around the state, and doing our best to model the values of creativity and courage which are foundational to our upcoming plans. You'll be hearing more from us as new plans unfold. We are excited about the possibilities for ecumenical ministry in Wisconsin.

The Wisconsin Council of Churches is committed to being visible to our members, and their communities, in ever more creative ways. We are in this together. We invite your prayers and your support as we seek the Spirit's guidance in this new day.

A Lenten Call to Action on Gun Violence

March 1, 2018



Beloveds, I have written more sermons about gun violence than I ever imagined I would have to preach.

We could recite a litany of places around this nation which have been made known to us because a human being chose to commit gun-assisted murder there. And from those places, too many sacrificed to our obsession with guns: schoolchildren, worshipers, revelers celebrating life and relationship, people simply trying to shop, get to work, get home. It is past time for us to move beyond prayers of lament, and ask the Spirit to equip us to act.

***The Ash Wednesday shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School
must be the end of privileging gun rights over gospel values.
We can no longer remain silent.***

In some churches, gun violence has already been a topic of much discussion. In other places, it has been a challenge to address gun violence, with division among the body about how to proceed. We have been asked for resources, and are gathering materials to help churches have faithful conversations which prepare people for action rooted in Gospel values.

We believe it is possible to address the scourge of gun violence as a people of faith, not fear.

We believe our faith compels us to act in this moment, standing with the traumatized, aligning ourselves with the hope of transformation and new life.

On behalf of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, I urge you and your faith community to take concrete action to change the status quo on gun violence. There are two paths forward which we strongly recommend to our members:

1) Support youth in your community. Let their voices be central. Offer them a platform in church to speak their truth about gun violence. Provide visible, vocal support. Attend student-led events as an ally, and consider if you have logistical or financial support that would be helpful.

We draw to your particular attention to three upcoming grassroots, student-organized events:

- **March 14 National School Walkout, 10 am.** Teachers, students, administrators, parents, and allies are encouraged to walk out for 17 minutes, one for every person killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on Ash Wednesday.

Let your students know you support their participation, encourage school administrations to support this event, and show up to support students with your presence.

- **March 24 March for Our Lives.** Washington DC, and sister marches being planned in Appleton, Green Bay, La Crosse, Madison and Milwaukee. Information can be found at www.facebook.com/marchforourliveswi/
- **April 20 National High School Walkout.** This is the 19th Anniversary of the Columbine High School shooting. act.indivisible.org/event/national-school-walkout/

These actions are in alignment with Christian traditions of nonviolent civil disobedience, a creative public witness on behalf of social change.

2) Ask Governor Walker to call a special session of the Wisconsin State Legislature to pass common sense gun reforms.

Without a special session, the opportunity to act will be delayed until the legislature comes back into session in 2019. [Tell the Governor](#) that the moral obligation to end the cycle of violence supersedes the normal legislative cycle.

There are items on which there is substantial public agreement, supported by solid research, that will make our communities safer. Should a special session be called, we will mobilize our grassroots network to advocate for these.

Addressing gun violence has been one of the Council's public policy priorities, with deep connections to community health and racial equity. We are heeding the call of the youth in our midst to make confronting gun violence a more urgent matter in this extraordinary moment – and invite you to do the same.

In the Acts of the Apostles, we hear Peter preaching from Joel: “God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy. Your young will see visions. Your elders will dream dreams.” (Acts 2:17 CEB)

Our youth have seized the moment, speaking and acting as prophetic leaders. They are speaking without fear, naming difficult truths, and advocating for change, believing that transformation is possible. They are confronting the powers of death with holy imagination. May we sense the Spirit’s movement, and have the courage to join them.

What are your Jesus words?

February 7, 2018

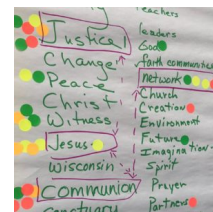
What words do you equate with Jesus? Our Board of Directors recently held a planning retreat to develop our strategic direction for the next few years, and we had conversation about the nouns, verbs, and descriptive words we hoped would characterize the future of the Council. One portion of the conversation went like this:

“For me, Jesus equals communion.”

“Really? For me, Jesus equals justice.”

A thoughtful silence followed.

We continued to work with words and concepts throughout the day. We spoke about whether the word ‘communion’ would have resonance for those outside the church. We identified a hunger for holy imagination, and opportunities for concrete action in the world. We affirmed that we are stronger together. With diverse voices in our network, we are more creative, making new connections. Sharing resources and strength, we have more capacity than we do alone.



The words we surfaced together are bold, fitting the work Jesus set before his followers: Courageous. Relevant. Connect. Advocate. Challenge. You can see these priorities already at work in the efforts of the WCC, as we experiment with living into them together:

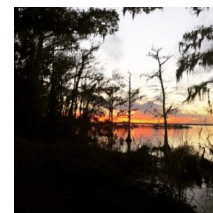
- The WCC is launching an ecumenical racial justice conversation in Wisconsin with a trip to Washington DC, Unite to End Racism, April 3-5. In addition to building relationships along the way, participants will join others from around the nation for education and advocacy. [Learn more and register.](#)
- Our Peace & Justice Commission has begun development of a study-action guide on gun violence which will equip churches and communities to have these important, timely conversations based in faith, not fear. [Add your name to our interest list.](#)
- Dr. Peter Bakken, WCC Public Policy Coordinator, recently testified with a panel of other faith-based advocates at a public hearing regarding public benefit reform, particularly its impact on those receiving FoodShare benefits. You can [watch the video](#) (panel begins at 5:48.20) or [read Peter's testimony](#). We'll be sending out an e-alert shortly to mobilize our advocacy network to speak out. As Peter said in his testimony, “failing to take into consideration the real situations of people in poverty is punitive and unfair. We can and we must do better.” [Sign up for e-alerts.](#)

I invite you to join in this exciting time in our ministry, to pray with us through this time of planning, and to offer your feedback. Where does holy imagination lead? Whom does it gather together around the table? Where does it send us? What is your Jesus equation?

