WISCONSIN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

COURAGE. JUSTICE. HOLY IMAGINATION.

STRATEGIC VISION AND THEORY OF CHANGE 2019-2022

I. BACKGROUND AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

In the Beginning

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. – John 1:1-5 (NRSV)

In the beginning, the people of the Church could all fit in one room. Commissioned by the Resurrected Christ, and moved by the Spirit, they went out into all the world. From the witness of scripture, tradition, and our own experiences, we see how the work of the Church continues to unfurl from that center.

In the beginning of the ecumenical movement, the Council formed as a collection of institutions working together institutionally. Our ways were mostly methodical and careful, shaped by the ways of the judicatories which gathered together for dialogue and common mission, and leaders' obligations to them. In the beginning of mapping our ecumenical future, we are coming to see new and different ways in which God's Spirit is moving among us. These ways sometimes feel chaotic, and yet they are representative of the ways God's Spirit has always moved God's people: shifting power and purpose from the center to the margins, beyond the boundaries of our comfort and our knowledge, serving as the Great Disrupter. "Throughout Israel's story in the Old[er] Testament and those of the church through its history, the Spirit continually disrupts the settled life of God's people, pushing them out of established frameworks and boundaries in order to compel them to reframe their lives to be more faithfully a sign, witness and foretaste of the Kingdom."[1]

[1] *Structured for Mission*¸ A. Roxburgh, p 102.

Where once our ecumenical relationships with one another were mediated primarily through judicatories, theological statements, and formal agreements – a more institutional, hierarchical expression of the church – ecumenical life is finding more diverse expression. We increasingly find ourselves relating to individual churches (including those which are truly nondenominational), parachurch organizations, and persons who are marginally affiliated with churches and denominational "brands," while we continue our long-standing relationships with the wider church in diocesan, synodical, presbytery, and conference life. The pace of operations and decision-making of these many new mission partners is different than one usually finds in denominational and judicatory life; the number of points of connection is exponentially greater.

There is great variation in the outlook and makeup of the churches connected to the judicatories and the Council. There are historic churches which still function in more institutional ways; there are newer church communities still forming and those which express themselves as movements more than organizations. In such an ecosystem, the Council's former ways of operating as an institutional convener, conversation mediator and/or event programmer seem less than helpful. Our question now becomes, what are we called to be and do to live into the deepest values of the ecumenical movement, and the deepest needs of this ecosystem?

Our plans are guided by three framing ideas anchored in both Christian text and tradition: Courage, Justice, and Holy Imagination.

Holy Imagination

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. (Hebrews 11:1, NIV)

One of the great aches of our time is the fading of Holy Imagination. In many ways, both the world's imagination, and the Church's imagination, seem to be broken. Our hearts and minds work separately, often uninformed by the working of the Spirit. As those around us struggle to find hope, beauty, love and meaning, we in the church struggle, as well. The Church has its own difficulty living into the *Imago Dei*. We do not spend enough time with the sacred memory of God's creativity, nor recalling the dreams and visions that are part of the Biblical story, which guided God's people in times of crisis. We are more likely to recount the seven last words of the church, "we've never done it this way before," than we are to engage Holy Imagination.

Our abdication of responsibility for creative, life-giving action in the face of powers bent on destruction has left a void. The world and the church are poorer for this. Nevertheless, the Gospel speaks a divine word of improvisation, a "Yes, and…" to our continual dead-end choices. When we allow the workings of the Spirit to connect heart and mind with the world around us, we move from human imagining to Holy Imagination.

We believe that cultivating Holy Imagination is an important animating value for the Council's work.

While Holy Imagination does not leave us disconnected from the past, we are released from the boundaries of what has *always* been to envision and enact what *might* be. Holy Imagination speeds us up where we have become stuck, and moves us to action. The Spirit will call us to move more quickly than we have been accustomed; to become nimble and prepare ourselves to respond rapidly to opportunities.

This call invites us to be proactive. We aim to encourage creativity in ministry, connecting people across distance and difference to learn from and inspire one another. We long to be about the affirmative message of the Gospel, speaking that divine YES wherever possible rather than responding with a reactionary "no".

When the Spirit came to the Church, and the response of the people was counted as drunken foolery, Peter quoted the prophet Joel: "'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams."[2] Such dreams and visions are a gift, a sign that the Church is still alive, and that our common life and uncommon ways have the possibility of being a witness to the world. We reclaim this calling to offer Holy Imagination into a world sorely in need of it.

We will build community and expand relationships.

