

A Brief History of the Wisconsin Council of Churches

(Adapted from a history of the Council written by the Rev. Robert Seater)

I. The Early Years: 1935-45

The Wisconsin Council of Churches began informally in 1935. There were economic as well as ecclesiastical reasons for its formation. The country was in a deep depression. Church contributions were suffering while at the same time the churches were being called upon to offer services they were not able to provide. There was a need for increasing cooperation among the churches to meet human needs.

In 1937 the Council was based in Milwaukee and it was a loose federation of denominations. A.G. Adams was the Executive Secretary. By 1942, the primary work of the Council was Christian Education. Five Christian Education conferences were held that year, and over 1,237 people registered, representing 345 local churches of 20 denominations in 161 communities. Other concerns included pastoral care to new communities of war workers springing up in various parts of the state, and a chaplaincy program for soldiers coming to Sparta and Camp McCoy.

II. The Ellis Dana Years: 1945-1970

Ellis H. Dana was the first full time Executive Vice President of the Wisconsin Council of Churches and served in this capacity for 25 years. A layman in the Congregational Christian Churches, Dana arrived in Madison on October 2, 1945 shortly after VJ Day. Dana, in reflecting upon that period said, "When I came here from Boston in October 1945, our State Council, at least in professional staff terms, was just beginning. It was, indeed and in fact, a 'venture of faith' with no office, no secretary and a minimal budget." The minimal budget was \$7,500 from which came the salary, housing, rent for the office, office supplies, travel for a state wide job and program expenditures. It was indeed a 'venture of faith'.

Methodist Bishop Schuyler E. Garth offered Dana a temporary office in the work room of the Methodist headquarters in Madison, which was located in the First National Bank Building. Eventually, the Council obtained an office in the old Washington Building. In 1965 the offices were moved to the all glass, National Guardian Life Insurance Building just blocks from the Capitol.

On January 2, 1947, when the Council was officially incorporated, it listed as its denominational members Baptist, Congregational, Evangelical, Moravian, Evangelical and Reformed, United Brethren, Methodist, and Presbyterian Churches. The keynote speaker at the 1947 Annual Meeting was Harold Fey, Editor of *The Christian Century* on the topic, "Can Protestantism Win America?"

In 1956, the Wisconsin Council of Churches had a membership of eleven denominations, comprising 1,500 local churches with a total membership of 321,000 members. The budget was set at \$22,400. The Lutherans, although cooperating in various programs, were being sought for membership. The Episcopalians were also in dialogue for membership.

The Council's strong educational focus continued through the 1950's into the mid 60's. The WCC's annual Laymen's Conferences drew 800-1,000 participants, while the Clergy Conference drew 200-400. A new publication, *The Wisconsin Councilor*, was launched. The Council began a migrant ministry program in 1958, developed statewide workshops in radio, direct mail and other tools for evangelism, and helped to initiate over a dozen local councils and ministerial associations around the state.

In 1961 the Council provided statewide leadership on a bill to strengthen the powers of the Governor Gaylord Nelson's Commission on Human Rights. This bill broadened the law on fair accommodation and to include a fair housing provision.

The WCC's concerns through the 1960's included: race relations, the problems of urbanization, the needs of rural congregations, the War in Vietnam, and the beginnings of a vital media ministry in Madison and Milwaukee.

III. The Bill Merriman Years (1970-1980)

The Rev. Willis J. Merriman came to the Wisconsin Council of Churches in February of 1970 from the Minnesota Council of Churches. He first served as Associate Executive Vice President working with Ellis Dana and then upon Dana's retirement, later that year, became the Executive Vice President of the Council.

The many issues that made the 1970's such a turbulent decade consumed Board meetings of the WCC: Rhodesia severed ties with the British Crown and became a segregated African state, four students were killed at Kent State, the U.S. Senate repealed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, and the Supreme Court ruled that the busing of students could be ordered to bring about racial desegregation. Anti-war demonstrations were common in Madison and elsewhere in the nation. The sting of tear gas was felt on numerous occasions by WCC staff members making their way to meetings in downtown Madison.

In the fall of 1970, the Rev. Dr. G. Lloyd Rediger was named the Director of the Wisconsin Council of Churches' Special Program of Pastoral Services to Pastors, a position he filled for 19 years. In 1973 seven Wisconsin judicatories joined forces with the Regional Office of Economic Opportunity to fund anti-poverty programs in Wisconsin, committing over \$70,000 to this unique public-private partnership.

The work of the Council through this decade saw the growth of its public witness ministry through the development of Wisconsin IMPACT, and the dramatic expansion of its broadcasting ministry under the leadership of Rev. Robert Seater, who served as its director for 30 years.

In 1979 the WCC changed its name to the Wisconsin Conference of Churches with the hope of attracting new denominational members. At that meeting A.C. Shumacher gave the commitment of the Southern District of the American Lutheran Church to become a member of the Wisconsin Conference of Churches and said he was glad to be part of this ecumenical body.

On May 15, 1980, Merriman submitted his resignation as Executive Director of the Wisconsin Conference of Churches, to accept the position as Executive Director of the Minnesota Council of Churches.

IV. The John Fischer Years (1981-1994)

The Board of Directors of the Wisconsin Conference of Churches elected the Rev. John Fischer to be the Executive Director at its annual meeting on December 3, 1980. He assumed the duties of Executive Director on March 1, 1981. Fischer, when elected, was the Executive Director of the Greater Milwaukee Conference on Religion and Urban Affairs, and had served in that position for ten years.

In April 1981, John recommended moving the offices of the Wisconsin Conference of Churches to 1955 W. Broadway office building in Madison. CROP would continue to rent part of the office space from the Conference. The new facility would provide more space and a conference room.