We Can't Do It Alone

January 11, 2018

One of the joys of being in relationship with the wider church is being able to rely on one another when things get complicated. I just returned from the annual State Ecumenical Executives gathering. We were originally supposed to meet at a retreat center in coastal Georgia, but last week’s East Coast storms intervened. Ice and snow in the south coated the roads, closing airports, making travel treacherous and taking out power to our gathering place. We pondered what to do – should we cancel? Using the gift of technology, we texted and emailed while there were several people in the air. One colleague who was local interpreted the weather maps and found a new location that was likely to be unscathed by the storm. Others of us began taking advantage of our airlines’ weather waivers to change our travel arrangements. Those who were on the ground early became impromptu chauffeurs, looping between the airport and our new retreat center to pick up waves of weary travelers as we arrived. We had worked together to accomplish something that none of us could have done on our own.



Throughout the weekend gathering, we can’t do it alone was a recurring theme.

Several of us, as new ecumenical executives, were warmly welcomed into this network of supportive colleagues. I heard of various state Councils of Churches collaborating on regional initiatives. We shared ideas regarding new projects and ways to support our work. We prayed about and discussed critical issues facing our communities: basic human needs and economic opportunity, the care of creation, sexism and

the #metoo movement, gun violence, white supremacy and racism. We learned about plans for **Unite to End Racism** – a major event being planned for April 4th on the National Mall, a joint effort by the National Council of Churches and several other partners with support from its member communions.

Returning to Wisconsin and the work of the Council in 2018, I am profoundly grateful for the many connections that make our broad engagement in civic life and the life of the church possible. Our focus for 2018 embraces many of the issues discussed at the ecumenical executives gathering. As I write this, we're making plans for a delegation from Wisconsin to attend the April 4th events in Washington DC; watch your inbox at the beginning of next week for details and an invitation to a transformational experience. We are monitoring legislation that affects people's ability to survive, thrive and give back to the community – offering testimony, and sharing ways for people of faith to respond through our advocacy network. Working with partners across the state, we continue to gather supporters for the [End Child Poverty](#) initiative.

Yes – there is a lot before us in 2018! There are several other projects in the works which we'll be sharing in upcoming issues of e-News. None of them would be possible without the good and faithful partnership of our nineteen member denominations, associates, and other supporters. As you choose how you will be involved in the mission and ministry of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, trust that there are others carrying different pieces along the way. None of us are about this holy, world-reconciling work alone. We will be in prayer for one another. Thanks be to God!

Advent Greetings!

December 18, 2017

The following is an adapted version of my introductory words at our recent Annual Meeting, held on Tuesday, December 5 at United Presbyterian Church in the Wisconsin Dells.

Good morning, Church! Let me tell you a story...

The congregation where I served before coming to the Council had a ministry called Messy Church. Once a month we would unfold a Bible passage in an informal, mildly chaotic cross-generational setting, and then explore the text in hands-on ways.

Part of the fun for me was figuring out how to share each text. Learning the bones of the story, and finding simple tools to support the telling, anchoring the story in the brain and heart was always something which enriched my own relationship to the sacred text.

There are portions of the Bible that lend themselves well to this approach. We spent a lot of time with the narratives – the stories of the patriarchs and the matriarchs, the Jesus stories, the parables. But we couldn't stay there forever. There were other parts of our faith story it was time to bring to life.

I had a challenge before me: how do you take the bits that some people have written off as dry, boring, or incomprehensible, and make them matter? How do you get people excited about the business items? (Do I really have to care about all those books with all those weird names in the back of my Bible?)

As we entered Acts and the Epistles, a fragile, lopsided boat, folded out of a single piece of paper, became my favorite prop. With this little boat, I started telling the story of the early church, and of the way of Jesus spreading from one place to another: the message carried by word of mouth, by foot, by boat, by letter, by caravan. I got to see people's eyes light up as we talked about the viral good news.



Once upon a time, the church was odd enough to light up the map with the repeated query, who are these Christians? Why are they here doing these strange things – caring for lepers, entering the prisons, standing alongside the dispossessed, setting aside their privilege, refusing to pledge allegiance to Empire?

These are the kinds of things you do – the things you still do – when you are a community of divinely commissioned oddballs, who believe there is something true in God's promises to turn the world rightside up again. So you set off in your little flotilla of boats, set out on the road, in twos and threes, to the edges – as people of faith, dispersed but connected by a Spirit that gives life. People of faith connected by a commitment to Christ's way. Knowing that it offers and demands much, even up to our whole lives.

We have documents in our business packets today that talk about our directions for the next year, but what I'd like you to take from those reams of paper or PDFs is this: the call to the edges. If we dare, we have the chance to be odd enough to light up the map once again, to make people ask, 'who are these Christians?' by looking to the edges.*

The church is always at its best when it de-centers itself...when it follows Jesus to the edges: the edges of town, the edges of empire, the edges of respectability, the edges of hope. To those who have given up on the church, and those who are about to. To those who are under-represented and whose voices have not been heeded.

For today, I will leave you with this: we know life at the edges is never easy. The way is costly. But we have a holy story, a treasure to bear into the world. And in the season when we hear of dreams and angelic visitors, the first words of these holy encounters are words of encouragement. Be not afraid. There is Good News to share. Amen?

*During my time at the podium I also referenced a [tweetstorm](#) by Diana Butler Bass about the rich spiritual heritage of the 'Exiles' and what the contemporary church should consider about its approach to those who are not settled in the institutional church. I highly recommend it to you!

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