As dreams lift us out of our own limited vision and draw us into deeper connection with the Holy, they grant us a sense of expansiveness which also impacts our human relationships. In a world of either/or, we must do what we can together to bridge these binaries and deeply entrenched identities. We ask, who are the unlikely travelers on the road with us, those whom might we meet or begin working with to make holy dreams come to fruition? We must trust when God brings unexpected partners to our attention. When Holy Imagination infuses our efforts, we can build a bigger table fit for generous dialogue and a growing community. At our best, we can be a network of people working together faithfully across difference to address critical issues with creativity and courage.

<u>Justice</u>

Listen to me, my people,
and give heed to me, my nation;
for a teaching will go out from me,
and my justice for a light to the peoples.
– Isaiah 51:4 NRSV

The work of justice is not new or different for the faithful people of God; it has long been a part of our faith DNA. One need only look to the prophets and their combination of challenging word and head-turning deeds as a reminder that our traditions call us to speak uncomfortable truths and take action where injustice reigns.

Justice is more than just a part of our tradition; it defines who we are. It does little good to keep such teachings within a small circle; they are intended to shape entire communities toward greater justice and mercy. The consistent message of the prophets is one of choice. The community is regularly instructed: you can keep organizing your common life in broken ways, putting your loyalty in the wrong place, and see the destruction wrought; or you can care for the widow, the orphan, the stranger and others on the margins, and see how community will flourish.

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[2] Acts 2:17 NRSV

Thus says the Lord: Execute justice and righteousness, and deliver the robbed out of the hand of the oppressor. And do no wrong or violence to the stranger, the fatherless, or the widow, neither shed innocent blood in this place. – Jeremiah 22:3 MEV

Doing and Teaching the Combination of Jesus and Justice in Public

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We understand the work of the Council with respect to justice as doing and teaching the combination of Jesus and Justice in public. Our hope is that most of our congregations are strong in the ways of Jesus; some of them are able to connect Jesus with his teaching and justice ministry. Putting Jesus and Justice together in public is the stretch goal for more people and communities of faith.

We understand the need to offer a range of options for people and churches to make the connections between faith, justice, and public life. We anticipate having a series of on-ramps to advocacy and witness, so that wherever someone is in their awareness, readiness or capacity, we can connect them to appropriate options – or invite them to take a role as a leader/equipper in the Council's network.

We will equip people for public witness rooted in faith, and for using their power when needed

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Rather than doing justice work *on behalf of*, we see our role as coming alongside and equipping. Some congregations or individuals might need encouragement, coaching or training to connect Jesus and justice in their church setting, through preaching, teaching, tools or peer support. Some may be asking questions such as, how does one "do justice" in church, addressing controversial issues while remaining covenantal, relational and committed to community? Others might be ready to take things beyond the generalities: what are some concrete justice issues in their community, and what are the Biblical intersections? How does faith call them to respond? How does one move from charity toward justice?

In his parting words to the disciples, Jesus tells them, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you shall be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8 MEV)

That same Spirit urged him into his public ministry:

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

-Luke 4:16-19 (NRSV)

Taken in this light, public witness is and can be accompaniment, and proclamation, discipleship and pilgrimage. Our activities move beyond individual relief and into seeking systemic solutions. We are sustained on this journey of prophetic activism by the Holy Spirit. We may find ourselves speaking at community forums, identifying gaps and reworking systems of providing community services, testifying to the legislature, participating in a march or engaging in civil disobedience, organizing people to participate in elections, or using the arts to develop an awareness-raising creative display.

The Council's part may be initiating, leading, or coordinating participation in any of these. We may offer framing theological reflections, convene conversations, or send out toolkits people can use to initiate conversations back home. We teach, equip and connect people for this work so that they can take it back to their judicatories, congregations, and organizations, and incorporate it into their whole lives.

Courage

We are heartened by the fact that justice and love come from the same place. The One who brought the world into being, Great Love which offered itself as a transforming gift upon the cross, Spirit breathing within us is the same Holy One who wills justice, righteousness, wholeness for all. We are challenged and comforted simultaneously. We are equipped even as we are urged forth.

If this is the first time you are engaging the Council's strategic vision, this could be a challenging word so far! This is a statewide organization, with national connections, engaged in transformational projects. These are Big Things, but they ARE the work of the Council. In over two thousand years, the unity of the Church has never been a small task. Praying so we remain grounded, teaching and musing about what Jesus meant, and running headlong into the world with sorely needed Good News, has never been small work.

Hear also this word of compassion and affirmation. For all its dreams, visions and visitations, the Bible is filled with reminders to not be stopped by fear. Always and ever, the message of the angels has been, "Do not fear!" We are especially moved by one thought-provoking translation which reads these texts as saying, "Stop being afraid!" Be of good courage, prophet and leaders. While the Church is on a wild ride, we are not in this alone. Where God has called us to advocate, God will not leave us without an Advocate.