During the 1980's there was a strong push for closer cooperation with the Catholic Church in Wisconsin. Through numerous meetings between WCC leadership and the Wisconsin Catholic Conference staff, a series of recommendations were adopted for closer cooperation on matters of common concern. While the Catholic Church chose not to join the WCC, a new membership category, "Observer Member" was created in 1989 and the Archdiocese of Milwaukee was the first to join under this category.

In 1982 a redesigned newsletter, *Ecunews*, was launched by the Council.

Due to high unemployment in Wisconsin throughout this decade, economic justice issues such as poverty and unemployment were major programmatic concerns of the Council. Other priority issues included: the nuclear freeze movement, the deregulation of natural gas, the concerns of people with disabilities, opposition to a state lottery, affordable housing in rural Wisconsin and the rights of Native Americans.

The family farm crisis of the 80's caused the Wisconsin Conference of Churches to react on behalf of its member denominations by formulating theological statements on agriculture, holding forums for discussion of the issues, and in cooperation with other groups helping to establish a loan fund for farmers in danger of losing their land.

The 1980's also saw a strong emphasis on international issues. Several WCC sponsored delegations went abroad to visit political hot-spots and to give witness to reconciliation.

John Fischer lost his life in a tragic car accident in 1994.

V. The Jerry Folk Years (1995-2002)

After an extended interim period following John Fisher's death, the Rev. Dr. Jerry Folk was called as the new Executive Director in 1995. An ELCA pastor, Jerry had been the Director of the Shalom Center in South Dakota, an ecumenical study center, and served most recently as pastor of St. Johns Lutheran Church in Madison.

Folk initiated a number of much-needed structural changes in the WCC to streamline the governance apparatus and to make it more relevant to the Council's programmatic work. A new mission statement was developed (still in use today) and an Executive Council was created to give leadership and direction to the 70-member Board of Directors.

The WCC offices were moved from the W. Broadway location to the United Methodist Center in Sun Prairie. The United Methodist Center housed several ecumenical partners and allowed for better meeting room space and freeway access for statewide gatherings.

In 2000 the name of the Wisconsin Conference of Churches was changed back to Wisconsin Council of Churches, which had more relevance historically and theologically within the conciliar ecumenical movement worldwide.

Council membership grew to include the Episcopal Diocese of Fond du Lac and two Orthodox communions, the Greek Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church in America. The Catholic Diocese of La Crosse joined the Council as an Observer Member.

Jerry Folk also sought closer working relationships with local and regional ecumenical partners. A new membership category, Associate Member, was created in the late 1990s. Church Women United, Madison area Urban Ministry and the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee joined under this new category, giving these three organizations a place at the governance table.

Work continued to deepen the relationship between the WCC and the Catholic Church in Wisconsin. John Huebscher, Director of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, joined the Board of Directors during this period.

Jerry also sought to give the Council a distinctive public policy witness with a strong theological grounding. Major policy statements on economic justice and nonviolence were

adopted during this period, which provided the Biblical and theological basis for the Council's legislative work. Interfaith IMPACT, which had a part of the Council since the 1970's, spun off as an independent organization to allow for the WCC's distinctive Christian witness at the State Capitol.

Folk drew upon his ecumenical work at the Shalom Center to launch an ambitious and successful statewide project focused on the new millennium called "Jesus Jubilee: The Reign of God." Over \$50,000 was raised for a series of local and regional gatherings around the state, which integrated worship with education provided by nationally recognized scholars and theologians.

VI. The Present Day

The Rev. Scott Anderson, a Presbyterian, began work as Executive Director in March, 2003, having served 12 years on the staff of the California Council of Churches, the last six as Executive Director.

The Council continues to expand its programs around leadership development and public witness, focused on equipping congregations for faithful ecumenical witness.

The Rev. Ken Pennings, a minister with dual standing in the ABC and UCC, served as Coordinator for Ecumenical Formation for nine years (2001-2010), dramatically expanding Council's ministry of leadership development and continuing education through a year-round program of high quality workshops and conferences held around the state.

The week-long Washington Island Forum, offered each summer for clergy and lay leaders and their families, has grown to become a national event thanks to co-sponsorship from the *Christian Century* magazine. In 2011, 245 participants from 22 states representing 14 faith traditions attended the Forum. Top-tier speakers such as Barbara Brown Taylor, William Willimon, Joan Chittister, Eugene Peterson and Marcus Borg have served as keynoters.

Dr. Peter Bakken, an ELCA layman, joined the staff in 2005 as Coordinator for Public Policy and has helped to expand the Council's presence at the State Capitol and developed resources to equip individuals and congregations to engage in advocacy. Council study guides on hunger, the death penalty, affordable housing and health care reform have helped congregations connect their faith with the public policy issues of the day.

With the growth of electronic communication, an electronic newsletter, *E-News* began in 2005, and now reaches about 4,000 individuals and congregations twice monthly. The printed newsletter, *Ecunews*, moved to a full color format and is printed twice a year.

In 2006 the Council welcomed its first African American and Pentecostal denomination into membership, the Church of God in Christ (COGIC). Benedictine Women of Madison and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious Region 8 also joined the Council the same year as Associate Members. In 2011, the African Methodist Episcopal was welcomed as a member of the Wisconsin Council of Churches. In 2012, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church and the Mennonite Church became members of the WCC. The Catholic Diocese of Green Bay joined as an Observer Member. In 2013, Armenian Church of America-Eastern Diocese also became a member. In 2014 the Mennonite Church and in 2015 the Coptic Orthodox Church were welcomed as a members.