

REPORT ON ECUMENICAL and INTERRELIGIOUS WORK

I am grateful to Bishop Fisher for asking me to take on the role of the Episcopal Diocesan Ecumenical and Interreligious Officer (EDEIO) for the Diocese of Western MA, a role that the Rev. Dr. Will Bergmann faithfully served in since 2003 before he retired from the work last year. To some it might seem odd to have a Lutheran serving in this role for an Episcopal diocese. However, my own passion for ecumenical work came out of the work my home congregation, Zion Lutheran Church in Worcester, did with our neighbors up the hill, St. Michael's On the Heights, around the full communion agreement between the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), *Called to Common Mission*.

In addition to joint worship services and discussions of our respective traditions, the leadership of each congregation had members of vestry and council attend one another's meetings. We also joined together one summer to do an every house in our zip code visitation where individuals were partnered with those of the other denomination. And when I shortly thereafter left to attend seminary, St. Michael's on the Heights used the proceeds from their "seminary education" giving envelope to support me in my formation as a pastor. Therefore, having an Episcopal congregation, and one in this diocese, be so important in my formation, it only seems fitting that I should then take on this role.

The relationship between Zion and St. Michael's on the Heights helped to show me how important our work together across denominational lines is in fulfilling the call of Jesus in John 17:22 that is often used as the basis for our ecumenical work, "so that they may be one, as we are one." As we live in a world with so much division, and often along religious lines, our ecumenical work and the witness of our oneness in Christ, speaks loudly of our ability to find unity to a world that too often sees Christians fighting over our differences.

While much ecumenical work happens among the theologians and denominational officials working on our behalf on a national level, I believe as my wise predecessor in this position often said that "all ecumenical and interreligious work is local." Or at least that is where the rubber meets the road as we live out the agreements the theologians and denominational officials create. Of course, this can be challenging as we try to figure out how to make those agreements work with canons and constitutions as we are finding out on a diocesan level now trying to formalize the partnerships that Christ Trinity in Sheffield and Christ the King-Epiphany in Wilbraham have formed as Episcopal-Lutheran congregations. Yet, in spite of the challenges, both congregations are finding the blessings of the Holy Spirit as they join together as one in Christ in their life and witness to the Gospel.

Our work in figuring out how two full communion partner congregations come to be one congregation has never been more important as the Episcopal Church seeks to sign another such agreement as it did with the ELCA in the near future. As part of my role as your EDEIO, each year I am called upon to attend the National Workshop on Christian Unity. This year we met in St. Louis, where at the beginning of the week the EDEIOs met with our equivalents in the United Methodist Church to get to know one another better and to do some of our ecumenical

training together. This work together was in recognition that the Episcopal Church is working on a full communion agreement with the United Methodist Church that will be voted on at their General Conference May 5-15, 2020 in Minneapolis and if passed there will go on to be voted on our General Convention in July 2021 in Baltimore. All of us were hopeful that this agreement will one day soon become a way we live out our oneness in Christ together as Episcopalians and Methodists.

As EDEIO, I also represent the diocese at advisory board meetings of the Massachusetts Council of Churches. At last year's meeting in October 2018 a vote was made to change the council's constitutional language to allow for membership to expand to include those Christian church bodies beyond those who are members of mid-level judicatories. This now allows membership of small and minority Christian communities who could not previously become members of MCC because their parent denomination had too few churches to meet MCC's membership requirements. This change allows MCC to better fulfill their mission of a common Christian witness and to better reflect the diversity of that witness within Massachusetts.

Interreligious work and witness also continue in the diocese, especially at Christ Church Cathedral through Rabbi Mark Dove Shapiro, the Rabbi in Residence. His work teaching and preaching continues to inspire and educate. The Cathedral also continues to host programs of a more broad interreligious nature such as this spring's, "Getting to Faith: What's Your Path?" This program included a discussion of members of the Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Baha'i communities.

Much more ecumenical and interreligious work is going on throughout the diocese on the local level where it is so important as relationships are formed one to one. Please share the work you are doing with me and feel free to be in touch with me for any questions you might come across as you engage in the work. May God bless all of us as we do this holy work and come together across our differences to witness to the power of God in the world.

Respectfully Submitted

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EDEIO for the Diocese of Western Massachusetts