Be mindful, though: the work of the Spirit is unpredictable. As with any such gift, if we try too hard to control it, we destroy it. We are a Spirit-driven movement, and if we are wise, we will remember to de-center ourselves and center instead the work of God. While many of our bodies are corporations, we need not be corporate in our response to the Spirit. Institutions worry about solidly defined plans. As people of faith, we trust in God, not ourselves. Our strategies, tactics and theories will be held loosely enough that should we see new truths emerging, we will be willing and able to respond.

Ecumenical Innovation: What are the possibilities for further cooperation, collaboration and true partnerships across denominational lines, locally and regionally?

A significant portion of the Council's work going forward builds on Holy Imagination and Courage and invites us to imagine further possibilities in Ecumenical Innovation. What are the possibilities for further cooperation, collaboration and true partnerships across denominational lines? Where is the Spirit stirring? How can we foster new generations of leaders with an ecumenical spirit to support one another in local

ministry even as denominations and judicatories face unknown futures? How can we celebrate the best gifts of our varied traditions and help leaders imagine a vital future together?

We urge the reader to consider the Spirit's call on these matters with respect to their ministry settings. We know that all parts of this work will not be for everyone, and yet we are confident that there is a place in this work for you. Each member group of the Council will engage with the work according to their readiness and priorities, and we will still be together in relationship. The foundation of the ecumenical movement relies upon our willingness to be at the table together for theological discussion, prayer and considering common ministry. Even when we have unresolved questions of faith and order, there is a movement of common life and work. For this we have a scriptural model: Peter and Paul didn't agree on everything, and they still moved the church forward!

Conclusion

As we preach and teach around the state, we commonly remind audiences that we are not merely an organization, nor are we an institution, but we are an expression of the ecumenical *movement*. We are committed to that sense of movement, and the capability of the Spirit to work most effectively with that which is already on the move.

The ecumenical movement is about expressing the visible unity of the body of Christ. The strategies and tactics described in these narratives, and in our one-page summary 'Theory of Change' are merely ways of getting there, an attempt to capture ways we feel may fit our call for this time.

Lest your ministry in this time of change seem daunting, let us remind you: none of us are in this alone. We trust that this work will bring us into deeper relationship, so that when one part of the body weeps, there are ecumenical witnesses present to weep with them, and ecumenical rejoicers in times of rejoicing. We trust that when we are faithful in this work, we will see an increase in creativity, community, and courage. We trust that the One who began the good work will be faithful to complete it.

Go forth into the world in peace.
Be of good courage.
Hold fast that which is good.
Render to no one evil for evil.
Strengthen the fainthearted.
Support the weak.
Help the afflicted.
Show love to everyone.
Love and serve the Lord,
rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit;
and the blessing of almighty God,
the Father, the + Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always. Amen.

This document is dedicated to the memory of the Rev. Tim Berlew, United Methodist pastor, church musician, and child of God, chair of the Unity & Relations Commission of the Wisconsin Council of Churches 2019-2020.

Theory of Change on following page
included for reference purposes.

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COURAGE, JUSTICE, & HOLY IMAGINATION

A Theory of Change for the work of the Wisconsin Council of Churches

HIGH-LEVEL OUTCOME	More people are motivated to engage justice issues in their context from a grounding in faith	People & organizations are equipped for advocacy & willing to use their power in a time of need	Growing networks of people committed to building meaningful, lasting relationship across difference	Advocates and leaders are inspired for their work and have the resources to support them in imagining a vital future	
MID-RANGE OUTCOME (demonstrated skill or asset)	Can reflect on indiv/systemic injustice & discuss faith implications	Know how to do public theology, advocacy, public witness	Able to build and renew relationships across traditions	Have a sense of engagement with, accountability to, care from faith community/network	Trying & implementing creative practices
WCC ACTIVITY	Faith & justice training Convene justice conversations Theological statements	Public Witness, incl. legislative advocacy Offering training and regular opportunities	Facilitating broad engagement in ecumenical conversation, at all levels of church life	Commitment to accessibility: Regional work facilitated by staff in the field, volunteers and partners Digital access & activity	Lively, rooted, spirit-filled ecumenical events Incubator for & disseminator of innovative ideas Communicating & modeling best practices

The Wisconsin Council of Churches is a network of people and organizations working together faithfully across difference to address critical issues with creativity and courage. We are rooted in our Christian identity and open to partners of any faith and none. We are inspired by a vision of a world filled with Courage, Justice, and Holy Imagination. As we are faithful in our work, we envision an increase in creativity, courage, and community in those influenced by those in our network.